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**Comic License and Extreme Figurations in
Contemporary American Storytelling**

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PhD in English Literature
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Declaration:

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Abstract and Lay Summary:

In this project I examine the significance and sophistication of comedy in contemporary American storytelling, in order to get beyond its frequent characterisation as either a superficial sweetener or a form of escapism. My thesis argues instead for comedy's usefulness as a strategy for effecting multiple responses: intimacy, recognition, attachment, de-familiarisation, celebration and catharsis, all in the service of confronting the unbearable. Examining work by George Saunders, Miranda July, Donald Antrim, and the filmmaker, Jordan Peele, I argue that comic license allows for the forthright address of troubling issues; class in Saunders's short fiction; sexuality in July's first novel; national identity for Antrim and race in Peele's film, *Get Out*. This license is effected in multiple ways: through the obliviousness of characterological traits such as naivety and pedantry for instance, as well as through the mechanisms of incongruity and relief.

Given that the works I examine are challenging, 'edgy', both in terms of style and content, I suggest that the comedy is inflected by what we might loosely call extremity. While extremity is arguably foundational to comedy, in that the comic violation of conventional boundaries necessitates it to one degree or another; I also argue that the comic license enables the work's 'extreme figurations' by ensuring the reader's or the viewer's consent. Comic pleasure thus keeps us close to what might otherwise be overwhelming.

In addition, comedy's tendency towards the material and the particular – the proverbial slip on the banana skin - helps to ground or embed the extremity of the work's abstract or fantastical aspect.

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Introduction

In this project I examine the significance and sophistication of comedy in contemporary American storytelling, in order to move beyond its frequent characterisation as either a superficial sweetener or a form of escapism. Lorrie Moore articulates a common tendency when she observes that there is a 'prejudice against humor as somehow mucking up the seriousness of your endeavor' (Garner par.23), while others have noticed 'a larger cultural tendency to confuse reverence with seriousness' (Martin par.5). The assumption that the comic and tragic modes are somehow separate and opposed is an ancient one, articulated most notably by Aristotle, who established tragedy's privileged position in his *Poetics*, as the 'imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude' (10), while denigrating comedy as 'an imitation of inferior people' (9). Over time, satire and irony have emerged as the critical categories that serve 'to defend comic art against charges of frivolity', but this focus has provided 'a rationale for bypassing an analysis of comedy' (Green 106). Given the 'paucity of major scholarly work on the language of humor' (Hutcheon 25), then, an account of the comedy in contemporary American storytelling seems long overdue. And while critical interest in comedy seems to be growing (the analysis of stand-up comedy for instance is flourishing), there is still a lack of substantial work addressing fiction and film. My thesis is an attempt to correct that deficiency.

In the works I have selected, comedy is inflected by what we might loosely describe as extremity. The works by George Saunders, Miranda July, Donald Antrim, and the filmmaker, Jordan Peele are challenging, 'edgy', both in terms of style and content. In 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' and 'Puppy', two short stories from

Saunders, garden ornaments made from immigrant women hanging from their heads, and a boy chained to a tree are the startling central figurations; while in July's highly conceptual novel, *The First Bad Man*, the reader is confronted by, among other things, two women fighting furiously and a homely middle-aged woman's rampant masturbatory regime. In Donald Antrim's novel, *Elect Mr Robinson For A Better World*, the violence is pervasive: a young girl is torn to pieces, and suburban homes are rendered lethal, while the central conceit of Jordan Peele's film, *Get Out*, is similarly horrific, with white brains transplanted into stolen black bodies. Arguably extremity is foundational to comedy: the comic 'violation of accustomed boundaries' (Jacobson 235) necessitates extremity to one degree or another, and certainly these extreme figurations, like jokes, seek to challenge 'an accepted pattern' (Douglas 365), illuminating afresh the coercion and the horror of aspects of contemporary life we have become inured to.

Work structured around the singular and striking moments outlined above might be deemed 'high-concept', a somewhat disparaging appellation which tends to suggest the absence of subtlety and complexity. I suggest that this is not the case. Instead, the stylised and highly coloured aspects of these works co-exist with a profound emotional realism. Extremity has tended to be the domain of genre fiction and film (melodrama, horror, fantasy) - lurid, pulpy - in opposition to the more subtle imperatives of literary fiction and art-house film, but extremity can co-exist fruitfully with psychological depth. Likewise, while comedy is often understood to be at odds with emotion, I will offer a more nuanced account that recognises the degree to which it too can co-exist with psychological complexity.

I was initially drawn to these texts because of their 'forthright address' (Lethem par.1) of what Jonathan Lethem calls 'the Full Now' (par. 20), relishing their

audacious and ambitious confrontation with difficult contemporary issues; class in Saunders's work; sexuality in July's novel; nationality for Antrim and race in Peele. The immediacy of that address is partly explained through economy, and a reliance upon shared social knowledge or unspoken cultural assumptions, which is fundamental to many comic procedures. Indeed, Franco Moretti suggests that this reliance upon shared convention is one of the reasons comedy tends not to travel well: 'laughter arises out of unspoken assumptions that are buried very deep in a culture's history and if these are not your assumptions, the automatic component so essential to laughter disappears' (98). In taking for granted that the reader does not need to be explained to, or cosseted, the work achieves an intimacy and a directness which seduces and startles us into uncharted territory. Just as explication can kill a joke, it can also kill narrative immediacy and intimacy. The absence of exposition in the work examined here demonstrates a profound confidence in its audience's sophistication. 'The Semplica Girl Dairies' for instance, cannot merely be about 'the way that people of means use and abuse people without' - we 'know that already': it has to be 'ramped up' ('This Week in Fiction' par.5) to push beyond the staleness of that truism into something fresh, which Saunders does by making the horror of the girls strung up by their heads entirely ordinary, with anyone who questions it depicted as out of step with everyone else in the fictive world. E. B. White suggested that at its best, humour offers 'a kind of heightened truth - a super truth' (qtd. in Eastman 307), and Max Eastman agrees that we often laugh 'with a sense of sudden reality' (309). A startled sense of recognition at 'reality frankly spoken' (311) holds true of all the work I have chosen. July, for instance, recognises that her decision to foreground heterogeneous sexual fantasy appears radical from a conventional or conformist perspective, but proceeds regardless, and with

complete assurance in the commonality of that fantasy. Peele similarly violates convention with the casting of Catherine Keener and Bradley Whitford, icons of the 'Liberal Elite', as Missy and Dean Armitage, thus registering the received wisdom that liberals are above racism, and then demolishing that myth, upending the familiar stereotype of the 'red-neck' racist, and locating the horror much closer to home. However, while Peele relies upon his audience's narrative sophistication to tell his story (in ways which depend upon comic procedures and also those of the horror genre, whose self-reflexivity acknowledges that you've seen it all before), his work notably reveals a lack of faith in the audience's capacities, as demonstrated by the film's careful negotiations with the racism of the dominant visual regime.

Meanwhile in Antrim's novel, deep-rooted cultural assumptions are also problematized, as he reveals the violence latent in the supposedly frictionless homogeneity of a white, heterosexual and middle-class community. His approach is distinct, however, in that the extreme figurations of *Elect Mr Robinson* are avowedly allegoric, aiming at 'clarity and obscurity both' (Fletcher 73). Angus Fletcher suggests that '[e]nigma, and not always decipherable enigma, appears to be allegory's most cherished function,' (73) and Antrim's deliberate obscurity offers another way of transcending cliché.

While extremity and comedy may often be inextricable, I also suggest a distinction between the two, given that comedy often *enables* the extremity, both by ensuring the reader or the viewer's consent, and by underpinning the extremity of the figurations. As I will discuss in more detail shortly, comedy's exemption from the usual social rules can create an alternative space in which boundaries can be safely transgressed, thus allowing for profound challenges to habitual ways of thinking about sensitive subjects. This comic outrageousness or excess is paradoxically

allied to a profoundly pragmatic use of comedy's materialism, which helps to ground or embed the extremity of the work's abstract or fantastical aspect. In examining these elements of the work I hope to demonstrate that rather than being peripheral or incidental, comedy is in fact integral to how the work functions.

A note on terminology is necessary before I proceed. While I favour the term 'comedy' and 'comic' in characterising the extent to which humour is foregrounded in the material, I recognise the terms might be contentious. In his overview of the comic genre, Andrew Stott similarly hesitates over the use of 'comedy', arguing that 'humour' offers more freedom, as 'a specific tone operating free from generic restraints' (2). Comedy, as a 'reasonably graspable literary form' (Stott 1), is both more restrictive - implying a broadly optimistic form for instance - and more troubled by diffuse associations, given the bewildering array of styles and sub-divisions that are labelled as comedy, including farce, burlesque, parody, satire and irony, as well as cartoons, sitcoms, films, stand-up, impressionists, and caricatures. The association with so-called 'light entertainment' has contributed to comedy's perceived frivolity, and its frequent characterisation as a fundamentally dishonest social palliative. This has contributed to the disdain for labels such as the 'comic novel' and 'comic writing', and as a result, as Sam Leith observes, '[n]ot many writers self-identify unhesitatingly as "comic novelists" (par.5). There is thus a certain appeal in trying to re-claim the term. However, to describe the works simply as comedies would be misleading, precisely because of that implication of a 'safe,...unconsidered and trivialised space of entertainment' (MacDowell 3). Although safety plays a crucial part in the efficacy of the work in this project, I argue that these works are very far from escapist.

In discussing the problem of definition, I must also attend to the larger issue of methodology. Emboldened by Rita Felski's advocacy of 'postcritical reading', those 'pragmatic and experimental modes of engagement which are not pre-fortified by general theories' (*Limits of Critique* 173), I have approached the texts without a rigid and systematic methodology, responding with a flexible and pragmatic use of theoretical writing. I have chosen not to systematically apply a specific theory of comedy to each artist, although I do rely heavily upon one mainstay of comic theory throughout, that of incongruity, as I will discuss shortly. Likewise, I am not positing an entirely new comic theory, although my emphasis upon obliviousness as an engine for humour and comic pleasure tries to get close. Instead I am trying to attend to the use of comedy as a strategy for effecting multiple responses: intimacy, recognition, attachment, de-familiarisation, celebration and catharsis among others, all in the service of confronting the unbearable.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski argues that critical pride at a 'lack of susceptibility to a text's address' (54) is misplaced and calls instead for a less antagonistic methodology which insists upon the agency of the text and allows it to gradually yield 'up its interpretative riches' rather than 'being probed for its unconscious contradictions' (66). This echoes my own inclinations in this project, her argument supporting my conviction that it is through submission rather than aggression, openness rather than guardedness, that one comes to an understanding of a text. By allowing the work in this project to work on me, rather than me on it, I have found my preconceptions and projections challenged. In the case of George Saunders, for example, my initial attempts to read his work 'anthropologically', for evidence about class, were turned upside down, as I realised that the accounts of poverty in his work were steadfastly undramatised, were indeed

ingeniously de-specularised, in ways that precisely refused my anthropological intention. In working on Miranda July's novel, my preconceptions about pornography were radically challenged: feminism for me necessitated 'a blanket condemnation of any explicit representation of sexuality or sexualised violence' (Felski, 'Redescriptions' 135), but under the influence of *The First Bad Man* I came to understand the limitations of that perspective. And, perhaps most significantly, Jordan Peele's film, *Get Out*, revealed the extent of my own white privilege, illuminating the strictures under which black artists labour - the ways in which they are, as Toni Morrison has written of black writers, 'at some level always conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of reader that understands itself to be 'universal' or race free' (xii). It is harder to quantify the effects of Donald Antrim's fiction - his work has made me feel accompanied and acknowledged to an extraordinary degree, and yet also often wholly confounded. Antrim has largely refused to comment upon his novels, and this has helped preserve their mystery. Indeed, I have struggled with the absence of authorial elucidation in his case, given the usefulness of such insight elsewhere in the thesis. At a moment when 'the protocols of hermeneutic suspicion' are being questioned, Andrew Hoberek et al. notice the growing critical acceptability of authorial commentary, to the extent that 'we don't feel compelled to eliminate questions of authorial agency, aspiration or personality to fulfil the interests of ideological critique', and I agree with their sense that 'there's a real opportunity to integrate into criticism details of what writers think they're doing' (41).

My chapter on George Saunders relies particularly heavily upon one of his own insights about the significance of those occasions 'when a perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought produces a phrase stripped of habituality or familiarity'

(‘What Makes’ par.3). This comment about one of the foremost comic mechanisms of his work helped reveal how central the deliberate use of unsophisticated or inarticulate narrators is in his short fiction, both as part of his commitment to presenting sympathetic working-class characters, and in effecting the immediacy of his work. As I will demonstrate, all three of the main theories of comedy - superiority, relief and incongruity - provide some explanation for the effectiveness of Saunders’s use of the ‘too-direct expression of a thought’; superiority characterised most famously by Thomas Hobbes as a ‘sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly’ (46); while relief is primarily associated with Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, which outlines his conviction that jokes operate much like dreams in allowing for the expression of repressed impulses, aggression and sexuality in particular. Comic incongruity, which uses deliberate dissonance or unlikely juxtaposition to play with expectation, is perhaps the most ubiquitous, and also underpins much of the comedy elsewhere in the project.

Saunders has noted the significance of Kurt Vonnegut for his development as a writer, acknowledging the degree to which Vonnegut’s refusal of ‘the usual conceptual packaging’ (‘Mr Vonnegut’ 80) informs his own economy of description. While Saunders’s admiration for Mark Twain is also clear, the influence seems less overt, but I suggest that the impact of Huck Finn’s characterisation is, in fact, substantial; most clearly upon his artless narrators, who are so significant in establishing a working-class presence that is not defined by trauma. I would argue that Huck Finn is an influence not just upon Saunders’s fiction but upon his self expression more generally, which demonstrates an abiding (and very unusual)

determination to avoid purely conceptual, abstract or 'fancy language' ('Mr Vonnegut' 74).

In examining Saunders's artless narrators, I use Freud's insights into naivety as a 'type of the comic' (*Jokes* 182), but it is in the subsequent chapter, on Miranda July's sexually explicit novel, *The First Bad Man*, that the function of naivety as a way of disarming readerly inhibition becomes most apparent. Freud describes naivety as an occasion when 'someone completely disregards an inhibition because it is not present in him', and because we recognise this as naivety rather than 'impudence' we cannot be 'indignant' and laugh instead (*Jokes* 182). This conforms to his larger theory of comic pleasure as the redistribution of the mental energy usually necessary for social conformity, and thus repression; on 'hearing the naive remark', the 'inhibitory expenditure which we usually make suddenly becomes unutilizable...and it is discharged by laughter' (*Jokes* 182). The naivety of July's protagonist 'overcomes the inhibitions of shame and respectability' (*Jokes* 133) and disarms any indignation, or squeamishness about what Freud calls 'smut' (*Jokes* 185), thus allowing July to address sex and sexuality in unconventional, even extreme, ways.

One of the ways in which July's novel is startling, lies in its effectiveness in overturning preconceptions about the 'Comic Novel' as a peculiarly masculine enterprise. Jonathan Coe suggests that 'the term somehow carries a whiff of the bar room and the gentlemen's club' (Leith par.11), a gendered, dated template arguably initiated by Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954); and its declared interest in 'difficulties with girls' (Leith par.9). Leith observes that 'it is more often male writers who are cited as being squarely in [the comic] tradition', listing the following as representative: 'Mark Twain, James Thurber, Carl Hiaasen, the Grossmiths and

Saki, Steve Toltz and Pauls Murray and Beatty, Joseph Connolly, Christopher Brookmyre and Tom Sharpe, Ben Elton and Stephen Fry, Douglas Adams, Jonathan Ames and both Amises, Howard Jacobson and Michael Frayn and so on' (par.10). While a comprehensive history of the comic novel is outside the scope of this project, suffice it to say that female writers have traditionally not dominated accounts of comic fiction, and *The First Bad Man* might be regarded as a gleeful trespasser into a mostly male preserve. Indeed, I suggest that parallels for July's achievement are not to be found in literature, but in stand-up comedy, where women are similarly invading a domain conventionally understood to be masculine. Playing off expectations of feminine modesty and passivity, female comics use sexual explicitness, profanity and aggression to effect dissonance or incongruity in order to provoke laughter, in ways which are both funny and freeing, and July makes use of similar strategies. In addition to stand-up, I also employ insights gleaned from conceptual art to further illuminate her approach; focusing in particular upon her use of deadpan, a deliberate withholding of affective signalling that denies the reader the usual emotional cues, a crucial constituent in the novel's peculiarly 'ground zero' quality. A notably under-theorised mode, the analysis that does exist for deadpan emerges from its significance for conceptual art.

Chapter 3 explores Donald Antrim's novel, *Elect Mr Robinson For A Better World*, applying Freud's insights into naivety to pedantry, another 'type of the comic' (*Jokes* 182). The pedant, based on the school and university teacher, is a long established comic type, 'common in farces of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', as one of 'the comic stereotypes built up from the dominating characteristics of each of the trades and professions' (Calder 65), and a notable feature of Molière's plays. Antrim re-works this seemingly tired comic convention to great effect, using it to

deepen the banality of the novel's suburban location, upon which hinges the incongruity of the psychological disturbance evidenced by the inhabitants. Rather than merely an additional element of farce, pedantry is therefore crucial to the structure of the novel. Moreover, as the abiding characteristic of the novel's narrator, the lack of discrimination effected by his pedantry also helps ensure that the novel is, as Jeffrey Eugenides points out, 'satirical without being satire' (xiv). As with Saunders, this diffuse satire replaces any simplistic conventional satiric method and ensures complacency is impossible. This is a point worth emphasising, given my avowed interest in analysing comedy rather than the satire that is considered the 'more appropriately 'serious' object of academic study' (Hutcheon 25).

In order to further elucidate Antrim's work, I use Isabel Cristina Pinedo's insight into the utility of comedy in horror films to create 'proximity to the terror at hand' (112), to examine his self-reflexive use of comedy's power of attachment. Whereas Antrim problematises that attachment, as I discuss in the final chapter of the project, Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* actively exploits it, using comedy to engineer identification with the film's two leads. Given the urgency of Peele's attempt to render 'emotionally accessible' (Pinedo 107) the horror of racism, the film's scenes of broad comedy also function as an essential release valve, designed to ensure no one walks out. In addition, I argue that the film's use of comedy provides a showcase of black comic gifts, thus countering its central focus upon trauma. And just as Miranda July can be set alongside the female comics who are claiming space and freedom for women, Peele's film can similarly be seen to build upon the public articulation of black experience by comedians such as Richard Pryor, Dave Chappelle, Chris Rock, and indeed, Peele's previous incarnation, the duo Key and Peele. This mainstream exposure has helped to educate the dominant

white culture, while also enabling what Mel Watkins calls 'a public purging of the embarrassments and frustrations built up over decades of concealing real attitudes and cultural preferences' (Watkins 559,560). *Get Out* builds upon racial comedy's forthright address of the centrality of race, and similarly works to educate white viewers while providing catharsis for a black audience.

Chapter 1

The presumption that highly coloured, distinctive work must perform lack subtlety is frequently at work in criticism of literary fiction. In Nicholas Dames's account of recent developments in the short story for example, he notices an increasing 'hookiness', a quality derived from mainstream forms, such as pop songs. He explains that a hook 'isn't just a technical device to catch readerly attention. It's also a temporal schema: a world without development, escape, or transformation. It is time compressed to a kind of bad infinity, the thing on which we are snagged' (par.15). For Dames, George Saunders is an exemplary creator of 'hooky' stories, 'parables for what Elaine Scarry has called "thinking in an emergency"' (par.17). He suggests that such 'opportunistic' work avoids the larger responsibilities of fiction, 'to be the history of the present, to teach empathy, to save culture' (par.11). Mark McGurl has similar concerns, detailing 'the phenomenon of contemporary literary fiction no one could miss: its eager embrace of the apparatus of once-tabooed genre fiction, in particular the forms of science fiction, horror, and fantasy' (par.20). McGurl sees the embrace of 'genre effects' ('the equivalent of special effects in movies') as rather anxious, a way of seducing 'distracted readers', by 'reminding them of fiction's capacity to produce its version of the richly artificial pleasures on offer everywhere else in contemporary mass culture' (par.21). McGurl suggests 'the ubiquitous postapocalyptic variant' (citing among others Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (par.21) as a particular instance of this tendency. Like Dames, he wonders if this development is somewhat opportunistic, a sign of 'a crisis of faith' in the potential of realism (par.20). This fiction's exploitation of the 'supremely dramatic

narrative effect' of the 'apocalyptic edge' (McGurl par.21) might be seen to evoke what Dames sees as the pessimism of "thinking in an emergency" (par.17), as opposed to any commitment to sustainability or 'ongoingness', and 'the implicit optimism of novelistic time' (par.11).

James Lasdun displays a similar suspicion in his review of Ben Marcus's 'landmark' short story anthology of 2015, a collection which Lasdun sees as leaning towards a 'brashly stylised aesthetic' (par.8), and which reveals the influence of both mainstream culture and genre fiction. Many of the stories are 'baroque, knowing, hyper-ironised creations' which 'draw on genre fiction, YA novels, satirical TV shows and standup comedy' (par.7). Once again Saunders is mentioned as representative: Lasdun sees his 'aggressively reductive', 'cartoonish' style as an influence in the move away from 'psychology and emotion' towards 'high-concept metaphors' and 'lavish effects of narrative voice' (par.9). In all these accounts, there is a clear ambivalence towards the tendency being described: the work is somehow dubious or excessive in using 'lavish' (Lasdun par.9) or 'show-stopping' (Dames par.15) 'special effects' (McGurl par.20).¹ These reports concern developments in literary fiction rather than film, but their concerns are frequently shared by film critics, who tend to perceive 'high concept' films as 'lowest common denominator filmmaking

¹ James Woods expresses a similar anxiety about the intense and fragmentary nature of contemporary fiction, suggesting that while the fragment is 'vivid and provisional, inhabits the vital moment, and renders the world in a cascade of tiled perceptions', the fragmentary tendency in fiction also works to prevent a novel's ability to make 'large connections, larger coherences', and prohibits 'the expansion and deepening of its themes' ('Making the Cut' par.14). This has a clear correspondence with what Fredric Jameson says about the 'temporal disconnection and fragmentation' of contemporary cultural production, which he finds to be 'emblematic of the disappearance of certain relationships to history and the past.' He worries that 'a text today' is viewed as 'the production of discontinuous sentences without any larger unifying forms' and in film, arguably the more influential model, the shift is even more pronounced, the 'change in times of the average camera movement from 7.5 to 3.5 seconds' providing a 'training in an increased tempo' (*Jameson on Jameson* 46), which effectively reduces attention spans.

featuring one-dimensional characters, mechanical plots, and a high-gloss style' (Kuhn and Westwell 35).

All these accounts share an anxiety about the potential effects of the excessive stimulation in degrading attention and consciousness; more specifically, 'shortening attention spans, diminishing the temporal reach of cognitive effort, and dangerously accelerating textual consumption' (Dames, *The Physiology* 5). For those who prize literary fiction's cultural role in providing 'withdrawal, retreat, and even sanctified self-communion' as 'an antidote to the assault of stimuli presented by modern, media-rich existence' (*The Physiology* 8), the proclivity for drama or 'hookiness' is troubling, situating literature as another facet of the larger cultural pathology, rather than a refuge from it (8). In this model, while literary fiction is a refuge, film is often the key culprit. Jonathan Beller, for example, is categorical about film's pivotal role in establishing the 'attention economy', a training ground for the internet's ultimate exploitation and monetisation of attention. "Cinema" means the production of instrumental images through the organisation of animated material' and works through 'the capitalisation of the aesthetic faculties and imaginary practices of viewers' (14), such that consciousness becomes 'an afterthought of the spectacle' (15). 'High concept' cinema in particular has consequences for the quality of viewers' consciousness, 'with viewers no longer engaging with rounded characters and a story arc' (Kuhn and Westwell 35).

These critiques clearly demonstrate the resilience of Fredric Jameson's assertions about postmodernism: the concern about spectacle and irony reflecting his sense of the 'depthlessness' of 'a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum' (*Postmodernism* 6); a 'superficiality' (*Postmodernism* 9) which empties out history, context, and subject. The eclecticism and opportunism of the 'genre

effects' and the plundering of other forms corresponds with Jameson's sense of postmodernism's drive to 'cannibalize', while the 'hooky', 'cartoonish', or highly conceptual aspects of the work speak to his diagnosis of a postmodern crisis in both representation and historicity, where interiority, subtlety and context are lost. The critics mentioned above clearly share Jameson's diagnosis of the complicity of postmodernism in not only registering but also perpetuating the pathologies of the postmodern. I will discuss in more detail the question of literary periodisation shortly but it is important to acknowledge here the continuing relevance of Jameson's arguments despite the frequent reports of the demise of postmodernism as a paradigm.

Given the frequency with which Saunders is cited as an exemplar of some of these 'extreme' tendencies, it is interesting that he also articulates an ambivalence about the risks of an 'autoswerve' towards 'drama, violence, darkness, speed', when he talks about the importance of 'steering towards the rapids' ('George Saunders 1' par.7) in his own writing process: 'steering toward the choice that gives off incrementally more power' or 'energy' (par.5). Saunders worries this is of a piece with a contemporary literary fashion for the 'obligatory-edgy' (par.33), useful as 'a way of introducing energy, and/or an appropriate overtone of skepticism' as well as 'a way of enlarging the frame, of accounting for the complications of real life' (par.35), but also potentially a compulsion towards both the 'hyper' and the ironic. He cites the example of his short story 'Victory Lap,' which began as 'an uninflected picture of a teenage girl', a homage to Chekhov's 'After the Theatre', but didn't seem to 'qualify as a story'. 'Suddenly, a guy shows up, and a few drafts later, turns out this guy is a potential kidnapper', and now the story has 'energy' ('George Saunders 1' par.26). With characteristic candour, Saunders wonders about the degree to

which this need for drama or irony to justify a story is ‘an acquired and automatic thing’ (par.22); like Dames, McGurl and Lasdun, his concern is about a wider cultural shift. While I believe Dames et al underestimate the potential emotional realism and subtlety of a ‘brashly stylised’, ‘high concept’ aesthetic, Saunders’s comments are useful in highlighting an ambivalence inherent in the work that I consider in this project, which both registers, and to a degree, perpetuates contemporary pathologies.² Given the abundance of what Will Self calls ‘grotesque mise-en-scène’ (par.16) - the excesses of reality television and live streaming, content in which highly explicit sex and violence become commonplace - we must ask ourselves, if extremity is the order of the day, what does this do to artistic form? Saunders offers one answer to that question when he suggests that ‘drama, violence, darkness, speed’ (‘George Saunders 1’ par.22) become automatic.

If extremity is endemic, then so too is comedy, the central preoccupation of my project. Indeed a similar question can be posed of comedy: if, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai suggest, ‘people are increasingly supposed to be funny all the time’ (236), what does this do to artistic form? Ngai essays one suggestion in relation to the impact upon literature, noticing how ‘much “serious” postwar American literature is zany’, such ‘that one reviewer’s description of Donald Bartheleme’s *Snow White* as a “staccato burst of verbal star shells, pinwheel phrases, [and] cherry bombs of..puns and wordplay” seems applicable to the bulk of the post-1945 canon’ (*Our Aesthetic* 8).³ Given Ngai’s interest in zaniness as a

² We might see the ‘extreme figurations’ of contemporary American fiction as both symptomatic of what Baudrillard describes as our ‘loss of reality’ (*The Perfect Crime* 133), and urgent strategies to remedy it: partly pathology and partly an attempt to address that pathology.

³ The impact of stand-up comedy is particularly evident in a substantial strand of recent literature: Jarett Kobek’s *I Hate the Internet* (2016), for instance, which was influenced by comedian Stewart Lee, whose routine *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One*, Kobek describes as providing the ‘template’ for his book (par.7). The rapid-fire delivery of

contemporary pathology, which I will look at in more detail shortly, we might suggest that such literature is both registering, and potentially perpetuating contemporary pathologies. Berlant and Ngai, in their recent special issue of *Critical Inquiry*: 'Comedy: An Issue', suggest that 'it is comedy that people increasingly come to expect in the kinds of social interaction that take place in all zones of modern life - politics, education, journalism, even religion' (237). They cite Arpad Szakolczai's description of the 'commodification' of the public realm, where comedy is the virus that transforms politics into farce.⁴ In 2013 Jonathan Coe diagnosed a similar pathology, using Boris Johnson as his case study. He proposed that politicians manipulate the comic expectations of a culture of facetious cynicism in order to avoid difficult questions. For Coe, supposedly subversive comedians have paved the way for this shift, establishing laughter as the standard response in the face of political problems, a way of disclaiming responsibility and defusing discomfort. Coe provides an acute analysis of one particular instance of laughter letting Boris Johnson 'off the hook' in an episode of the satiric news show, *Have I Got News For You*, and argues that the satire of such shows have contributed to the tendency to laugh about political issues, rather than think about them. Johnson in particular 'seems to know that the laughter that surrounds him is a substitute for thought rather than its conduit:... [i]f we are chuckling at him, we are not likely to be thinking too hard about his doggedly neoliberal and pro-City agenda, let alone doing anything to counter it' (par.18). This illustrates Berlant and Ngai's point about the ways 'the

Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* (2015) also seems to be influenced by stand-up comedy (although Beatty himself does not concur). In the comments discussed at the outset of this chapter, James Lasdun notes the influence of stand-up upon contemporary literature with disapproval (par.7).

⁴ Szakolczai derives the term 'commodification' from Martin Green and John Swan's study of the diffusion of commedia dell'arte's style of humorous dissent into contemporary aesthetic culture (*The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*, 1986).

affective labour of the comedic as a socially lubricating mood commandeers comedy to enable the very contradictions and stresses to which it also points' (236).

Comedy's ability to let people 'off the hook' is also at work in Donald Trump's political success: where, as Emily Nussbaum suggests, 'his jokes let him say the unspeakable and get away with it' ('How Jokes' par.4) (not that his notorious remarks are jokes; rather, they exploit 'the shape of a joke' (par.6)).⁵ This is what William Cheng calls 'comedic alibis,' which 'can be so powerful that they drag errors and faux pas into the realm of respectability, enabling even the most egregious ethical or aesthetic failing to pass for ..well, passing' (533).⁶ Nussbaum suggests several socio-cultural comic developments behind Trump's success, citing an environment where the distinction between comedy and news had become increasingly blurred, where viewers 'had spent years getting their news delivered via comedy, and vice versa,' both scrambling for visibility in 'the attention economy, where entertainment mattered most' ('How Jokes' par.27).⁷ She also describes a

⁵ His remark about John McCain for example, 'I like people who weren't captured' (Nussbaum 'How Jokes' par.6).

⁶ Michael Schulman explores one problematic instance of the comedic as an alibi or 'a socially lubricating mood' with his analysis of the 2017 Emmy Awards, when Stephen Colbert introduced Sean Spicer, 'the erstwhile White House press secretary. Wheeling a mobile podium onstage—a nod to Melissa McCarthy's scathing portrayal of him on "Saturday Night Live"—Spicer announced, "This will be the largest audience to witness the Emmys, period." ...But Spicer shouldn't get to be in on the joke. He told a ridiculous lie about the crowd size at the Inauguration on behalf of his ridiculous boss. When people say not to "normalize" such transgressions, they're talking about stuff like this. Please, late-night hosts: don't write them endearing gags—and, for God's sake, don't rub their hair' (par.3).

⁷ There is abundant literature on this blurring of the line between news and entertainment: see for example *News as Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (2007) by Daya Kishan Thussu. Some commentators, like Julie Webber and Rob Wilkie, argue that political satire has spearheaded this development, focusing in particular upon the many American comedy shows with a focus upon news. Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* is often cited as the original; others include *The Colbert Report*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, *The Rachel Maddow Show* and *Late Night with Seth Meyers*. While Amber Day's *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate* (2011) argues that such shows create effective 'counterpublics' which can work to alter the political landscape, Webber suggests that 'the consumption of such comedy' may merely provide empty 'reassurance that there is indeed "dissent"' (187). Similarly Wilkie argues that television satire safeguards the status quo with 'strategies of non-engagement' (606).

'global army of trolls', whose aggressive, anarchic humour had been limited to inside jokes on 'anonymous Internet boards', but during Trump's campaign, developed into highly contagious 'memes' with 'real world' traction: '[I]ike Trump's statements, their quasi-comical memeing and name-calling was so destabilising, flipping between serious and silly, that it warped the boundaries of discourse' (par.17).⁸ Berlant and Ngai wonder if 'an aggrieved sense of having been denied laughter' partly 'explains rage at feminism' (241) and Nussbaum similarly acknowledges that 'payback for the rigidity of identity politics' (par.16) might explain the relish for Trump's legitimisation of insulting humour.

While Trump's success can be read as a spectacular instance of the pervasiveness of the comic mode (and we must of course, be wary of too simplistic a reading of the complex reasons behind his election),⁹ Berlant and Ngai are more concerned with the ways in which comedy has come to shape expectations on a granular level. They notice the importance of the comic to social membership, functioning as 'an overarching tone of late capitalist sociability' (237) which affects 'how people self-consciously play as well as work together and the spaces where they do so (including Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and YouTube), such that 'the demand for play and fun as good and necessary is everywhere inflecting what was once called alienation' (237). Nicholas Holm agrees, suggesting that 'so

Jonathan Coe's argument about the complicity of *Have I Got News For You* clearly resonates with this position, as does his conviction that 'laughter is not just ineffectual as a form of protest, but... it actually replaces protest' (par.10).

⁸ "We memed a President into existence," Chuck Johnson, a troll who had been banned from Twitter, bragged after the election. These days, he's reportedly consulting on appointments at the White House' ('How Jokes' par.17).

⁹However, Lauren Berlant for one is adamant: 'Pleasure won this election, you know. Pleasure and violence are all bound up in each other for this election' ('Pleasure Won' par.16)

profoundly is humour knitted through the fabric of our cultural and social orders, that it is experienced as a demand, rather than an option' (7).

This insistence upon positivity is explored in more detail by Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*, which analyses the 'demand for play and fun' as part of the affective labour (defined as 'the production of affects and social relationships' (7) so essential to the postindustrial working model, with its lack of distinction between work and play, public and private.¹⁰ She reads contemporary zaniness, as an 'aesthetic ... explicitly about the politically ambiguous convergence of cultural and occupational performance [or playing and labouring] under what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the new "connexionist" spirit of capitalism' (7), which encourages 'workers, through a rhetoric of "networking" to bring their abilities to communicate, socialise, and even play to work' (8). Zaniness, 'a ludic yet noticeably stressful style' (8) is 'hyper-attuned and responsive' (182), reflecting the anxious precarity of flexible network capitalism, whose new model for the worker is marked 'by an increasing extraction of surplus value from affect and subjectivity' (188).¹¹ In this reading, then, like 'drama, violence, darkness, speed', comedy is also potentially a 'training ground for industrialized consciousness' (Dames, *The Physiology* 8); a consciousness tutored in denial, and thus able to avoid the full realisation or articulation of the tragic implications of late capitalism.

¹⁰ There are several other excellent accounts of the mechanics of affective labour, for example *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) by Arlie Russell Hochschild, and Eva Illouz's *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2007).

¹¹ Ngai's insights into zaniness are a significant addition to comic theory, and challenge the canonical theories of comedy in thought provoking ways: for instance her suggestion that the 'zany qua aesthetic of incessant doing, or perpetual improvisation and adaption to projects' invites us to invert Henri Bergson's famous thesis about comedy as 'something mechanical encrusted on something living' (an argument I will outline in more detail shortly). If Bergson argues that an individual's inability to cope with changing social situations – their social inflexibility – makes them comical, then 'perhaps there is something fundamentally anti-comical and even pathological -that is, fundamentally zany - about those do nothing else' (*Our Aesthetic* 189).

While the increasing demand for comedy is perhaps relatively easy to historicise, the argument that extremity is newly pervasive is more difficult to situate securely. In his account of the 'New Sensibility', George Cotkin argues that 'excess' characterized much American cultural output from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s, and his sweeping survey includes, among others, the 'riotous maximalism' (1) of writers like Norman Mailer and Gore Vidal; Hunter S Thompson's 'gonzo' style; the explicitness of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, and the self-lacerating performances of artist Chris Burden. Cotkin argues that these artists celebrated 'excess as a style, a way of seeing and presenting the world'; one which 'was riveted on a common core of subjects: violence, liberation (especially sexual), and madness' (14). For Cotkin, the once transgressive elements of this 'culture of excess' have effectively been mainstreamed (333); he cites Johnny Knoxville of the reality tv series *Jackass*, shooting himself after donning a bullet proof vest – a form of 'excess in performance' (337) which superficially resembles Chris Burden's work, but 'packaged for ready consumption' (335) and transformed into fatuous entertainment.

While excess is an undeniable feature of the artists Cotkin profiles, there is a sense in which his survey is so capacious as to be rather dilute. For my part, while the cultural tumult of the 60s, so significant in Cotkin's analysis, provides one point of origin for the notion of extremity – one which allows for an acknowledgement of Bartheleme and Vonnegut, writers who are undeniably important for Antrim and Saunders - it is instead the 1990s which I wish to position as a particularly significant moment. *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World*, published in 1993, is the earliest of the texts I consider, and it can be usefully associated with other output of

the 1990s; Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991)¹² for example, and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996); along with Quentin Tarentino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994); and both *The End of Alice* (1996) and *Music for Torching* (1999) by A.M Homes. Violent, explicit and often savagely funny, these works share a distinctness and a coherence that Cotkin's archive seems to lack. I think it is in this period, in the artistic reaction to the conservatism of the Reagan-era (itself a reaction against the liberalization of the 60s), that we see the entrenchment of the 'drama, violence, darkness, speed' that is so endemic today. The committed brutality and explicitness of this storytelling - torture, child murder, pedophilia, incest, scenes of cannibalism, necrophilia, sadomasochism - seems a crucial moment in extending the possibilities of the sayable. It is an extension that is bound up with postmodern stylistics, in particular the emphasis upon language play and textuality characteristic of the general cultural tendency towards dematerialization.¹³

As Leo Benedictus noted recently, the preoccupation with 'extreme material' (par.13) remains a dominant contemporary trend, with multiple bestselling novels featuring 'torture, coprophilia, child rape and murder' (*Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh

¹² The period's preoccupation with extremity has been noted: A.M Donnelly for instance, in her account of 'blank fiction' – novels and films such as *American Psycho*, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) – which are 'characterized by their simplistic plots, undeveloped characters, choppy narration, reliance on popular cultural references, and depictions of graphic sexuality and/or violence' (11). She argues that the violence is often 'met with apathy all around, by perpetrators and victims alike' thus 'forcing the notion of an inappropriate emotional response' to the forefront of the work (3), and implicitly critiquing the wider social rationalisation of violence.

¹³ Peter Boxall suggests that the postmodern concern with immateriality is the combined result of new technological and political formations, in particular, 'the liquidation of capital, the invention of electronic communication, the dawning of an era of instantaneity, [and] the emergence of a global context for all of our interactions', all of which have led to 'a profound disjunction' with 'our real, material environments' (9). Literary and critical theory have also played a part in 'the general emphasis on the textuality of our environments, to the neglect of their material realities', and Boxall cites both 'the theorisations of the postcolonial condition' as well as those of 'the politics of race, gender, sexuality, class' (15); Judith Butler is one theorist he singles out, as 'associated with a postmodern tendency to disavow the body, to see the body as an immaterial effect of narrative' (16).

(2015) and *The Lives of Others* by Neel Mukherjee (2014); 'violent or degrading sex,' (*How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti (2010), *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* by Eimear McBride (2013), *Adèle* by Leïla Slimani (2014), and 'compulsive promiscuity, self-harm and drug-taking' (*Love Me Back* by Merritt Tierce (2013)).¹⁴ But while there is a clear continuity between the work of the 1990s and these contemporary novels, there is also a sense of a growing seriousness or earnestness in the treatment or handling of 'extreme material'. This might be indicative of a larger cultural shift, away from the postmodernist traits of deconstruction, irony, pastiche, and relativism, towards what Adam Kelly and others have termed a 'new sincerity' ('The New Sincerity' 197), a move characterized in part by a renewed attention to material embodiment. The lapsing of postmodernism as a cultural dominant has been much discussed, and while the idea of what Kazuo Ishiguro describes as 'a new seriousness' (261), may seem at odds with the pervasive demand for humour, there is a sense in which irony or 'chic bitterness' (Sloterdijk 5) no longer has the purchase it once did. As Benedictus states, the 'social value' of 'extreme material' is now marked (par.13).

In my project this sense of social value or purpose is certainly evident – particularly in the work of both Miranda July and Jordan Peele, where ideas of celebration and catharsis are central - but the work I consider is also set apart through its use of comedy. I have suggested that comedy and extremity often overlap (both share features such as hyperbole, transgression and incongruity), but the two are also distinct and I will examine how comedy can both enable and temper

¹⁴ Further additions to this list might include Alissa Nutting's *Tampa* (2013), and *Maidenhead* by Tamara Faith Berger (2012), both of which feature violent, degrading and/or compulsive sex. It is interesting to note the degree to which women are spearheading this preoccupation with extremity – possibly reflecting an increasing sense of liberation in confronting challenging and/or 'ugly' experience.

extremity. And while all the storytelling I discuss is highly conceptual – and thus might be seen to align with older, postmodern impulses - it is also very much engaged with both emotion and materiality, the latter largely through comic means. Beyond the fiction and film examined in this project, other contemporary work can be seen to foreground humour to a similar degree, both as part of a strategy for enabling extremity, and as an intrinsic part of their ‘forthright address of the Full Now’ (Lethem par.1); Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout* (2015) for instance; along with Boots Riley’s *Sorry to Bother You* (2018). The former confronts aspects of African-American experience with extravagant, caustic and yet heartfelt satire, while Riley’s film, similarly surreal and ‘high-concept’, is also passionately committed in its analysis of racism and economic injustice.

I turn now to look at the issue of materiality in more detail, in order to elaborate upon my earlier suggestion that comedy has a pragmatic function in grounding or embedding the extremity of the work’s abstract or fantastical aspects. Comedy’s preoccupation with the material has often been noted - Jean Paul, for instance, argues that ‘the comic cannot exist without sensuousness’ and whereas ‘the serious always emphasizes the general...and spiritualizes things...the comic writer...fastens our mind... upon physical detail’ (qtd. in Silk chap.1, note 183). Pirandello makes a similar point, noticing the ways in which comedy pays close heed to specificity: ‘art generally abstracts and concentrates; that is, it catches and represents the essential and characteristic ideality of both men and things. Now it seems to the humorist that all this oversimplifies nature and tends to make life too reasonable or at least too coherent’ (142). I suggest that this tendency ‘towards the material and away from the metaphysical’ (Silk 94) is very evident in the work I

examine and is used to produce a kind of comic realism that effectively tempers the abstraction or extremity of the allegory.

However, this association with the concrete and the finite should not blind us to the ways in which comedy is also often inherently excessive. Alenka Zupančič notices the frequency with which comedy is characterised as an immanent form, turning from the 'universal values of the beautiful, the just, the good, the moral...towards the individual or the particular (as always and necessarily imperfect, limited and always slightly idiotic)' (38), but she rejects the conventional thesis that 'comedy brings us down to earth from our identification with abstract ideals by exposing the universal's contamination by particularity' (Ngai, 'Theory' 476). Zupančič argues instead that it is important to attend to the ways in which 'comedy's supposedly unrealistic insistence on the indestructible' constitutes 'a kind of excess rather than a finitude' (47). And certainly this excess is apparent in all the storytelling I consider: from the drastic humiliation heaped upon Saunders's protagonist in his short story 'The Semplica Girl Dairies', and similarly upon July's narrator Cheryl in *The First Bad Man*, and the indestructibility of both in their obliviousness to it; to Antrim's protagonist, Pete, who is tireless in his pursuit of perverse satisfaction, and Peele's character, Rod, who demonstrates a similarly indefatigable persistence. These instances of indestructibility help demonstrate the degree to which comedy does not 'fully renounce the site of the infinite' (Zupančič 59).

In itself a form of excess, indestructibility - often produced through obliviousness - is also one of the most effective means by which comedy ensures the reader's (or the viewer's) consent to extreme material. While the notion of comic license has previously only been used in relation to jokes and/or stand-up, it is one obvious way in which storytelling more generally can function independently of

social norms. This freedom is frequently emphasised in accounts of the joke as a marginal reality exempt from the usual rules. John Morreall, for instance, suggests that jokes operate without concern for protocols such as decorum or decency. He suggests that '[w]hen we are being funny, the usual intentions, presuppositions and consequences of what we say and do are not in force' ('Humour' 68); '[w]e exaggerate wildly, express emotions we don't feel, and insult people we care about (*Comic Relief* 2). Sophie Quirk agrees, noticing that joking provides 'an abstract safe space in which jokers can operate outside of the restrictions which govern most regular interaction' (36). Similarly, Mary Douglas argues that a joke 'represents a temporary suspension of the social structure, or rather it makes a little disturbance in which the particular structuring of society becomes less relevant than another', thus offering 'freedom from form' (365). And Lauren Berlant also alludes to the comic disposition's freedom from the 'real' when she points out that if a comedian 'says something outrageous' in his 'commitment to the joke...he's going to follow it through to its logical end, even if the logical end is completely untethered from the real' ('Pleasure Won' par.15). Clearly an equivocal practice, the lack of distinction between the comic and non-comic modalities can have ruinous consequences for public discourse, as outlined above in the discussion of the political use and abuse of comic discourse. However, I want to emphasise instead the potential benefits to creating a space exempt from the usual social rules, a relatively safe space in which to explore risky or taboo concepts.

Miranda July's novel, *The First Bad Man*, and Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* offer the most straightforward examples of comic license creating an alternative space: in the former, the novel's comedy - largely created by way of the comic device of a naive persona - provides July the freedom to reconceptualise subjectivity

and sexuality, by revealing ‘the supposedly marginal operations of fantasy at the centre of all our perceptions, beliefs and actions’ (Burgin 2). Underpinned by a strong sense of social purpose, the novel’s combination of the erotic and the comic helps forge an alternative erotics, as July attempts to dispel the anxiety and shame that so often restricts thinking about sexuality. Using Freud’s insights into the freedom assigned to the naive speaker - an individual who ‘completely disregards an inhibition because it is not present in him’ (*Jokes* 182), I explore the ways in which the naivety of July’s protagonist, Cheryl, overcomes our inhibitions and disarms any indignation, or squeamishness about the novel’s sexually explicit content.

Freud’s examination of naivety occurs in *Jokes and their Relationship to the Unconscious*, as part of his larger investigation into the ways in which comic exemption is won. Describing the pressure of ‘critical judgement’ and ‘the inhibitions of shame and respectability’ (133) that jokes must overcome (through complex techniques such as condensation, distraction or displacement), Freud suggests that jokes are able to ‘open sources of pleasure that have become inadmissible’ (103), like violence, obscenity and nonsense.¹⁵ He notices that because the naive speaker does not possess the inhibitions of criticism or shame, naivety’s inadvertent humour is able to ‘produce nonsense and smut directly and without compromise’ (185). License has to be worked for in jokes, but in naivety it is automatic - and we extend it because someone is trying ‘in good faith to draw a serious conclusion on the basis of... uncorrected ignorance’ (183).

¹⁵ John Limon’s gloss on Freud’s argument is helpful. He suggests that the joke is ‘an escape from criticism to a prior happiness’ (*Stand-up* 12), and in accessing such happiness, ‘we cannot estimate how much of our laughter disguises satisfactions that are distinctly unfunny’ (*Stand-up* 14).

While *July* uses comic license to address sexuality, *Get Out* uses it to overcome inhibitions about the frank discussion of race. Here too, there is a clear social purpose at work – the film carefully designed as a way of opening up the fraught conversation about race,¹⁶ while creating a ‘safe environment’ in which to purge ‘fears and discomforts’ (‘Jordan Peele’ par.19). Largely through the comic framing of the interactions between the protagonist, Chris, and his best friend Rod, the film avails itself of the explicitness won by African-American stand-ups. The characters’ easy, discursive conversations showcase the linguistic fluency and powerful sense of community brought to mainstream attention by comedians like Richard Pryor, David Chappelle and Chris Rock. Peele further consolidates his access to this hard-won license through the casting of the stand-up comedian, Lil Rel Howery as Rod, as well as through his own widely known background in comedy, as half of the comedy duo, Key and Peele. While the tension of the film often deliberately denies laughter, Rod’s scenes of broad comedy have a very specific psychic utility in countering the film’s palpable anguish and outrage and allowing for a crucial degree of playfulness. Like *The First Bad Man*, the film’s comedy makes an implicit promise of survival (a promise borne out by happy endings in both cases), thus ensuring a certain degree of safety for the viewer and the reader. In this way a space is created in which boundaries can be transgressed, and significant cultural work can be achieved.

The assurance of indestructibility is, as Alenka Zupančič suggests, central to ‘the comic universe’ (28), and in Antrim’s *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World*, the promise of survival, though subtle, is also present. Antrim uses a pedant for his

¹⁶ Peele commented in interview that ‘the conversation is broken..we don’t know how to talk about race in this country’ (interview by Kovie Biakolo).

protagonist, a comic identity device, which, like July's naive persona, allows for that 'vigorous, exhilarating rebound of living things from mishap, or their artful dodging of disaster' (29) that Jack Morgan argues is so characteristic of comedy. Morgan notices the 'irrepressible vitality' (32) of comic characters like Wile E. Coyote and Inspector Clouseau, characters who are entirely undeterred by setback and humiliation, and the same indefatigability is evident in older comic folk figures, such as the Harlequin and the Fool. Morgan is building upon Suzanne Langer's theorisation of 'vital feeling' (340) or the '*élan vital*' (342), which draws out the importance of exuberance in comedy, and Antrim's hapless hero exemplifies Langer's sense of the comic archetype, 'the personified *élan vital*':

his chance adventures and misadventures ...his absurd expectations and disappointments...his whole improvised existence. He is...genuinely amoral...but in his ruefulness and dismay he is funny, because his energy is really unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move (342).

As I will show, naivety and pedantry are mechanisms that allow for a similar degree of indefatigability; through their different kinds of obliviousness, both are modes that privilege resilience and recovery, and in this way, enable consent.

For Saunders, obliviousness is also a key technique in his use of comic license. The diarist in the 'The Semplica Girl Dairies' is oblivious both to current and past humiliations, and while we delight in his capacity to rebound from mishap, it is also problematic. Only once his obtuseness is finally breached does he understand the inequity structuring his social aspirations. In 'Puppy', Saunders's handling of Marie's obliviousness, one of his protagonists, is complex: she is not obtuse enough to be funny and indeed, her self-conscious attempts at humour are sufficiently tedious to repel, but her insensitivity prevents her from seeing beyond her own trauma, and thus dooms another character to tragedy. The assurance of

indestructibility only goes so far in these stories, and the comedy eventually bleeds out, leaving us suddenly aware of our own complicity in classist and racist assumptions. The quiet aggression of the tactic is reminiscent of some stand-up comedy: the warmth and safety of the comic seduction suddenly withheld.

I have suggested that a relish for resilience and recovery is at the core of our enjoyment of obliviousness, but more than that, it offers a chance to relax our concern for the ceaseless self-consciousness and responsiveness required of us as social creatures. Interestingly, Henri Bergson sees 'absentmindedness' as 'the comic itself, drawn as nearly as possible from its very source' (65), defining it as '[i]nattention to self, and consequently to others' (65). Bergson's key example is Don Quixote, whose '[s]ystematic absentmindedness...is the most comical thing imaginable' (65). In line with his argument that laughter is purely punitive, Bergson suggests that the laughter that greets absentmindedness is an 'immediate corrective' that 'singles out and represses' it as a social vice (39). 'What life and society require of each of us is a constantly alert attention that discerns the outlines of the present situation, together with a certain elasticity of mind and body to enable us to adapt ourselves in consequence' (8). Any rigidity or 'inelasticity of character' (9) is therefore eccentric and anti-social. Bergson's characterisation of absentmindedness as 'mechanical' is part of his larger thesis that the comic is something 'mechanical encrusted on something living' (17), and he argues that as with any form of 'automatism' (8), absentmindedness is 'corrected' by laughter. However, Bergson also concedes a degree of pleasure or relief in our response:

The comic character no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member. He slackens in the attention that is due to life. He more or less resembles the absentminded. Maybe his will is here even more concerned than his intellect, and there is not so much a want of attention as lack of tension; still, in some way or another, he is absent, away from his work, taking it easy. He

abandons social convention...[and] our first impulse is to accept the invitation to take it easy. For a short time, at all events, we join the game. And that relieves us from the strain of living (87).

This can only be momentary, the 'sympathy' that underwrites it merely 'a lapse in attention' (87). In this way, Bergson's insistence upon comic laughter as ridicule prevents him from developing his insights into the empathetic aspects of comic pleasure. Reading him against the grain, however, I want to bring these incidental comments to the fore in building my case for the significance of comic absentmindedness or obliviousness as a form of comic license. Obliviousness can be used in a sustained way to avoid shame and the fear of offence, crucial when addressing difficult, taboo subjects.

Our pleasure in obliviousness is partly pleasure in witnessing and sympathetically participating in the avoidance of humiliation, a condition which we are acutely and continually preoccupied with evading. Indeed, Wayne Koestenbaum argues that 'we all live on the edge of humiliation' (22) and are perpetually engaged in the 'enormously complicated' (53) efforts required 'to comply to the laws of behavioural and aesthetic propriety,' (55) necessary to ward it off. This emphasis upon the exhausting toll of conformity is reminiscent of Bergson's recognition of the 'constantly alert attention' required to conform to social convention, and suggests further evidence of the attachment we feel for those comic characters who perform their obliviousness to those laws. While I am keen to resist the argument that comedy necessitates the avoidance of emotion, in this respect, relief at not having to feel does play a part in the production of comic pleasure. Freud argues that such relief is central to the 'genesis' of 'humorous pleasure'. Expecting signs of affect (anger, fright etc) in the humorist, the listener or onlooker 'is prepared to follow his lead and call up the same emotional impulses in himself,' but instead of expressing

affect, the humorist makes a joke, and the 'expenditure on feeling that is economised turns into humorous pleasure in the listener' ('Humour' 428).

Obliviousness (or absentmindedness) suggests a form of muted or delayed affect, very different to the keen sting of humiliation, and thus represents an economy of 'expenditure on feeling'.

A little more detail on comic relief, one of the three key comic theories, is necessary here. I have already touched upon Freud's theory of jokes as the means to evade social and internal prohibitions, and his argument that the relief at the effective removal of such obstacles manifests as laughter is often cited as the most significant theorisation of comic relief. Jokes that cloak sexual or hostile purposes allow us to 'override our internal censor, expressing our repressed libido or hostility, and the now superfluous energy summoned to repress those urges is then released in laughter' (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 18). It is worth noting that there is a distinction between this more complex process, which sees 'the release not of the energy of repressed feelings, but of the energy that normally represses those feelings' (Morreall, *Comic Relief* 18), and the simpler dynamics outlined in the paragraph above, when laughter arises through the release of energy that is summoned but then found to be unnecessary.¹⁷ This more straightforward sense of sudden release or relaxation is the one commonly understood when comic relief is discussed. In John Dewey's pragmatic account, laughter 'marks the ending ... of a period of

¹⁷ Freud cites Mark Twain's story about his brother working as a road builder as an example of the latter. 'The premature explosion of a mine blew him up into the air and he came down again far away from the place he had been working... he had a half-day's wages deducted for being 'absent from his place of employment'' (*Jokes* 230). As John Morreall explains, our laughter on hearing this story 'is the release of energy that was summoned to feel sympathy for Twain's brother, but was then seen to be unnecessary. When we hear the absurd ending, we realize that pity would be inappropriate' (*Comic Relief* 19). In Freud's words: '[a]s a result of this understanding, the expenditure on the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off' (*Jokes* 230).

suspense, or expectation.' It is a 'sudden relaxation of strain, so far as occurring through the medium of the breathing and vocal apparatus ... The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief' (558–9).

While most general comic theory has insufficiently addressed the usefulness of obliviousness, stand-up comedy has long recognised its importance: John Limon suggesting that it is 'earned from moment to moment' as a way of denying, or managing, the inherent abjection of 'the stand-up condition' (*Stand-up* 105).

Abjection is 'stood-up in stand-up' for two reasons: primarily because of the comic's vulnerability in abasing themselves in front of an audience (stand-up is distinct from other comedy in that a comedian's audience 'make his jokes into jokes, or refuse to, by a reaction that is more final, less appealable, than a judgement' (*Stand-up* 26).

And also because their material so often corresponds with Kristeva's definition of abjection, as 'a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite alienable - for example, blood, urine, feces, nails and the corpse' (*Stand-up* 4). Sarah Silverman is one comedian among many whose routines rely upon obliviousness: in one notorious bit she reprises Lenny Bruce's "Jews killed Christ" joke ("I did it. My family ... Not only did we kill Christ, we're going to kill him when he comes back") with a twist. "Everybody blames the Jews for killing Christ," Silverman says with her habitual wide-eyed demeanour: "And then the Jews try to pass it off on the Romans. I'm one of the few people that believe it was the blacks" (Goodyear par.6). While Bruce's joke displays a characteristically stark oscillation between abjection and aggression, Silverman's version is satirical and relies upon being routed through her demure, oblivious persona. Arguably female comics rely more heavily upon personas, given the extra 'joke work' they need to do - those strategies necessary for the overcoming of prohibitions that Freud examines.

Faced with the demand for feminine modesty and passivity, personas allow female comic artists a degree of distance from their controversial material; this can be seen as a way of deflecting the threat to patriarchal norms, thus allowing the audience to laugh. I will address some of the specific issues facing female comic artists in more detail shortly, in relation to Miranda July's novel, but suffice it to say here, that, already established as a stand-up strategy, obliviousness should also be acknowledged as a more general comic technique.

While Silverman's obliviousness is one mechanism at work in her comic presentation, another is incongruity, which along with relief and superiority, constitute the three foremost theories of laughter. Having suggested that modesty and passivity are constraints facing female comics, it is also true that these kinds of cultural expectations can be productive of comedy. In this case, Silverman's demure demeanour deliberately summons the expectation of feminine sweetness or harmlessness in a way that enhances the sense of violation effected by her aggressive words. This clash of incompatible ideas is central to the incongruity theory of humour. The philosopher James Beattie is the theorist most frequently cited in positing laughter as a reaction to incongruity; his essay from 1776, 'On Laughter and Ludicrous Composition', stating that,

Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them (320).

Schopenhauer offers a more nuanced view, arguing that laughter is caused by the 'sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation' (52). The incongruity is caused by the mental jolt between our abstract concept and our sense perceptions; in Silverman's case, between feminine sweetness and her hostile words. John Morreall notes that

'the Incongruity Theory is the most widely accepted account of humor in philosophy and empirical psychology' (*Comic Relief* 12) and it is certainly central to all the work I examine, particularly to July's novel, which, as we will see, employs it in much the same way as Silverman.

In emphasising comic indestructibility and obliviousness as I do, there is a risk of re-iterating the conventional case for comedy's incompatibility with emotion or psychological complexity. This is not my intention. While indestructibility and obliviousness help create a safe space, in ways which are partially a result of how emotion is handled, the paradigm of a clear divorce between comedy and feeling is too reductive. It is Bergson who makes the case most baldly in modern times, stating that the comic 'appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion' (62), arguing that it would 'fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness' (87). In keeping with his argument that laughter is punitive, Bergson insists that comedy deals only with 'stock characters', rather than rounded individuals, because the latter would arouse 'sympathy, fear or pity,' thus making it impossible for us to laugh. Kenneth Lash is equally adamant: '[t]o perceive the comic element at any given moment, emotional neutrality towards the comic object is demanded' (117). There is something of this conception of comedy in James Wood's distrust of 'the Comic Novel' as a mode in which 'characters are clicked like draughts across ... boards; a comedy of apparent heartlessness, in which the novelist is always a knowing adjective ahead of his characters' (283). D. L. Hirst articulates the implications behind Wood's position more explicitly when he states that 'tragedy plays on our emotions, it involves us and demands our sympathy for the protagonist; comedy appeals to our intellect, we observe critically and laugh at the victim' (xi). As M Silk observes, behind all this lurks the ultimately

'pernicious' (55) Aristotelian assumption that tragedy and comedy are opposites, with the implication of tragedy as the 'imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude' (10), and comedy the 'imitation of inferior people' (9). It is this tradition of thought - in which the comic artist and their audience are superior to the characters depicted - which helps situate the superiority theory of comedy. Thomas Hobbes articulated this explanation of laughter most notably, stating that 'the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly' (46). The theory is not without merit, but it has helped establish a narrow understanding of comic laughter as mere ridicule, thereby precluding a more capacious understanding of comedy's relationship with emotion.

In the *Critical Inquiry* special issue, Lauren Berlant offers a useful corrective to the presumption of comic detachment, suggesting the limits of the superiority theory, and instead developing a paradigm that allows for a more nuanced account of our relation to comic characters, one which is alert to the shifting spectatorial feelings of 'aversion, empathy, identification, disidentification, seasickness, kindness and a failed kind of numbness' ('Humorlessness' 309). Although she does not explicitly mention obliviousness, it might be characterised in her discussion as the humourless subject's 'refusal to adapt to anything but his own style of adapting to his own fantasy' (307). This is a partial obliviousness - one which is 'always teetering on reversal, exposure, and a collapse' (307), and its fragility ensures that spectators 'have a morally encumbered relation' (310) to the subject. Her emphasis

is upon the ambivalence in the spectators' response, on the vulnerability which makes humourless comedy difficult to bear,¹⁸ while my focus is upon invulnerability: how comedy's promise of indestructibility makes difficult issues *more* bearable.¹⁹

Berlant's attempt to broaden the terms of our critical engagement with comedy beyond the limited preoccupation with satire and irony is significant, and her keen sense of the importance of proximity rather than detachment may well augur the beginning of a newly sympathetic critical approach, but meanwhile comedy's incompatibility with emotion remains the overwhelming popular characterisation. In emphasising the use of naive and pedantic personas, and thus evoking comic types which suggest generic or reductive characterisation, there is a risk of playing into this conception of comedy as dealing only in 'generality of character rather than the individual-types' (Bergson 72). However, while the works discussed in the pages that follow make strategic use of comic hyperbole and even stereotype, the nuance and depth of the psychological insight throughout are marked. The emotional lushness of Saunders's work offers perhaps the clearest refutation of the idea of emotional neutrality and psychological simplicity; its expansiveness not only co-existing with comedy, but actively exploiting it. Saunders excels at 'affect management,' and humour is one of his most significant strategies; he understands the affection in which we hold those who make us laugh, and conversely, the

¹⁸ Berlant is interested in those liminal edges of a situation, where the distinction between comedy and tragedy or melodrama is a fine one, suggesting that as long as the discomfort of 'being asked to hold someone's secret and be knowing about it without saying that one is, induces more gestural adjustment and tact than drama, the modality is comic' (311). I am similarly interested in such liminal areas, in particular where comedy meets horror. I see further parallels with my account and the way Berlant's work 'takes liberties' in extrapolating from the 'real' to the fictional and back again. For example, in describing the ways in which 'altruism and the fear of being exposed as cruel' motivate 'keeping the secret of someone else's failed aesthetic or personhood project', she thinks of the 'need for reciprocity' (311) as an additional incentive in our complicated response to the humourless subject.

dismay and disappointment with which we regard those who fail to. And obliviousness, or lack of it, is one of the key ways in which that laughter is either generated or denied. Obliviousness is also fundamental to Lil Rel Howery's comic appeal in *Get Out*, an appeal that is in part designed to supplement the straight man, Chris, who is the complex emotional centre of the film. Howery's character, Rod, is Chris's best friend, and his fondness for Chris helps to cue his value to the audience, thus guiding our admiration and allegiance. Chris's universal likability is key: as a black protagonist who functions as the audience's stand-in he must maintain that identification with both black and white audiences despite ultimately killing an entire white family.

Antrim also exploits our predilection for obliviousness in order to win sympathy for his protagonist. There is, moreover, an emotional substance and intimacy to his work: the reader feeling acutely the travails of his narrators, who model the moment by moment struggles of inhabiting a body in richly phenomenological detail. July's novel is just as attentive to those struggles, but whereas Antrim delights in his protagonists' super-abundant analysis and emotional articulacy (which is shown to be entirely compatible, even conducive, to obliviousness), the narrator's naivety in *The First Bad Man*, allows July the opportunity to examine an inner life that is relatively free from the kind of normative emotional literacy which results in rigid or conditioned formulations and conclusions.²⁰ The absence of this literacy is both very funny and very fresh, and provides July with the means to deconstruct and denaturalise convention. It is also

²⁰ This has long been a strategy of her creative practice: both her collection of short stories (*No One Belongs Here More Than You*, 2007) and her films (*You, Me and Everyone We Know*, 2005, and *The Future*, 2011) use naive, young, or lonely protagonists, without highly developed emotional narratives for themselves ('I am like this because of this and this'). Cheryl behaves and speaks as if she doesn't know about conventions, and all of July's narrators have this characteristic - as if they are newly inhabiting the world.

intensely intimate; Cheryl's inner life open freely to us without the intermediation of classification or judgement. The flatness of the narrative tone - its deadpan quality - is another way in which classification or judgement is kept at bay. Using Brian Massumi's definition of affect as prior to emotion, with emotion as narrativised, 'classified' affect, we can suggest that by keeping Cheryl's experiences in the realm of the affective rather than the emotional, they remain free from the qualitative 'socio-linguistic fixing' (88) that Massumi sees as so prescriptive. In July's case then, it is not that her work refutes the accusation of emotional detachment and psychological simplicity, but that it overturns the assumptions structuring that charge. If detachment is presumed to prevent intimacy, and psychological simplicity is at odds with complexity, July demonstrates the opposite: the determinedly flat register of her style the means to intimacy and attachment, while Cheryl's lack of emotional literacy - her psychological simplicity - results in a complex reconsideration of social norms.

It is not so much the pleasure of not having to feel that July demonstrates, but rather the pleasure of not being mired in feeling, or more specifically, not being mired in conditioned or habituated feeling. Zupančič suggests that it is not simply a matter of 'comedy keeping a distance from feelings', but rather comedy's 'way of introducing a distance (or non-immediacy) into the feelings themselves' that is useful, given that 'emotions (far from constituting a direct insight into the Real of the subject) can lie and be as deceptive as anything else' (8). This helpful refinement of the idea of comic detachment builds upon Simon Critchley's conception of humour as 'a profoundly cognitive relation to oneself and the world' (102), which in turn is forged through his engagement both with Lord Shaftesbury's sense of comic rationality and Freud's later work on humour, (his essay of 1927, 'Humour') which

conceives of humour as the superego laughing at the ego, or the adult me laughing at the child me. Shaftesbury defends 'true raillery', arguing that it encourages the use of reason, by rendering speculative conversations 'agreeable', (qtd in Critchley 81) while Freud sees humour as a way of the ego refusing to be 'distressed by the provocation of reality' ('Humour' 429) and thereby transcending suffering. While these assertions of humour's implicit reasonableness can be seen to feed into the familiar opposition between comedy and tragedy, with comedy as intellectual and tragedy as emotional, there is little sense here of comic 'heartlessness' (Woods 283). To argue for comedy's critical powers need not preclude its capacity for emotional complexity, as the storytelling in this thesis demonstrates. However, it remains true that while the work is emotionally nuanced, that emotion is often tempered or checked in some way. This 'non-immediacy' is vital, because, despite our reverence for emotion as both the arbiter of experience and the measure of authenticity, 'emotions ... can lie and be as deceptive as anything else' (Zupančič 8). Howard Jacobson states that '[c]omedy breaks every trance – that's its function,' ('Howard Jacobson' par.5) and perhaps, given that reverence, it is where emotions are concerned that automatism is to be most feared.

Many discern an increasing compulsion towards emotional expressivity, which arguably makes the notion of 'non-immediacy' all the more necessary. Lauren Berlant for instance, asserts that 'the liberal culture of true feeling' is powerfully, 'sentimentally' present in 'the growth of diaristic, autobiographical, personal-is-political, intensified artwork' across many aesthetic sectors (*Cruel Optimism* 65).²¹

²¹ Berlant's engagement with 'the liberal culture of true feeling' emerges out of her response to Fredric Jameson's account of the 'waning of affect'; and she argues instead that it is 'impossible to distinguish waning and profundity from their appearance in the aesthetic conventions of mass cultural expressivity' because 'the conventionality of public feeling frustrates the adjudication of what constitutes an authentic phenomenological exchange or

As she suggests, this ‘culture of true feeling’ is evident in multiple facets of our culture; social media being only the most obvious location, and journalism another.²² The conventions of emotional immediacy and transparency have become a form of orthodoxy, leading to an uncritical veneration of the emotions themselves. This is especially problematic given sociologist Eva Illouz’s persuasive argument that the ‘intensification in emotional life’ in the twentieth century (5) is largely due to the way in which ‘consumer culture has systematically turned emotions into commodities’ (7).²³ Illouz notes multiple developments contributing to the process by which emotions have become ‘the major social form’ (9): the emotionalization of the workplace for instance, wherein the evaluation of work became understood in terms of emotional satisfaction, along with the importance of ‘emotional management, and emotional expressiveness’ in jobs themselves. While in advertising, ‘emotional branding...helped construct the consumer as an emotional entity, thus making consumption into an emotional act’ (12). This economic production of emotions has been underwritten by the increasing cultural preoccupation with self-realisation, which has led to emotions being ‘objectified, labelled and integrated into ideals of

deep relation to the history that produces the experience of the present’ (*The Female Complaint* 78,79).

²² Roger Luckhurst pinpoints the 1990s as the beginning of the trend for confessional accounts by journalists, citing autobiographical accounts by Ruth Picardie, John Diamond, and Robert McCrum among others. He argues that this established a trend whereby journalists ‘vacated the political public sphere (and the allegedly traditional role of the liberal press to challenge the armatures of the state) and retreated into private and individualised experience’ (‘Traumaculture’ 38).

²³ Illouz notes that others have proposed arguments which address the ways in which emotion or affect is incorporated into capitalism; in particular the notion of ‘affective economy’ which is based on Antonio Negri’s claim that ‘affect is reintegrated within the ‘fold’ of capitalism itself’, ensuring that ‘[m]eaning, affect and affection are extensively organised, produced and maintained for the needs of capitalism’ (14). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Sianne Ngai also examines the ‘increasing extraction of surplus value from affect and subjectivity’ (*Aesthetics* 188). Another high-profile writer interested in the ways in which feeling has been co-opted for the purpose of maximising profits is William Davies, who describes the science of human sentiments – ‘the measurement, surveillance and government’ of our feelings (7)– as one of the fastest growing forms of manipulative knowledge.

personhood' and 'pursued in the forms of moods, emotional/relational acts, and self-improvement' (21). In demonstrating both the ways in which 'emotions follow cultural scripts' (15) and the part objects play in manufacturing emotion, Illouz's work helps us to see how the conventional association of emotions with both interiority and the dyadic model of relationships must be revised, and forces us to rethink our sense of emotions as an arbiter of authenticity. This in turn, supports my attempts to stake a new claim for the necessity of comic detachment.

In July's novel for instance, the undeniable sincerity co-exists with irony: her acknowledgment and affirmation of the struggle of existence far from uncritical. The droll tone of Antrim's work is similarly destabilising: both sincere and ironic; sardonic, fantastic, and yet intimate. While his narrators' initially definitive-seeming interpretations and statements become unstable and self-cancelling, they do not create outright estrangement - an uneasy balance is maintained between belief and disbelief, identification and dis-identification. With Saunders, the reflex emotional response is avoided partly by his refusal of the conventions of literary mastery and his commitment to the comic vernacular, which allows for expression 'stripped of habituality or familiarity' ('What Makes' par.3). Wyatt Mason gives a nice example of this in his comparison of two scenes of near fatal hypothermia, one in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, the other in Saunders's short story 'Tenth of December'. Both are unabashedly emotional, but while Franzen reaches for a heightened, "serious" register, choosing 'marmoreally' to describe a character's chilled skin for example, Saunders 'is dedicated to jocoserious language that any of us has at hand' - and the physical encounter of the two frozen characters is described as 'like Popsicle-on-Popsicle' (30). In his pursuit of high feeling and sanctioned literary form, Franzen follows the habitual, whereas Saunders's rejection of 'fancy language' ('Mr

Vonnegut' 74) in favour of the comic vernacular interrupts the conditioned response, a response which privileges the reverent or the tragic.

Franzen's self-seriousness is problematic enough in its reliance upon a reflexive emotional reaction, but perhaps more pressing is the case to be made for African American aesthetic production to move beyond configurations that are primarily tragic or traumatic. Paul Beatty's take on reading *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* gives some sense of the coercion of such configurations:

I read another paragraph, growing more oppressed with each maudlin passage. My lips thickened. My burr-headed Afro took on the texture of a dried-out firethorn bush. My love for the sciences, the Los Angeles Kings and scuba diving disappeared. My dog, Butch, growled at me. I suppressed my craving for a Taco Bell Bellbeef (remember those?) because I feared the restaurant wouldn't serve me. My eyes started to water and the words to "Roll, Jordan, Roll," a Negro spiritual I'd never heard before, rumbled out of my mouth in a sonorous baritone. I didn't know I could sing. I tossed the book into the kitchen trash. For a black child like myself who was impoverished every other week while waiting for his mother's bimonthly paydays, giving me a copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was the educational equivalent of giving the prairie Indians blankets laced with small pox or putting saltpetre in a sailor's soup. I already knew why the caged bird sings but after three pages of that book, I now know why they put a mirror in the parakeet's cage: so he could wallow in his own misery (7).

Beatty comically reinstates the particularity denied by Angelou's insistence upon a race consciousness structured by trauma, thus demonstrating the usefulness of comedy's attention to specificity in the face of abstractions. The wallowing in misery contrived by the novel is conditioned or habituated feeling: Beatty feels compelled to own feelings that forcibly reinstate victimhood. Mel Watkins makes a similar point about the focus upon victimhood perpetuated by the use of the tragic modality in his account of the 'talented tenth' writers, whose

insistence on tragic portrayal not only further separated their work from the laughter and more humanised existence experienced by most black Americans but, by casting blacks solely in the role of victims, in some ways affirmed the authenticity or, at least the efficacy, of the belief in racial destiny they struggled to eradicate. (412)

In 'Of the Coming of John' in W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, for instance, a young black college student returns to his rural Georgia hometown, with tragic consequences, his education having made him 'upity'. 'Instead of exploring the comic nuances of the character's predicament...Du Bois focused on tragic defeat' (412). For Beatty, this avoidance of comedy 'comes out of a tradition of abolitionist "And ain't I an intellect" activism aimed, then as now at whites' (11). Save for some significant exceptions (like Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston), 'the defining characteristic of the African-American writer is sobriety - moral, corporeal, and prosaic' (11). Here, we might discern a continuum between the original abolitionist strategy of racial accommodation, proposed most notably by Booker T. Washington, and intended to assuage and appease the fears of paternalistic whites, to the ongoing strain of social conservatism in contemporary black culture. Given the pressure of stereotypes concerning abjection, sexualisation, and menace, it is unsurprising that somewhat earnest and prescriptive notions of cultural engagement remain in place. Prior to his downfall, Bill Cosby exemplified this conservatism, with *The Cosby Show* a significant early African-American presence on mainstream TV, and one accused of participating in a 'politics of respectability'; its moralistic conclusions and insistence upon personal responsibility and 'uplift' eliding the facts of structural inequality and discrimination.

Get Out's response to the traumatic or tragic paradigm is complex: it recognises the ongoing fact of trauma, its central conceit a way of articulating the ways in which black consciousness has been damaged by slavery, while simultaneously using comedy to demonstrate both resilience and agency. The issue of habituated feeling is slightly different here, the film actively indulging in one such set of responses, recognising that to be free of fear is a luxury that African

Americans cannot afford. However, that indulgence is, if not always overtly comic, certainly ironic, in ways that are 'rebellious' rather than 'resigned' (Freud, 'Humour' 429). This is Freud's description of 'the humorous attitude', which 'signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle', in fending off the possibility of suffering and insisting 'that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world' (429). In the film's amused awareness of the ridiculousness of whiteness, there is a quality of what Freud calls 'magnificent superiority' (429). This foregrounding or othering of whiteness is crucial given the habitual use of it as the representational norm, 'the sense that being white is coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity' (Dyer 47). The subtle satire of film's opening scene for instance, when 'Run Rabbit Run Rabbit', 'perhaps the whitest song in the world' (Smith par.2), issues from the stereo of the car slowly pursuing a young black man; as well as the lightly satiric presentation of the white guests in the party scene where Chris is forced to endure multiple micro aggressions. Without the music, and the sardonic portrayal of the white guests, the tone of the scenes might feel resigned, even doomed. The narrative certainly justifies paranoia, but the irony creates a sense of power and leverage, or mobility. The film's other comic elements, largely centred around Rod, make this defiance more pronounced: both as a way of demonstrating resilience and providing a kind of judicious showcase of black comic gifts, running alongside, and offering a counter to, the focus upon trauma. All this suggests a very specific relationship to comedy for African Americans, and certainly we can situate *Get Out* in a long tradition of African American humour, which as Glenda Carpio observes, has been, 'for centuries, a humor of survival' (230). It has moreover, also been 'a safety valve, a mode of minimising pain and defeat, as well

as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief in the most artful and incisive ways' (230,231).

Given this particular relation to comedy for African Americans, might we suggest a similarly distinctive approach to comedy for women? Nancy Walker suggests that '[as] a minority group...it would be logical to suppose that [women's] humour has elements in common with that of more clearly identified racial and ethnic minorities,' revealing at the very least, 'a collective consciousness' (Walker 13). While the female comic tradition is not as well defined, several theorists have attempted to outline specifically feminine approaches to comedy. Regina Barreca for instance, argues for distinctive forms of comedy whereby the usual conventions of comedy (comedy as celebration of regeneration, and as social safety valve) do not apply. She notices the ways in which these essentially conservative qualities rely upon women's oppression: the traditional conception of marriage for instance, which is so essential to the idea of comic regeneration, and argues instead that writers like Aphra Benn and Virginia Woolf subvert these expectations by withholding fertility and community (14). Also working with Woolf, along with Muriel Spark, in *Comedy and The Woman Writer* (1983), Judy Little uses Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of 'carnival' as a temporary state of transgression or challenge to the status quo, and argues instead for comic feminist fiction that celebrates 'an ongoing subversion...instead of a temporary inversion and return to order' (2). Little is writing in 1983, while Barreca's work on comedy dates from the late 1980s and mid 1990s, and since then there have been only two notable collections: *Women and Comedy, History, Theory, Practice* (2013), edited by Peter Dickinson et al., and Sabrina Fuchs Abrams's *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers* (2017). Both offer a historical perspective alongside their address of contemporary humour, in order to redress the

historic marginalization of women and comedy.²⁴ While Abrams's introduction is hesitant about making any generalisations about 'a distinctive body of humor by women' (6) beyond 'humor as a form of transgression' (9), the editors of *Women and Comedy* argue that women's comedy can work as a form of a 'critical positioning' which allows for a 'partial distancing or detachment' (xxvii), and even a playfulness, about gendered social roles. I would argue that this critical resistance to normative pressures is particularly evident in stand-up, and in chapter two I use insights gleaned there to unpack Miranda July's work.

Like African Americans, women have been defined by object-hood - we might say, traumatised by it - and comedy offers the chance of subject-hood and agency. Kali Taj suggests that every woman possesses a 'pre-atrocity consciousness' since she 'expects atrocity and has been prepared for it since birth' (31). This might seem something of an overstatement, but is borne out by an extensive study which shows the degree to which girls are considered vulnerable and in need of protection, 'while boys are set free to roam and explore', in ways which have 'consequences for their behaviour and expectations' throughout life (Boseley par.2). James Baldwin argues that African American children are inculcated with a similar awareness, noticing that '[e]very effort made by the child's elders to prepare him for a fate from which they cannot protect him causes him

²⁴ *Women and Comedy's* address of contemporary comedy focuses mainly upon stand-up, which remains the site of the most significant recent research on women's use of humour, while Abrams's collection offers a more diverse coverage, with articles on contemporary fiction, poetry and autobiography alongside the stand-up. Despite its strengths however, the collection still struggles to argue convincingly for the centrality of comedy in these other forms. 'Humor, Gentrification, and the Conservation of Downtown New York in Lynne Tillman's *No Lease on Life*' by Diarmuid Hester is one contribution that does successfully position comedy as fundamental to the work's efficacy, suggesting that the jokes collected in Tillman's text are 'motivated by an impulse to collect and preserve the Geist of a disappearing Downtown' (139), and through their particularity, 'allow us to glean important information about the features of this culture and, to a certain extent, reconstruct it through its impressions' (148).

secretly, in terror, to begin to await, without knowing that he is doing so, his mysterious and inexorable punishment' (*The Fire* 40). Baldwin's analysis from the 1960s is revisited by Ta-Nehisi Coates in 2015, who testifies to how little has changed, with parents' stringent efforts at teaching their children to be safe 'inculcating them with yet more fear' (24), which results in a profound sense of 'disembodiment' (114). I have spoken to the power and leverage that comedy can effect for African Americans, and for women, comedy can also offer a similar sense of mastery.

To notice an equivalence between the experiences of the two groups is not to claim parity of suffering, given the uniquely horrific nature of chattel slavery and its ongoing consequences.²⁵ But there remain clear correspondences between the two kinds of comedy, perhaps most obviously in terms of constraints: Aaryn Green and Annula Linders find that the racial or ethnic comedy is 'more susceptible to the influence of social setting, delivery, and audience reception than ... other genres of comedy' (256), focusing specifically upon how the racial composition of an audience effects the audience's responses to racial comedy. While Mahadev Apte observes that 'women's humor reflects the existing inequality between the sexes not so much in its substance as in the constraints imposed on its occurrence, on the techniques used, on the social settings in which it occurs, and on the kind of audience that appreciates it' (69). Jennifer Foy notices that substance is also key in her analysis of the risks taken by the female comic who tells sexual jokes; observing that sexual humour will be accepted and enjoyed by an audience 'only if the female comic is

²⁵ In *Cultural Trauma, Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman explores the ways in which 'the formation of an African American identity' can be examined 'through the theory of cultural trauma'. The trauma is slavery, 'not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people' (1).

perceived as libidinous, the possessor and purveyor of sexualised appetites' (703). This 'has uniquely negative consequences', in that it 'dismisses women's wit as promiscuity, rather than seduction, and invokes the social alienation commonly associated with promiscuity rather than the homosocial bonding facilitated by phallogentric sexual aggression and voyeurism' (703).²⁶

Having suggested earlier that female comic artists have more 'joke work' than men to do to overcome an audience's inhibitions, it is worth noting that non-white comic artists may have to do more still. An example from the recent Edinburgh Fringe illustrates this: in an event which involved audience participation, Nick Ahad, a mixed race comedian, made a joke in response to the host's inability to pick him out in the crowd: "'I'm over here – I'm brown, not invisible'" (par.6). The audience didn't laugh. 'In fact, they turned kind of nasty. There was an intake of breath, some booing and a pretty unpleasant atmosphere' (par.7). Ahad notices the irony when 'someone stood up and pointed out the massive gender disparity on stage and received a round of applause. Had there been more diversity in the audience, my quip would have got a laugh. But there wasn't. So everyone missed my joke and I felt hostility aimed squarely at me, the only brown man in the room' (par.10). Ahad's experience substantiates Green and Linders's sense of the importance of setting in

²⁶ While I am emphasising the constraints upon minority humour here, Joanne Gilbert argues instead that marginality is a privileged site for the production of comedy. She suggests that '[f]rom the physically deformed fools of the ancient world to the Jewish, African American, and female comics of today, marginality has been key to the comic persona' (17), largely because '[d]eviance from social norms and dominant cultural traits' has served 'as a license for social criticism' (18). Gilbert notices that even those comics who do 'not speak from an ethnic or sex-based position of marginality' construct and perform 'a rhetorical marginality' (in David Letterman's case, for example, he presents 'an offbeat persona' which draws 'attention to his 'goofy' appearance' (21). While there is much to commend her thesis, I would argue that it relies upon an exaggerated sense of the cultural significance and potency of comics from minorities; if marginality were indeed paramount then female comics would dominate stand-up, however, while the numbers fluctuate, women generally only constitute between 'fifteen to thirty percent of those in the field of comic performance' (Krefting 121).

determinations of whether something is funny or offensive, in particular the racial composition of the audience (250). Given the audience's rejection of Ahad's implicit request for comic licence, we can see how Peele's frank discussion of race, consciously aimed at a mixed audience, was never guaranteed an easy reception. The film's success is testament both to his sophisticated comic strategies and the specific stand-up lineage he is situated within.²⁷

Recognising these constraints allows us to acknowledge the skill of those able to effectively work around them, and while Jordan Peele and Miranda July overcome inhibitions in different ways, both have similar hopes of moving beyond the paradigm of trauma. Abjection is an issue for both: but whereas July is able to access its comedic potential through her construction of a 'grotesque' feminine persona, Peele's position is more difficult. In her comparison of the different strategies available to black and white female producers of comedy, Rebecca Wanzo argues that '[f]or middle-class white subjects, abjection historically has not been a defining characteristic of white identity', thus leaving it available for comic appropriation by white women. While this ignores the proximity of abjection for all women, regardless of colour, her conviction that 'the historical weight of black abjection' (Wanzo 30) is that much more pressing reveals a key difference. In July's utilisation of it there is a sense of opening up new ground, and creating territory which offers freedom from the confinements of beauty and decorum; Peele however, must be attentive to the ways in which abjection remains 'determined by

²⁷ Would a British version of *Get Out* work? Probably not, and I would argue this is partly because Britain does not have the same black comic culture. As Daniel Kaluuya, the British star of *Get Out* commented, 'our sub culture is quite new: 15 or 20 years. The American brothers' culture is more developed' (Kaluuuya). The reasons for this are obviously complex, but originate primarily in the fact of slavery, and the ways in which black culture has emerged from this historical trauma. Ta-Nehisi Coates makes this causal link explicit when he describes the 'diamonds' of black culture - the community, the language, the music, food and style - 'forged in the shadow of the murdered, the raped, the disembodied' (120).

the history of white supremacy' (Wanzo 30). He must protect his protagonist from humiliation, while July can actively delight in humiliating hers. The dyadic structure of the film, with Rod as Chris's comic compliment, is Peele's solution to the need to locate full comedic potential elsewhere.

In thus observing both the similarities and differences between Peele and July's comic license (and between the production and reception of humour more generally for African Americans and women), one further strategy that both artists use should be noted: deadpan, a deliberate withholding of comic signalling that is particularly potent when deployed by either group. David Robbins suggests that we use the term 'to describe those products that display the emotional neutrality of data yet retain an existential charge of theatre. Deadpan is a communication knowingly drained of affect' (256). He goes on to refine the definition, suggesting that '[a]n additional qualifier is necessary - namely, a certain outrageousness, to lend tension to the fact like neutrality.' Given the cultural constraints upon both African Americans and women, the 'outrageousness' need not be especially marked for it to register as such. In her discussion of deadpan in relation to African American conceptual artist, William Pope.L, Lauren Berlant notices that for both African Americans and women, 'the appearance of the body is never a non-event, but erotic in its over-presence, and an incitement to a managerial judgement in the direction of simplicity', thus precluding 'opportunities to be notional, friendly, or casual' ('Showing Up' 117). The risk of stereotyping pressures both groups into definitive forms of social signalling²⁸ that are at odds with the ambivalence of deadpan, while the obligation to be conciliatory can make deadpan's neutrality read as aggressive. It follows then, that

²⁸ I am thinking here of social practices that perform assent and accommodation, like smiling, head nodding, etc.

its use can be deeply discomfiting. Both Robbins and Berlant's theorisation of deadpan emerges from their engagement with conceptual art, and in chapter two, I argue that we can locate July's work within the ongoing comic tradition of conceptual art.

In the discussion above I have suggested that comedy can act as a counter to trauma, and I turn now to elaborate upon the potential opposition between the two. This opposition can be seen as a logical development of comedy's capacity for critical distance, which, by forcing a cognitive perspective on emotion, can potentially transcend suffering. Several other commentators have noted the polarity: Glenda Carpio, for instance, highlights the work of black humorists who, '[r]ather than adopt the language of trauma' (13), address slavery through comic means; while Carl Gutierrez-Jones notices the ways in which 'critical humour' (112) can create pathways out of the victimisation that 'has become a defining feature of race and ethnic cultures' (114). Ofer Ashkenazi argues that in post-unification Germany comic representations of Nazism allow for a better 'working through' of the past than wholly serious ones, as a way of getting 'beyond the trauma and its mechanism of suppression' (101), and ensuring that the difficult past remains part of 'post-unification identity' (105), but without the dubious aesthetization and 'self-pitying' of 'commemoration discourse' (113). Ashkenazi's account of this discourse makes use of Roger Luckhurst's concept of 'traumaculture', a cultural formation which develops when multiple facets of popular culture establish 'traumatic exceptionality' (36) as the privileged form of subjectivity. Defining an identity organised around trauma as premised on 'that which escapes the subject, on an absence or a gap' (28), Luckhurst makes a persuasive case for the 1990s as a period that saw an unprecedented degree of 'subjective and communal identification with or projection

onto' (28) this model of the gapped subject; a model that paradoxically offers the recovery of both plenitude and authenticity. Although he does not make any claims for comedy in general, Luckhurst commends Tracey Moffat's 'serio-comic' (47) photographic series, *Scarred for Life*, for both playing with and exposing the allure of this 'impossible recovery' (47).

In *The Trauma Question*, Luckhurst develops his reservations about trauma theory in more detail, suggesting that the focus on the post-traumatic stage rather than the actual traumatic event is an 'injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition. To be in a frozen or suspended afterwards, it seems to be assumed, is the only proper ethical response to trauma' (210). Building upon this argument, Irene Visser notes that the 'preservation of trauma' in trauma theory can tend 'towards themes of victimization and melancholia', which may 'obscure themes of recuperation and psychic resilience' (277). While trauma might not dominate the cultural landscape in quite the way that it did,²⁹ there is little doubt that it remains a powerful paradigm, and comedy suggests one way of countering its centrality, offering as it does the possibility of both survival and agency. Simon Critchley's interpretation of humour as 'the expression of an abstract relation to the world' (62), is useful in articulating the degree of detachment that enables the leverage or mobility of the comedic perspective, which is so different from trauma's frozen melancholia. Unusually, in *Get Out's* 'happy' ending, the two strands are able to co-exist: Chris's final, silent, state can be characterised as 'a frozen or suspended

²⁹ Mark Seltzer's seminal account of a 'wound culture', a 'culture of suffering, states of injury, and wounded attachments' (4), was written in 1994 and describes a moment that has now passed, but in some specific respects, trauma has gained traction - in the #MeToo movement for instance, which despite all its usefulness can work to enshrine a sense of women's vulnerability.

afterwards' (Luckhurst, *Trauma Question* 210) while Rod's wisecracks provide the comic freedom.

'Happy endings' are significant as an obvious marker of a comic work's commitment to both resilience and survival, and I will address them in more detail shortly, but first I wish to briefly situate George Saunders and Donald Antrim in terms of comedy as a counter to trauma. For Saunders, the notion is most acute in his handling of class, in particular his use of a comic vernacular which emphasises the resources of his working-class characters rather than their lack. Linguistic restriction or unsophistication, conventionally understood to be a form of impoverishment, becomes a strength in his work, while forms of class privilege such as lyricism become suspect. In this way, an alternative model emerges to that which understands class only as a form of collective trauma, which like 'racial, gender, sexual... and other inequities' produces 'chronic psychic suffering' through structural violence (Visser 276). Saunders acknowledges the psychic suffering of class - the 'characteristics of prolonged, repeated and cumulative stressor events' (Visser 276) are in evidence throughout his work - but through comedy, he is able to propose a more capacious sense of resilience. The intersection of class and race in 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' extends this avoidance of victimhood, the diarist's inadvertent comedy confounding our expectations about the Semplica Girls' abjection and trauma.

In Antrim's work, a cognisance of trauma is a key part of the intellectual orthodoxy that he so drolly mocks, an integral part of the cultural furniture, but one which yields comically inadequate results in terms of real self knowledge. This is most apparent in the other two novels of the trilogy: *The Hundred Brothers* and *The Verificationist*, where the speculation and rationalisation about psychological

damage is most explicit. In *Elect*, the first novel, the protagonist's emotional literacy is less pronounced, while in wider, social terms, psychic suffering or disturbance is essentially ignored. The fact that this obliviousness is funny complicates any sense of comedy as an exemplary mode, by forcing us to notice the pathological ways in which abstraction can obviate feeling. And while problematising abstraction is one way of complicating the picture, *Elect* also confounds any dogmatic opposition between trauma and comedy by illustrating their similarities: reminding us that survival is actually fundamental to both - as Lauren Berlant observes, trauma 'doesn't kill you and you have to live with it. And that's the thing about comedy, too. The comedy is that you get up again after you fall off the cliff, and have to keep moving' ('Pleasure Won' par.6). *Elect's* ending can hardly be described as happy, but Pete, the protagonist, survives, thus re-asserting the indestructibility of the comic universe after its near collapse, but only just. The ending is not merely a concession to comic logic: in its ongoingness it embodies a harder truth than tragedy, which offers instead the relief - and even the glory - of finality.³⁰ It is the quality or the style of survival that is different perhaps, with comedy offering the possibility of both agency and pleasure.³¹

Given endings are the moment when traumas are ultimately resolved or transcended, or even merely managed, then the issue of the 'happy ending' needs to be addressed. And more specifically, it is the optimism represented by the happy ending that needs to be examined, a quality which remains preeminent in

³⁰ And with finality comes the possibility of heroism. Simon Critchley argues for a mistrust of tragedy's capacity to offer a kind of heroism, and he celebrates the comic and anti-heroic in place of the tragic, heroic paradigm: '[t]ragedy is insufficiently tragic because it is too heroic. Only comedy is truly tragic. And it is tragic by not being a tragedy' (119).

³¹ In her comparison, Berlant does not attend to the possibility of either, whether for the protagonist who is able to assert themselves humorously despite their fall or for the spectator who finds it comic.

conventional conceptions of comedy, and one which is arguably a significant cause of the genre's low critical status. Why, then, is the happy ending categorized so persistently as 'bad object'? James MacDowell suggests it is because the happy ending is equated with 'fantasy and escapism and a [w]ishful thinking' which thus implies 'an unrealisable perfection' and 'a lack of complicating problems' (131). Furthermore, he argues that it tends to be conceived of as essentially uniform in a way which 'is entirely in keeping with familiar presumptions about the fundamentally standardised nature of Hollywood filmmaking, and indeed popular culture, in general' (21). This characterisation was articulated most vociferously by Adorno and Horkheimer, with modernist art conversely positioned as the 'good object' in its focus upon 'plurality, multiplicity, ambiguity', and while film studies have largely moved away from such generalisations, the happy ending 'seems to be one subject towards which it is still usually acceptable to be almost as roundly dismissive as Adorno and Horkheimer were of popular culture as a whole' (21).³² MacDowell argues that while the entrenchment of modernist ideals was at the heart of this growing suspicion, it was postmodernism that saw it firmly established, wherein the conventions of closure came to be considered hackneyed - the sense of 'excessive over-familiarity' accelerating 'the process of a diminishing appearance of realism' (107).

MacDowell's analysis of the critical disdain for happy endings - a disdain also apparent in the more general dismissal of comedy as a broadly optimistic form -

³² In Andrew Stott's discussion of Erich Segal's *The Death of Comedy*, about the long line of descent from the euphoric highs of 'Aristophanic triumph' to the resignation of the 'theatre of inadequacy' (as represented chiefly by Beckett), he suggests that 'vigorous expressions of vitality become more complicated and contingent as history and experience instruct us in cynicism, and boisterous, optimistic comic forms are rendered increasingly untenable' (Stott 6). Segal himself is categorical: 'There will be no revel, renewal, or rejuvenation...[t]he traditional happy ending is no longer possible' (452).

can usefully be read alongside other accounts of modern-day disenchantment, such as Rita Felski's. She notices that enchantment is often figured as 'a sorry hold-over from a time of superstition and primitive belief,' which 'can only be a jarring anomaly in a scientific age that prides itself on skepticism and rational inquiry' (*Uses of Literature* 56). In this model, suspicion and critique are seen as the ideal, but Felski instead questions critique's privileged status by arguing for a broad cultural sensibility of habitual suspicion and cynicism, in which suspicion is 'humdrum and routinised' (*Limits of Critique* 47) rather than heroic. Our contempt for happy endings can thus be seen as a rather automatic form of cynicism, one that is culturally constructed rather than authentic.³³

Felski's concern about cynicism as an abiding aspect of the contemporary sensibility returns us full-circle to George Saunders's anxiety about the pervasive reverence for the 'obligatory-edgy' - a tendency which accounts for 'the complications of real life', but which also reveals a compulsion towards both the 'hyper' and the ironic ('George Saunders 2' par.33). Despite his disquiet, however, Saunders admits that he has struggled to enact more specifically optimistic conclusions in his own work. His comments about 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' for instance, reveal an inability to effect a more hopeful ending without losing some of the story's immediacy.³⁴ Clearly 'endings possess particular power for rhetorical persuasion' (MacDowell 167) and there is a sense in which Saunders's attachment to maximum rhetorical impact is in itself somewhat cynical, and of a piece with the pervasive 'knee-jerk darkness' ('George Saunders's Humor' par.25) that he finds so

³³ I recognise, however, that making any distinctions between culturally constructed and authentic responses or attitudes is obviously very difficult, if not impossible, as my chapter on July will show.

³⁴ In interview he sketches an alternative ending whereby 'the narrator has to sort of do penance, by trying to get them [the Semplica Girls] repatriated in their respective countries via some illegal group...' ('A Little at a Time' 239).

troubling. Indeed, in his preoccupation with impact, there is, as Jurrit Daalder suggests, an element of 'cruelty,' an understanding of literature as itself traumatising, as revealed in Saunders's conception of the story as 'a black box' for changing the reader. The analogy is 'alarmingly close' to 'a CIA black site' (179), thus revealing his willingness 'to do whatever it takes inside the black box—he is willing to employ the full range of what we might call his enhanced moral interrogation techniques—in order to alter the reader's mind in the direction of kindness' (179,180). The consolation of a happy ending, no matter how provisional, jeopardises Saunders's efforts 'to wake us up' (184).

While both Saunders and Antrim have an ambivalent attitude to happy endings, embodying a general suspicion of closure and consolation, the endings of *Get Out* and *The First Bad Man* offer more genuinely radical gestures of affirmation.³⁵ Both offer resolution, and safety from uncertainty and harm, while also promising not just continuation, but flourishing for their characters. Given the tendency for African American and female aesthetic production (or at least, sexually explicit female production) to be configured in tragic or traumatic terms, there is perhaps a particular need for affirmative endings for both groups. In comments about his novel *Maurice*, E. M. Forster suggests this is also the case for other minority groups,

'A happy ending was imperative. I shouldn't have bothered to write otherwise. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows,... which, by the way, has had an unexpected result: it has made the book more difficult to publish

...If it ended unhappily, with a lad dangling from a noose or with a suicide pact, all would be well' (qtd in MacDowell 185).³⁶

Far from 'bad object', then, the happy ending can be seen as vitally important in over-turning tragedy and trauma as modes capable of punishing and pathologising particular identity positions.

However, given the cynicism both Felski and Saunders diagnose, happy endings require careful negotiation, and July and Peele must be contingent in effecting enchantment in line with Felski's invocation of those modern forms of beguilement, 'in which we are immersed but not submerged, bewitched but not beguiled, suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us' (*Uses of Literature* 74). This recognition of enchantment as a construction relies upon Michael Saler's concept of 'the ironic imagination' (606), a 'double-minded consciousness' in which '[r]ationalist scepticism is held in abeyance, yet complete belief is undercut by an ironic awareness that one is holding scepticism at bay' (607). Largely by foregrounding the fictiveness of the resolution, *Get Out* and *The First Bad Man* strategically enable scepticism to be held in abeyance, and thus leave us free to feel happiness, and hope. While the emphasis on the artificiality of the endings relies upon our sophistication as postmodern readers, in neither case is it overtly ironic or satiric. The endings must instead be

³⁶ Andrew Sean Greer, author of the comic novel *Less* (2017), another homosexual love story, reiterates this point when interviewed about his novel's 'unashamedly romantic, happy ending':

There's a gap on my bookshelf for a story about two men in love that isn't about trauma and despair and I wanted to write that book. You know, *Brokeback Mountain* is a beautiful story, but it is not the story of most people I know. It's not a story that gets you excited about your possible romantic future. I wanted to have a book that acknowledged the difficulty of being gay in the world, but also the possibility of joy ('Andrew Sean Greer' par.7).

acknowledged and celebrated as more purely comic, and as such, proof of both comedy's seriousness and its ethical efficacy.

Chapter 2: George Saunders

George Saunders's comic gifts have been widely recognized, with Michael Basseler, Alex Miller and Layne Neeper among those who have addressed the complex satire of his work. However, there has been very little sustained analysis of Saunders's use of comedy beyond satire. Likewise, while class is frequently acknowledged as central to his work, it is rarely examined in any detail. In this chapter I will attempt to correct these omissions by arguing that comedy and class are in fact profoundly linked in his short fiction. From a working-class background himself, Saunders's work is notable for its engagement with the vernacular, and the concomitant disavowal of literary language; where other writers will reach for a heightened, serious register in summoning emotion and complexity, Saunders's rejection of 'fancy language' ('Mr Vonnegut' 74) and the 'lyric/epic' (76) modes works to avoid 'the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation' (80).³⁷ His privileging of the vernacular, which he exploits for those moments 'when a perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought produces a phrase stripped of habituality or familiarity', ('What Makes' par.3) is moreover, a fundamental part of his commitment to presenting sympathetic working-class characters.

The 'perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought' is, as I will demonstrate, a comic procedure, depending as it does upon what David Bordwell et al. call 'the radical cheating of expectations' (31), and as such, is of a piece with Saunders's wider desire to steer 'towards the rapids' ('George Saunders 1' par.5) in effecting an

³⁷ Saunders's dedication to the comic vernacular is partly inspired by his early reading of Kurt Vonnegut, and in his essay on *Slaughterhouse Five*, he describes his initially anxious reaction to the novel's humour and disregard for purity of genre, which felt like 'an ode to the abandonment of control, a disavowal of mastery' (80). Mastery here is equated with the potential falsehoods of the 'lyric/epic' (76), while 'the comic is the truth stripped of the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation' ('Mr Vonnegut' 80).

intense reaction in the reader. Thus comedy plays a crucial part in his commitment to moving the reader, its immediacy checking habituated emotional responses. While the hyperbole of his stories' extreme figurations might in themselves be seen as a form of blackly satirical comedy, comedy also tempers that extremity - both by grounding the extremity of the conceits in a kind of realism or familiarity, and by developing a readerly identification that complicates and broadens the satire. In the short stories 'Puppy' and 'The Semplica Girl Diaries' the extreme figurations dramatise the contemporary intensification of social inequality, while the wider narratives examine the often unconscious procedures that work to produce class distinctions. Before examining these stories in more detail, I will briefly outline some paradigmatic examples of Saunders's use of the comic vernacular that allow his working-characters to demonstrate an authentic and vivid responsiveness despite their inarticulacy.

Perhaps the most significant model behind Saunders's many sympathetic working-class narrators is Huck Finn, whose voice Saunders celebrates in his introduction to Twain's novel, as 'one of the most natural and poetic literary voices ever devised', relishing his 'common sense, his original way of thinking' and 'the perfect roll and cadence' of his 'odd sentences ('United States' 192)'. Saunders's examination of the differences between Huck and Tom provides some background to his wariness of 'fancy language', suggesting the ways in which it might engender a conditioned approach to the world:

Tom believes in what he has read in books, or more correctly, in the concepts that have arisen from what he has read in books. Huck believes in the reality of the things and people he sees, whereas, to Tom, these things are only imperfect imitations of the people and things about which he has read. Because Huck believes that other people are real, he also believes in the reality of their suffering...Whereas Tom knows, Huck wonders. Whereas Huck hopes, Tom presumes. Whereas Huck cares, Tom denies ('United States' 202)

Tom's reading has distorted his capacity to respond authentically, without mediation, while creating a fatal over-confidence, whereas Huck's - always provisional - wisdom has been earned through experience. '[F]ancy language,' then, is implicitly set against the naturalness and authenticity of the vernacular, and this opposition holds true for most of Saunders's fiction; the former figuring in a variety of different ways: as corporate jargon ('CivilWarLand in Bad Decline'), ad speak ('Jon'), high flown lyricism ('The Falls' and 'Escape From Spiderhead'), while the clarity of everyday speech remains the ideal. Clare Hayes-Brady is right that for Saunders, language is 'the engine of subjectivity', 'shaping and expressing it', such that 'limited language checks the development of a coherent self' (24), but her suggestion that his working-class protagonists have a 'restricted or incomplete vocabulary' (37), risks misrepresenting Saunders's concern with 'linguistic independence' as antithetical to his faith in the vernacular. Indeed, Saunders clearly delights in a certain degree of restriction or unsophistication in his narrators, which allow for those moments 'when a perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought produces a phrase stripped of habituality or familiarity' ('What Makes' par.3). Just as with Huck, that 'too-direct expression', lacking in finesse or guile, is generally comic, and in its artlessness, very loveable. Huck delights us while inadvertently revealing the cant of the society around him, for example, his quizzical response to the absurd exaltation of sensibility in evidence in the Grangerford parlour is not sneering, only perplexed:

They was different from any pictures I ever see before; blacker, mostly than is common... one was a young lady with her hair all combed up straight to the top of her head, and knotted there in front of a comb like a chair-back, and she was crying into a handkerchief and had a dead bird laying on its back in her other hand with its heels up, and underneath the picture it said "I Shall Never Hear Thy Sweet Chirrup More Alas' ...Everybody was sorry she died, because she had laid out a lot more of these pictures to do, and a body could see by what she had done what they had lost. But I reckoned, that with her disposition, she was having a better time in the graveyard (112).

In their guilelessness, Saunders's narrators similarly inadvertently unveil linguistic pretension and obfuscation. In 'Jon' for instance, when the narrator's involuntary exclamation registers the slight shift into jargon in an account minimising the removal of a memory implant:

And though he said, in Question No. 2, that his hole did not present him any special challenges in terms of daily maintenance, looking into that hole, I was like, Dude, how does that give you no challenges, it is like somebody blew off a firecracker inside your freaking neck! (par.41)

This suggests the ways in which corporate jargon's internal logic - frequently characterised in Saunders's work as a kind of venal positivity - is able to hijack the nascent thought or perception and shape it into inauthentic expression. The idea of 'an inauthentic relation' ('Thank You' 63) to one's own language is crucial for Saunders, and while jargon is the obvious enemy, he also explores other modes of language which can effect a lack of truthfulness or responsibility, empathy or doubt. In 'My Chivalric Fiasco' for instance, the high flown discourse enabled by 'KnightLyfe ®', the drug designed 'to help with the Improv' (208) in a medieval theme park, has terrible consequences. After witnessing his boss raping a colleague, the narrator Ted is given a promotion to a 'Medicated Role' (208) in exchange for his silence. However, his drug-induced eloquence compels him to proclaim the truth behind his promotion, '[s]ecrecy not befitting a Gentleman (211)', despite the woman involved trying desperately to stop his very public diatribe. When Ted comes down from the drug, having lost his job and caused Martha to be publicly humiliated, he is horrified at his presumption: 'I felt like a total dickBrain, who should have just left well enough alone, & been more Moderate...who did I think I was, Mr. Big Shot?' (214). As Daniel Hartley points out, the 'carefully crafted juxtaposition of idealised pre-modernity with the casualised diction of postmodern America' is a

frequent feature of Saunders's work, with 'hilarious bathetic' effects (177). But while Hartley sees the contemporary linguistic actuality as impoverished in comparison to the ideality of the pre-modern, I would argue that it is the pre-modern discourse that distorts Ted's natural diffidence and responsiveness - expressed so artlessly in the vernacular - compelling him to insist upon the rights and wrongs of others' circumstances in a manner that privileges a rigidly conceptual understanding of the world. Essentially, Ted on 'KnightLyfe ®' is Huck speaking Tom.

Adam Kelly is one of the few critics to recognise Saunders's interest in lyrical modes of language, which despite being conventionally figured as the means 'to resist and transcend' (42) corporate jargon, are often equated in his fiction (in 'My Chivalric Fiasco', for example, the lyrical mode *is* the corporate jargon).³⁸ Kelly's contention that what Saunders offers instead of lyricism is 'an emphasis upon sincerity' (45), suggests something of the artlessness or lack of guile that I consider so significant in Saunders's narrators, but his assertion that an 'agonizing inarticulacy' often drives the stories (45) seems to ignore the comic aspect of the work. The 'perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought' is, after all, a comedic structure, and one which underwrites many jokes and comic utterances. All three theories of comedy - superiority, relief and incongruity - provide some explanation for its effectiveness: superiority characterised most famously by Thomas Hobbes as a 'sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly' (46); while relief is primarily associated with Freud, who argues that laughter arises through the release of energy that is

³⁸ In Kelly's analysis of 'Escape From Spiderhead' he examines Jeff's lyrical description of Heather's suicide, which, he argues, converts 'pain into philosophical and aesthetic abstraction' (46); this insight might be usefully deepened by remembering Saunders's comments about the ways in which Tom's reliance upon his reading effectively denies the reality of other people's suffering.

summoned but then found to be unnecessary. The incongruity theory argues that it is the deliberate violation of norms that triggers laughter and we can see how the 'too-direct expression' functions primarily through this mechanism, where the recognition of incongruity relies upon the shared social knowledge of the appropriate or conventional expression of a thought. Saunders understands that the appropriate or conventional formulation is often just as much about prestige or status (or worse) as it is about clarity, and through his narrators' artlessness he strips away the implicit appeals to authority that attend so much language use. Artlessness here might be understood as a variety of obliviousness, a naivety or lack of sophistication about linguistic norms. The comic pleasure we find in it is complex: our laughter at the narrators' lack of adroitness suggests the superiority theory, but their undefended directness also offers relief; in Freud's terms, their naivety means the 'inhibitory expenditure' which we would usually make in trying to speak correctly 'suddenly becomes unutilizable' and is discharged by laughter (*Jokes* 182). While the effort to use language correctly is generally unacknowledged for native speakers, it can be an intense strain and is a key part of the ceaseless self-consciousness and responsiveness required of us as social creatures. It is partly the characters' obliviousness to their 'mistakes' that we cherish, partly our kinship in making them, and partly our momentary superiority. Meantime, of course, we relish the satirical light cast upon linguistic inauthenticity, but as Alex Miller argues, it is an 'affective, diffused satire' (11) which is deeply compassionate. Just as Huck sweetens Twain's satire, and tempers his tendency to didacticism, similarly, in Saunders's fiction, the potential cynicism of satire is checked by the sweetness of his unassuming narrators, and our attachment to them. Sarah Pogell is right when she suggests that while there are similarities between his work and black humorists

such as Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and Donald Bartheleme, the 'aesthetic of negativity' that informed much of their output is too 'degenerative' for Saunders (472).

Adam Kelly grounds his sense of the 'agonising inarticulacy' of Saunders's characters in the lack of 'access to particular forms of consciousness and lyrical expression' (45), and in thus recognising Saunders's sensitivity to class, he is one among many critics who find Saunders's preeminent subject to be the American working-class. David Rando, for instance, also notes the degree to which Saunders's work revivifies 'old but enduring questions about literary form and class representation' (438). However, by emphasising only the impoverishment of the linguistic resources available to Saunders's characters, Kelly fails to recognise the ways in which Saunders's comic burnishing of the vernacular reclaims a space for working-class voices, a strategy that is complemented by a satirical analysis of those very 'forms of consciousness and lyrical expression' (45), and that command of the appropriate linguistic register, that are conventionally understood to constitute class privilege. The very pointed contrast between the narrator's parents and his sister's in-laws in the short story 'Home' provides an example of these two movements. In the first section of dialogue, the narrator's mother is talking about his sister's new baby, and poking fun at her partner's confusion about its gender:

"Think", Ma said. "What did we buy it?"
"You'd think I'd know boy or girl," Harris said. "It being my freaking grandkid."
"It ain't your grandkid," Ma said. "We bought it a boat."
"A boat could be for boys or girls," Harris said. "Don't be prejudice. A girl can love a boat".
"Just like a boy can love a doll. Or a bra."
"Well, we didn't buy it a doll or a bra," Ma said. "We bought it a boat." (174)

Harris's fine disinterest in propriety is revealed both by his happy obliviousness to linguistic error, and an engaging directness, as shown in the cavalier

incompleteness of his syntax and the sudden logical swerve of 'bra'. His use of 'freaking' - a favourite of Saunders' - harnesses the energy of profanity, its freedom from propriety, while the modification indicates an endearing degree of respect for the sensitivities of others.

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, 'in a good part of downtown' (175), a conversation between the in-laws demonstrates an all too keen interest in propriety:

"Say what you will about Lon Brewster," Ryan's dad said. "But Lon came out and retrieved me from Feldspar that time I had a flat."

"In that ridiculous broiling heat," said Ryan's mom.

"And not a word of complaint," said Ryan's dad. "A completely charming person."

"Almost as charming - or so you told me - as the Flemings," she said.

"And the Flemings are awfully charming," he said. (175)

The deliberate correspondence between the two conversations sharpens the contrast between the straightforwardness of the former and the convoluted nature of the latter, which strains to signal prestige and status. While Ryan's mom and dad remain nameless, and therefore somewhat generic, the naming of Ma and Harris works both to particularise them and to instigate an intimacy with the reader. Intimacy is also created by the omissions of Harris's speech, which we must intuitively supply, and the familiarity of the register, which contrasts with the more formal, comprehensive and defended language of Ryan's parents. Clearly both conversations are funny, but we laugh *with* Ma and Harris, while we laugh at Ryan's parents.³⁹

The affinity we feel for Ma and Harris is also established by the simple fact of their relationship to the narrator, whose first-person voice we experience so intimately. By using a working-class voice as a first-person narrator, Saunders

³⁹ It is not quite as simple as this though: Saunders's compassionate satire suggests that Ryan's parents are over-compensating for their lowly origins.

embeds the reader in the midst of their family, an effective way of creating readerly identification irrespective of background or class, as the narrator's allegiances rapidly become our own. In emphasising how fundamental intimacy and identification are for Saunders's approach to class, I take issue with David Rando's characterisation of Saunders's engagement with the problem of literary form and class representation as largely confrontational. In his analysis of the short story 'Sea Oak', for instance, Rando cites the 'trap' set for the reader in the implicit parallel between the reader and the viewer of the reality television shows watched by the narrator's sister and cousin, arguing that the shows' provision of 'sensationalistic thrills at the suffering guests' expense' (449) is a deliberate reflection of Saunders's own participation in such dynamics. Rando's recognition of Saunders's awareness of the middle-class reader as a consumer of 'working-class' fiction is important - he notes that all of the stories in *Pastoralia* originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, testament to Saunders's 'largely middle-class readership' (449). However, while I agree that Saunders is alert to the risk of sensationalism in representing poverty, I would argue that the implicit parallel between reader and viewer is not an end in itself, rather, it is a moment of recognition that precedes Saunders's subtle re-configuration of readerly identification. When the reader first sees Min and Jade they are 'feeding their babies while watching *How My Child Died Violently*' ('Sea Oak' 93) - a stereotype in miniature of two single mothers watching reality television. But this is followed by the sentence: 'Min's my sister. Jade's our cousin' (93). The reader's initial alignment with the detached observing perspective is immediately confounded by the possessive pronouns 'my' and 'our', given weight and resonance by their pivotal positions in the short sentences that contain them. As a result, the reader's detachment is replaced by attachment. This repeats the same dynamic as the

opening lines of the story, when the manager of the narrator's workplace, a pilot themed strip joint and restaurant, 'comes on the P.A. and shouts "Welcome to Joysticks!"' (91). Initially, the reader is aligned with the audience - the women waiting to ogle the 'pilots' - but only momentarily, until the subsequent sentence pulls the reader into identification with the narrator and his colleagues: "We take off our flight jackets and fold them up. We take off our shirts and fold them up. Our scarves we leave on' (91). The personal and possessive pronouns work accumulatively to create a sense of identification.

In both instances there is a brief registration of a perspective of judgement and assessment which works to acknowledge the reader's failure of empathy. Then, in a characteristically compassionate move, this perspective is overturned: from observing the working-class characters impassively, bound by class difference, the reader - so often middle-class - quickly comes to identify with them. Meanwhile, Saunders works to undermine the middle-class characters, or at least those who aspire to class superiority, through satire, thus ensuring readerly dis-identification. In much the same way that he does in 'Home', Saunders focuses here on those 'forms of consciousness and lyrical expression' (Kelly 45) which might be said to constitute class privilege. He satirises Frendt, the manager of Joysticks, who uses laboured analogies and long winded digressions to dress up the ugly realities of a humiliating workplace with no job security. When making one of the narrator's colleagues redundant, Frendt transforms the more commonplace managerial euphemism into an obscure anthropological analogy:

"There are times" Mr Frendt says, "when one must move gracefully to the next station in life, like for example certain women in Africa or Brazil, I forget which, who either colour their faces or don some kind of distinctive headdress upon achieving menopause. Are you with me? One of our ranks must now leave us. No one is an island in terms of being thought cute forever, and so today we must say good-bye to our friend Lloyd. Lloyd, stand

up so we can say good-bye to you. I'm so sorry. We are all so very sorry."
(92)

The analogy is clearly an absurd attempt to disguise and ennoble Lloyd's redundancy into a rite of passage. In rendering the situation in anthropological terms Frenndt distances himself from responsibility, while his apparent emotional literacy operates in a similar way, concealing the ugly lack of care in florid sentiment. As with 'My Chivalric Fiasco', this is another fusion of corporate jargon with a discourse conventionally thought of as its obverse - in this case academic disinterest. His verbosity is in stark contrast to the comic directness of the narrator and his family, whose lack of pretension works to illuminate linguistic affectation and obfuscation in others. Jade for instance responds sharply to a salesman's description of a 'Sierra Sunset' coffin, with: "No freaking way...Work your whole life and end up in a Mayflower box? I doubt it" (102). The supposedly impoverished vernacular is the source of clarity and authenticity, while those forms associated with class privilege are shown to be deeply inauthentic. The rhythm and pacing of Jade's speech gives some sense of the robust farcical energy of the story, which checks knee jerk responses to the representation of poverty, like voyeurism or mawkish pity. Comedy thus counters the exploitative potential of representation, while making poverty visible, a need that is especially urgent given the extent to which it is hidden in the national culture. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich notices a blindness at work in America's 'highly polarised and unequal society [that] makes the poor almost invisible to their economic superiors' (216), she goes on to argue that this is due in part to increasing geographical and educational segregation:

the affluent ... are less and less likely to share spaces with the poor. As public schools and other public services deteriorate, those who can afford to do so send their children to private schools and spend their off-hours in private spaces - health clubs, for example, instead of the local park (217).

In suggesting that 'Sea Oak's' farcical quality checks habituated emotional responses, it is necessary to explore a little further the relationship between emotion and farce, which might be defined as a style that typically includes 'crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations' (OED). When Bergson argues that the introduction of 'sympathy, fear or pity' (87) in comedy make it impossible for us to laugh, it is perhaps farce that he has in mind, and once we acknowledge this specificity, his insistence that comedy only deals in stock characters (66) begins to seem more reasonable. Saunders's story - an early work - does utilise reductive characterization (and indeed 'ludicrously improbable situations': the narrator's Aunt Bernie returns from the dead) as the means to achieve comic license. Our 'sympathy, fear or pity' (87) are thus checked and it is this exemption from the usual social rules that allows Saunders to create an antic space which is largely governed by the rules of play. However, to say that these emotions are checked is not to say that they are blocked entirely. As I have demonstrated, Saunders works hard to ensure our identification with the narrator and his family. We are quick to assume that any tempering of emotion equates to 'heartlessness' (Woods, 'V.S Pritchett' 283), but here, Saunders shows us how productive it can be. In addition to making poverty visible and demonstrating the clarity and authenticity of the vernacular without didacticism, he is also able to celebrate a working-class identity without making any substantive claims about working-class subjectivity. Peter Hitchcock states that '[t]he difficulty of working-class representation begins with the fundamental abstractness of class', given that '[c]lass is not a thing but a relation..(23)', and Saunders's comedy allows for a generic abstractness that might otherwise be objectionable.

However, perhaps aware of the limitations of the farce of stories like 'Sea

Oak' - the lack of psychological depth and motivation, as well as the potential for comic pleasure to legitimise amoral behaviour (letting dubious characters 'off the hook'), Saunders's later work demonstrates a shift. In the next story I want to consider, 'Puppy', from his 2013 collection, *Tenth of December*, Saunders's strategies for exploring class have changed, and here he often works against the comedy, deliberately withholding it. The middle-class character - and the evidence of her class privilege - become the objects of scrutiny, in ways which gently compel a middle-class reader to recognise their own complicity in perpetuating class distinctions while protecting the working-class character from any anthropological or voyeuristic intent. The nature of the comedy has also changed, demonstrating a newly self-reflexive awareness of the ambivalent social uses of humour. This undermines the common characterisation of comedy as subversive, and recognises the ways in which laughter can instead signal conformity. Indeed, to some extent, 'Puppy' might be seen as an exercise in non-cathartic humour. Saunders's fiction has frequently registered how problematic explicitness about humour can be, using the ambivalence of the written form of laughter - 'ha ha ha' - to both denote and to effect a moment of unease. Here he develops that insight to produce a sustained sense of strain which denies the reader the release or satisfaction of laughter. In 'Puppy' the two characters' internal explicitness about their private attempts at humour has the opposite effect to the freedom of obliviousness, revealing instead a self-conscious desire for conformity. Remembering Bergson's recognition of the 'constantly alert attention' (8) required to conform to social convention, and the release from the exhausting toll of conformity that obliviousness represents, we can see that a character's self-consciousness might have the opposite effect - producing a sense of constraint rather than release.

For the middle-class character, Marie, her private attempts at humour function as a form of self-deceit, allowing her to disavow her unkindness during a visit to the home of another woman, Callie, in order to buy a puppy. She is both disgusted and rather delighted by what she sees, her 'humorous' conception of it as a 'field trip for the kids' signalled by her internal laughter:

Well, wow, what a super field trip for the kids, Marie thought, ha ha (the filth, the mildew smell, the dry aquarium holding the single encyclopaedia volume, the pasta pot on the bookshelf with an inflatable candy cane inexplicably sticking out of it) (38).

Her 'joke' is an example of what William Cheng calls 'comedic alibis', which 'can be so powerful that they drag errors and *faux pas* into the realm of respectability, enabling even the most egregious ethical or aesthetic failing to pass forwell, passing' (533). Her laughter also represents a nervous policing of standards - making good the dissonance between what she sees and what she believes she should see (a clean, well ordered home) - a conformity to social norms that blinds her to the grinding logic of poverty. Moving from humour to disgust, her internal monologue continues:

and although some might have been disgusted (by the spare tire on the dining-room table, by the way the glum mother dog, the presumed in-house pooper, was now dragging her rear over the pile of clothing in the corner, in a sitting position, splay-legged, moronic look of pleasure on her face), Marie realised (resisting the urge to rush to the sink and wash her hands, in part because the sink had a *basketball* in it) that what this really was, was deeply sad.

Please do not touch anything, please do not touch anything, please do not touch, she said to Josh and Abbie, but just in her head, wanting to give the children a chance to observe her being democratic and accepting, and afterward they could all wash up at the half-remodeled McDonald's, as long as they just please please kept their hands out of their mouths, and God forbid they should rub their eyes.

The phone rang, and the lady of the house plodded into the kitchen, placing the daintily held, paper-towel-wrapped turds *on the counter* (38-39).

Taken as a whole the passage becomes another sophisticated instance of

Saunders's gift for identification and intimacy rather than confrontation, as Marie

enacts the failure of liberal empathy: a middle-class reader is not given the chance to be judgemental, or salacious, she does it for them - a manoeuvre that saves the reader from the failure of empathy while articulating that failure very precisely. By granting us a second-order observation, the reader is given the opportunity to scrutinise Marie's perspective, as she complacently intones the orthodoxy, recognising this as 'deeply sad.' But beneath the vanity of that moment of superficial sympathy, lies the implicit association of the plodding 'lady of the house' with the 'glum mother dog', 'dragging her rear'. The working-class individual is no longer rendered merely as a different nationality and a different culture (as in the case with Frendt and his employees), but a different species. The poverty of Callie's home is configured as a cultural event: the experience 'a super field trip', with the opportunity for Marie to demonstrate her tolerance of difference, wholly missing the point that simply acknowledging Callie's difference is wholly missing the point. The point is her poverty.

Marie's self-congratulation in tolerating difference suggests the ways in which the logic of identity politics have confused class analysis, a confusion condemned most notably by Walter Benn Michaels, who notices the ways in which celebration of cultural difference obscures the reality of economic difference. For Michaels, this transformation of class position into culture not only ignores the fact of poverty, but erases it entirely, 'not by removing the deprivation but by denying that it is deprivation' (*Trouble* 200). Similarly, Rita Felski argues for caution in characterisations that celebrate the working-class because 'class politics is ultimately concerned with overcoming differences, not with affirming and celebrating them' ('Nothing to Declare' 42).

Marie's next attempt at humour is a comic fantasy about the puppy. Like the gag about the field trip this allows Marie to covertly ridicule Callie's circumstances:

Okay, then, all right, they would adopt a white-trash dog. Ha ha. They could name it Zeke, buy it a little corncob pipe and a straw hat. She imagined the puppy, having crapped on the rug, looking up at her, going, Cain't hep it. But no. Had she come from a perfect place? Everything was transmutable. She imagined the puppy grown up, entertaining some friends, speaking to them in a British accent: *My family of origin was, um, rather not, shall we say, of the most respectable...*

Ha ha, wow, the mind was amazing, always cranking out these - (39)

Once again, the ambivalence of 'Ha, ha' reveals a degree of nervousness: she is 'only joking'. Rather than release, laughter here is a symptom of the 'constantly alert attention' (Bergson 8) required to conform to social convention, as she tries to disavow her unkindness while making good the dissonance of the situation. Marie's humour in these examples illustrates Bergson's conception of laughter as punitive, or what Michael Billig describes as its 'disciplinary functions' (132). Billig argues that there is 'too much optimistic theorising about humour' which omits the significance of ridicule (6), and his work foregrounds laughter's rhetorically paradoxical qualities, which enable 'us to perform contrary discursive acts': 'we can assert, because we can deny; we can question because we can answer; we can criticise because we can justify and so on' (177). Saunders's portrait of Marie is acutely alert to these kinds of dynamics, all of which are occurring internally. His target is not the more conspicuous demonstrations of humour as social corrective, but the more subtle part it plays in our relationship with ourselves.

Marie's fantasy of redeeming the dog from its lowly origins has a long cultural lineage. Victorian sentimental narratives are rife with tales of the social mobility of impoverished but appealing individuals, and in their patterns of displacement such fictions serve clearly ideological functions. Critic Amy Lang suggests that the trope of the appealing orphan, whose comeliness 'springs her

loose of class' and 'simultaneously confirms her rightful position in the middle-class and locates the promise of social harmony in her well-ordered home', works to mediate 'the pain of poverty and the potential explosiveness of class difference' (8). Such narratives do important cultural work in reinforcing the myth of social mobility, while their displacements and resolutions help to manage 'the experience of class and its antagonisms' (8). Marie's fantasy about the dog does exactly this:

reinscribing the myth of social mobility while denying the potentially explosive reality of class difference. The specific nature of her use of 'white trash' is continuous with her practice of interpreting Callie's poverty as cultural identity - the corncob pipe and straw hat become a nostalgic reification of poverty, which is then further objectified by being worn by a puppy. The bucolic image represses the painful reality of class difference: her wealth (she drives a Lexus and lavishes expensive gifts on her children) in the face of Callie's destitution. In Marie's fantasy, the dog, like the comely orphan, assumes its 'rightful position in the middle-class' (Lang 8) thereby reinforcing the fiction of social mobility, and allowing Marie to enjoy a pleasurable sense of beneficence. The fantasy is a form of 'Americana,' which Lauren Berlant describes as 'the essentialising trivia of national culture, where the profoundly hardwired meets the banality of kitsch', turning 'inequality into adorableness' (*Female Complaint* 79,80).

Despite their shared concerns in raising a family - a kinship which makes the failure of relation all the more stark - the differences between Marie and Callie are pronounced: Marie is solipsistic, entitled and lacking in self-awareness despite her apparent emotional literacy, while Callie, like so many of Saunders's working-class characters, is both sensitive and unassuming. These differences are developed further by the characterisation of their husbands, in particular, the men's laughter.

Marie refers five times to her husband's laughter, luxuriating in anecdotes about his way of 'saying "Ho HO!" whenever she brought home something new and unexpected' (33). "Ho HO!" Robert had said, coming home to find the iguana. "Ho HO!" he had said, coming home to find the ferret trying to get into the iguana cage. "We appear to be the happy operators of a Humorlessness menagerie" (33). Her pursuit of exotic pets and other 'Family Missions' (33) to buttress her family's sense of identity, is explicitly based on credit, and Robert, the presumed wage-earner, is marked by ambivalence, his strained laughter suggesting a supplementary story about the difficulties of his professional life off-stage.⁴⁰ It is largely Marie's enjoyment of Robert's laughter that cues the reader to interpret it as forced, given the evidence for her determinedly optimistic mis-readings of familial antagonism. When she tries to communicate with her son for instance, mostly lost in video games, her cheery description of his habitual response sounds deluded: 'he would reach back with his noncontrolling hand and swat at her affectionately' (34). Our sense of that misconception as idealising fantasy is deepened by a subsequent sprightly comment about an incident only yesterday when 'they'd shared a good laugh [and] he'd accidentally knocked off her glasses' (34).

Callie also thinks repeatedly and lovingly about her husband's laughter, but whereas Robert's laughter seems hollow to us, Jimmy's 'sudden laugh/despair-snort...like a sneeze, or like he was about to start crying' (37) sounds authentic. In a subtle variant of the paradigm that sets the competently expressed yet inauthentic against the inarticulate and authentic, Jimmy's 'agonising inarticulacy' (Kelly 45) is precisely the quality that we are drawn to, while Robert's laughter, so absurdly

⁴⁰ An entirely fabricated professional life perhaps, in the vein of Laurent Cantet's film *Time Out*; a house of cards waiting to fall.

'correct' in its expression - the very embodiment of paternal warmth with its suggestion of Santa Claus - is both unconvincing and disturbing.

Marie is an exemplary instance of what Lauren Berlant calls a 'comover subject' ('Humorlessness' 308), a subject whose desperate commitment to a fantasy of sovereignty, and whose subsequent intractability, imbricates the spectator in ambivalent relation. In her abject striving for 'family laughter' ('Puppy' 32), Marie starkly displays the 'reifying ambition and the proliferating micro adjustments that preserve [her] attachment to life' (Berlant, 'Humorlessness' 307), and our recognition of her fragility ensures a complex array of feelings: 'aversion, empathy, identification, disidentification, seasickness, kindness' (309). Given this ambivalence, we might wonder at what point 'humourless comedy' becomes melodrama or tragedy, and Berlant suggests that it is partly '*the desire for comedy*' (italics in original) structuring a protagonist's action (309), that keeps it in the comic modality. The story does tilt into tragedy at the moment Marie's desire for comedy abruptly ceases, when her complacent judgement of Callie's home is jolted into something more strident. Looking out of the window, she sees the startling scene of a young boy chained to a tree. The reader already knows why Callie has had to do this, having been privy to her anxious thoughts about her son's psychotic episodes before Marie's arrival. Marie, however, does not pause to consider any possible alternatives: she interprets the situation as abuse and resolves to call Child Welfare, 'where she knew Linda Berling, a very no-nonsense lady who would snatch this poor kid away so fast it would make that fat mother's thick head spin' (41). It is an apt illustration of Berlant's observation that 'the privilege to be humourless, to withhold the cushion of generosity, wit, or mutually hashed out terms of relation is unequally distributed across fields of power..' ('Humorlessness' 310). Marie's ability

to withhold humour as a 'socially lubricating mood' (Berlant and Ngai 236) is entirely due to her position of power.

Marie's response to witnessing what she believes is Bo's suffering is to remember her own mother's neglect, which the text shows as a loop of memory continually playing in her consciousness, revealing the extent to which her abject pursuit of 'family laughter' ('Puppy' 32) is shaped in response to her past. Her decision to call Child Welfare is a response predicated upon her own needs - an attempt to right the wrongs of her own past - rather than any kind of engagement with Bo's actual situation. It illustrates what critic Megan Boler describes as one of the most significant 'risks' of empathy; when it operates 'more [as] a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you' (257). It is this 'passive empathy' that Saunders critiques in Marie, and through her, and her imperviousness to the part she plays in enacting class difference, Saunders compels the reader 'to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront' (Boler 257). Clearly, Saunders does intend the reader to identify with Marie: the complacency of her secret fantasy of redeeming the puppy, even her 'use' of Bo as a pedagogical parenting tool (when she lets her son see Bo chained to the tree, in order that he learn 'the world was not all lessons and iguanas and Nintendo' (41); these are examples of what Saunders calls 'an inadmissible thought-stream' (Elmhirst 51), intended to provoke a grudging recognition: "'I've done that, or I could imagine myself doing that'" (Elmhirst 51). It is through such processes that class is enacted, as John Hartigan suggests, '[c]lass is not simply determined in a sociological or economic sense; rather it is actively produced and performed by individuals, often in charged, emotional interactions that can be characterised succinctly as efforts to put people "in their place" (24). And

having put Callie in her place, Marie leaves with her children, enlarged, refreshed, and restored in her own sense of identity and integrity.

The point of view then shifts to Callie, who is left with the problem of what to do with the now unwanted puppy. Knowing that her husband will feel compelled to kill it, she takes on the task herself and taking it far out into the fields behind her house, she abandons it there. Killing a dog, chaining a boy to a tree - in the perverse 'logic of necessity' (Watkins, *Throwaways* 38) these extreme figurations become acts of great love and resourcefulness. The story ends as she luxuriates in her satisfaction with her albeit temporary solution to Bo's illness, little knowing that she is about to go to bureaucratic hell in order to get her son back. The reader knows that Marie's entitled righteousness will nullify Callie's act of loving expediency, vulnerable as it is to misinterpretation.

Judgement and interpretation, bolstered by entitlement and access, these are all qualities - like humourlessness - that arise out of privilege, and it is these arguably middle-class traits that are scrutinised in the story, rather than any anthropological inspection of Callie's poverty. In satirising traits which are often understood to constitute class privilege, Saunders extends the model used in 'Home' and 'Sea Oak', where the 'forms of consciousness and lyrical expression' (Kelly 45) along with a command of the appropriate linguistic register are satirised. In being rendered ridiculous, middle-class pieties are subtly Othered, while Callie's working-class voice is established as the unmarked norm.⁴¹

⁴¹ As I will demonstrate in a later chapter, there is a kinship here with Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, which also marginalises the familiar, dominant perspective, by displacing the assumption of whiteness. Furthermore, Peele, like Saunders, utilises non-cathartic humour as a strategy, both to effect a general air of unease and to manage spectatorial allegiance. Both recognise that effective humour can mitigate ethical failure, and by deliberately sabotaging or withholding humour, readers and viewers are less likely to find excuse for such failure.

The focus on Marie also allows Saunders to neutralise the potential sensationalism in the representation of Callie's poverty, with the story's energy residing not in any objective description of her home but in Marie's aesthetic judgement of it. This ensures that the reader is not given the opportunity to 'consume' Callie or the poverty of her home. The details noticed by Marie are rendered as a matter of fact, all the heat taken out by the voluptuous relish of her disapproval. Saunders's use of italics is a particularly skillful way of rendering her delighted disgust: 'four *dog turds* from the rug; 'the spare tire on the *dining-room table*' (38); 'some kind of *crankshaft* on a cookie sheet', and 'a partial red pepper afloat *in a can of green paint*' (41).

The text makes clear the extent to which Marie's own class anxiety drives her judgement of Callie. Her memories of the shame of an alcoholic mother compel the ongoing and anxious 'work of boundary maintenance' (Hartigan 151). She returns to one memory in particular: being 'locked in a closet (a closet!)' while her mother is 'entertaining a literal ditch digger in the parlour.' (34) 'Entertaining', 'parlour' - the vocabulary is steadfastly genteel, as is the shocked decorum of the exclamation - 'a closet!'. Later, clearly haunted by the memory, she thinks again of 'coming out of the closet to find her mother's scattered lingerie and the ditchdigger's metal hanger full of flags' (40): it is delivered as melodrama, but there is clearly a comic aspect too, and the combination makes for an ambivalence that denies outright laughter.

In the final story I wish to examine, 'The Semplica Girl Dairies', the laughter is much less ambivalent, while the part social anxiety plays in perpetuating class distinctions is more explicitly at work. As with 'Puppy', we see the processes by which difference is aestheticised, and inequality disavowed, this time with race as

an additional co-ordinate. Once again, the representation of poverty is scrupulous. The protagonist is the focus of the satire, effectively neutralising any potential sensationalism. However the satire is much broader and more diffuse than the austerity of 'Puppy's 'humorless comedy', and instead of withholding comedy, here Saunders engineers our affection for the narrator with an abundance of it.

The story describes a world very like our own, but with one extreme addition: luxury garden items called Semplica Girls, poor immigrant women strung up by wires through their heads and hung on rotating structures. It is a startling and characteristically compressed figuration, as I will discuss shortly, but its clearest implication is as a metaphor for the Western abuse of immigrant labour. Given the clear-cut moral response to such abuse, Saunders has been explicit about the necessity for complicating the morality of the story, avoiding the reiteration of a familiar stance,

In which case, who needs it, you know? If the only thing the story did was say, "Hey, it's really wrong to hang up living women in your backyards, you capitalist-pig oppressors," that wasn't going to be enough. We kind of know that already. It had to be about that plus something else ('This Week in Fiction' par.5).

One of his solutions to the problem of the 'too-easy-metaphor dilemma' ('This Week in Fiction' par.11) is the story's diary form, which creates a powerful intimacy with the story's narrator, a lower middle-class man who, like most people in his world, is entirely blind to the moral horror of the Semplica Girls, regarding them simply as aspirational objects. Through his diary, the reader experiences him as a sweet, loving man, devoted to his family and continually struggling to do his best for them; there is pathos in the undefended vulnerability of his hurried, sometimes muddled speculations, and the multiple 'must do lists' and 'notes to self' and exhortations to do better, all of which run aground due to finite resources of money and time and

skills. The fragmentary form of the diary entries, with extensive ellipses and omissions, compels the reader's intuitive participation, while the diarist's hasty and unguarded entries are a means of generating ample instances of the incongruity of 'a perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought'. Comic pleasure is thus central to the story's fostering of intimacy. In contrast to the constraint bred by the characters' self-consciousness about humour in 'Puppy', in 'The Semplica Girl Dairies' the reader is allowed to enjoy the full freedom of the narrator's obliviousness. We delight in what Bergson calls 'absentmindedness', that slack '[i]nattention to self, and consequently to others' (72), that contrasts so profoundly with the exhausting vigilance required of us as social creatures. After a party at the home of his daughter's wealthy friend (their vast garden is adorned with a 'red Oriental bridge flown in from China' complete with 'a hoofmark from some dynasty' (113), the diarist recounts a conversation with the father, Emmett. He is oblivious to the insulting implications:

Asked about my work, I told. He said well, huh, amazing the strange arcane things our culture requires some of us to do, degrading things, things that offer no tangible benefit to anyone, how do they expect people to continue to even hold their heads up?

Could not think of response. Note to self: Think up response, send on card, thus striking up friendship with Emmett? (117)

Part of our pleasure in this is the diarist's avoidance of humiliation, a condition which we are acutely preoccupied with evading. Freud's description of comic relief helps us see how humorous pleasure is produced here: expecting signs of affect (humiliation or anger) in the narrator, the reader 'is prepared to follow his lead and call up the same emotional impulses' but instead of expressing strong affect, the diarist's obliviousness flattens his reaction, and the 'expenditure on feeling that is economised turns into humorous pleasure' in the reader (428). There is also a certain degree of what Hobbes calls 'eminency' in our superior knowledge: we perceive the insult, while he does not.

His obliviousness to Emmett's entitled rudeness is partly due to a kind of sweet naivety, a quality that is reminiscent of many of Saunders's working-class characters. While the diarist is a rung higher on the social ladder than those characters, Saunders exploits his diffidence to deepen a sense of readerly attachment. That sweetness becomes more marked in subsequent passages, particularly the entries when, worrying about his daughter Lilly's birthday, and acutely aware of her shame at her family's precarious financial and social standing, he remembers his own painful party experiences:

(Sept. 12)

Nine days to Lilly's b-day. Kind of dread this. Too much pressure. Do not want to have bad party. Why issue? Possibly own thirteenth b-day party? Horseback riding and Ken Dryzniak nearly paralysed in fall? Plus cake was stale. Snake menaced Kate Fresslen. Dad killed snake with hoe, bits of snake flew up, soiling Kate's dress? Or maybe this b-day stress perfectly normal, all parents feel?" (122)

Again the humour, structured largely by incongruity, is inadvertent, the diarist's obliviousness preventing him from identifying the experience as straightforwardly humiliating. There is a parallel here with Marie, whose past also explicitly informs her present actions. But while Marie's narrative concerning her past is both comprehensive and definitive, and therefore defended, the diarist's perplexed account is porous - partly the result of multiple question marks - and allows the reader to intuitively fill the gaps and draw conclusions.

It is important to note, however, that the diarist's obliviousness, while humorous and endearing, is also deeply problematic, a crucial part of his unthinking acceptance of dominant social values. His embrace of the blatant exploitation of the SGs is the most obvious manifestation of this, but it is also evident in his dogged belief in social mobility. Aaron Thier notices this enduring conviction in equality in many of Saunders's characters; a 'Horatio Alger ethos' of rags to riches, which 'is a

relic of older days'. As Thier observes: '[t]hese people have inherited a hopefulness, an idea of themselves and their country and their shinier futures, that is no longer applicable' (40). For Gillian Elizabeth Moore, the need to sustain the fantasy of equality, so foundational to the myth of American exceptionalism, explains the diarist's tendency toward 'disavowal' (62) and repression. She cites the diarist's recollections of his father as an instance of this tendency: despite 'positive mental attitude and disciplined hard work' his efforts 'resulted in an endless cycle of minor promotions and demotions that balanced out to economic paralysis' (62). However, the narrator 'represses all traces of this familial failure, constantly aspiring beyond ordinary achievement toward exceptional success' (62). In this reading, then, obliviousness becomes pathological, and the diarist's imperviousness to instances like Emmett's rudeness might be seen to emerge partly from a deluded confidence in their essential parity,⁴² or at least in the possibility of their imminent parity - an optimism which readers understand to be entirely unfounded. His obliviousness is in fact an integral part of what Lauren Berlant calls the 'fantasy-work of national identity' (*Anatomy 2*) or the nation's 'fantasy bribe' (*Cruel Optimism 7*). Indeed, we could suggest that the diarist's profound identification with the American Dream has in some ways stunted his intellectual and emotional development: an investment in fantasy that limits his consciousness, his conscience, and even his humanity. And given the enduring purchase of the myth of exceptionalism, this dynamic is arguably widespread. In his bestselling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy* (2017), J.D. Vance details the extraordinary efforts required to move from poverty stricken childhood to adult success, but despite having to work multiple jobs to pay for his education, scarcely

⁴² It is this delusion that accounts for his obliviousness to the implications of the history teacher's remark about their car bumper ('saying he too had car whose bumper fell off, when poor, in college'); rather than taking offense, the narrator's note to self to 'write letter of commendation to principal' speaks to a complacency about his relative status.

leaving time to sleep, Vance seems blind to systemic inequity. The lessons he takes from his experience 'are not that higher education is rigged in favour of the rich, or that state-funded universities suffer under austerity, but that hard work will be rewarded and payday lenders are a necessary lifeline' (Doherty par.7). While Vance's hard-won education enabled his advancement, Maggie Doherty points out that more widely, higher education no longer fulfils its promise as 'the engine of social mobility', to the extent that '38 per cent of students from low-income families will stay poor, even if they graduate' (par.8). The diarist is also a college graduate - a fact that has had no discernible effect upon his social or economic status.

Clearly then, Gillian Elizabeth Moore's sense of the diarist's interpretation of 'his stasis as personal rather than systemic' (62) is a conservative position that is still widely shared. In his account of the story, Daniel Hartley also argues that the narrator is locked in an individualism that cannot comprehend 'the structural limitations of the neoliberal present' (180). In the only sustained engagement with Saunders's comedy that I have thus come across, Hartley emphasises the part played by comedy in articulating this 'entirely private' and apolitical existence (179). He argues that the comedy creates an 'art of idiocy' (178) which emphasises moments of contingency, triviality and 'social formlessness' (179). However, this reading both ignores the relevance of idiosyncrasy and triviality to the diary form, and denies the significance of such moments as an emotional realism very much preoccupied with social form, illuminating the diarist's socio-economic background and thus informing his present day class anxieties. While Saunders may not be making any didactic claims about class, the diarist's unwitting anecdotes offer indirect insights into the ways in which class is enacted and experienced.

Hartley notices the corporeal quality of these instances, their ‘focus on the absolute peculiarities of the body’ (179), which he argues deepens the story’s asocial and apolitical emphasis. One such instance is the diarist’s memory of his mother’s embarrassingly frugal birthday gifts:

Once got basketball but was overly bouncy ABA type, red, white, and blue, with for some reason, drawing of clown on it. When bounced, went like two feet higher than normal ball. Friends called it my “bouncy ball” ...Believe Mom got with soap coupons...[Mom] [t]ook photo of me trying to trying to dribble bouncy ball ...In photo, ball bouncing up out of frame. Bottom curve of ball just visible, like moon. Chris M, looking up at ball/moon, amazed/flinching’ (123).

For Hartley this comic emphasis upon singularity undermines ‘systematicity’ (179) and thus presents ‘a minimal humanity which has no way of incorporating itself into the civic institutions of the society at large’ (180). However, this again ignores the social anxiety at the heart of the anecdote, which provides concrete detail about ‘the development of class-consciousness’ in childhood (Steedman 13). Baudrillard’s account of the ‘social logic of objects’ is helpful in understanding what is at work in the passage. Proposing a ‘discourse of objects’ to replace the simpler motivations of ‘needs and their satisfactions’ with a focus instead upon ‘discrimination and prestige’ (*For A Critique* 30), Baudrillard argues that objects ‘speak to us not so much of the user and of technical practices as of social pretension and resignation, of social mobility and inertia, of acculturation and enculturation, of stratification and of social classification’ (38). And arguably, given the absence of traditional markers of class distinction in America, consumption becomes even more freighted with symbolic social meaning. While the ball in the diarist’s reminiscence seems a utilitarian object with little scope for the innovation or refinement that is so central to creating symbolic distinctions (and the market for more goods), it is clearly all wrong - both too bouncy and emblazoned with a childish drawing. And moreover, in a detail that

the diarist presents as inconsequential, but which reveals the explicitly socio-economic shame of the gift, it was purchased with soap coupons.

It is important to note here that the detailed particularity of such passages can also be explained in the pragmatic terms of narrative craft, as a way of invoking comedy's robust immanence and thus countering the somewhat austere abstraction of the story's extreme figuration. Despite the clarity of its logic, the central image is surreal, even dream-like (indeed, Saunders has explicitly described the idea coming to him in a dream⁴³), and the emphasis upon concrete details is a way for Saunders to ground the story in a granular realism. The focus upon concrete physicality in the passage about the 'bouncy ball' is evident in several other instances, in the reminiscence quoted above about horseback riding for example, where the material limitations of the body are so prominent. Another passage Hartley cites as evidence of triviality and 'social formlessness' (179) is arguably even more pronounced in its attempt to ground or embed the story in a form of physical realism: 'So good night to all future generations. Please know I was a person like you, I breathed air and tensed legs while trying to sleep and, when writing with pencil, sometimes brought pencil to nose to smell' (110).

Hartley argues that through such anecdotes, the story enacts a 'weak...liberal humanism' that embodies 'the individualist, liberal humanist ...position under neoliberalism' (180), thus testifying to Saunders's essentially apolitical perspective. However, I believe this underestimates the complexity of the

⁴³ 'Somewhere around 1998, I had this incredibly vivid dream in which I went (in my underwear) to a (non-existent) window in the bedroom of our house in Syracuse and looked down into our backyard. Balmy summer night, beautiful full moon, etc., etc. I was looking at something, and it wasn't clear what, but I was getting this incredible feeling of happiness and well-being and deep satisfaction, as in, Wow, I finally was able to really step up for our family. I am such a lucky guy—to have this amazing wife and kids and now, at last, to be able to do justice to them in this super way. Then the yard came into focus, and what was out there was ... as I describe in the story' ('This Week in Fiction' par.2).

affect engendered by the diarist's idiosyncratic and artless narration. Without regard for sophistication or prestige, his guilelessness produces a comic pleasure that is equal parts superiority and relief, a combination that effects a safe space in which the reader can 'let their guard down', and acknowledge in turn their own crassness and stupidity, and thus recognize themselves 'as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront' (Boler 257).

Indeed, the importance of recognising a more universal culpability is central to Saunders's project: wary of the limitations of traditional 'linear' satire with its bounded object, he has frequently mentioned the need for a more diffuse satire:

To me, the 'enemy' is human tendency - that is, the enemy is us. Sometimes those tendencies cluster into systems - communism, materialism, fascism - which I think are the sorts of things a more classical and talented satirist like Orwell would take on - but I find myself more interested in the tendencies themselves, as they manifest, in unnamed, unclustered, and often embryonic form. ('Between the Poles' 92)

This remark suggests that Hartley is right to see Saunders as preoccupied with the individual rather than the collective, an engagement embedded in an empiricist interpretation of the world, which might constitute a form of humanism. Hartley defines the 'liberal humanist' tradition as 'an ideology organically related, but not reducible, to liberalism, which poses structural political and economic problems in individualist, ethical and inter-personal terms, and which sees in literature and culture a repository of transhistorical moral values which are widely unavailable in the society at large' (171, 172). And while it is true that Saunders examines systemic issues in steadfastly 'individualist, ethical and inter-personal terms', it is hard to argue with his privileging of specificity, given that detail is crucial in engendering recognition and empathy, while the collective or the systemic tends to be conceived of in the abstract. Compelling fiction, in other words, relies on detail and the individual, not the abstract and the collective. But that does not mean that

fiction, in foregrounding the particular, is not saying something about society. It is. By broadening the story's satire, and examining the 'tendencies' involved in class formation in process rather than as monolithic, Saunders compels us to recognise our own complicity, to acknowledge that simply decrying 'capitalist-pig oppressors' is to avoid the harder truth of our own participation in oppression. 'Classical' satire's proclivity for externalising the object explains in part Saunders's ambivalence about being classified as a satirist, recognising as he does that, as John Limon puts it, '[t]he term satirist will [only] seem magical for those short periods in history when we have met the enemy and he is not us' (Limon, 'American Humor' 311).⁴⁴

Layne Neeper notes that if Saunders's story were to use the procedures of traditional satire, 'the ameliorative corrective would be blatantly apparent'. The diarist's covetous desire for his own Semplica Girls would be 'ruinous', while his participation in their victimization, as an escape from the oppression of his own class anxiety, simply 'immoral' (295). However, by demonstrating the significance of his children in that anxiety - his fear that they will be 'scarred by how far behind' ('The Semplica Girl Diaries' 121) the family is relative to their wealthy neighbours - Saunders 'radically destabilizes the simplistic satiric method... so that in the end what [he] demands from readers is not the censuring of the story's narrator but our empathetic understanding of a character who has been led to detestable acts for reasons we might judge to be good and worthy' (Neeper 295). Interestingly, given the tendency to privilege the rigours of satire over and above comedy, as revealed by one typical characterisation of satire as 'purposeful comedy' (Levin 8), here

⁴⁴ Arguably we are in one such period - with the left wing US news satirists rather self-righteously relishing the spectacular failings of Trump. Julie Webber suggests that such satire trains 'spectators to feel like they are political even if they abhor participatory citizenship' (156). The satire is thus counter-productive, working to 'therapeutically mediate' urgency and rage (133).

comedy is a crucial part of Saunders's method in broadening the satire and securing our identification, or attachment. Traditional satire is often characterised in heroic terms, which ignores the ways it can establish 'a standard target', which works 'not to undermine but to confirm the audience's prejudices' (Frayn 9). Externalising the object or the enemy; standardising the target - there is clearly a risk of complacency in satire's assurance, and Saunders demonstrates that it is comedy, so often overlooked, that is crucial in complicating this moral simplicity and developing instead a sense of our complicity.

In focusing only upon Saunders's portrayal of the diarist, however, we risk ignoring the extreme figuration at the heart of the story, the immigrant women as luxury garden ornaments. On one level it is in itself akin to Steven Weisenburger's description of traditional satire: 'a closely targeted, normative, and corrective aggression' (14) which functions as a clear metaphor for all those immigrants who work menial jobs in the US in order to survive and support their families back at home. However, the image is complex, perhaps because, as Freud suggests is often the case with dream attributes, it is over-determined. The detail about the 'electrolines' which are used to suspend the women by their heads, for instance, is suggestive of wider implications. Saunders himself suggests that this feature reveals the complex characteristics of a 'demanding, narcissistic culture':

It's more direct in enacting its desires. It has to be richer (to afford the surgeries); its taste is more refined and strange and perverse/decadent... It doesn't like the harness idea because the harnesses would look baggy, the SGs would hang at strange angles—something like that. But another (nastier) difference is that there is an element of complete physical domination/subjugation in the surgical approach that this culture (subconsciously) likes and wants; and that, in turn, says something deep about the lengths to which this... culture is willing to go to optimize its aesthetic landscaping choice, i.e., its "pleasure." ('This Week in Fiction' par.13)

His comments help unpack the 'dramatic compression' ('Mr Vonnegut' 79) that is at work in the image of the Semplica Girls, a compression which can read as extremity. The phrase comes from Saunders's essay on Kurt Vonnegut, where he articulates the ways in which Vonnegut allowed him to see the usefulness of the 'artistic uncoupling from the actual' (79). He argues that Vonnegut's

sci-fi elements could be understood as a form of dramatic compression, meant to urge us more directly toward the truth of our existence: Do we travel in time? We do. Are there aliens that see and judge us? There are, although they are in our heads, and sometimes we call them "Gods," or "our conscience," or "the superego" (79).

Is Western exploitation of minority women bound up in a form of aestheticisation? It is. And while Saunders's own insights go some way in examining what that aestheticisation reveals about our culture, we need to look in more detail at the social logic exposed more generally by the SGs.

The story's preoccupation with the sociological aspect of objects has already been noted, the bouncy ball at one end of the spectrum, and the conspicuous consumption of Lily's friends the Torrinis at the other. Similarly, the SGs themselves must be understood as objects which refer to what Baudrillard calls 'social objectives' (*For A Critique* 38). Baudrillard's theory of objects builds upon Thorstein Veblen's insights into the ways which 'subservient classes' function to display 'the *standing* of the Master'. Veblen argues that one of the major indications of prestige is the blatant waste of time involved - apparent in largely ornamental jobs such as footmen - and Baudrillard argues that the world of objects participates in the same logic: 'their uselessness, their futility, their superfluousness, their decorativeness, and their non-functionality' all the means of demonstrating prestige (*For A Critique* 32). Baudrillard seems to suggest that the decadence of purely ornamental roles has been superseded, these degrading demonstrations of status a feudal

obsolescence. But Saunders shows otherwise. The SGs's 'superfluosness' and 'decorativeness' represents, in fact, a consolidation of feudal and modern inequality, simultaneously both degrading job and aspirational object.⁴⁵

And more than simply aspirational, their objectification performs complex cultural and ideological work. In their youthful beauty and 'fresh white smocks' ('Semplica Girls' 137) the SGs offer a hygenic representation of idyllic, carefree affluence. Like Marie's fantasy about the puppy in a straw hat, smoking a corncob pipe, the SGs are archaic, nostalgic abstractions which transform 'inequality into adorableness' (Berlant, *Female* 80) and obliterate stark economic and historic reality. Both repress the problematic body by transforming it into a commodity form, which in Lauren Berlant's words, 'replace[s] the body of pain with the projected image of safety and satisfaction [that] commodities represent' (*Female* 112): Marie addresses the puppy in place of Callie - replacing the complexity of the over-embodied woman with the solving simplicity of the puppy as commodity, while the SGs - juridically problematic immigrant women - are transformed into commodities which speak of security and belonging. In their commodity form the SGs resolve and reconcile what Lisa Lowe describes as 'the condensed, complicated anxieties regarding external and internal threats to the mutable coherence of the national body' that collate around the figure of the Asian immigrant: 'the invading multitude, the lascivious seductress, the servile yet treacherous domestic, the automaton whose inhuman efficiency will supercede American ingenuity' (18). Representative of a 'universality that ...admits the non American only through a multiculturalism that aesthetizes ethnic differences as if they could be separated from history' (Lowe 9),

⁴⁵ This is a preoccupation in much of his work: in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* and *Bounty* for instance, where his characters are degrading theme park entertainments. They are denied both agency, and the dignity of productivity.

they are a substitute for that which is and must remain repressed. Both a memorial and a screen for the repressed history of a US imperialism spanning four Asian wars, and continuing in the neoliberalism that depends upon immigrant labour while resisting the bestowal of full legitimacy.

In thus unpacking the complexity and compression of the figuration, we begin to realise that despite its seeming extremity, it actually offers a fair representation of multiple aspects of contemporary racialised inequity. And while I have interpreted the Girls as specifically Asian, the metaphor also includes the history of African-American slavery. Saunders acknowledges that in developing 'the oppressed/oppressor psyche' (Gillian Elizabeth Moore 40) of the narrator, 'I thought a good bit about our slavery days,' particularly about "the average guy," blinded to the atrocities of the system by his own fears and his desire to get ahead' ('This Week in Fiction' par.23).

Lisa Lowe's analysis of the aesthetization of multiculturalism as a way of commodifying racial ethnic cultures which 'can only take place through historical amnesia' (30), clearly reflects Walter Benn Michael's conviction that the celebration of diversity obscures the reality of economic deprivation. The SGs's difference is manifestly aesthetized, while in 'Puppy', Marie aesthetizes Callie's poverty, rendering it as difference rather than deprivation; the fantasy of the puppy a form of 'Americana,' in contrast to the 'exotica' of the SGs. In the same way that Saunders defuses the aesthetization of Callie's poverty, here he works against the sensationalism of the 'Personal Statements' that accompany the women; descriptions of their previous lives which in articulating only impoverishment re-assure their new owners of their happy compliance in the 'work':

Laotian (Tami) applied due to two sisters already in brothels. Moldovan (Gwen) has cousin who thought was becoming window washer in Germany,

but no: sex slave in Kuwait (!). Somali (Lisa) watched father + little sister die of AIDS, same tiny thatch hut, same year. Filipina (Betty) has little brother “very skilled for computer,” parents cannot afford high school, have lived in tiny lean-to with three other families since their own tiny lean-to slid down hillside in earthquake (135).

Identified primarily by their nationality, with their names an afterthought, the diarist re-iterates the women’s generic exoticism, but the casual sensationalism of the summaries is undermined by the inadvertent comedy of the passage. The symmetrical alliteration of ‘window washer in Germany’ and ‘sex slave in Kuwait’ for instance, an incongruous pairing which economically suggests the complexity of a global trade in people. The sheer scale of this is followed by a further incongruity: the hilariously incommensurate exclamation mark, the diarist’s shorthand for astonishment; in itself a ‘too-direct expression of a thought’, which through haste neglects ‘correct’ or appropriate expression, and thus avoids ‘habituality or familiarity.’ The representation of poverty is often understood to demand a sombre, dignified register, but the comedy of both the diarist’s inadequate expression and then the absurd slapstick of the ‘tiny lean-to’ sliding down a hillside interrupts conditioned responses. We all know the orthodoxy - as Marie puts it: it ‘is deeply sad’ - but the scripts of superficial sympathy are wholly insufficient. Here, comedy provokes a cognitive perspective upon empty emotionalism, in the hopes of puncturing complacency.

The Personal Statements’ one-sided emphasis upon poverty is made more complex, and the lazy lack of specificity unpicked when the diarist comes across a poster his daughter Lilly has been working on for “Favorite Things Day” at school:

Poster = photo of each SG, plus map of home country, plus stories Lilly apparently got during interview (!) with each: Gwen (Moldova) = very tough, due to Moldovan youth: used bloody sheets found in trash + duct tape to make soccer ball, then after much practice with bloody-sheet ball, nearly made Olympic team (!). Betty (Philippines) has daughter, who, when swimming, will sometimes hitch ride on shell of sea turtle. Lisa (Somalia)

once saw lion on roof of her uncle's "mini-lorry." Tami (Laos) had pet water buffalo, water buffalo stepped on her foot, now Tami must wear special shoe. "Fun Fact": their names (Betty, Tami, et al.) not their real names. These = SG names, given by Greenway at time of arrival. "Tami" = Januka = "happy ray of sun." "Betty" = Nenita = "blessed-beloved". "Gwen" = Evgenia. (Does not know what her name means.) "Lisa" = Ayan = "happy traveller." (166)

Through Lilly's example, the diarist learns to foreground their names, but in an austere piece of satire, her "Fun Fact" reveals the mendacity of the leasing company Greenway in giving the women entirely new names, a gesture reminiscent of the imperial project of naming supposedly uninscribed territory. The poster restores their original names, while the 'body of pain' that was replaced by the sanitised 'image of safety and satisfaction' (*Female* 112) projected by the commodity, is reinstated - the injured foot, the bloody sheet, the daughter. This is an essentially comic process: the dogged focus upon materiality undoing the idealism and abstraction of the SGs as commodity. While Gillian Elizabeth Moore suggests that the poster is symptomatic of the wider erasure of 'these women's abject, traumatic histories of wretched poverty, illness, and sex slavery' (Gillian Elizabeth Moore 66), I would argue instead that its focus upon resilience and resourcefulness deliberately mitigates that abjectness and trauma, as part of Saunders's strategy for working against sensationalism.⁴⁶

The narrator fails to persuade his youngest daughter, Eva, of the women's contentment, and she finally resorts to releasing the SGs, who then flee. There are catastrophic financial consequences for the family, who it transpires, are liable to pay the leasing company the full 'Replacement Debit' (152) for each Girl, a sum far beyond their means. As the narrator contemplates the possibility of losing the family home, the diary form which has compelled the reader into identifying with the

⁴⁶ This suggests parallels with both Miranda July and Jordan Peele, whose use of comedy similarly avoids trauma as the organising paradigm.

narrator's myopia, now opens out as the narrator finally begins to wonder about the women, imagining the scene as they left their homes to set off for America and worrying what will come of them, without money or papers. As he learns to wonder, so does the reader:

Letter comes, family celebrates, girl sheds tears, stoically packs bag, thinks: must go, am family's only hope. Puts on brave face, promises she will return as soon as contract complete. Her mother feels, father feels: we cannot let her go. But they do. They must. Whole town walks girl to train station/bus station/ferry stop? Group rides in brightly coloured van to tiny regional airport? More tears, more vows. As train/ferry/plane pulls away, she takes last fond look at surrounding hills/river/quarry/shacks, whatever, i.e., all she has ever known of world, saying to self: be not afraid, you will return, & return in victory, w/big bag of gifts, etc, etc (167).

Unlike Marie, whom Saunders uses to model the outright failure of liberal empathy, in 'The Semplica Girl Dairies' he uses the diarist to model first the failure, and then the effortful birth of empathy. His dawning epiphany is delivered steadfastly in 'casualised diction' (Hartley 177), with only a brief instance of lyricism - 'be not afraid, you will return, & return in victory' - which is duly exploited for the incongruity of the subsequent clause: 'w/big bag of gifts, etc etc' - the initially graceful rhetoric contrasting comically with the clumsiness of the plosives and the hasty inadequacy of 'w/' and 'etc etc'. The diarist's artless disregard for sustained lyricism and 'correct' expression shows this to be another moment when 'a perhaps-too-direct expression of a thought produces a phrase stripped of habituality or familiarity' ('What Makes' par.3). The presumption in this instance might be of reverent lyricism, but, as in so much of Saunders's work, the comedy interrupts expectation and produces a startling immediacy of address. Lyricism and pathos can engender a potent mix of sentimentality and narcissism or self congratulation, and comedy is able to puncture the risk of infatuation with one's own sensibilities.

The passage also continues the work of mitigating any semblance of 'Poverty Porn' - representations notorious for transforming individuals into suffering objects⁴⁷ - by suggesting instead 'the strengths and riches' (Lissner par.10) of developing countries. Summoning the strength of family and community ties for instance, while economically invoking aesthetic delight and optimism through the description of the 'brightly coloured van'.

Saunders's rightly celebrated humanity is clear here both in his careful treatment of poverty and his compassionate comprehension of the potential failures of middle-class empathy, which 'The Semplica Girls', like 'Puppy', works to redress. Offering both diagnosis and cure, his sophisticated strategies manage readerly affect to an extraordinary degree, and comedy plays a critical part: from the discomfort of 'humourless comedy' which denies us the satisfaction of laughter, to the release offered by the 'too-direct expression of a thought' which we relish both because of its freedom from, and its revelation of, linguistic pretension and obfuscation. Saunders's use of the vernacular is key to this process, which exposes inauthentic or abstracted discourse, whether in the form of lyrical or philosophical expression, or corporate jargon. While it is important to recognise the degree to which his modest, unassuming characters and their inarticulacy are constituted

⁴⁷ In his discussion of aid agencies' fundraising strategies, Jorgen Lissner argues that the focus upon 'the starving child image' (par.4) tends to create 'a distorted view of the underdeveloped world' (par.1) He finds it telling that while this type of 'social pornography' is 'prevalent in fundraising campaigns for the benefit of other races in far-away places,' it is '*virtually non-existent when it comes to domestic concerns*' (par.7 italics in original). 'All the pain and agony in our own midst – broken homes, pollution, crime, drug abuse, loneliness – are conveniently swept under the carpet. And so are all the strengths and riches of the 'unfortunate ones' – their ingenuity, their cultural identity, their close family ties, their generosity, their hospitality' (par.9). The result is that 'once again the superiority of Western civilization and Western values' is underscored. He suggests an alternative strategy would focus upon 'images and slogans showing Third World people as industrious and ingenious people who act intelligently within the limits of their resources'. People in high-income countries would then no longer be 'asked to play God or save humankind, but simply to 'lend a hand' (par.12).

through lack, both educational and economic, Saunders's working-class narrators are frequently delightful, thus countering the paradigm of tragedy or trauma that tends to dominate in the representation of minority groups. His work, however, does not avoid the tragic or the traumatic, indeed the extreme figurations of the stories I examine can be seen as a means of insisting upon the tragic in contemporary life, a 'hook' upon which the reader is snared.

Chapter 3: Miranda July

Like George Saunders, Miranda July is uninterested in conventional literary mastery and her work rarely indulges in lyricism or allusion. Moreover, both writers pursue a certain degree of unsophistication or inarticulacy in their characters, which results in a startling immediacy of address that often manifests as comic. While Saunders takes aim at class, for July the target is sexuality, and her novel *The First Bad Man* is an ambitious attempt to get away from 'the politicizing words' ('Miranda July' par.16) that structure conventional attitudes to gender and sexuality. Her protagonist's naivety, a trait frequently used as a motor for comedy,⁴⁸ is central to July's creation of an alternative space in which sex and sexuality are addressed without judgement and anxiety. And while the naivety of her protagonist, Cheryl, is one source of comedy, July also makes ample use of the incongruity of the novel's sexual explicitness and those other attributes which define her protagonist - a middle-aged, heavy-set, homely woman, with grey hair and sensible clothing. That such incongruity exists reveals just how narrow our preconceptions about both femininity and sexuality are; indeed I would suggest that the 'extremity' of the novel arises partly because Cheryl is positioned so far outside the narrow categories which legislate social legibility and value for women. It is arguably the audacity of this which contributed to the early negative reviews of the novel. Laura Miller, for instance, accused it of being 'freakish,' (par.4), while Michiko Kakutani described it as 'wilfully sensational' (par.1), 'gratuitous and contrived', and 'deliberately

⁴⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one significant instance of naivety used in a sustained way, Huck's literalness and gullibility allowing Twain to reveal the hypocrisy of the world around him. A more recent example might be found in *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017), in which the protagonist's naivety is similarly used for its capacity to shed an oblique light on contemporary mores.

grotesque, even repellent' (par.8). Instead of comic particularity working to embed the extremity as it does with the other work I consider, with July, the particularity *is* the extremity: the text's insistent materialism wholly at odds with the idealised and abstracted conceptions of the feminine that still structure conventional attitudes. In this case comedy's tendency 'towards the material and away from the metaphysical' (Silk 94) proves itself to be clearly subversive. The discomfited critical responses are also a reflection of the text's comic and provisional metaphorical structure, which is in such marked contrast to the self-serious and aspirational nature of much literary fiction. This provisionality can usefully be viewed in relation to conceptual art, which I argue offers helpful insights into July's practice. She is, after all, a conceptual and performance artist as well as a writer and a filmmaker. Because of 'its special relation to appraisals of worth' (Ngai, 'Theory' 475), the subversive humour of conceptual art can read as cheap or gimmicky, thus obscuring its analytical intelligence and intentionality, and July's work has certainly been viewed in this light. Conceptual art also offers valuable detail into deadpan, a mode that the novel uses extensively, and I demonstrate how deadpan's neutral affect checks habitual or conditioned emotional responses. Remembering Zupančič's commendation of comedy as 'a way of introducing a distance (or non-immediacy)' into feeling (8), we can see how deadpan's lack of affective signalling helps force a cognitive perspective upon our responses. This is particularly helpful given the dogmatic conventions that habitually structure the erotic.

As discussed in the chapter one, another parallel for July's strategies can be found in stand-up comedy. Like July, female stand-ups and comic actors often violate cultural expectations of femininity in order to effect a sense of comic incongruity, in ways which ultimately claim space and freedom for women. Nancy

Walker notices that '[h]umor's inherent posture of superiority - even aggression - is in conflict with traditional notions of female submissiveness and passivity' (14), and the sense of social power produced by the joke's temporary transgression of such notions, and the assent signalled by the listener's laughter, can work to constitute jokers as 'masters of discourse' (Purdie 5). Given the traditional gendering of a joke teller as male (as is the case in Freud's work for instance), the increasing degree of female 'discursive control' (Purdie 5) demonstrates a significant shift.

Before exploring these aspects of the novel in more detail, however, I wish to explore the themes of fantasy and mediated experience, which are central to July's project in reconceptualising subjectivity and sexuality. Both are immediately evident in the novel's opening sentence, which also succinctly introduces Cheryl's distance from social value, as she day-dreams about her 'crush':

I drove to the doctor's office as if I was starring in a movie Phillip was watching - windows down, hair blowing, just one hand on the wheel. When I stopped at red lights, I kept my eyes mysteriously forward. *Who is she?* people might have been wondering. *Who is that middle-aged woman in the blue Honda?*' (1).

The dynamism of the italics lends urgency to the imagined interest, comically contradicting the stolid facts which reveal instead the more likely lack of interest; that those facts emerge within the idiom of urgent interest makes the contradiction or incongruity funnier still. We quickly come to understand that the stolidity is characteristic of Cheryl, a kind of unresponsive or uninflected obliviousness that prevents irony. Part of our pleasure in her inadvertent comedy is due to that very absence, which, given the social significance accorded to irony as a way of signalling alertness to nuance, allows us to participate in a brief freedom from the laws of social conformity. Thus, as with Saunders's artless narrators, our comic pleasure has multiple sources: the incongruity of Cheryl's solipsism relying upon the

shared social knowledge of her cultural invisibility; while her undefended lack of irony allows for both relief and a certain degree of superiority.

In this concise opening the novel's central preoccupation with mediated experience are immediately evident. Not only is communication with others in the novel 'constantly constructed and complicated by the presence of a third-party mediator' (Kofman par.5), it is also continually at work in the private, internal experience of subjectivity and sexuality. As Cheryl's fantasy demonstrates, the settings and scripts of 'third-party' representations 'feed individual fantasy', potentially 'refashioning subjectivities and reshaping sexual practice and individual and group identity' (Ziv 3). One of July's particular innovations is to focus on the way individuals appropriate cultural representations, and in proposing public forms of fantasy that are not corporate driven, forms that are 'lo-fi', or homegrown, July is able to positively affirm an 'inauthentic' or radically superficial model of subjectivity and sexuality. In this she is unusual; as Ava Kofman points out, *The First Bad Man's* use of 'the artifice of the performance in the service of intimacy' is at odds with the more customary dynamic whereby 'the protagonist ends up further alienated by narcissism' (par.8). July's preoccupation with artifice 'in the service of intimacy' is longstanding, as is clear from her comments about the inevitability of role-play in an interview discussing her first feature film *Me, You and Everyone We Know*. She describes one of the characters, Richard, as 'someone who is afraid to play a role (of father or lover) because it feels fake to him - he feels "like a man in a book."' But July refutes this, insisting that 'we must play roles, and believe in them enough to connect to each other through them' (Kushner 64). For her, artifice or inauthenticity is inevitable, and must be celebrated not disavowed: 'Yes! It's not real! But let's pretend it is, let's celebrate it and in doing so, let's believe in the invention of us

together' (Kushner 64). *The First Bad Man* models this affirmation, and in celebrating rather than pathologising qualities like artifice, superficiality, and inconsistency, the novel opens up a playful and richly productive space.

As the opening of the novel suggests, one of the most compelling aspects of Cheryl's life is her enduring passion for an older man, Phillip, a trustee on the board of the company she works for, a non-profit organisation called Open Palm, which began as a self-defence studio and now mostly sells fitness DVDs. Her connection with Phillip, which she is convinced has existed through 'a hundred thousand lifetimes' (*First Bad Man* 12) is based entirely in fantasy; as is her connection with a baby she met once as a child, whom she calls Kubelko Bondy, and whose reincarnated soul she searches for in every baby she passes. The novel's action begins when she tries to articulate her feelings to Phillip, who responds to her attempts at intimacy with news of his own 'crush,' a sixteen year old called Kirsten. Meanwhile, her carefully ordered life is threatened by an unwanted guest: Clee, the daughter of her Open Palm bosses, a young woman who becomes increasingly aggressive.

Initially merely insolent, Clee's behaviour becomes more threatening, and she begins to physically intimidate Cheryl: pushing her against a wall, crushing her wrist. Deeply confused by Clee's behaviour, and her own anger, Cheryl's initial attempts at a confrontation falter as she imagines herself through Clee's eyes: '[s]he could see I'd gotten all geared up - a forty-three-year-old woman in a blouse, ready to brawl' (57). Mortified, she retreats: 'It took a day to become calm and gather up my pride. Delicate was the word Phillip had used to describe me. A delicate woman would not throw punches in her own home' (59). The degree to which the 'imitative reproduction of the self image ... involves a detour through the eyes of the other'

(Phelan 36) is clear: Cheryl's self image is structured first by her interpretation of Clee's perception, and then by Phillip's. Using Clee to police her femininity, Cheryl is appalled by the reflected self image she imagines, which reveals the inappropriateness of her aggression (for her gender and her age). She swings to Phillip's 'perspective', and *composes* herself, constructing herself anew in order to dispose herself in a more appropriate manner. The episode is symptomatic of what Judith Butler describes as the 'incessant activity' of 'doing' gender, 'performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing'. As Cheryl's actions demonstrate, 'one does not "do" one's gender alone. One is always "doing" with or for another even if the other is only imaginary' (*Undoing* 1); and even the most private experiences of subjectivity are mediated through others.

Cheryl's increasing rage at Clee's bullying is compounded by her frustration at Phillip's continual involvement of her in his relationship with Kirsten, and, as Clee's physical aggression escalates into full body attacks, Cheryl finally retaliates, kicking and hitting. Her initial triumph over Clee proves to be a sweet relief from a lifelong, unacknowledged rage, manifested somatically in her 'globus hystericus' (*First Bad Man 2*), a throat condition which at its worst prevents her from swallowing. As it turns out, both women find themselves obscurely satisfied by the violence, and the pair continue their improvised fights until Cheryl realises they have been seen and tries frantically 'to concoct a more clinical way to fight, something organised and respectable, less feverish' (85). She alights upon the idea of using old Open Palm self defence videos to provide formalised scenarios. Using attack simulations like 'A Day at the Park', 'Gang Defense', and 'Woman Asking Directions' (86-87), Cheryl is able to re-configure the violence between herself and Clee in accordance with some degree of social legibility. 'If only Rick had seen "Domestic

Traps” instead of whatever it was we were doing before. This wasn’t anything, just a re-creation of a simulation of the kind of thing that might happen to a woman if she didn’t keep her wits about her’ (87). Cheryl’s comically forced insouciance thus incidentally unpacks the layers of mimicry involved in any production of ‘realness’ (Butler, *Bodies* 129).

As the scenarios make clear, the urgency of effecting ‘realness’ is most acute in the practice of gender, and in her mimicry of the gestures of the videos’ female protagonist, Cheryl’s performances reflect ‘on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced’ (Butler, *Bodies* 125). A woman with an ambivalent relationship to femininity, she enjoys the novelty of role-playing an ultra feminine persona:

My hair felt long and heavy on my back; I swung my hips a little, knowing I was being watched, hunted even. It was interesting to be this kind of person, so unself-conscious and exposed, so feminine. Dana could have had a career making videos like this for all occasions - waking up, answering the phone, leaving the house; a woman could follow along and learn what to do when she’s not being attacked, how to feel the rest of the time (88).

In this deconstruction of femininity we can see the dogged materialism of comedy, so useful in critiquing idealism and appraising worth. Alenka Zupančič suggests that comedy is ‘extremely adept at showing *how* something functions - that is to say, it is adept at showing the mechanisms ... that allow its functioning and perpetuation’ (italics in original, 178), and through the scenarios July is able to showcase how femininity functions. Here, Cheryl’s literalness illuminates the procedures that would otherwise pass unnoticed, thus denaturalising and deconstructing convention.

Ostensibly empowering, the ‘how-to’ videos regulate ‘the production and maintenance of gender norms’ (Butler, *Undoing* 55) by instituting a model of male aggression and female vulnerability. Cheryl’s memory of the suddenly ominous atmosphere in the classes when the ‘attackers came out in their giant-headed foam

pummel suits and began to simulate rape, gang rape, sexual humiliation, and unwanted caress' (*First Bad Man* 14) explicitly reveals the active production of gendered norms, her tendency to the literal creating the list's inadvertent comedy. 'The men inside were actually kind and peaceable - almost to a fault - but they became quite vulgar and heated during the role-plays' (14). The classes codify or programme gender roles - the usually 'kind and peaceable' men conscripted into aggression. Cheryl and Clee's appropriation of the scenarios both reveals and undoes the gender prescription of the classes, the model which, in Baudrillardian terms, first figures 'the real', and in their simulations, the often heavily anxious work of everyday gender practice are ritualised into a kind of theatre, or performance art.

This interpretation is underscored by the textual framing of the initial description of the scenarios. The paragraph opens as follows: '**COMBAT WITH NO BAT (1996)**' (86) - italicised and in bold, like the title of a piece of conceptual or performance art. In thus noticing the kinship between the scenarios and conceptual art we can see a precedent for July's humorous approach in the novel, which otherwise seems so singular. Her use of comedy as 'conceptual critique' (Diack 76) can be situated in an ongoing comic tradition, one that is evident in conceptualism's 'extensive use of puns in perception, visual deconstructions, and slapstick seriality' (Diack 76).⁴⁹ The deconstruction in the novel is clearly pervasive, while there are also frequent 'puns in perception': for instance, Open Palm is figured both as self defence and as fitness regime (the former as the means to repel men, the latter as a

⁴⁹ 'Visual deconstruction' is clearly pervasive in conceptual art, with Marcel Duchamp perhaps the best known exemplar, his notorious 'Fountain' (the urinal signed R. Mutt) a way of questioning the procedures that structure the meaning of art itself. Jeremy Deller's 'Sacilege' (2012), a bouncy castle version of Stonehenge, suggests one instance of an artwork using 'puns in perception': the severe monumentality of the national landmark absurdly rendered as an interactive inflatable. And although reverence has edged out the comedy in his work, many of Andy Warhol's pieces stand as good examples of 'slapstick seriality'.

means to appeal to them); while 'the homeless gardener' (11), Rick, briefly transforms in Cheryl's imagination into a 'fine surgeon who fell from grace' (166) when he intervenes in Clee's difficult birth later in the novel, only to revert back abruptly to a homeless gardener again once the ambulance arrives and his authority dissipates. Later still it transpires he is actually a 'neighbor with a green thumb and no yard' (246). Meanwhile, the novel's recessive quality can be seen as a form of 'slapstick seriality' (Diack 76) - Cheryl's habitual sexual fantasy for example, which transports her to a room, and then another 'very similar room' (39), and then another equally similar room, until she can go no further inside herself. The successive layers of simulation are equally absurd: initiated by real situations that cause terror; then simulations of those situations in the role-play classes; then self defence sold as exercise; and finally, Clee and Cheryl's appropriation.⁵⁰

Furthermore, as Heather Diack suggests, the comedy in conceptualism is 'often couched in a deadpan sensibility' (77), a disorientating withholding of affect which is also central to July's tone. Deadpan is a rather under-theorised aesthetic mode, with the notable exceptions by Lauren Berlant, David Robbins, and John C. Welchman emerging from their recognition of its significance for conceptual art. In his discussion of John Baldessari's 'deadpan withdrawal' (247), Welchman commends his 'strategic holding back' (248), and his 'situational disavowal' (255), as a way of refusing to manage the work's reception. Welchman provides some useful background to deadpan as a distinctively American comedic format, which is widely considered to have been introduced in the 1920s to describe a kind of film comedy at the height of the silent era which 'eschewed expression [or] emotion of

⁵⁰ July cannot resist adding one more level later in the novel when Cheryl and Clee take infant CPR lessons: 'Never before had we simulated with such passion. I looked sideways at Clee, wondering if she was reminded of the how-to videos we had both watched long ago' (215).

motile physicality...in favour of physiognomic reduction and impassive restraint' (254,255), perhaps best embodied by the films of Buster Keaton. David Robbins agrees that the mode only becomes common comedic practice in the 'machine age,' once sufficient numbers of people had gained personal experience with 'the veneer of neutrality' derived through 'prolonged exposure to machines' (260). Robbins uses Duchamp, Ed Ruscha and Warhol as exemplary practitioners of deadpan as a 'destabilising process' (259), which in its undermining of sincerity, problematises the 'integrity of the real' (258).

Lauren Berlant's analysis of deadpan also grows out of her engagement with conceptual art, in this case, the African American artist, William Pope. L. She develops Robbins's sense of deadpan as destabilising, describing Pope. L's work as that which 'disturbs the refuge of the known object, the consistent tone' ('Showing Up' 107); the lack of direction or guidance to the audience thus 'turns towards unlearning' (109), in a 'recessive action' which compels uncertainty. This is also true of July, whose studied neutrality allows for the 'unlearning' of conditioned or habituated responses. Given the ways in which 'the appearance of the body is never a non-event' (117) for both African Americans and women, Berlant suggests that combination of 'comedy and withdrawal' in Pope. L's installation 'opens the pores of the oversaturated object [and] dilutes its fullness' (117). Both black and female bodies are weighed down with association and expectation, and deadpan's deliberate neutrality offers a way of 'making movement possible' (117). Berlant notices the ways in which this neutrality can be read as aggressive in its withholding, and certainly, when wielded by a woman, given the social expectation of emotional disclosure and/or conciliation or accommodation, there is a higher risk of that interpretation. Indeed, so entrenched are those expectations, that used by a

woman, deadpan can be understood as extremity. I will look in more detail shortly at the ways in which gender inflects comic style, but suffice it to say here, that July's use of deadpan - specifically her female protagonist's deadpan style - helps to explain in part the startling distinctiveness of the novel.

The novel reduces the affective signalling in multiple ways, primarily through Cheryl's naivety, and her lack of emotional literacy, as well as her tendency to indiscriminating literalness. Robbins notices that an additional qualifier is necessary for a contrivance to qualify as deadpan, 'a certain outrageousness to lend tension to the fact like neutrality', 'something that contrasts strongly with reality'(256), and it is Cheryl's lack of emotional literacy as well as her lack of experience that produces the contrast with a conventional understanding of reality; her 'outrageousness' largely inadvertent. These qualities create an absence of nuance which mean that we are 'unable to read the sender's emotional relationship to the signal' (Robbins 256). This is discomfiting, given how significant such affective signalling is for us in 'identifying our own emotional response' (Robbins 256); indeed, as Robbins points out, often the signalling 'doesn't stimulate feeling in us so much as have our feelings for us' (256). Emotional cues are also denied by the absence of any classification or judgement in the descriptions of Cheryl; a lack made noticeable in contrast to the frequency with which the narrative signals what Philip is feeling, for example, 'pensively' (28), 'nervously' (29). This is both consistent with her character - she is sensitive to his feelings in a way she is not to others - while also developing Philip's association with a dubious emotional indulgence. In a largely deadpan narrative, the emotional cues that cluster around his character read as a kind of contagious fussiness.

In leaving us without cues, the novel's studied neutrality thus forces us to work out an independent response. And given how accustomed we are to continual emotional signalling, this ambivalence can seem very troubling. Interestingly, in her review of the novel, Lydia Kiesling comes close to describing July's style as deadpan, but stops short because, 'deadpan relies on a wink, a tacit acknowledgment of underlying absurdity', whereas 'it's not clear whether July is trying to be funny, and her wide-eyed reticence can be irritating to people, like me, whose natural inclination is to laugh at things and who instead are stuck with sustained half-smile' (par.4). I would suggest that, in fact, the uncertainty of Kiesling's response offers ample proof of the narrative as deadpan.

Kiesling's review is also useful for demonstrating another aspect of the novel, which can similarly be illuminated by way of conceptual art, namely the ways in which July's use of subversive humour can obscure the novel's analytical intelligence and intentionality. Heather Diack notices that the 'tension between the use of subversive humour and a constrained and analytical approach' is often unexplored in the analysis of conceptual art (78). The humour of conceptual art can read as cheap or gimmicky, partly because of 'its special relation to appraisals of worth' (Ngai 'Theory' 475), which can obscure the artwork's rigour and purpose. Sianne Ngai notices that the conceptual artwork is a 'prominent stereotype of a gimmicky artefact' (477), and one which often draws an unfavourable assessment of its 'aesthetic integrity' (470), centring around 'our negative relation' to its apparent 'abbreviation of labor' (470). One example of this is Martin Creed's 'Work No.227: The lights going on and off' (2000), in which Creed uses the existing light fittings of a gallery space to transform an empty room from darkness into light at 5-second intervals. It won the 2001 Turner Prize amid much controversy: the judges

commended it for the audaciously economical challenge it posed to the experience of visiting an art gallery, while other commentators railed against the work as a cynical and insubstantial stunt.

Excessive conceptualism allied with lack of effort are indeed the chief criticisms of Linda Kiesling's review, which argues that July's novel 'seems less like a unified work of art than a bullet list of points of interest, things to consider, ideas', to the extent that parts of it 'truly seem as though they required little effort' (par.3). Clearly, this does not recognise the intentionality behind the novel's deliberately crude and provisional metaphors - the turd in the toilet absurdly personified as a dog for instance, or Clee's talking 'puss' as imagined by Cheryl, 'In me! In me! her puss whined, through aching mushy lips' (*First Bad Man* 114) - there is a 'trash' aesthetic at work here, which is very different to the more aspirational and decorous metaphors we are accustomed to.

The turd in the toilet is a particularly good illustration of July's subversion of conventional literary mastery. Having been invited to Phillip's house for what she believes is the beginning of their romance, Cheryl has an unplanned 'bowel movement', and in her anticipation of happiness, indulges in a brief daydream in which the turd becomes their dog:

Is the dog yourself, as you've known yourself until now?

Yes.

No need to kill it, my sweet girl, he'd say, reaching into the toilet bowl with a slotted spoon. We need a dog.

But it's old and has strange, unchangeable habits.

So do I, my dear. So do we all. (45)

The sonorous paternalism of 'Phillip's' part contrasts comically with the absurd context - like Saunders, July only reaches for graceful rhetoric in order to exploit its incongruity; while 'bowel movement' and 'slotted spoon' are characteristic of Cheryl, in being slightly quaint and rather pedantic. Her literalness necessitates the slotted

spoon detail - which might be considered fatal to the sustaining of the fantasy, but her obliviousness to social norms means her daydream is not ruptured. And beyond the specific detail of the comic patterning, lies the impossible fantasy of total and unconditional acceptance, which this passage dramatises. The passage captures something of the desultory and unguarded thought processes or daydreams that seldom make it through to conscious articulation, and in capturing that quality, July furthers the novel's sense of intimacy. George Saunders similarly excels at depicting 'inadmissible thought-streams' (Elmhirst 51), a skill, which as with July, is augmented formally by the use of the vernacular. It is a high risk strategy, however, given the expectation of the usual markers of literary accomplishment, and it is July's disavowal of such mastery as much as her 'obscenity' that contributes to our sense of the novel's audacity.

While conceptual art allows us to situate July in a comic lineage, her application of conceptual insights and challenges to the characterisation and psychology intrinsic to the novel form is clearly innovative. Cheryl and Clee's appropriation of the scenarios might be loosely categorised as 'slapstick seriality,' (Diack 76) but there is a generative quality at work that transcends any risk of conceptual gimmickry. The scenarios allow for a form of 'enabling' choreography which effectively relieves both women's repression: Cheryl is able to assert herself and her long suppressed rage, while also accessing a form of femininity previously alien to her, while Clee, through her role-playing as the masculine sexual predator, is able to work through her repressed lesbianism. In choreographing 'butchness', she begins to conceive of herself as a sexual subject, rather than a sexual object.⁵¹

⁵¹ The theme of 'enabling' choreography is recurrent in July's work; in the interactive sculptures first exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2009 for example, which necessitate physical intimacy: one, a wide pedestal for two people which reads, 'We don't know each other, we're just hugging for the picture....' Likewise the seven-year internet project,

Clee is busty, blonde - a “bombshell” (23) - so much an archetypal object for male lust that she is seen as public property. ‘Women looked her up and down and then looked away. Men did not look away - they kept looking after they passed her, to get the rear view. I turned and made stern faces at them, but they didn’t care. Some men even said hi, as if they knew her, or as if knowing her was about to begin right now’ (29). Her body is so mediated by cultural associations of amplified femininity that conventional protocols of politeness or respect are displaced by a sense of casual ownership. Dully accustomed to such reactions, the novel suggests that Clee has never consciously questioned her heterosexuality, and she is initially quick to reject the suggestion that there is anything sexual about the ‘simulations,’ over-reacting to Cheryl’s gift of a scented candle: “I appreciate the gift but I’m not...you know. I’m into dick” (75). When Cheryl agrees, Clee says, “For me it’s a little more intense.” She was bouncing her knee unconsciously. “I guess I’m ‘misogynist’ or whatever” (76). Her malapropism - she means masochist - is not so far from the truth; she is a masochist because cultural heteronormativity has coerced her into a role she is deeply uncomfortable with, and in order to be ‘normal’ she has had to understand her suffering as gratification. The enabling choreography of the simulations allows her to experiment with gender play and offers her the opportunity for liberating cross-identification. The novel’s title comes from a moment when Cheryl is confused about which character from the ‘Gang Defense’ scenario Clee is

‘Learning to Love You More’, produced in collaboration with artist Harrell Fletcher, in which more than 8,000 people submitted material in response to online assignments like ‘Braid someone’s hair’ and “Draw a picture of your friend’s friend”. Seemingly simple, even reductive, the work demonstrates the validity of William James’s famous assertion that the physical expression of emotion is the emotion, that ‘we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful’ (par.4). July’s enabling choreography suggests that by coolly making the physical gestures of emotion, the emotion will follow; a radically unsentimental - or deadpan - affective schematic in the service of what is in some respects a sentimental project, the attempt to make people connect to one another.

playing, one of the 'two bad men' or 'another man all in denim who didn't want trouble', and Cleo clarifies impatiently, "The first bad man." Cheryl is struck by the anomaly that presents itself: 'She wasn't the first bad man ever but the first I'd ever met who had long blond hair and pink velour pants' (91). The false correspondence between anatomical sex, gender, and object-choice is thus clearly exposed.

If conceptual or performance art is one idiom that the enabling choreography between the two women alludes to, then another is pornography. With titles like 'Gang Defense' and 'Woman Asking Directions', the scenarios describe erotically suggestive tableaux which directly address sexualised violence. Safely coded as self-defence, the scenarios allow July to playfully examine themes of submission and domination, or masochism and sado-masochism, which are integral to the structures of much pornography. The conceit is helpful in establishing a gently ironized tone, useful when pornography remains such a provocative and polarising subject. The 'sex wars' of the 1970s and 80s are long past, but a great deal of ambivalence about pornography remains; within academia the debate may have been won by the pro-sex feminists, but 'for the general public, the antiporn position is usually taken to represent the feminist position on pornography' (Ziv 2).

Led by Catherine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin and Diana Russell, the anti-pornography feminists asserted that all pornography was inherently misogynistic, and that any pleasure women found in it was merely masochism; a way of internalising and eroticising oppression. However, the pro-sex feminists (such as Amber Hollibaugh and Jane Ward), discerned a confused 'sexual demonology' (Rubin 166) at work, indistinguishable 'from other highly conservative views of sexuality and gender' (Smith 47), and sought instead to defend alternative, legitimate eroticisms. The pro-sex position denied any intrinsic contradiction

between feminist politics and erotic fantasy and consensual practice, an attitude which is now arguably feminist orthodoxy. Marianne Noble articulates a prevalent bias when she states that “[w]omen are as capable of experiencing unspeakable desires that run counter to their conscious senses of who they are and their political, social and religious values as men are’ (13). However, despite the developing field of feminist pornography, it remains true that a great deal of pornography is misogynistic,⁵² and even when it is not intended as such, ‘the co-existence of conflicting and non-synchronous perspectives on female sexuality guarantees that images of female masochism can be used to support very different agendas, from the feminist to the post-feminist to the anti-feminist’ (Felski, ‘Redescriptions’ 137).⁵³ Felski illustrates her point about the ‘unusual degree of ambiguity’ in ‘images of female masochism’ by asking

When we come across a picture of a woman bending her body in an attitude of sexual submission, what exactly are we seeing? A traditional image of female subordination to male power? Or a consciously staged post-feminist defence of women’s right to explore all possible permutations of sexual pleasure? (137)

So, while attitudes to female sexuality have undergone dramatic changes, invoking pornographic tropes remains problematic, and July is clearly alert to the risks. The Open Palm scenarios allow her to investigate issues such as masochism dispassionately; ‘shifting the field’ (*First Bad Man* 153) from the usual scenes which structure conventional imaginaries of alternative eroticisms. Predicated upon an essentialist model of ‘female passivity and submissiveness’ (Felski, ‘Redescriptions’ 138) and male aggression, the scenarios are then transformed through their

⁵² Often the problem when discussing pornography is that it isn’t viewed as having complexity - it is regarded as monolithic, when clearly it is not.

⁵³ Felski focuses specifically upon masochism in her discussion, and clearly not all pornography relies upon masochism, but elements of submission and domination are presumably difficult to escape entirely.

appropriation by Cheryl and Clee, an appropriation that creates a formalised or bounded environment for erotic experiment. Once we conceptualise their fights in this way, a kinship emerges between Cheryl and Clee's practice and that of BDSM, (bondage, discipline or domination, sadism or submission, and masochism). Their use of the scenarios speaks to Robert Weeks's emphasis upon the way in which 'traditional definitions of sex' are downgraded in S/M, where, '[i]t is no longer the act and its perversions that is the object of concern but the context and relational forms which allow erotic practices to multiply'. In S/M 'it seems to be the ritual as much as the zone of the body that matters, the eroticisation of the situation as much as the orgasm.' His account of the 'degenitalisation of sex and of pleasure ... taking place in these practices which disrupt our expectations about the erotic (240,241)' is equally true of Cheryl and Clee's experience.

For many, however, BDSM still suggests the outer limits of what Gayle Rubin calls 'the sex hierarchy' (150), the 'abnormal' to the 'normal' of 'vanilla' sex, the stigmatised 'lower order' to the more privileged forms of sexuality. The arrangement between Cheryl and Clee does not play to anxiety about 'scary sex' (Rubin 152), rather it is playful, even absurd. This is not to say the situation is without risk: neither of the women understand what is going on between them, and they seldom feel able to attempt any articulation or definition. Indeed, that absence of definition is precisely July's objective: neither masochism or sado-masochism are mentioned explicitly in the novel - the words are simply not part of the characters' vocabulary. This is a deliberate omission on July's part: one of her strategies in approaching the subject from a fresh perspective. In Rubin's account, one of the key 'ideological formations' which restricts thinking about sexuality, along with 'the hierarchical valuation of sex acts', is 'the lack of a concept of benign sexual

variation' (150). July looks to conceptualise 'benign sexual variation' both by removing the conventional labels and ensuring that the action is largely constituted as comic. Indeed, I would argue that her attempts to 'shift the field' should be seen as an attempt to change the paradigm - from the traumatic or tragic terms upon which alternative eroticisms are so often predicated, to the comic.

The audacity and freshness of these efforts becomes clearer when compared to another novel much preoccupied with ideas of domination and submission, the bestselling *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012). The novel, which addresses BDSM in terms which very much rely upon and perpetuate a conventional imaginary, describes the relationship between a young, inexperienced and beautiful woman and an older, experienced and wealthy man, whose BDSM practice is both abusive and borne out of abuse, 'all wrapped up in a great big toxic fantasy of wealth and glamour' (Jenkins par.8). Despite the dungeons and cable ties, it is a profoundly heteronormative romance of gleaming penthouses and glossy bodies, which lazily pathologises BDSM, while reiterating dangerous conventions about submitting to violence "out of love". These are the tropes we are accustomed to, but in July's rendering they are radically reconfigured: here the relationship is between two ostensibly heterosexual women, and the young woman is the aggressor, while the older woman, despite being the one to improvise the bounded environment, is entirely inexperienced. And in place of stupefying materialism, July's novel presents a careful poverty of surroundings. While 'romance' narratives like *Fifty Shades of Grey* tend to mask 'the origins of wealth, naturalising and valorising it' (Kaplan 164), the backdrop for the simulations is Cheryl's small, sparsely furnished house, which speaks to the more commonplace reality of finite resources, and compromised, humdrum aesthetics. Far from being

glossy and gleaming, Cheryl and Clee's enactments are farcically inadequate: 'I jumped to my feet and ran away. Because there wasn't far to run I ran in place for a few seconds, facing the wall. And then jogged a little longer to avoid turning around' (86). The crucial part played here by comedy in the overturning of preconceptions about sexual variation is clear, as both the glamour and the threat are removed. Mikhail Bakhtin's account of laughter's capacity to dethrone an object provides a useful insight into the process by which July de-fetishes the issue:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look at its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it (23).

We can see here another iteration of comedy's alignment with materialism; Bakhtin capturing very precisely how the comic artist 'fastens our mind... upon physical detail' (Jean Paul qtd. in Silk, chap.1 note 183) as a way of countering any tendency to abstraction or ideality. Moreover, he helpfully elucidates the potential consequences of that abstraction or ideality - identifying the 'fear and piety' that can result. Cheryl is largely the means by which the process Bakhtin describes is achieved - her inexperience or naivety is instrumental in creating the novel's deadpan tone, which produces precisely the kind of 'ground-zero' of razed conventions and preconceptions he evokes. That naivety or lack of sophistication ensures an oblivious freedom from social conformity that inadvertently 'demolishes fear and piety'.

Like many of July's protagonists, Cheryl is profoundly innocent about intimacy, and the reader's experience of her perspective defines the terms upon which the novel's eroticism develops. Forty-six years old, single, and without any

close friends, she has very little experience of relationships; when she does experience sleeping together 'interlocked like two Ss', she is convinced it is evidence of a rare synchronicity, only to be told that '[a]ny two people can do it' (213). Without the experience or vocabulary for 'spooning', slightly more arcane concepts like 'masochism' or 'sado-masochism' are entirely alien to her. It is Cheryl's therapist who gives her the phrase 'adult games' to make sense of the 'simulations', vocabulary which resolves the weirdness of the situation sufficiently for her to relax and 'flit' around the city, luxuriating in an unusual feeling of being part of the human collective,

I ate a pastry made out of white flour and refined sugar and watched the couple next to me feed each other bites of omelet. It was hard to believe they played adult games but most likely they did, probably with their co-workers or relatives. What were other people's like? Perhaps some mothers and fathers pretended to be their children's children and made messes. Or a widow might sometimes become her own deceased husband and demand retribution from everyone... People were having a good time out here, me included (82).

Her daydreams of other people's 'adult games' have an oblique, child-like quality, which shifts the field from the conventional sexual paranoia that fixates on normal or abnormal, good or bad, into an altogether different register.⁵⁴The expanded set of possibilities suggested by Cheryl's musings demonstrates the impoverishment of a paradigm predicated upon anxiously policed binaries. This novel, and indeed all of July's work, attempts to extend the narrow range of the 'visibly' erotic, by revealing a larger spectrum of sexuality. Her comments about the risk involved in such endeavours reiterates the visibility trope: "it's always embarrassing to pin a tail onto thin air, nowhere near the donkey. It might be wrong, it sure looks like it is - but then

⁵⁴ The pursuit of an alternative erotic has long been a project of July's. 'I love to watch people touch each other in non-sexual ways - watching someone getting a massage or a haircut is just mesmerising to me' (Kushner 63).

again, maybe the donkey's in the wrong place, or there are two donkeys, and the tail just got there first" (*It Chooses You* 101).

When Cheryl describes the simulations to her therapist, Ruth-Anne, she tells her the experience is 'like square dancing or tennis..a real vacation for the brain.'

"So you would describe your pleasure as...?"

"A little theatrical but mostly athletic. And I'm the most surprised of anyone because I've never been good at sports." (91)

The reader might suspect that her endearing naïvety blinds her to the obvious, but perhaps instead she shows the potential richness of not 'getting it'. As Adam Phillips suggests, the desire to 'get it' - 'the joke, the point, the poem' (37) is 'a definite preference', 'a clue about the ways we want and the ways we are educated to want' (37). And he wonders 'what we might find ourselves doing if not getting it was the project, not the problem' (38). Like her daydreams of adult games, her descriptions conceptualise a diffuse erotic hinterland, the benign variations which might or might not flame into localised passion. A hinterland that might 'link us in strange and evocative ways with some of our earliest experiences' (Phillips 38), the unstructured and polymorphous infantile realm before 'the sexual instinct' was 'isolated as a separate biological and psychical instinct' (Foucault 105).

The dim registers of this erotic spectrum suddenly do ignite into the specifically sexual, and the metamorphosis hinges upon a single word. Clee has commandeered the house for a party and Cheryl is absentmindedly watching her dancing, and thinking about Phillip's 'sexts':

Philip was already having intercourse with Kirsten, I could feel it - from his point of view, I was in him, in her. Each time Clee sang *jiddy jiddy rah rah* she pumped her pelvis forward to the beat and her bosom bounced. Dear God, look at those jugs, Phillip panted. I whispered the word.
"Jugs." (107)

Cheryl's characteristically decorous choice of 'bosom' is translated into 'Jugs', a word borrowed from the vocabulary used by Phillip in his 'sexts' about Kirsten. Cheryl occupies his language like a prosthesis, in the same way she occupies his body in fantasy: 'My big, hairy hand worked itself down the front of her jeans and my fingers, with their thick blocky fingernails, slid into her puss' (107/108). Cheryl's appropriation of Phillip's body is figured as exaggerated, even cartoonish; a visual slapstick that maintains the novel's playful tone, despite the increasingly explicit material. Through the 'seduction' of the borrowed language, July illustrates what Baudrillard describes as 'the body worked by artifice' (*Seduction* 9), or 'the body in its passion separated from its truth', an inauthentic passion wholly at odds with 'the ethical truth of desire which obsesses us' (*Seduction* 9,10), and which suggests instead a radically superficial model of sexuality. However, in marked contrast to the portentousness of Baudrillard's description, the seduction in July's novel is couched in terms of broad comedy, and this unusual combination of the erotic and the comic is one of its most striking characteristics. The combination poses an important challenge to conventional conceptions of the erotic, which is conventionally conceived of as strictly circumscribed and somewhat precarious.

The party marks the beginning of a period of intense erotic activity, as Cheryl fantasises and masturbates compulsively about Clee, initially through the 'medium' of Philip. When she describes the new mutation of the relationship with Clee to Ruth-Anne, Cheryl is very clear that she is 'tapping into Phillip's lust':

"Right. And perhaps we don't even need to call it Phillip's lust? Maybe it's just lust".

"Well, it's not *mine*. These just aren't the kinds of things I would think about, on my own, without him." [...]

"I see. And how does Cheryl Glickman feel?"

"Me?" (111)

She is startled by the reference to Cheryl Glickman - the name of a subject she almost fails to recognise, so entirely submerged is she in 'hosting' Phillip. (In much the same way that other babies host Kubleko Bondy). Initially using Dana, the protagonist of the defence scenarios, to relate to Clee - 'Every gesture, every scream, every glare and growl I'd made for the last week was Dana's' (90) - Cheryl now subsumes herself in her fantasy of 'being' Phillip. Once again, she is 'acting in concert' (Butler, *Undoing* 1). Framing the experience as a way of being close to Phillip, she imagines the fantasies as 'another roiling corner of our journey together' (110). Soon however, while Clee remains the constant, Cheryl has to use the novelty of other men to 'achieve cream' (117):

A thin nerdy lad I saw in Whole Foods: Clee followed him out to his car, begged him to let her hold his stiff member for one to two minutes. An Indian father who politely asked me directions with his shy wife in tow: Clee rubbed her puss all over his body and forced stiffness out of him, he was whining in ecstasy when his wife walked in. Too nervous to say anything, she waited silently until her husband creamed on Clee's jugs. Old grandfathers who hadn't had sex in years, virginal teenage boys named Colin, homeless men riddled with hepatitis. And then every man I had ever known. (117,118)

No oblique, subtle shading on the spectrum here, just a few notes banged out loudly, the 'hordes of imaginary men' necessary to compensate for the fantasy's monotony. But the men themselves: a 'nerdy lad'; an 'Indian father'; 'grandfathers'; 'virginal teenage boys'; 'homeless men riddled with hepatitis' - are hardly the stuff of 'sanctioned fantasies, sanctioned imaginaries' (Butler, *Bodies* 130). Cheryl's gallery of absurd specimens continues the work of a dissident erotics, comically resisting conformity.

While the men's obvious unsuitability is one form of the novel's alternative erotics, another is the way in which Cheryl's male cross-identifications complicate the simple symmetry of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual'. Her sexual fantasies illustrate Eve Sedgwick's observation about masturbation as 'a productive and

necessary switch-point in thinking about the relations...between homo- and heteroeroticism' (822), as a form of sexuality which runs 'fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual identities whose meaning and outlines we always insist on thinking we know' (822). Masturbation (and its attendant fantasies) offers a uniquely heterogenous erotic space, free of 'the cultural entailments of "sexual identity"' (824). It is a space moreover of erotic self relation, which as Sedgwick reminds us, is necessarily same-sex and therefore shares a certain 'homo' quality with homosexuality.

July's emphasis upon the mutability of role playing in sexual fantasy is also attested to by psychoanalytic theory,⁵⁵ in particular Laplanche and Pontalis's classic essay, 'Fantasy and the origins of sexuality', an interpretation of Freud's deployment of fantasy which explores the positionality of the subject in fantasy. They suggest that the subject participates in a scene without being 'assigned any fixed place in it...As a result, the subject, although present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivised form' (26). The instability of subject position is developed further in their analysis of seduction fantasy, one of the primal fantasy scenarios posited by Freud:

'A father seduces a daughter' might perhaps be the summarised version of the seduction fantasy ...it is a scenario with multiple entries, in which nothing shows whether the subject will be immediately located as daughter; it can as well be fixed as father, or even in the term seduces (22-3).

For Cora Kaplan, Laplanche and Pontalis allow us to move away from accounts of fantasy which insist upon simple and unvarying identifications along gender lines,

⁵⁵ I should note here the potential conflict between a queer studies perspective upon sexuality and a psychoanalytic one, the former emphasising a 'superficial' model of fluid and contingent sexuality, while the psychoanalytic approach argues for a more essentialist paradigm. However, while acknowledging the phallogentric aspects of the Freudian model, I wish to draw attention to the more capacious aspects of the psychoanalytic approach, and the ways in which it has been helpful to me in unpacking July's work.

and away from fantasy 'as an activity which mainly serves to fix subject positions' (152,153). Laplanche and Pontalis's account speaks specifically to the 'origins' of sexuality, but its analysis also describes the dynamics of an ongoing, current sexuality: while in Cheryl's initial fantasies about Clee she identifies as Phillip, in most of the subsequent episodes she participates in the scene without being 'assigned any fixed place' (26). When for instance, a plumber, 'a chubby Latino man', comes to fix the shower, Cheryl becomes aroused when she sees his eyes 'grow sluggish' at the sight of Clee on the couch. Her fantasy begins as she imagines his astonishment when Clee, half naked, enters the bathroom:

He wasn't sure at first, he didn't want to get in trouble. But she begged and tugged at the wide matronly front of his pants. In the end he was not as polite as he seemed. No sirree. He had quite a bit of pent-up rage, possibly from racial injustice and immigration issues, and he worked through all of it. (117)

The characteristically stolid detail and the quaint slang adds to the comedy of another incongruous male stand-in - Cheryl's literalness necessitating a description of the style of his trousers, along with a dutifully 'correct' backstory. Neither, of course, are 'sexy'. The incongruity of her fantasy relies upon our recognition that such detail is conventionally considered irrelevant, even fatal, and in recognising this we realise the arid narrowness of the conventions that habitually structure the erotic. Furthermore, the comedy forces a cognitive perspective on what is generally only titillating, and this helps July sustain her readers' consent to the novel's discomfiting explicitness.⁵⁶ As we will see in the next chapter, the pedantry of Donald Antrim's protagonist, Pete, similarly forces the inclusion of comically irrelevant detail, which also ensures the character's comic license in testing the

⁵⁶ Howard Jacobson notices that '[c]omedy breaks the erotic trance' to such an extent that '[a]spiring writers of pornography are warned by publishers who specialise in such work not to let comedy anywhere near' ('Howard Jacobson' par.5).

limits of the acceptable. Pedantry, like naivety, proves to be a consistently productive comic trait.

Cheryl's fantasy corresponds with Laplanche and Pontalis's assertion that the 'primary function of fantasy' is to provide 'a setting for desire'; the fantasy scenario thus taking precedence over any fixed identification of the subject with any one character in the scene. The question of who Cheryl identifies with or as is often irrelevant; her participation is desubjectivised. As July says:

I realised that who you end up playing when you fantasise is really pretty loopy. Sometimes it's just like a flash of a bunch of images y'know. It's like, who are you in it? Are you just watching? Is the woman in it you? Or, is it someone who you know, is it someone else? ('Miranda July on sexuality' par.13)

July's sense of the mutabilities of sexual fantasy suggests an unstructured and polymorphous realm at work akin to that of infantile sexuality, which in Freud's account is characterised by a variety of drives and an openness concerning object choice; the initially 'perverse, bisexual human animal' which is then 'conscripted into the rigid structures of normal genital (hetero-)sexuality' (Weeks 135). *The First Bad Man* demonstrates how the heterogeneity of infantile sexuality prevails in adult sexual fantasy, a heterogeneity which can cause anxiety and suspicion, when so much rests upon stable or coherent sexual identities. The feminist exhortation to 'overhaul desire' (Bartky 51) in the search for an 'authentic' or 'politically correct' sexuality is just one example of a pervasive mistrust of fantasy, which is commonly conceptualised as a delusion or an escape; a model July refutes. She insists instead upon the centrality of fantasy as a crucial part of psychic life, as 'a process required for human sexuality and subjectivity to be set in place and articulated, rather than a process that is either good or bad, or of which we can have too much or too little' (Kaplan 153).

As Cheryl's masturbation becomes the central focus of the narrative, the obliquely pornographic references of the first part of the novel are ramped up into an emphatically discordant mess of rampant sexual obsession; delicacy and decorum gleefully annihilated - an intention spelled out by the first time Cheryl (as Phillip) masturbates, when she imagines semen exploding across the room, '[a] rope of semen' even hitting 'the top of the dresser, splattering across my hairbrush, my earring box, and the picture of my mother as a young woman' (108). Despite its explicitness, having established Cheryl's naivety as the grounds for the evolving erotics of the novel, this section is underwritten by a paradoxical innocence, as Cheryl applies herself to her new masturbatory regime with the air of a child with a new toy. Through Cheryl's voice, July secures the readers' acceptance of some extreme developments. And more specifically than the voice, it is the particulars of Cheryl's sexual slang that are so important in perpetuating the quality of naivety, particulars which generate a great deal of comedy. In the climatic scene before the obsession finally fades, at a dinner with Clee's father, Cheryl (as Phillip) is enraged by the attentions Clee is receiving from a waiter, and decides (in fantasy) to assert herself:

He thought I was her mother. He didn't have enough experience to guess I might be stiff and shaking with violence. How shocked he would be when I bent her over the dinner table, pushed up her dress, and jimmied my member into her tight pucker. I'd thrust with both hands high in the air, showing everyone in the restaurant, including the chefs and sous-chefs and busboys and waiters, showing all of them I was not her mother. (127)

Cheryl's rivalrous fury, and her conception of herself as experienced and authoritative is comically at odds with her quaint, dated attempts at sexual language - 'jimmied' and 'pucker' - as she (quite literally) mounts a defiant show of dominance, all of which remains entirely imaginary. The juxtaposition of the innocuous safety of Cheryl's presumed maternity with the aggression of her sexual

desire is both troubling and very funny, one example among many of July 'taking advantage' (Good Minds par.3). The prohibitions facing women may be considerable, but July instead exploits what she calls '[t]he unheard, underdog position' and capitalises upon its possibilities 'for artistic freedom' (Good Minds par.3).

That these prohibitions or limitations are now ripe for comic exploitation seems to be a view shared by other female comic artists; stand-up comedians like Margaret Cho, Amy Schumer and Ali Wong, along with Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson of the television series *Broad City*, all stage the 'performative violation of femininity' (Goltz 273) to great comic effect. This is obviously a very partial list, which could easily be extended. In her analysis of recent shifts in the representation of women on television, Emily Nussbaum includes a brief survey of female led comedy which provides further examples:

[T]here's a growing sorority who are unafraid to look ugly or horny, a comic tradition launched by "Girls" but that now includes great shows such as "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend," "Chewing Gum," "Broad City," "You're the Worst," and "Fleabag." Many of their protagonists are stalkers; plenty make comic hay from humiliation, jokes about their periods, and so on. They've created a sturdy slapstick of feminine thirst. Several of these shows turn debasement into a tool of liberation—in a comedy that you control, the freedom to let your characters be the butt of the joke is a form of power (par.8).

Like July, these artists utilise our narrow preconceptions about femininity to create comic incongruity; their sexual explicitness, profanity and aggression playing off against expectations of modesty and passivity. The traditional comic preoccupation with the materialism of the body thus becomes radicalised in being utilised by women, a materialism which, given the restrictive assumptions governing femininity - i.e. 'modesty, mystery and motherhood' (Buci-Glucksmann 133) - reads as

extremity.⁵⁷ The immanence of comedy works against the transcendental abstraction of these attributes, but, in the way in which Cheryl's obsession 'persists, keeps asserting itself and won't go away' (Zupančič 47), there is a demonstration of the immoderation and excess of comedy, a compulsion which complicates the conventional argument that comedy celebrates human finitude. That comic excess, so commonplace in male-authored comedy, is, in female authored comedy, often understood as extremity.

However, despite the ambivalence produced by female comedy's play with materialism, it is also the case that the restrictions that govern femininity can be perversely productive of comedy. Dustin Goltz examines Amy Schumer's strategic use of such preconceptions, noticing how she uses the expectations engendered by her identity as 'a normatively attractive and feminine white blond woman', in order 'to pander to and then upset gendered norms' (273).⁵⁸ In so doing, she

⁵⁷ It is important to remember that this shift is not without precedent; Howard Jacobsen suggests Jo Brand as an earlier practitioner of this 'gross' materialism, her 'lazily libidinous' manner, offering an 'indefatigability, greed, mobility, indifference' (*Seriously Funny* 67) that matched any man's.

⁵⁸ Goltz's careful analysis of Schumer's 'ironic performativity' during her 'breakout' appearance on the 2011 'Comedy Central Roast of Charlie Sheen' is excellent and worth quoting in detail. The event 'was an unapologetic championing of misogyny, wherein Sheen's violence toward women...was celebrated' (267), with Schumer only one of two women on the stage. 'Prior to her set, Schumer sat politely on the dais, an unassuming "girl next door" with a chipper smile that conveyed deference, humility, and accommodation. When faced with a joke, she would nod in recognition, playing the good sport without visible resistance. [Roastmaster Seth] MacFarlane asks, "What can I say about Amy Schumer? I actually say that sincerely, I've never heard of this woman." Schumer nods her head up and down slightly, accepting this introduction. "Please welcome the fourth runner-up of the fifth season of Last Comic Standing, Amy Schumer!" Rock music and applause accompany her walk to the podium. Schumer moves with playful confidence, bouncing slightly to the music. As she steps down the stairs, she gently accepts the assistance of [roaster Jeffrey] Ross, extending her hand to Sheen as she passes. Schumer gracefully steps to the podium in a poufy silver dress, cut above the knee, which she deliberately presses down and straightens as she approaches. She plants her hands on both sides of the podium, pops her head toward the dais, and looks directly at [Mike] Tyson. She flashes a bright smile, her eyes and expressions playful, her energy upbeat. She energetically shifts back and forth from the dais to the audience, and, at the end of each joke, she squints her eyes in a half-committed gesture of confusion, as if to say, "explain this to me, I'm not sure I get it." Her smiley accommodation, however, is layered with a slightly forceful assertiveness—a quickness in her shifts of the head and her facial meta-commentary that cites a docile femininity, yet also

demonstrates the ways in which ‘the body she inhabits provides differing and specific access... into gendered and sexist discourses’ (277). Like Schumer, Ali Wong also uses her body’s ‘differing and specific access’ to upset gendered norms. In her televised special *Baby Cobra* (2016), which she performed heavily pregnant, she uses her pregnancy as a visual amplifier of expectations of feminine nurture and conciliation, which is then juxtaposed against a deadpan and entirely unapologetic examination of aggressive sexual desire. Remembering David Robbins’s insight that ‘a certain outrageousness’ is necessary ‘to lend tension to the factlike neutrality’ (256) of deadpan, we can see here that Wong’s pregnancy - and all the associations summoned by it - provides an ‘outrageousness’ that lends tension to her impassive presentation. Like July’s use of Cheryl’s presumed maternity in the restaurant scene described above, Wong’s strategic use of her maternity is a sophisticated piece of comic orchestration, which in recognising and deliberately transgressing social conventions, takes power over the rules rather than merely submitting to them.⁵⁹ Susan Purdie argues that it is this transgression and the assent signalled by laughter that constitutes ‘jokers as ‘masters’ of discourse’ (5), thus explaining the social potency of joking.

simultaneously undercuts it (267)’. After thus carefully establishing a frame of ‘demure and hesitant femininity’ (272) Schumer goes on to deliver a series of devastatingly aggressive and darkly funny jokes at the expense of Mike Tyson in particular, which entirely resist any ‘feminine apology, accommodation, retreat or search for approval’ (273), and leaves the men on the dais clearly confounded, and the audience gasping with laughter.

⁵⁹ We can see another instance of the deliberate transgression of social expectations of feminine conciliation and sweetness in a recent joke by Tina Fey. In the ceremony for Julia Louis-Dreyfus’s award of the Mark Twain prize for lifetime achievement in comedy, Fey commended the ground-breaking significance of Louis-Dreyfus’s character Elaine in *Seinfeld*: “‘Julia let Elaine be selfish and petty and sarcastic and a terrible, terrible dancer,’” Fey said. “Julia’s never been afraid to be unlikable – not on screen and not in person.” (Holpuch par.12). Fey’s subversion of the contextual obligation to eulogise is deepened by the expectation of feminine compliance. She commends the rejection of such compliance while in turn performing that rejection herself.

In her subsequent Netflix special, *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), Wong, once again heavily pregnant, does not refer to her pregnancy. Rebecca Mead suggests that '[o]ne way of interpreting her silence is as a bold gesture of liberation—the freedom not to mention her condition, as if it necessarily modified her words' (par.9). Having served its purpose in providing incongruity in the first routine, pregnancy is now allowed to become inconsequential. Given Lauren Berlant's conviction that the appearance of a woman's 'body is never a non-event, but erotic in its over presence' - all the more marked in the case of a pregnant body - this insistence upon being 'notional... or casual' is striking ('Showing Up' 117). Wong's focus in the new act is characteristically subversive: as she 'takes a staple of male standup comedy—the dick joke—and turns it into an extended peroration on the transformation that childbirth can wreak upon a woman's labia' (Mead par.2). I would suggest that July is also trying to extend comic parameters with the frequent mentions of Clee's 'pussy': a way of asserting some representational parity between the comic familiarity of the penis and the obscurity of the vagina. Through comic particularity, she attempts to dispel the vagina's troubling mystique and allow for a more robust cultural presence. The 'dick joke', and its many comic synonyms both demonstrate and perpetuate the penis as a key social symbol, whereas the vagina seems remote, even pathological.

It is worth noting that there is one significant distinction between July's novel and stand-up, in that the latter has built up a precedent for semantic license which outstrips that of the novel. There is therefore more risk in the novel for the sense of violation inherent in July's transgression being experienced as 'merely' extreme. I have suggested that the 'violation of accustomed boundaries' (Jacobsen 235) is central to comedy, necessitating extremity to one degree or another; but if the

transgression is sufficiently outrageous, that violation might not be universally assented to. I am thinking here of the novel's negative reviews - those accounts which felt it to be, among other things, 'freakish' (Miller par.4), 'repellant' (Kakutani par.8) and 'wilfully sensational' (Kakutani par.1). For these readers, the violation was clearly not experienced as comic. I would suggest however, that their hostility to July's semantic license is perhaps predicated upon unconsciously gendered expectations.

However, despite the limitations upon women's access to humour, in some ways an audience's inhibitions are less pronounced in response to a female comic persona or character. A joke from later in the novel plays upon this disparity: during Cheryl and Clee's brief romance, Cheryl relishes being seen in public: 'I liked to watch men ogle her and see the way their faces changed when I put my hand in hers ... Anyone who questions what satisfaction can be gained from a not-so-bright girlfriend half one's age has never had one. It just feels good all over' (203). It is Cheryl's femininity that makes this material comic. The same is true of the novel more generally: the obsessive masturbation, the explicitness of the sexual fantasies - if we imagine the character as a middle aged man, the comedy would have to contend with much greater cultural inhibitions.⁶⁰ To be sure, there are still barriers that July must overcome, as is revealed by the ways in which she establishes Cheryl's 'paradoxical innocence' - her quaint slang; the conviction that the masturbating is an expression of her and Phillip's eternal love; the unlikely male stand-ins she chooses. Remembering Freud's analysis of the ways in which jokes must overcome the pressure of reason and 'the inhibitions of shame and

⁶⁰ Cultural sanctions against misogyny are now fairly widespread, but the inhibitions are obviously different depending upon the reader. I talk in more detail about this in the chapter on Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, a cross-over film which in trying to speak to both black and white audiences must work hard to manage the different sensitivities.

respectability' (*Jokes* 133), we can see how July utilises the freedom assigned to the naive speaker, who, because they do not possess such inhibitions, are licensed to 'produce nonsense and smut directly and without compromise' (185). Thus Cheryl's naivety disarms any indignation or squeamishness about what Freud calls 'smut' (*Jokes* 185).⁶¹ These strategies allow July to create a paradoxical space where incommensurable ideas collide: where for instance, the maternal is conflated with incestuous sexual aggression (all the more startling in its defiance of Oedipal convention).

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Cheryl's 'paradoxical innocence' is the relative absence of shame. She does feel shame, especially when she finally realises she has hurt Clee's feelings, but the typical expressive structures or atmospherics of shame, what Sandra Bartky calls shame's 'affective taste' or 'emotional coloration' (88) are missing from the novel. When critics disparage *The First Bad Man* for being 'goofy' (Kiesling par.4), they deny the significance of that lightness of tone, the screwball, absurdist quality that is so disarming and, I would argue, so useful in addressing issues long shrouded in shame and 'murk'. July's comedy is crucial in countering the dominant Western paradigm, where, in Gayle Rubin's words, 'sex is taken all too seriously' (171). Elder Olson suggests that while tragedy involves the belated bestowal of value on the right goods, comedy involves the timely devaluation of overvalued goods, and July's strategies do just this, revealing how over-valued and rigid many of our conventions about sexuality are. Olson argues that if tragedy bestows value in part through catharsis, the characteristic technique of comedy is by contrast *catastasis*, which he describes as

a 'special kind of relaxation of concern' (25), and given the anxiety that sexuality can engender, the relaxation that July's comedy brings is clearly very useful.

That determined 'relaxation of concern' is also evident in the novel's swift movement through the episodes that mark the permutations of Cheryl and Clee's relationship. Once the 'spell' of Cheryl's obsessive masturbating is broken, Clee's unplanned pregnancy takes centre stage and Cheryl moves from psychically submitting Clee to her aggressive fantasies, to nurturing her. Outraged by her daughter's pro-life decision to put the baby up for adoption rather than have an abortion, Clee's biological mother absents herself, and Cheryl finds herself acting as a surrogate mother, accompanying Clee to prenatal checkups, and supervising her diet. Clee feels unable to give the ailing baby away and her relationship with Cheryl undergoes another metamorphosis, and they become lovers, and parents. The novel confidently navigates this startling series of transitions from antagonists to mother and daughter, to lovers and parents; shifting registers through screwball to stricken concern, and back, cycling swiftly through each new episode. Cheryl and Clee's 'unspoken agreement' that they 'wouldn't look back' (140) allows their relationship to mutate without any attachment to consistency, and without shame.

Mutation or metamorphosis are crucial modes for the novel, structuring principles that are enacted both thematically and formally: inconsistency is a veritable article of faith. If 'sex is taken all too seriously' (Rubin 171) in our culture, then so too is sexual identity; Foucault's argument that sexuality is understood as revealing the 'truth' about the individual, still prevails - it remains remarkable the degree to which sexual orientation is thought to reveal a person's 'essence'. *The First Bad Man* counters this by presenting instead the fluidity - and the radical inconsistency - of sexual identity. As July comments in interview, '[a]ll of us need to

realise it's all actually pretty slippery – we are all reorienting ourselves all the time as far as orientation' (Siddall par.14) Her belief in the necessity of playing roles, and of believing 'in them enough to connect to each other through them' (Kushner 64) clearly also extends to sexuality. In the scene when Cheryl and Clee finally do have sex, where another writer might feel compelled to effect an 'authentic' - and serious - moment of communion, July resists. The scene is instead steadfastly comic, as Cheryl once again falls into playing the role of Phillip: relishing Clee's breasts 'pressing against my hard, hairy chest [...] and her actual wet puss sliding against my stiff member' (226). The quaintly comic specificity of 'puss' and 'member' ensuring that Cheryl's characteristic idiom continues to shape the scene's affect, complicating and diffusing its erotic impact. Her response is not dissociative or pathological, rather it is the only way she knows of being present sexually. We can argue that her fantasy is fundamentally inauthentic in its hetero-normativity, but for Cheryl, the hetero-sexual model still provides the abiding paradigm for sexual exchange, as much because it embodies erotic specificity. She does not have the conceptual apparatus to allow her to participate 'authentically' in sex with another woman. But July's point is precisely that 'authentic' participation is an impossible and self-defeating aspiration, after all, as queer theorist Jane Ward asks, 'can any sexuality be truly authentic, or uninfluenced by our cultural context?' (Ward 133)

Ward poses these questions in an essay that argues with the feminist Ariel Levy's warnings about 'the rise of raunch culture', and the increasing commodification of women's sexuality. While agreeing with Levy's emphasis upon the ways in which women are represented, 'feminine appearance and heterosexual desirability' valued above all else, Ward worries that Levy's assertion that women have been 'alienated from their authentic sexual desires' (133), and her insistence

upon a 'genuine female desire' (134) existing beyond or outside culture, relies upon an unthinking essentialism that ultimately seeks to pre-empt and anticipate female desire (135). Ward goes on to develop this point further in relation to the definition of 'feminist porn': '[s]ure, market research may indicate that women do, in fact have group preferences (for deeper plot narratives, close-ups of female orgasms, and so on), but even these "feminist" preferences have been marketed to us, and arguably mirror simplistic cultural constructions of femininity, such as the notion that women's sexuality is more mental or emotional than physical' (135).

Ward's 2011 analysis picks up on much older concerns about the prescriptive tendencies of some feminist thought, for example, Gayle Rubin and Amber Hollibaugh in the early 1980s, who worried that the framing of sex as complicit in patriarchal practices created a profound suspicion of all sexuality, a sense that 'anything sexual now is unhealthy and contaminated because of the culture' (English 41). The only 'legitimate' sex is very limited: '[i]t's not focused on orgasms, it's very gentle and it takes place in the context of a long-term, caring relationship' (English 44). As Ward's concerns about Levy suggest, many of the confusions and prohibitions of the 1980s and 1990s remain current, despite third-wave feminism's project of reclaiming and embracing a diverse female sexuality. Indeed, David Halperin's recent book *The War On Sex* (2017) argues that the feminist ambivalence about sex continues unabated, and he suggests that '[m]any feminists find themselves torn between the need to protect women from sexual violence and the goal of underwriting female sexual self-determination' (30). One of the book's contributors, Elizabeth Bernstein, asserts that the former imperative has overwhelmed the latter for many feminist activists, and argues for a 'newfound and nearly ubiquitous insistence upon carceral versions of gender justice' (301). She

contends moreover, that a significant strand of feminist opinion aligns with evangelical groups in embracing ‘a sexual ideology that is ‘pro-marriage’ and ‘pro-family’ and antipathetical ‘toward nonprocreative sex’ (300).⁶² July’s insistence upon the necessity of inauthenticity brings significant clarity to a contested terrain: Cheryl’s role playing reflects the ‘slippery’ subjectivities of fantasy, and the unruly and often comically inappropriate circuits of desire, rather than the dogmatically correct procedures of a ‘genuine’, politically suitable, sexuality.

July describes her decision to address sexual fantasy as a chance to explore territory that is ‘wide open’, suggesting that while any artistic intervention seems ‘kind of radical’, ‘if we’re honest we all know that it really isn’t’ (Siddall par.13). The simplicity and clarity of this statement is characteristic of all July’s comments in interview about sexuality: her idiom is unusually straightforward, without coyness or irony. In talking about favourite books in an interview for *New York Times Sunday Book Review* series, ‘By The Book’, for instance, she adroitly introduces the category of erotica into a conservative format. Listing “The Romance of Lust” (published in 1873) in response to the question ‘What was the last book to make you laugh?’, she describes it as ‘a book which is ‘taboo after taboo, no shame’ and ‘completely enjoyable on an erotic level’. ‘It is more than 500 pages, so obviously don’t read the whole thing - just dip in and get what you need’ (‘Miranda July: By the

⁶² Bernstein’s larger argument is about the rise of the anti-trafficking movement, a framework which can work to erase the agency of women by positioning sex work as ‘a kind of statutory crime, with women as legal children, with issues of coercion assumed and questions of consent rendered irrelevant for the court’ (Halperin 44). This is just one aspect of a more diffuse ‘war on sex’, evident in the severity of sentencing around so-called sex crimes: the huge expansion of sex offender registries for instance and the carceral aspect of the anti-prostitution movements, both of which operate under the guise of preventing and punishing sexual harm, but which instead often prohibit ‘sex that does no harm but that arouses disapproval on moral, aesthetic, political, or religious grounds. Those grounds provide an acceptable and politically palatable cover for a war on the kinds of sex that are disreputable or that many people already happen to dislike’ (Halperin 3,4).

Book' par.8). The synthesis of the erotic and the humorous is unusual, (a characteristic of her own work) as is the straightforward acknowledgement of the utilisation of the erotica, in getting 'what you need'. Thus July effectively re-engineers the format, placing erotica on the same footing as the more conventional categories of childhood favourites, favourite short stories etc. A similar reconfiguration of the territory is evident in another interview, where after talking about the sexuality in *The First Bad Man*, the interviewer asks whether she's ever 'scared' about the response to her work. July refuses to engage with the implication that she might be scared of the response to the explicitness of the novel, and instead talks about feelings of doubt regarding another project, thereby refusing to corroborate the causal link between explicitness and fear. In both cases she refuses to accept the terms of the enquiry, and in her answers, subtly redefines the often highly charged discourse around sex and sexuality.

July speaks with a complete trust in the common ground of heterogeneous fantasy, and this assurance underwrites the novel. The positive critical responses to the novel attest to a rather startled sense of recognition: Chris Ware for example, writes that the "yes, that's really the way it is!" moments...came.. fast and furious', and applauds the way in which July's novel reveals 'the uncharted world of unspeakable desires, embarrassing hopes and shifting conquests'; while Lena Dunham writes that '[n]ever before has a novel spoken so deeply to my sexuality...my secret self'. These 'unspeakable' 'embarrassing' and 'secret' desires are at the very fore of Cheryl's experience, fantasies which constitute the mesh through which the world is mediated. By articulating this so frankly, with humour, and without shame, July contests the habitual characterisation of fantasy as deeply dubious, and topographically remote.

As Ada Kofman points out, it is not just Cheryl who experiences the world like this, rather, '[e]verybody in *The First Bad Man* is living out a fantasy, whether the source material is a pornographic stereotype, strange dream, childhood memory, or Hollywood movie' (par.4). While Cheryl uses 'Phillip' to have sex with Clee, Clee in turn uses an image of 'Cheryl' dressed in a long corduroy dress. Worn for an unsuccessful date with the father of one of Clee's friends several years before, the image of Cheryl 'dressed like a lesbian' (109) reached Clee and became a kind of talisman in her nascent lesbianism.⁶³ Knowing dimly that the dress is significant for Clee, Cheryl wears it and Clee becomes aroused:

her eyes locked onto the pennies in my shoes and slowly crawled up the length of corduroy dress, button by button...Her face was almost stricken, almost pained. She ran her hand through her bangs and wiped her palms on her sweatpants a couple of times. I had never been looked at this way before, like a fantasy come to life. (225)

Phillip also needs an intermediary: before sex begins, he masturbates while watching unspecified images on his phone. When he and Cheryl have sex, the levels of mediation are multiplied to an absurd degree, as Cheryl concentrates hard to replace the 'real' Phillip with her imaginary version. The 'real Philip' interrupts and everything scatters, so she gives up on her regular fantasy, and tries 'to imagine the penis in me was my own version of Phillip's member and that I was doing the thrusting, into Clee. Once I got a hold on it, the scene felt very real. Like a memory' (269). Fantasy mutates into memory, and the 'real' becomes increasingly difficult to distill from the 'unreal'.

There are clearly dangers here, some of which July illustrates through the fate of Cheryl's therapist, Ruth-Anne. Her crush on a fellow therapist, Dr Broyard,

⁶³ The suggestion here is that Clee, believing Cheryl to be a lesbian, had on some level deliberately sought her out. This potentially presents limits to the novel's constructivism: Clee's lesbianism pre-existing 'the particular, performative acts' (Sedgwick 821) of the scenarios.

grows to consume her entire identity, '[e]verything else in her life, including her therapy practice, was faked' (258). A 'big-boned', androgynous woman, she transforms herself 'through sheer force of will' into a 'petite...delicate woman' (257),⁶⁴ and becomes 'what he once said he wished his wife was: small, feminine, with a slightly conservative elegance' (258). She gives herself over entirely to her fantasy of his fantasy and it is a living death. Cheryl recognises this as fantasy become 'fixation' (257), the equivalent to her obsession with Clee, and tries to break the 'spell'; Ruth-Anne seems briefly to emerge, but in the presence of Dr Broyard the fixation once more descends and she tucks herself back into the shrunken shell of a fettered femininity, 'almost relieved, it seemed' (260).

Through Ruth-Anne, July examines femininity itself as fantasy, what Joan Riviere calls the 'masquerade of womanliness,' a performance for a man, 'as he would have her' (Heath 50). For Luce Irigaray, 'the masquerade has to be understood as what women do...in order to participate in men's desire, but at the price of renouncing their own' (133). In giving up her desire and giving herself over to Dr Broyard's definition of idealised femininity, Ruth-Anne absolves herself of the responsibilities of autonomy. 'Ruth-Anne': her very name a joke about self-alienation or doubleness - the tall, 'daring' (258) woman whose obsession reduces her to a docile, 'wafer-thin 5 percent version' (258) of herself. Here is the caveat - or the disclaimer - to July's celebration of fantasy, and of simulation: while for much of the novel fantasy is productive, here, when it topples into obsession, it clearly is not. Squeezing herself into a 'tight-fitting blouse' which minimises her broad shoulders, and wearing a 'tartan headband' (257) to pull back her hair, Ruth-Anne's physical

⁶⁴ The description of a 'delicate' woman picks up on Philip's use of the word to describe Cheryl, which develops the sense of the coercion or limitation of adopting another person's fantasy, so acute in Ruth-Anne's case.

transformation is the inverse of Clee's, whose 'personal style' (228) is also transformed through fantasy. The catalyst for Clee is the fantasy of the simulations, the choreography that enables her 'butchness', and allows her to replace the clothes that conform to a conventional fantasy of femininity, the pink velour pants and tank tops, with the androgyny of tuxedo shirts and 'army pants' (228).

Clee's youthful good looks ensure the passage out of the masquerade is relatively painless. For Ruth-Anne, however, a middle aged, androgynous woman, the rupture of the masquerade is convulsive. As she sings the song that is the antidote to the spell, she momentarily emerges from her fixation and begins to sweat profusely, 'big damp rings ... rapidly expanding from the sides of her blouse' (259). Her jaw gallops as she sings, her shoulders broaden, 'almost ripping her blouse', and makeup melts 'into the wrinkles around her eyes' (260). The text suggests that outside the masquerade lies the threat of sexual and social illegibility, a threat that is also acute for Cheryl, another middle aged woman with an ambivalent relationship to femininity. But while Ruth-Anne gives way to conventional paradigms, Cheryl resists the pull of masculine expectations, when, after Clee leaves, Phillip comes looking for sympathy for his increasingly poor health, and proposes a life growing old together. Cheryl refuses his fantasy of a sedate, settled life together and instead chooses autonomy - and loneliness.

Her loneliness, however, is greatly mitigated by the presence of Clee's baby, Jack. The relationship with Clee may not endure, but Cheryl's bond with Clee's baby does. Clee, acutely depressed after the birth, feels little for her son, and is relieved when Cheryl tentatively asks if she can look after him. In keeping with the novel's constructivist treatment of all such seemingly irreducibly specific roles, maternity is presented here as a relationship that need have no correspondence with biological

materiality. Indeed, in suggesting that it is Cheryl's fantasy which generates Jack, the incarnation of the longed for Kulbelko Bondy, the child allows July to demonstrate the degree to which materiality itself is phantasmatically structured; a spectrum which the novel illustrates running from Cheryl's 'globus hystericus' at one end to a baby at the other. If Cheryl's earlier use of the penis suggests Judith Butler's notion of 'the lesbian phallus', an appropriation that displaces the privileged signifier from 'traditional masculinist contexts', then the baby might demonstrate a similar displacement, in which '[t]he phantasmatic status of "having" is redelineated, rendered transferable, substitutable, plastic' (*Bodies* 89). Thus, in an admirably even-handed equivalence, the 'phantasmic privilege' of motherhood is shown, like masculinity, to be available to 'recirculation' (*Bodies* 85).

During Philip's final visit, Cheryl suddenly understands he is Jack's father, whose name Cleo has refused to divulge, and in imagining their meeting, realises her unconscious involvement in bringing them together. She 'didn't make' Jack, but, 'did each thing right so he would be made' (*First Bad Man* 270). Rather than the normative heterosexual couple, a 'web' of people have 'spun' the child into being (270). Studiedly unspecific and poetic though it is, the novel's treatment of maternity might suggest assisted reproductive technology (ART),⁶⁵ a further addition to those medical and biotechnological developments of the late 1950s which are described by transfeminist Beatriz Preciado as theoretically threatening 'the heterosexual dimorphic regime': 'males are no longer guaranteed to impregnate, females stop menstruating under the effects of the contraceptive pill, and lactation is provided by food industries instead of by female breasts' (105). However, as Preciado points

⁶⁵ Perhaps another instance in which July avoids 'using the politicizing words that we're used to' ('Miranda July' par.16).

out, despite the contemporary possibilities of ‘the technical construction of sexual difference’, we are still far from creating an ‘alternative (multimorphic) epistemology for understanding bodies and desires’ (105). July’s novel rather seems to suggest the limits of any attempt at such an epistemology. It might not be by chance that a therapist, who is supposed to know, becomes a victim of obsession or fixation, while Cheryl, who knows so little about herself as a woman, succeeds in her long cherished desire to become a mother.

The muted happiness of the ending, as Cheryl watches Phillip leave, and she returns to the house and the sleeping baby, seems markedly sedate, but in the short epilogue⁶⁶ that follows, July provides a final instance of the irrepressible comic vitality that is so characteristic of the novel. She secures this optimism strategically, however, having prefigured the scene - the arrivals hall of an airport - earlier in the novel, as a self-soothing fantasy of reunion to counter the fear of Clee leaving with Jack. In the first iteration, Cheryl addresses the baby internally, a habit left over from the years of silent communication with the many incarnations of Kulbelko Bondy:

You’ll run toward me and I’ll run toward you and as we get closer we’ll both start to laugh. We’ll be laughing and laughing and running and running and running and music will play, brass instruments, a soaring anthem, not a dry eye in the house, the credits will roll. Applause like rain. The end (235).

The epilogue is a variation on this, but with additional details that mark it as a specific event rather than a fantasy (Jack is now described as a young man, accompanied by his girlfriend). Significantly, the italics are removed, effectively moving it out of Cheryl’s internal stream of consciousness and into an objective reality, thus reaching into the future to give her and Jack a ‘faux-cinematic’ ending that is, in Lorrie Moore’s words, ‘all wish-fulfilment’. Noticing the risk of

⁶⁶ James MacDowell notices that the epilogue is a frequent strategy for effecting happy endings, by providing us with a reassuring glimpse of the characters’s settled future (117).

sentimentality in thus ‘throwing happiness’ into the future, Moore suggests that ‘throwing happiness into the past’ is less problematic, as ‘one can end with a moment of ...elegiacally positioned hope’ which ‘is usually partially doomed and more precise than the rapturous gauze of faux cinema’ (par. 21). Implicit in this is an unease about film’s particular powers of enthrallment, and those ‘vernacular forms of aesthetic response driven by dream worlds of mass culture’ (Felski, *Uses* 52), a distrust which reflects James MacDowell’s sense of the critical consensus around the happy ending as ‘representative of Hollywood’s worst tendencies’ (3) in promulgating escapism, and closure. July’s novel however, does not participate in this orthodoxy - recognising it as somewhat dogmatic and defended, and her use of cinematic rhetoric can be seen as a deliberately unseemly invocation of the ‘baleful bewitchment’ of Hollywood films as opposed to the ‘authentic enchantment’ of literary fiction (*Uses* 67), thus undermining any sense of a moral taxonomy. Far from disdaining mass-mediated or generic forms, July satirises those who do; like Clee’s parents, whose pursuit of the unique and the quirky is used as way of disavowing their obligations to their grandson: “We’re supposed to play the part of the ‘grandparents’...and he’s supposed to enact the ‘grandson’... That just feels empty and arbitrary to us, like something Hallmark came up with” (250). This picks up on a similar sentiment in her short story ‘Mon Plaisir’, where a couple’s contempt for all things Hallmark is also a sign of deluded superiority:

We are not people who buy instant cocoa powder, we do not make small talk, we do not buy Hallmark cards or believe in Hallmark rituals such as Valentine’s Day or weddings. In general, we try to stay away from things that are MEANINGLESS, and we favor things that are MEANINGFUL. Our top three favorite meaningful things are: Buddhism, eating right, and the internal landscape (148).

The epilogue - to some extent a pastiche - is a celebration or reclaiming of generic fantasy, of that ‘rapturous gauze’ which, Moore implies, is a form of obfuscation, or

even deception, but which July sees instead as an inevitable and even necessary way of articulating emotion. However, July's ending is not only 'rapturous', it is also scrupulous, the overt repetition an acknowledgement of its formulaic and inauthentic nature. This contingent belief in a generic idiom follows the same logic as her belief in the necessity of role playing in relationships: 'Yes! It's not real! But let's pretend it is, let's celebrate it and in doing so, let's believe in the invention of us together' (Kushner 64). So too with the fantasy of a happy ending: it is not real, but in celebrating it, we live as though it might be. Through this paradoxical affective stance, which is simultaneously sincere and ironic,⁶⁷ the reader's scepticism is overcome, and both the sentiment and the comic optimism become tenable. As we will see in a later chapter, this adroit affect management is a quality shared by Jordan Peele, again, most markedly manifested in the contingency of his film's happy ending.

The epilogue's celebration of a mass-mediated form accords with the novel's engagement with mediation as a whole: mediated kinship, mediated sexuality and subjectivity - the novel is systematic in its exploration of the inevitability of third party involvement in modes of being that are traditionally seen as the domain of the sovereign individual or dyad. Such sovereignty is as Lauren Berlant points out, 'a fantasy misrecognised as an objective state', a merely 'aspirational position' of personal control, 'security and efficacy' (*Cruel Optimism* 97). Mediated modes which threaten the illusion of sovereignty can be deeply troubling, which is why, like fantasy, mediated experience is frequently characterised as suspect. However, like fantasy, mediated experience is an inevitable part of psychic life, 'a process required

⁶⁷ In their discussion of metamodern practice, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker describe theorist Raoul Eshelman's concept of 'performatism' as 'the wilful self-deceit to believe in - or identify with, or solve - something in spite of itself' (6) which is precisely what July is doing here.

for human sexuality and subjectivity to be set in place and articulated, rather than a process that is either good or bad, or of which we can have too much or too little' (Kaplan 153). In demonstrating the degree to which identity is appropriated, borrowed, and imitated, the novel documents 'the impossibility of securing the authentication of anyone or anything' (Phelan 107). As July says, 'we must play roles' (Kushner 64), and shame about inauthenticity can only be self-punishing. July's affirmation of a radically superficial model of subjectivity and sexuality - 'Yes! It's not real!' (Kushner 64) - is cause for celebration, not shame.

Chapter 4: Donald Antrim

While July uses Cheryl's naivety to secure the reader's acceptance of a certain degree of extremity, in *Elect Mr Robinson for a Better World*, it is the protagonist's pedantry that is used to engender comic license. Both are comic modes that privilege resilience and recovery, and through the promise of safety, allow for the exploration of troubling issues. If the comedy is used in July's novel in order to disarm our inhibitions around sexuality, in Antrim its aim is not so clear. This seemingly fantastic novel (the first of a loose trilogy) is profoundly enigmatic, a fact that perhaps partially explains the lack of scholarly writing on Antrim's work. However, in what follows, I will argue that the novel's fantastical elements are in fact ingeniously allegorical in their satire of key aspects of American exceptionalism, such as the right to bear arms, capital punishment and religion. While I have been keen to avoid focusing upon satire in too much detail in this project, given the ways in which it has served as one of the critical categories that has provided 'a rationale for bypassing an analysis of comedy' (Green 106), it is important to note that the difference between the two modes is often hard to discern. Antrim's novel in particular occupies a liminal space. In this chapter I preserve the distinction between the two, and duly emphasise an analysis of the novel's comedy, in particular the paradigmatic incongruity between psychological disturbance and banality, which is further deepened by the protagonist's pedantry. However, I also maintain that satire must be understood as a species of the comic; consequently, in the second section of the chapter, the focus moves to the satiric allegory of the novel's extreme figurations.

Both the comic and the satirical aspects of *Elect* are characterized by the same 'relaxation of concern' (Olson 25) we noticed in July's novel, that 'conversion of the grounds of concern into absolutely nothing' (25) which Elder Olson argues is so central to comedy. We might use Olson's elaboration upon this insight to posit a difference between the two modes, and thus refine the novel's comic procedures. He argues that the comic operates through the 'minimisation of the claim of some particular thing to be taken seriously', which works 'either by reducing that claim to absurdity, or by reducing it merely to the negligible in such a way as to produce pleasure by that very minimisation' (23). If we assume that satire might be loosely understood as the more aggressive approach, with a corrective aspect, while comedy is less aggressive and less pointed, then the reduction of a claim to absurdity is arguably more akin to satire and the reduction of it to the negligible is more straightforwardly comic. However, the tenuousness of these distinctions shows just how minimal the difference between satire and comedy can be (satire can be playful while comedy is frequently aggressive). In the novel, banality is key to both forms of 'minimisation': on the one hand the banality renders exceptionalism absurd (and therefore pathetic); while on the other, it makes the horror or the extremity of the allegorical circumstances seem 'negligible' by checking or tempering our emotional responses. I explore this latter, more straightforwardly comic dynamic with reference to Freud's account of comic pleasure as the release of energy that is summoned but then found to be unnecessary; release here effectively corresponding with Olson's sense of 'relaxation'. Intensified by Pete's pedantry, this relief from feeling is the chief source of our comic pleasure and therefore our attachment, and it works to both broaden and diffuse the satire. But,

as I will show, it is also ultimately the means by which Antrim ensures our sense of complicity.

While the novel's comedy is often exuberant, there is an abiding skepticism at work, which recognizes the darkness implicit in the comic celebration of resilience and recovery. Pete's '*élan vital*' (Langer 342) is a crucial part of his attraction, but the novel is also at pains to acknowledge Alenka Zupančič's refinement of the convention that it is simply vitality or life itself that triumphs in comedy. She argues that it is often the Id, rather than the Ego, that prevails, to the extent that the typical comic character combines a miserable "I" and a happy "it" (71). 'The discrepancies between what I want and what I enjoy are the bread and butter of comedies', as 'is the fact that something in me can be satisfied even though 'I' find no satisfaction'. There is, moreover, 'something about satisfaction and enjoyment that has its own logic and relatively independent autonomous life, which can land the subject in rather awkward situations' (63). This is amply demonstrated by Pete, along with Antrim's other protagonists, who doggedly pursues the satisfactions of *jouissance*, or perverse desire, in ways that are often wildly destructive. However, in their complacent conviction of both sanity and essential decency, Antrim's 'heroes' are unable to recognise their own madness, in ways that feel obscurely familiar. Indeed, while Pete sees himself as a mere observer of the excesses of the small seaside town in which he lives, this interpretation is frequently undermined, in ways which reflect the reader's own unacknowledged or unexamined complicity in contemporary pathologies. Like Saunders, Antrim is very aware of the ways in which obliviousness can be fatal: it is obliviousness that keeps *Elect Mr Robinson* within the comic

modality and yet it is also this which ultimately pushes it out into the horrific.⁶⁸ His 'lovable, terrible' narrator ('Back from the Land' par.6) manifests a resilience and buoyancy largely borne of a lack of self-awareness, which both 'images the charm of the vital energy that motivates the world' (Morgan 31) in ways which characterise the comic, while simultaneously working as the catalyst for horror.

The circumstances of the town are undoubtedly extreme: feuding families have laced the park with mines and every home is a lethal fortress, while the schools were disbanded when the taxpayers elected to defund the system and the libraries are due to follow. The mayor of the town, Jim Kunkel, has been drawn and quartered, ostensibly in retribution for a murderous act in which many were killed. But despite the dysfunction, while the water level rises and the drains back up, the townspeople are wilfully oblivious to the horror. They attend town meetings, take their children to story-time sessions, ogle one another's wives, work on their defensive pits, and invest in the self-development opportunities offered by the local fish cults. Pete, a teacher, defines himself in opposition to the vigilante machismo of the convention-bound Rotarians who dominate the town, but while this characterisation is one of the ways the reader's sympathy is elicited, it is often undermined. Not only does Pete do nothing to stop the dubious developments, in

⁶⁸ While *Elect* focuses primarily upon a specifically American obliviousness, or denial of dysfunction; in the second novel of the trilogy, *The Hundred Brothers*, Antrim widens his satire to include the solipsism of the West as a whole. The hundred brothers, squabbling in their decaying library, illustrate Western solipsism bolstered by a much vaunted intellectual history and tradition that is now rapidly disintegrating. Outside the house, camped around fires, are dimly seen Others, who, while mostly kept out of mind, are anxiously understood to be a threat. This allegory economically illustrates Gary Younge's account of Western obliviousness: 'The west does not see itself the way others see it; indeed it often does not see others at all. Solipsistic in its suffering and narcissistic in its impulses, it promotes itself as the upholder of principles it does not keep, and a morality it does not practise. This alone would barely distinguish it from most cultures. What makes the west different is the physical and philosophical force with which it simultaneously makes its case for superiority and contradicts it. Therein lies the dysfunction whereby it keeps doing hateful things while expressing bewilderment at why some people hate it' ('American Sniper' par.5).

several instances he actively instigates them. For instance, his lecture to the Rotary club on his favourite topic, 'The Barbarity of the Past' (45) (with specific attention to the Inquisition and methods of medieval torture), directly inspires the mayor's death. Pete purports to be dismayed by the use made of his ideas, but when later in the novel he organises a home school, he locates the classroom in his basement, where his '1:32-scale, exhibition-quality balsa-and-Styrofoam cutaway reproduction of a Portugese interrogation chamber (circa 1600)' (27) has pride of place; and another character - this time a young girl - is drawn and quartered. Both instances are structured by the autonomous logic of Pete's perverse satisfaction, clearly at odds with any notion of personal or practical good. His disavowal is initially broadly comic, as he blandly wonders about his role in the mayor's execution: 'how much responsibility must I bear for what eventually, inevitably occurred, simply because I suggested using some Toyotas and Subarus packed nearby, in lieu of horses?' (4). But by the end of the novel, during Sarah's execution, the humour is wrung out; leaving, as Jeffrey Eugenides remarks in his introduction, 'a poisonous residue' (xx).

I will return to the effectiveness of the ending in due course, however, first we need to examine how, in order to create readerly attachment, Pete's blindness about morality is initially presented as comical. In contemplating the lethal defensive pits, for example, rather than deploring their ubiquity, he pedantically commends the workmanship: '[t]hese were well-planned, sturdy structures, erected by gifted home-improvement enthusiasts willing to pay out for topflight materials' (92). Freud's account of comic pleasure as the redistribution of the psychic energy necessary for social conformity suggests one reason why this is funny: the 'inhibitory expenditure' which we would usually make in summoning the 'correct' response - in this case, deploring the fortifications - 'suddenly becomes unutilizable' and is discharged by

laughter (*Jokes* 182). Pete similarly violates expectation at the town hall meeting convened in a local restaurant to discuss the ongoing developments: instead of supporting the woman who presents a case for prohibiting the pits, citing injuries to children, his focus is on the food. 'Jerry, next to me, was halfway through a clam roll. Jerry's clam roll looked and smelled delicious, and I decided that this, the clam roll drenched in tartar sauce, would, if I could only flag Terry or Claire, constitute my next order' (72). Fussing over his dinner choices, he avoids the larger responsibility of supporting the mother against the 'bully boys' who defend the pits. His wife, Meredith, and her mother, look at him reproachfully, but he brushes away any guilt: 'What did they want me to do? I just kept the minutes' (75). Remembering Freud's suggestion that comic pleasure derives in part from relief at not having to feel, we could suggest that here, expecting the 'correct' response - supporting the mother - we are prepared to follow Pete's lead and 'call up the same emotional impulses' (Freud, 'Humour' 428) in ourselves, but instead of the onerousness of that effort, Pete's preoccupation with food means 'expenditure on feeling' is economised. In both cases we enjoy his blithe disregard for social propriety, relishing his obliviousness to the 'constantly alert attention' demanded by 'life and society' (Bergson 8). The 'joke' of his sidestepping of the ethically or socially correct response also allows Antrim to avoid didacticism: the incongruity of Pete's response requires the use of shared social knowledge to 'get' the joke, thus summoning the 'correct' or socially congruous response without any exposition. Simon Critchley suggests that 'in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as such, there has to be a congruence between joke structure and social structure - no social congruity, no comic incongruity' (*On Humour* 4). Indeed, the simultaneity of social congruity

and comic incongruity may be one way of explaining the sense of surplus or tangible 'bonus' in comic works, or what Freud calls the comic 'yield' (*Jokes* 133).

Pete's obliviousness is often very pleasurable, but even at its most benign, Antrim allies it with a sense of the social costs, illustrating Bergson's conviction that '[c]omedy begins ...with what might be called a growing callousness to social life' (171). However, these costs remain steadfastly abstract for much of the novel. On his midnight quest to bury the mayor's foot, having promised Kunkel a ritualised burial, Pete meets the widower of one of the victims of the mayor's attack and offers him a fig bar from his rucksack, unaware that it has been leaked on by the rapidly thawing foot. Pete is delighted by the 'elegance of this symmetry' 'the bereaved taking into his mouth the blood of his wife's executioner', but Ray, however, is not:

he was too busy going berserk from the putridity of blood and rot that had entered his mouth via a leaked-on fig bar; and he was saying words to me, attempting to anyway – something garbled I couldn't quite make out but that was, judging from tone and inflection, harshly accusatory. He got up then and started walking away. Staggering, actually, was more like what he was doing; he staggered, retching, down the beach. What could I say? (56)

Again, Pete's pedantry is very funny, while his 'indestructible trust' in himself – which Hegel describes as the essential attribute of a comic character (qtd. in Propp 110) - prevents him from seeing himself as culpable in any way. Indeed his pedantry⁶⁹ is partly what allows for that trust, his focus on irrelevant detail and chronic lack of judgement preventing him from seeing the larger picture; a clear example of not being able 'to see the wood for the trees.' His pedantry not only preserves his own sense of innocence, it also preserves the reader's trust in him, safeguarding our sympathy. We can see here that as a 'type of the comic' (Freud, *Jokes* 182) pedantry functions in much the same way as naivety, in creating an occasion when

⁶⁹ The word itself derives from the Old French for schoolmaster or teacher, so Antrim's choice of profession for his protagonist is clearly very deliberate.

'someone completely disregards an inhibition because it is not present in him' (182). Much like the naivety of July's protagonist, Cheryl, Pete's pedantry ensures that we see this disregard as innocent, rather than deliberate, and so we are prevented from being 'indignant' (Freud 182) and laugh instead. His apparently innocent disregard 'trumps' the social costs, even when his interlocutors' reactions demonstrate just how wrong or misguided his actions are. The social costs remain abstract, clearly for Pete himself, and through his role as the centre of consciousness for the novel, for the reader too.

The effects of naivety described by Freud, which can thus be extended to pedantry, might be described as comic license: we indulge those who possess such qualities in ways which we do not for others. While we tend to think of comic license as a property specific to jokes or jokers, comic personas can have much the same privileges, their expression equally characterised by what Mary Douglas calls 'an exhilarating sense of freedom from form' (365). In her account of comic license, Douglas pointedly refers only to jokes and jokers, as does John Morreall in his description of humour's exemption from the conventions and codes that rule 'real' life. While we can only loosely call Pete a joker – given that it implies an intentionality he does not display – it remains the case that his inadvertent comedy engenders a freedom from the usual social protocols. Comic exemption has to be worked for in jokes, in order to overcome the imperatives of social propriety and sensitivity, but pedantry partially shares in naivety's immunity. We grant license automatically in naivety - because someone is trying 'in good faith to draw a serious conclusion on the basis of... uncorrected ignorance' (Freud, *Jokes* 183). While pedantry's claim is not as straightforward, because its assertions of ignorance or innocence are not as secure, it remains a productive comic mechanism.

Clearly, that freedom is predicated upon a degree of emotional detachment. Just as Cheryl's naivety allows July to create to a deadpan narrative that checks emotion, Pete's pedantry works in a similar way. As an attribute of a first-person narrator that effects a certain stolid lack of nuance, pedantry ensures a narrative with a reduced emotional charge. But while the lack of emotional cues in July can be experienced as ambivalent, even extreme, perhaps largely as a result of gendered expectations of expressivity or emotional sincerity, here its function as a form of comic relief is more straightforward. It offers a degree of freedom from emotion, and the dimming of 'sympathy, fear or pity' that Bergson describes as the necessary conditions for laughter (87). As we will see, however, at the end of the novel, Antrim subtly recalibrates those conditions, in order to problematise our response to Pete. This also effectively problematizes the larger issue of comedy's capacity to occlude emotion.

The lack of emotional signaling in the majority of the novel also has a pragmatic narrative utility, in helping readers to accept the extremity of the circumstances without question. With no emotional cues to tell us otherwise, we can swallow the extravagance of Antrim's conceits more easily. Moreover, Pete's pedantry does important work in embedding the strangeness of the world Antrim creates in a kind of realism. In commending the craftsmanship of the lethal defences, for instance, or preoccupied by food at the town hall, Pete's myopic focus on the material and the specific provides a consistent degree of concrete detail that tempers the fantasy of the novel's extreme figurations. There is a correspondence here with Saunders's use of comedy in the diarist's memories of childhood birthday humiliations; their detailed physicality helping to ground the abstraction of the extreme figuration at the story's heart. In both cases the comedy counters the de-

familiarisation effected by the narrative elsewhere, working to embed the extravagance of the allegorical conceits. A similar strategy is also at work in *Get Out*, where the broad humour of the protagonist's best friend, Rod, anchors the extremity of the film, a strategy which Jordan Peele has explicitly noted, suggesting that Rod's scenes 'ground the entire project' (DVD commentary). We could argue that comedy has a pragmatic usefulness in fantasy more widely: in Angela Carter's work for instance, the juxtaposition of comically empirical exactitude and Gothic excess is a combination that is also key to Antrim's characteristic tonal imperturbability. This is particularly true of Carter's *The Passion of the New Eve*, whose hero/heroine is also something of a pedant. *Gulliver's Travels* might serve as another example: Gulliver's stolid pedantry helping to embed the extravagance of Swift's figurations.

The recurrent use of comedy to embed, or ground fantasy and/or extremity, clearly reveals comedy's status as an immanent form, preoccupied with the particular rather than the universal. The comic alignment with human finitude, with material and physical limitations, (most frequently signified by the proverbial slip on the banana peel) in opposition to the discarnate abstraction and universalism of tragedy, is certainly borne out by the work I examine, but it is important to note that rather than celebrating finitude, comic characters are often, in Alenka Zupančič's words, 'the ones departing violently from moderation' (47). Zupančič argues that 'comedy's supposedly unrealistic insistence on the indestructible, on something that persists, keeps asserting itself and won't go away', constitutes 'a kind of excess rather than a finitude' (47). It is a 'failed finitude' (50), which is, as Sianne Ngai puts it, 'compromised by universals' ('Theory' 476). Pete offers a particularly clear case of violent immoderation, a comic character whose persistence is pathological.

Before moving on to examine the incongruity between psychological disturbance and banality which structures so much of the novel's comedy, an additional aspect of pedantry's comic usefulness necessitates comment, one which also relies upon the mechanism of incongruity. The juxtaposition of Pete's stolidity against the very evident violence and rage all around him participates in a dynamic which is shared by both *The Passion of the New Eve* and *Gulliver's Travels*, where the phlegmatism of Evelyn/Eve and Gulliver are similarly juxtaposed against their extraordinary circumstances to great comic effect. In *Elect*, this incongruity is paradigmatic. Patrick McGrath describes the novel as 'suburban gothic', an apt characterisation of the amalgamation of wild disturbance evidenced by the lethal homes, the mayor's torture, and the landmines, and the banality of the suburban setting and Pete's pedantry. The incongruity between the unacknowledged distress and the banality is both richly comic, and rather horrifying.

It is worth noting here that despite seeming the antithesis of each other - humour is associated with 'a sense of release and sensations of lightness and expansion' while horror prompts 'feelings of pressure, heaviness, and claustrophobia' (Carroll 145) - there are also profound similarities. Noel Carroll notices that horror's preoccupation with the 'violation, problematization and transgression of our categories, norms and concepts' is shared by humour (152). Indeed, incongruity - such a crucial aspect of how comedy functions - is at the heart of both. Carroll asserts that comedy occurs within a horror framework when the potential for fear is removed - when the incongruousness of the monstrous element is shown to be harmless, or 'clownish' and, 'as a result, an appropriate object of laughter' (156). Initially in the novel the incongruity is 'played for laughs', with Pete presented as harmless and therefore 'an appropriate object of laughter' (156), but

as we will see, at the end of the novel, this sense of assurance disappears. Jordan Peele has a similarly keen sense of the kinship between horror and comedy, and like Antrim's novel, his film also utilises comedy's ability to create 'proximity to the terror at hand' (Pinedo 112).

The novel's opening pages establish the incongruity between psychological disturbance and banality to be a paradigmatic juxtaposition as Pete, in his padlocked attic, muses on recent events, in particular the notable occasion, 'when Jim Kunkel made that sorry, stupid show of indiscriminately lobbing Stinger missiles into the Botanical Garden reflecting pool. Many picnickers died that day. I recall Ray walking up Main, oblivious to traffic, blood-soaked and carrying his wife's corpse' (2,3). The incongruity of Stinger missiles and the Botanical Garden reflecting pool is obvious, as is the juxtaposition of the homely 'Main' and the traumatised man with his wife's corpse. Pete's predilection for precision generates both the type of missiles used and the comprehensive detail about the pool, and while most would be satisfied with 'people', the specificity of Pete's choice of 'picnickers' deepens the incongruity. The banality of context is exacerbated by the banality of expression, which is then juxtaposed against the extremity of psychological disturbance. Remembering Elder Olson's suggestion that comedy reduces 'a claim of some particular thing...to the merely negligible, in such a way as to produce pleasure by that very minimisation' (23), we can see that here, it is the claims of death and loss that are minimized. And through Pete's comedy, our potential 'expenditure on feeling' is checked.

In the instance above, it is Pete's banality that is most evidently comic, but in subsequent examples, the emphasis is upon the wider psychological disturbance.

For example, when Pete makes enquiries in the neighbourhood to assess interest in a homeschool he is thinking of running, he has first to negotiate the fortified pits:

I made a total of seven recruitment visits that day and the next, and was successful at each, and in danger of dying only once, when Deborah and Carl Harris's automatic garage door/catapult discharged a fusillade of calcified coral fragments, missing my head by inches. Deborah Harris cooed apologies from the house, "Yoo-hoo, Pete, sorry about that. I *told* Carl to turn that thing off. He must've forgotten." (100,101)

The extremity of feeling represented by the existence of the pits is clearly incongruous in comparison to the banality of the homeowner's nonchalant apology. The same pattern is again apparent in a subsequent scene when Pete meets up with some Rotarians in the park mined by two feuding families, with the aim of locating and defusing some of the mines - by throwing heavy books from the soon-to-be-defunct library. Covertly competitive about their throwing prowess, afterwards the men sit on deck chairs to drink beer and compare notes on their favourite books (for throwing). The psychological disturbance represented by the mines is clear, while the rendering of the trip to defuse them as banal effects further incongruity. While the mismatch between the evidence of disturbance and the breezy denial of the social performance is clearly funny, it also dramatises a significant insight into the ways in which social convention fails to accommodate any real range of feeling. In a rare comment about his novels, Antrim states that the notion of 'reality succumbing to polite social discourse' is 'embedded' (Random House interview) in all three books. He does not elucidate further, but I would suggest that in *Elect* the psychological disturbance is the 'reality' that continually succumbs to the denial of 'polite social discourse.' This is perhaps best illustrated by a conversation after the book throwing, when the men's talk briefly ventures on to larger subjects:

Jerry said, "Pete, I take it you refer to the dark side of human nature. Is 'misery' the word you want to use?"
"Maybe not, Jer. Maybe just 'pain'."

“How about, um, ‘despondency?’” suggested Tom
“Heartache,” Abe said.
“Anguish,” added Jerry. Which earned a “Hmn” from Bill, who contributed,
“Rage.”
We all thought about that for a minute, about rage. Jerry observed, “Good
insight, Bill.” Both Tom and Abe nodded their heads in agreement with this,
smiling and saying, in near unison and with genuine if slightly sodden
enthusiasm, “Yeah, definitely.” (115,116)

Knowing they have reached the point in polite conversation ‘when talk must either
cease or become intimate, self-revelatory, deep,’ (116) the group recognise it as
their cue to start preparing to leave. Their tip-toeing around the psychological
realities of rage, anguish and pain keeps the subjects painstakingly abstract, and
the carefully conventional affirmations - “Good insight”, “Yeah, definitely” - are
ludicrously meager, indicative of the ways in which ‘polite social discourse’ is ill
equipped to accommodate a full psychological spectrum. It is obviously ironic that
such denial and fear of feeling exists in a town where rage and violence are writ
large for all to see: a town where the mayor’s killing spree is punished by a torturous
death; where the houses are made lethal and essential local services are wilfully
destroyed. The circumstances may be hyperbolic, but the habit of denial is not, and
in acknowledging the resonance with a recognisable psychology we can see the
ways in which these extreme figurations co-exist with a profound emotional realism.
And once we acknowledge the realism of these particulars, the larger parallels with
contemporary conditions start to become clearer. It is these parallels – generally
obscured by the critical focus upon the strangeness of Antrim’s work – that I wish to
examine more fully now.

In the only piece of scholarly writing on Antrim’s work, Brian Evenson
describes *Elect* as ‘nonsensical’, ‘odd’ and ‘absurd’ (11), a response which largely
characterises the novel’s reception. However, while there is little doubt that the
novel (and Antrim’s work more generally) is profoundly enigmatic, with ‘considerable

experimental qualities' (Eugenides xx), I would suggest that its fantastical elements embody a powerfully allegorical impulse, indeed as Antrim himself comments, while 'the novels function as fantasies, [they're] not complete fantasies; and they may not, in the end, be truly fantastical at all' ('Interview with Donald Antrim' par.3). While my reading emphasises the implications of the final clause of this remark, Antrim leaves open the possibility that the novels can also be read as the protagonist's fantasies (or phantasies) - borne out in *Elect* by the degree to which the logic of Pete's pursuit of perverse satisfaction structures the narrative. As his comment implies, the allegory is sufficiently veiled that the work is able to function as a hermetic entity, as an object that is audaciously - and very skilfully - non referential. In a manner similar to the work of Lewis Carroll, *Elect* can be seen as an attempt at an 'immaculate fiction' that actively 'resists the attempts of readers...to turn it into an allegory, a system equatable with an already existing system in the non-fiction world' (Holquist 390).⁷⁰ While there is much that could be said about this aspect of his work, my intention here is to work against that resistance and reveal the ways in which the text - always indirectly - reflects contemporary reality.

Evenson's perplexity at the paradoxical conditions of the novel reflects a typical sense of its obscurity, and he wonders why, in 'the face of traps, survivalism and fortresses', with each family 'digging in and isolating themselves', they still strive 'to maintain a larger community' (12). However, his response ignores the extent to which this paradoxical mind-set is representative of the West in general, and

⁷⁰ Donald Barthelme similarly argues for the importance of the literary object, as understood by the likes of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce 'as an object in the world rather than a representation of the world' ('Not-Knowing' 16). This 'is then encountered in the same way as other objects in the world'. 'The question becomes: what is the nature of the new object?' In this model, 'the author is removed' because 'the reader is not listening to an authoritative account of the world delivered by an expert but bumping into something that is there, like a rock or a refrigerator' ('After Joyce' 4).

America in particular. Individualism, 'with its endorsement of private enjoyments and control of one's personal environment and its neglect of public involvement and communal attachment' (Stephanie Alexander 51), may guide habitual action, but community is still venerated in the abstract. In the novel, despite all the evidence to the contrary - having voted to defund the schools and the libraries, and investing abundant time and money developing their lethal home fortifications, which 'defend' individual homes at the cost of the wider community - the townsfolk are still passionately attached to the idea of community. The library bulletin board - in itself a placeholder for community - functions as a screen that covers the multiple social catastrophes, advertising instead a fantasy of collectivity:

poetry clubs, garden societies, yard sales, bake sales (including one to raise money for the failing library system), babysitting services, papier-mâché workshops, housepainting, handgun seminars, car repair and lawn work. A printed handbill announced that night's big town meeting out at Terry Heinemann's Clam Castle. Another poster, elegantly hand-lettered in purple Magic Marker and rubber-cemented with scissor-cut crayon renderings of famous storybook characters, detailed the library's Saturday morning Mother and Child Story Time program (57).

Pete's description of the board is, naturally, comprehensive, his proclivity for detail establishing an even attentiveness that avoids any condemnation of what the board reveals - even the sublime pointlessness of 'papier-mâché workshops' for example, passes without comment. This lack of aggressive or pointed ridicule - a characteristic of traditional satire - is true of the novel as a whole. In his introduction Jeffrey Eugenides notices that the novel is 'satirical without becoming a satire' (xiv), and it is perhaps this withholding that he means.

While emphasizing the novel's diffuse ambivalence is crucial, however, eschewing the work's satire risks obscuring both Antrim's literary progenitors and his skill in re-vitalising a mode we tend to think of as moribund. After all, both Pete's pedantry and the novel's allegorical aspect have clear precedents in satiric tradition.

Pedants are foremost in Northrop Frye's list of the defining and reductive 'mental attitudes' (309) typical of Menippean satire (he cites practitioners such as Swift, Rabelais, Erasmus and Lucian), while Ellen Leyburn notices that the myopia of such narrators is one of the ways in which 'the quality of indirection' (7) that is so crucial to both allegory and satire manifests itself. Noticing the propensity for satire 'to express itself in allegory', she argues that 'scores of works from which we form our very conception of satire' are 'all cast in allegorical form' (323), mentioning Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* and Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and *Gulliver's Travels* as particular instances of 'satiric allegory'. Such ingenuous and comprehensive satires have long since fallen out of use, but *Elect*, as I will demonstrate, shows a similar dexterity and scope. Indeed, Antrim's novel demonstrates a kinship with literary modes that are older still; those medieval allegories that demonstrate the oldest conception of allegory as 'a human reconstitution of divinely inspired messages, a revealed transcendental language which tries to preserve the remoteness of a properly veiled godhead' (Fletcher 21). While his allegory is clearly not driven by religious belief, Antrim's enigmatic novel is assuredly 'properly veiled'. Like Saunders, Antrim recognizes the need to avoid the reiteration of an overly familiar moral stance, or a 'too-easy-metaphor' ('This Week in Fiction' par.11) and this steadfastly oblique approach helps to avoid the complacency of an overt and stable satirical object or target. The original purpose of allegory was to avoid 'the limitations inherent in literal language' and create 'meaning within the reader, bypassing the inevitable degeneration of meaning as it passes through the obscuring veil of language' (the paradox being, 'that it is this veil which makes the transmission of meaning – the revelation – possible' (Akbari 9). For Antrim, meaning is degraded through over-familiarity and habitualisation and his extreme figurations

offer a hidden meaning that the reader must actively construct. The right to bear arms, capital punishment, religiosity; in what follows I argue that these constitute the novel's allegorical meaning, as well as its satirical targets, but the obscurity of the allegory and the diffuse nature of the satire is such that other readers may well disagree.

In thus addressing the novel's satiric allegory, I want to make use of Elder Olson's distinction between the different modes of comedy's 'minimisation of the claim of some particular thing to be taken seriously'; that of reducing a claim 'to absurdity' and 'reducing it merely to the negligible'. I suggest that the reduction of a claim to absurdity is preeminent in satire. In *Gulliver's Travels* for instance, it is pronounced: in Lilliput, British political and cultural issues, usually of grave import, are quite literally minimized (in being miniaturized). It is this satiric impulse towards the absurd that I wish to foreground now in discussing *Elect's* equivalent address of political and cultural issues. Having discussed the primarily comic drive towards the 'negligible' thus far, I wish to focus now upon the ways in which the novel steadfastly diminishes the tenets of exceptionalism through a banality of expression and setting. This is not to say that the comic and the satiric elements are entirely distinguishable: more often than not they are intertwined, yet each can be characterised fruitfully by using the terms of this distinction.

It is at the 'big town meeting' advertised on the library bulletin board that the novel's allegorical scheme starts to become apparent. While the meeting is in itself testament to a commitment to community, the petitioner's catalogue of the human costs of the pits, reveals instead a grotesque lack of civic responsibility:

Harley Greer, aged seven, extensive cuts about the legs, arms, and face when he chased a ball into a neighbouring lawn ringed by a ditch filled with broken window glass. Sheila Wells, aged fourteen, near loss of a foot after

stumbling into a big hole full of steel animal traps, many rusted. Drew Smith, aged sixteen – (73,74)

She is interrupted by the chairman, Jerry, ostensibly ‘on behalf of childhood innocence’, reproaching her for presenting ‘a full catalogue of injury and impairment’ in ‘the presence of minors’ (74). Another ‘bully-boy’, Bill, takes over and his ‘protracted screed about target marksmanship, home ownership, the joys of gardening and the Rule of Law’ (74) culminates in an incoherent speech about the defence of children:

Bill puffed out his chest and finished, “Friends, little Jeff’s home with the sitter tonight, and let me tell you I feel a whole lot better knowing there’s a network of electronically triggered fragmentation bombs armed and ready in the nasturtiums outside his window” (76)

Using the novel’s paradigmatic comic pattern of psychological disturbance and banality - fragmentation bombs in the nasturtiums - Bill’s perverse logic has clear parallels with the rhetoric of the American gun lobby. Despite the frequency of mass shootings, and the more mundane daily cases of homicide, guns are still passionately defended as ‘tangible symbols of such fundamental American values as independence, self-reliance, and freedom from governmental interference’ (Gabor 14), and thus there is a profound ambivalence about increased regulation, even for minor prohibitions such as pre-purchase background checks or a national database of guns or gun ownership. The image of homes made lethal in the novel is hardly dystopic when we consider the sheer accessibility and ubiquity of guns; the partial list of children’s injuries suggesting a parallel with the high incidence of gun violence in the home.⁷¹

⁷¹‘According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in 2010, there were 2,711 infant, child and teen firearm deaths in the USA, about 7 such fatalities daily. Between 1981 and 2010, 112,375 infants, children, and teens were killed by firearms. These fatalities exceed the combined deaths of soldiers in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan’ (Gabor 207).

The Founding era's defence of the right to bear arms in the Second Amendment was specifically premised upon service in a 'well-regulated militia' – as a palliative to those anxious about the potential tyranny of a national standing army. Over time and largely through the machinations of the National Rifle Association (NRA), the notion that rights, regulations and obligations were inseparable has been lost, leaving a simplistic individualistic paradigm, which, while justified and sustained by seemingly patriotic notions such as the checking of federal government and the reiteration of resistance to English tyranny, instead effectively 'prioritises one's rights to live the way one wants, without any interference, over other people's right to live at all' (Gabor 275). This radically individualist shift has been fully enabled by the legislature, through developments such as the individualist re-interpretation of the Second Amendment by the US Supreme Court's ruling in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008); the 'rapid liberalization of open-and concealed-carry laws' (Kautzer 174), and the Castle Doctrine in 'Stand Your Ground' laws which expands the right to use deadly force in self-defence (Kautzer 179).⁷² The location of the debate about the fortified pits in the town hall - the place of governance in the novel - is perhaps a reflection of this complicity.

Given the risk to public safety, the unregulated right to bear arms is arguably the most significant instance of the incompatibility of individualism and community in America, an incompatibility that seems to have little chance of being addressed, so

⁷² These recent juridical developments build upon years of legislative support for gun rights, driven largely by the immense lobbying power of the NRA. There are too many examples to list here, but Thomas Gabor uses two laws in particular to demonstrate the degree to which gun rights are protected. The most notable is the exception granted to guns under the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which is tasked with ensuring that products are safe for use. However, it 'has been expressly forbidden by Congress from regulating firearms or ammunition', thus allowing the firearm, one of 'the most dangerous and ubiquitous products in the American home,' to go 'untested and unregulated' (Gabor 195). In a similar way, an act passed in 2005 grants the industry immunity from negligence-based lawsuits, an exemption which no other industry benefits from.

entrenched is the narrative that insists upon the significance of guns for American identity, and so powerful the gun rights lobby. Gary Younge suggests that ‘gun deaths have become generally understood in the same way as car accidents. They are the unfortunate, if heavy, price one pays for living in twenty-first America’ (93). Through the extreme figuration of the lethal houses, Antrim seeks to circumvent these sedimented attitudes and expose the unregulated right to bear arms as a ‘public health menace’ (Gabor 275), thus renewing our sense of the fantastic in this everyday aspect of America.

As Bill’s ‘screed’ shows, the right to bear arms is also sustained by an enduring American machismo, which, in a ‘brazen appeal to masculinity’ (Friedman par.20), positions guns as a legitimate and necessary defence of home and family, an argument that continues to gain in popularity. Given that ‘all categories of violent crime have been on the decline in the United States for over 25 years’ (Kautzer 184), Chad Kautzer wonders why the recent legislative agenda - led predominantly by white men - is so invested in self defence. He suggests that an answer might be found in the decline of the white demographic, which is ‘projected to lose its majority status in less than 30 years’; a tendency which together with ‘gains in social economic and political power by women and racial minorities...has contributed to a profound and widespread condition of white anxiety’ (184). A version of Kautzer’s question is asked in the novel: while Bill’s speech is greeted with ‘thunderous applause’ by his supporters, a woman interrupts the ‘hooting’ to ask simply, “What exactly are you so afraid of, Mr Nixon?” (76),⁷³ and the room falls suddenly silent while Bill, clearly discomfited, struggles to answer the question. In the era of Trump,

⁷³ Mr Nixon: perhaps we could suggest an allusion here to Richard Nixon as emblematic of a particular kind of white paranoia.

however, such embarrassment is no longer necessary. White anxiety has been legitimatised, with multiple variations on a white-nationalist narrative that bewails the “dispossessed white race,” (Kentish par.16) ‘the great replacement’; even ‘white genocide’, (Williams par.4) emerging ‘from the recesses of the Internet into plain sight’ (Williams par.14).

The vexed issue of white masculinity is, in fact, central to the novel, albeit in a typically oblique fashion. The townsfolk appear to be, without exception, white, heterosexual and middle-class, with men the most active in terms of governance and leadership, and it is partly this homogeneity that makes the town’s violence so inexplicable, or incongruous. In this way, the novel’s very premise is structured like a joke, the incongruity of homogeneity as antagonistic revealing the social congruity which holds uniformity to be frictionless. While this follows the same pattern as both the incongruity of Pete’s pedantic responses and the townsfolk’s banal social performances in the face of psychological extremity, this oblique revelation of a deep-rooted cultural assumption feels like a joke at our expense, highlighting as it does a piece of conditioned thinking that uses difference as an excuse or justification for violence. Antrim’s extreme figuration of a town full of white, middle-class people at war with each other removes this excuse, to unmask a more banal violence. It is just the kind of violence masked by the NRA’s narrative of the lethal stranger intruding into the private sanctuary of the home; a largely mythical account, given that ‘people are more likely to be shot not by strangers but by people they know or by themselves’ (Younge, *Another Day* 132).⁷⁴ The intimacy of this threat

⁷⁴ ‘A study in 1998 showed that for every gun in the house that was used in self-defence in a ‘legally justifiable shooting’, there were four unintentional shootings, seven criminal assaults or homicides, and eleven attempted or completed suicides’ (Younge, *Another Day* 132-133). Thomas Gabor notes that it is ‘disproportionately women and children who die from guns - partly because they spend more time in the home, and that’s where the guns are kept’ (44).

suggests another answer to the question of “What exactly are you so afraid of?” - not fear of being displaced, or relegated, but rather, fear of one’s own capacity for violence.

The town hall meeting shows the white ‘bully boys’ in control, with their wives in clearly subsidiary roles (running the dwindling libraries for example), a power structure that can be seen as a satirical reflection of the homogeneity of America’s ruling elite. While the upcoming 116th Congress is being celebrated for its diversity, women will only make up 23% of the House, (previously women and minorities each made up less than 20 percent of lawmakers (De Simone par.2). Even worse ratios characterise other legislative bodies like the Supreme Court,⁷⁵ where only three non-white, and four female Justices have been appointed in its entire 228 year history. Antrim plays with this dogged national attachment to white virility when he gently mocks the ‘folksy’ names of his characters: Pete, Jerry, Abe, Tom, Bill; representative of an abiding conformity that is more than merely ‘suburban’.⁷⁶ It is a typically droll and understated piece of comic satire, demonstrating a playfulness that is as much comedy as critique.

Once we understand the bully boys as emblematic of American state power, we can see their actions in murdering Jim Kunkel as representative of supposedly legitimate state violence. And perhaps the most striking example of such juridical killing is capital punishment, which unlike any other Western country, remains a

⁷⁵ Currently, of the nine Justices, three are women (of four in its history), one is African American, (only the second in its history) and one is Hispanic (the first in its history) (Drake and Gramlich par.13). While there has been a recent shift to a Catholic majority, for its first 180 years, justices were almost always white male Protestants. There have been eight Jewish justices, and no Muslims (Weigant par.4)

⁷⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg suggests that the idealised American identity which developed in the Founding era’s newspapers and magazines ignored the nation’s actual diversity, a myopia that stubbornly persists: ‘their new American’s virility, whiteness and social respectability would remain core components of what it meant to be a true American - from their day to ours’ (27).

legal penalty in the United States. Indeed, the townsfolk's mismanaged murder of the ex-mayor might be seen as obliquely reminiscent of accounts of botched executions. Having decided to use 'Toyotas and Subarus...in lieu of horses' (4) to facilitate his drawing and quartering, a small crowd looks on uncomfortably, as 'Bill Nixon tried and retried to start his fume-spewing, out-of-tune Celica', while Jim lies on the ground, 'trussed, bound, spread out and spread-eagle on his belly, weeping' (7). Jim is tied to the 'back of bumpers of cars poised to travel in different directions', and while Pete wants to tell him 'it would be over quickly, that it wouldn't hurt', he suspects otherwise:

I was particularly concerned over the use of fishing line for a heavy-stress operation like this. Leaders might hold, or snap, in any of a wide range of infuriating combinations. Success depended on a clean, even pull, with no lurching - just like hauling aboard a big fish (7).

As Pete's pedantry segues into euphemism, there is an echo of the media reporting of botched executions, which often share characteristics that allow for the avoidance of 'the possibility of pain or suffering' (Sarat et al. 706), and thus the larger question concerning the ultimate legitimacy of capital punishment.⁷⁷ Given the degree to which '[a] botched execution involves a significant departure from the protocol of killing someone sentenced to death' (Sarat et al. 697), those risks are high. Of the approximately 9,000 executions from 1890 to 2010, 246 were problematic, with, among other things, such circumstances as 'inmates catching fire while being electrocuted, being strangled during hangings (instead of having their necks broken) and being administered the wrong dosages of specific drugs for lethal injections' (Sarat et al. 698). These incidents 'can turn organised, state-controlled ritual into

⁷⁷ A meticulous focus upon technical detail for instance, along with an emphasis upon justifications such as a novice executioner or unusual physical resistance in the victim, as well as the repeated use of the passive voice that effectively obscures any agent (i.e. "The current was turned on"), all work to minimise the risk to the abstraction of state violence (Sarat et al. 706).

torture; solemn spectacle of sovereign power into spectacles of horror' (698). And Jim Kunkel's death presents us with exactly such a slippage: in place of a solemn spectacle of sovereign justice, a brutal, improvised piece of knee-jerk retribution. In Olson's terms, the figuration reduces the claim of sovereign justice to be taken seriously by 'reducing that claim to absurdity' (23). As with the lethal homes, then, Antrim is trying to get beyond habitual ways of seeing and thinking, reconfiguring the forms associated with capital punishment - hanging, the electric chair, lethal injection - in order to strip them of familiarity, and to allow us to recognise afresh the madness and horror of juridical killing as communally sanctioned murder.

However, while I argue that this banal brutality is the 'revealed truth' of the allegory, this is not how we experience the scene initially. The Toyotas and Subarus, the fishing line, the jumper cables that finally get Bill's 'out-of-tune Celica' moving, these 'suburban', mundane details are incongruous with the fact of Kunkel's death, in a way that is both funny and horrifying. But through Pete's punctilious account, it is the comedy that is foremost. The comedy prevents the satire from being didactic or shrill, while also softening the horror of the scene, in making the emotion or pain 'negligible'. Comedy thus veils the 'truth' in a productive way – in allowing us to see the critique afresh while keeping 'us close to the unbearable...by adding pleasure' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 109). But, as we will see at the end of the novel, while this pleasure is useful, it is also problematic, predicated as it is upon the occlusion of emotion.

Support for capital punishment reached its lowest point in more than four decades in 2016, but has increased somewhat since then,⁷⁸ and it retains a

⁷⁸ A Gallup poll from October 2018 shows 56% in favour of the death penalty, up from 55% in October 2015, while a recent Pew Research report puts the number at 54% (in comparison to 49% in 2016). The Gallup poll also revealed that 62% of respondents judged the death penalty to be 'morally acceptable' (Gallup), up from 58% in May 2017.

powerful symbolic significance, representing an ideological self-definition of the supporter 'as unyielding in the war on crime, unwilling to coddle criminals, firm and courageous' (Gross and Ellsworth 19). William E. Connolly takes this analysis further, suggesting that supporters of the death penalty are profoundly invested in a moral absolutism which denies the instabilities of concepts such as freedom and responsibility - the life circumstances that might mitigate a crime for instance - to the extent that they would 'rather sacrifice the lives of killers than sacrifice the purity of the concepts through which persons are now judged and sentenced' (194). In enacting the 'violent vindication of individual responsibility' (200), support for capital punishment might be seen as a logical consequence of the fetishisation of self-reliance, which under the auspices of protecting the community, functions instead to 'ratify desert for the precarious social standing' attained by its supporters, with the additional pleasure of the 'vicarious participation in the legal killing of murderers' (199), thus offering 'a momentary release from the dictates of self restraint' (200). Like Chad Kautzer's explanation for the increased justification for violent self-defence, Connolly's account also sees white anxiety as foundational, and certainly polls consistently show that white men are the demographic most in favour of the death penalty.⁷⁹ Whether or not white anxiety is the chief motivation, what is clear is the degree to which support for capital punishment is symptomatic of a moral absolutism borne of an extraordinary degree of self confidence. As Austin Sarat states, the death penalty is,

the ultimate assertion of righteous indignation, of power pretending to its own infallibility. By definition it leaves no room for reversibility. It expresses either a "we don't care" anger or an unjustified confidence in our capacity to recognise and respond to evil with wisdom and propriety (Sarat 4).

⁷⁹ White evangelical Protestants continue to back the use of the death penalty by a wide margin: 73% in favour, and 19% against (in 2016, 69% were in favour, while 26% were against it) (Oliphant). It would appear from these statistics that Trump's vociferous support for the death penalty has increased or legitimized its support more generally

The 'unjustified confidence' that Sarat sees as so specifically American,⁸⁰ is also perhaps the most significant - and paradoxical - characteristic of the townfolk's self image. This is most overt in the discussion that follows Pete's lecture at the Rotary luncheon. Barbara, Bill's wife, refutes the lecture's implication that the cruelty of the past lives on in the present, saying, "I can't accept that. We're good people here. We care about one another," articulating explicitly the self-belief that is everywhere implicit in the banal neighbourly interactions, and evident in the cheery communal notice board, despite the evidence of the mined park and the fortified homes. The ex-mayor Jim Kunkel growls in response, "There's no love here" (48) and then announces to the packed room: "We're all murderers here" (50). It is another dramatic moment of social rupture, another violation of 'polite social discourse', (Random House interview) and there is obvious relief when Jim's 'solemn commentary' is 'buried' by the arrival of 'silver trays laden with pie topped with generous helpings of whipped cream. "'Ah, ooh," people said' (50). But Jim's denunciation is too significant to be long forgotten, and while the obvious motive for his murder is retribution for the deaths he caused in the Botanical Garden, his public indictment of the 'truth' of the community is perhaps the more profound reason. Jim's 'solemn commentary' might be seen as a reflection of Antrim's own critique, one that is similarly 'buried' or veiled. After all, Jim's declaration is obscured by that staple of slapstick, the cream pie, which, like the banana skin, can be seen as a

⁸⁰ Sarat advances a compelling theory for the ongoing American attachment to state killing, which he sees as a paradoxical result 'of our deep attachment to popular sovereignty. When sovereignty is most fragile, as it always is when its locus is in "the People", dramatic symbols of its presence, like capital punishment, may be most important. The maintenance of capital punishment is, one might argue, essential to the demonstration that sovereignty could reside in the people. If the sovereignty of the people is to be genuine, it has to mimic the sovereign power and prerogatives of the monarchical forms it displaced and about whose sovereignty there could be few doubts' (Sarat 5).

metonym for comedy. There is thus a typically oblique allusion here to the way in which comedy veils – and sweetens - the solemnity of the novel’s densely historical and political satiric allegory.

Barbara’s complacency is complemented by another of the ‘Rotary Anns’ (30), Rita, who articulates the historical provenance of the nation’s ‘unjustified confidence’ by performing a narrative from ‘national lore’ (59), which, in masking the violence of the country’s founding, preserves and consolidates national self-belief. At a story-telling session at the library, Rita tells the children the tale of Pocahontas, the native woman who saved a white man from her father’s anger, then converted to Christianity and married a white settler:

“...One day, voyagers arrived in Pocahontas’s land. Brave, strong men, sailing the ocean in ships.” She held up the book to show a water-colour of a fully rigged man-o-war flying the Union Jack and dancing over liquid seas. She turned the page and there was the same vessel with sails furled, anchored on a sunny topaz bay dotted with brightly painted bark canoes carrying warriors. A shoreline was partly visible: dunes, saw grasses, a pine stand where seabirds might nest. It looked peaceful. Rita went on, “The Explorers brought many gifts with them, including books. Soon Pocahontas learned to read and write” (62-63).

The episode shows how the storytelling session, itself a simulation of community and civic care, works as part of a larger and ongoing process of nation building that insists upon American exceptionalism, one piece of a mythology that sustains the extraordinary self confidence ‘of power pretending to its own infallibility’ (Sarat 4).⁸¹ Like the sentimental paradigms which George Saunders shows at work in ‘Puppy’ - the narratives which reinforce the myth of social mobility - the Pocahontas story continues to wield power, despite the blatant cultural work of its creation, ‘as a

⁸¹ If capital punishment is one place in which we see this confidence most obviously manifested, another is foreign policy. Madeleine Albright’s infamous comments might suffice as an example: ‘But if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us’ (par.35).

symbolic representation of the sexual availability and cultural tractability of native American women to European colonizers' (Stymeist 1). Indeed, Pocahontas could be seen as the mythic equivalent of the Semplica Girls, a nostalgic abstraction of idealised femininity which obliterates the grim economic and historic realities of conquest and acquisition.

The story's blandly optimistic vision of the colonisers' arrival seeks to deny the violence of the historical event in much the same way that the townsfolk's banal social performance denies their contemporaneous violence. And again, the incongruity of the actual disturbance and the breezy denial of the social performance is comic: Rita's ad lib about the 'books' brought by the 'Explorers' a small masterpiece of euphemism, given that their gifts were more likely to be smallpox and venereal disease. It is notable, however, that even in this moment when the expectation of overt satire or ridicule is at its most intense, the pellucid beauty of Antrim's description undercuts any certainty about the satirical object. 'A shoreline was partly visible: dunes, saw grasses, a pine stand where seabirds might nest. It looked peaceful'. He attends to the image fully, seemingly without design, which allows for a spaciousness that is very far from the pointed rejection of caricature.

While myths like Pocahontas provide one ideological resource for national self belief, then our allegorical reading of the novel suggests religion as another. In examining the moral absolutism that characterises support for issues like capital punishment and gun rights, it is important to remember the significance of religion in America, which remains a largely Christian nation.⁸² While white anxiety offers one

⁸² 74% of Americans identify with a Christian religion, still one of the highest rates in the world (Newport par.3).

persuasive reason for the passionate investment in issues such as capital punishment and gun rights, the extraordinary moral confidence they demand can also be partly elucidated by religious belief. The novel's address of religion is characteristically oblique, but I will examine how Antrim establishes a series of correspondences to national religious conditions which demonstrate their role in the perpetuation of individualism.

In one key episode, Jerry tells Pete that, like the other 'fellows down at Rotary', he believes 'that our task in life is to open our inner eyes, perceive reality in its totality, and embrace the million levels of Universal Consciousness' (29), a statement that worries Pete in revealing the 'nonsecular nature' (29) of the organisation. Jerry's deadpan avowal of fervent belief is couched in 'New Age' terms, and the incongruity between that somewhat eccentric idiom and the characterisation of the Rotarians as stolidly complacent businessmen is clearly comic. An equivalent statement about a more conventional Christian belief would be less incongruous, but this comic shift de-familiarises and problematises the more 'respectable' religious belief, by implying a similar idiosyncrasy. Thus, Jerry's advocacy of 'the million levels of Universal Consciousness' (29) works satirically to reduce the claim of Christianity to be taken seriously by 'reducing that claim to absurdity' (Olson 23).

Given the Rotarians' role in representing governance in the novel, we might understand Pete's concern about their overt religiosity as a sidelong reflection upon the significance of the American separation of church and state. The First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus ensuring an unprecedented emphasis on the liberty of the individual's conscience, in contrast to those older

societies which frequently adopted an 'established' or common religion in attempting to secure social stability (Davis 42).⁸³ One consequence of this shift, alongside the developing legal protection of religious liberty, was an extraordinary degree of religious pluralism.⁸⁴ Chris Beneke argues that the early 'emergence of so many spiritual alternatives and the appearance of so many open disagreements prompted colonial Americans to actively challenge religious authority'. Thus emboldened by choice, 'laypeople ...and fiery preachers animated by their faith routinely badgered the institutions and the people that appeared unresponsive to their pleas for a satisfying religious experience' (50). The denominationalism engendered by this sense of agency remains today in a vast array of religious movements that includes 'Pentecostals, Mennonites, Seventh-day Adventists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Churches of Christ, black Baptists, Mormons, Southern Baptists, and holiness Wesleyans' (Carpenter 4). This pluralism is enacted in the novel as the Rotarians' belief in 'Universal Consciousness' moves first to 'theriomorphism', and then to what Pete describes dismissively as 'the fish cults'. First instigated by Meredith's ichthyomorphic trance at a Rotary luncheon, the fish cults take hold as further trance states reveal that 'everyone in town was some kind of sea creature' (133); everyone that is, apart from Pete, the only bison. Jerry is a tuna, and Bill a clam, while Meredith is a coelacanth. The incongruity is deftly ridiculous, but the satire remains typically diffuse, and Antrim is sympathetic to the palpable yearning for recognition and intimacy manifested by the new religion. In describing her trance experience for example, Meredith speaks of her kinship with

⁸³ This decision is made all the more momentous when we remember the degree to which 'most early modern governments treated dissenters from their state-sponsored church establishments as criminals' (Beneke 5).

⁸⁴ Another causal factor was the tradition of dissenters from Europe arriving here to escape prosecution.

other coelacanths, who are '[m]ore than friends...[o]ne was my mother and one was my father, and I had schools of brothers and sisters. I knew them, and they knew me. They didn't wonder where I'd come from, because I'd always been there with them' (34).

The sadness and simplicity of Meredith's desire for relationship brings to mind Eugenides's comment about the novel's 'dual or triple register[s]' (xviii). It is a quality also noticed by Thomas Bolt, who writes of the novel's handling of the 'inner animal', that Antrim renders 'the process so lovingly', that he is 'at once ridiculing it and treating it more seriously than it has ever been treated' (Bolt 29). While the 'recessive action' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 110) created by this ambivalence has some similarities with deadpan – which Lauren Berlant describes as both 'offering and yet withholding metacommentary' ('Showing Up' 109), Bolt is right that there is an ardent quality to Antrim's sympathetic participation that goes beyond the mere absence of emotional signalling.⁸⁵ Like the description of the 'Explorers' arrival, this is another moment when we expect the satire to be overt, but instead Antrim actively works against that expectation. In Meredith's oblique characterisation as a charismatic revivalist for instance, Antrim's limpid prose dignifies the scene:

Meredith said, "The light of the moon makes a shining path to each of us. Wherever we stand, the path will cross the water to find us. Go up or down the beach, and it will follow." "Yes," said people on the circle. And, "That's right." In this way, a vision we'd seen and taken for granted all our lives, simple reflected light, became miraculous (83).

⁸⁵ Indeed, as Bolt suggests, there is something like love at work here, an aspect of Antrim's approach that George Saunders notices in his introduction to the third novel of the trilogy, *The Verificationist*. Saunders writes that if 'love equals attention, this book is overflowing with love... Noticing as unflinchingly as Antrim does, describing as vividly as he does, nailing people for their foibles as mercilessly and gleefully as he does — these are acts of love. Who notices/describes/nails as energetically as this, but a lover?' ("The Verificationist" par.29). Given that I discern some kinship between Saunders and Antrim's approach to satire, these comments arguably support my sense that both share a desire to broaden and diffuse the satirical target, to create a form of satire that is as much love as it is aggression.

While the extreme figuration of the fish cults works satirically to reduce the claim of religion to be taken seriously by ‘reducing that claim to absurdity’ (Olson 23), that satire is increasingly unstable, leaving the reader uncertain of their relation to the target. The very idea of ‘fish cults’ is clearly ridiculous and yet Antrim’s empathetic generosity prevents the simplicity of partisan judgements.

Given the novel’s allegorical engagement with American religion, I suggest an economical reference in the passage about Meredith’s address to those spiritual awakenings⁸⁶ that were so significant in shifting ‘theology away from rational doctrines...to an inwardly oriented psychology of spirituality’ (von Frank 123). The ‘sharply heightened valuation of subjective human consciousness’ (121) engendered by this shift was subsequently articulated most clearly by Transcendentalism’s ‘theology of inwardness’ (119), a radical self-reliance which, in ‘having no place for external authority’, arguably could not ‘consist with religion as a social project’ (von Frank 125). The text provides a discreet gloss on the risks of too high an estimation of individual moral capacity in a small but telling detail: Meredith gives her husband a ‘talismán’, a ring of polished black coral, ‘altogether elegant, though sizes too large for any of my fingers’ (6) - its oversized scale evoking

⁸⁶ The religious revivals of the mid-eighteenth-century tend to be referred to as *The Great Awakening*, however Chris Benecke argues that the revivals, which ‘occurred intermittently between the mid-1730s and the mid-1750s,’ were ‘often independent of one another’ (49). In his account of American religious revivals, Michael McClymond gives some sense of their multiplicity, with historical instances including the ‘Northampton Awakening of 1734–5, the Great Awakening of 1740–1, Cane Ridge Revival of 1801–2, the Revival of 1857–8, the Azusa Street Revival of 1906–9, the Latter Rain Revival in Canada of 1948–9, and many other lesser-known occurrences’ (309). Pentecostal revivals continue to this day; a revival at the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship in 1994 ‘drew hundreds of thousands of visitors,’ while a revival at the Brownsville Assembly of God Church in Florida ‘drew more than two million in three years’ (McClymond 306,307).

Emerson's supremely confident conception of man; a scale appropriate to 'the relocation of God from without to within the human soul' (Milder 102).⁸⁷

When Pete jokes that the 'ring might serve as sexual device', Meredith is not amused, "Please don't blaspheme, okay?" (5), her offended piety proof of the fish cults' rapid consolidation from their incidental beginnings. The rings and charms, made from the reef; the 'starfish fetishes and totems of cowry,' (2) - all 'dead sea creatures' (1) - are produced in the newly 'converted primary school' (1), the townsfolk's preoccupation with a commodified, exploitative spirituality thus equated with their neglect of civic responsibilities. The town's disregard for the trance revelations of kinship with sea creatures is also underscored by their continuing consumption of seafood; their massive intake a recurring motif in the novel: from Pete's covetous accounts of other people's menu choices at the Clam Castle (seafood salad, cherrystone clams, clam rolls 'drenched in tartar sauce' (72) to the Rotary luncheon, when '[e]veryone seemed slightly stunned from the volumes of delicately poached blowfish they'd tucked away' (46). At home, Pete and Meredith

⁸⁷ The text's twinning of religion and natural exploitation is borne out by Perry Miller's sense of the disastrous implications of Transcendentalist pantheism. Miller contrasts Emerson's supremely confident conception of an unfallen humanity with the Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards, who 'went to nature, in all passionate love, convinced that man could receive from it impressions which he must then try to interpret, whereas Emerson went to Nature, no less in love with it, convinced that in man there is a spontaneous correlation with received impressions' (185). Edwards insists upon the necessity of Scripture in interpreting nature, knowing 'man to be cut off from full communion with that created order because of his inherent depravity' (185) while Emerson believes in an unmediated relation. For Miller, once 'the restraining hand of theology' (202-203) was withdrawn, the Transcendentalists' 'complacency' provided a vision of 'natural America' which allowed the nation's indefinite expansion 'without acquiring sinful delusions of grandeur', simply because it was 'nestled in Nature' (211). 'Nature religion' became the orthodoxy of the sublime by which 'the most utilitarian conquest known to history' was viewed as an 'immense exertion of the spirit' (207). In Antrim's novel, Meredith's serene re-making of the moon in the image of humanity's need speaks to just such complacency. She articulates an exceptionalism that was commonplace in the nineteenth century, a conviction of 'a renowned existence' promised by God, a promise spoken 'in the sublimity of Nature' (210). Such exceptionalism was problematic then and rather more so now, given the ecological circumstances evidenced by the novel: the unsustainable consumption of fish; the destruction of oceanic ecosystems and rising sea levels.

eat chowder, 'large bowls brimming with sea creatures' (23) and bouillabaisse, '[f]ish, scallops, medium shrimp, vegetables - all these things floated up, clung to bay leaves and one another in the crimson liquid' (20); the descriptions reanimate the fish-become-food, subtly underscoring the violence of consumption. The soup is stored in the same freezer as the dismembered parts of Jim's body, which Pete promised the dying man he would bury, 'those packages of Jim Kunkel tucked in the back of the freezer beneath the restaurant-sized bag of fish sticks' (21), the incongruity between psychological disturbance and banality providing another instance of the novel's characteristic comic patterning. The implicit association between Kunkel's body and the fish suggests that the town's appetite for seafood borders on the cannibalistic, another facet of the communal barbarity. The conspicuous move of transforming humans into fish is funny, while the other more discreet contrivance - animating seafood - is uncanny, and that combination is clearly unsettling; Antrim's sleight of hand ensuring that the novel's overt comedy is tempered by disquiet.

Rather than providing restraint then, the townsfolk's religion furthers their failures of responsibility, thus demonstrating the inadequacy of an 'inwardly oriented psychology of spirituality' (von Frank 123) as a communal or social project, and refuting the cherished claim that 'moralism is best fostered in a climate of self-sustaining voluntarism rather than government-sustaining inducements' (Davis 47). Through the veneration of individual conscience, the American religious tradition thus provides further justification for the national preoccupation with self reliance and individualism, at the cost of community.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Lisa McGirr argues that in dismissing right wing beliefs as merely the result of 'personal anxieties' (147), left wing commentators like Richard Hoftstader forget the larger, religious case for individualism, which sees the 'liberal emphasis on sociological explanations for

While Pete's dislike of the fish cults is one instance in which his sense of singularity is justified, in general any critique he offers of the communal barbarism is compromised by his own involvement. As the 'Town Scrivener' (11), responsible for the town meeting minutes, Pete's complicity might be seen as Antrim's meta-commentary upon his own imbrication in the world he presents, a further acknowledgment that the allegory, while satiric, is not written from a perspective of unwavering moral judgement. However, the ending does change the dynamic of the novel significantly, the droll or deadpan tone disappearing as the recessive action seems to hit some bedrock. In observing Sarah's torture, Pete's pedantry may be the same, but our reaction to it is different. As we witness his orchestration of the children's violence in the fetid basement, and Pete's pursuit of his 'it' reaches a climax, we can no longer take pleasure in his perverse satisfaction but are appalled instead. In part this is because of the loss of the discrepancy between Ego and Id - 'one of the crucial dimensions of the comical' (Zupančič 63) - here the Ego has thrown in its lot with the Id, and there is no internal resistance or discord in Pete's pursuit of satisfaction.⁸⁹ The change is highlighted by the repetition of a sentence structure used earlier in the novel, as Pete ponders his involvement in the mayor's death; then it was used to comic effect, now, however, the comedy is absent. He wonders, 'how much responsibility must I bear, for what eventually, inevitably occurred, simply because I suggested using the flat, hard surface of a leather-decorated steamer trunk, and Matt and Larry Harris's strong young arms and backs, in lieu of a real rack?' (157). The rhetorical evasion, once so enjoyable, is now problematic, the casuistical language sounding sly, deliberate. His pedantry is no

social and economic problems' as a way of exorcising 'individual responsibility and morality'. For some, faith in government threatens faith in God (157).

⁸⁹ Given that the Id and its pursuit of satisfaction is often preeminent in both horror and comedy, this suggests an additional distinction between the genres.

longer innocent, the focus on irrelevant detail and chronic lack of judgement that had seemed spontaneous now appears calculated, and our trust in him is weakened further by his evident relish of the Harris twins' physicality, and the other children's nascent sexuality. The growing unease is then compounded by the text's explicitness about the violence; we don't see the mayor's body being pulled apart, whereas here we must watch, 'the elongate form of Sarah's body stretched like pink corpulent matter across a grimy storage trunk', 'her innocent bloodless face rag-stuffed and screaming silent screams at the ceiling while shoulder and hip and wrist and ankle bones pitched and rocked and pivoted grotesquely' (162). Here is the violence at the heart of Pete's obsessive interest in the Inquisition and medieval torture, until now rendered comic in its abstraction. By removing the occlusion of violence, Antrim shifts the ending of the novel into horror. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this movement is reversed in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, where the careful editing and framing of violence in the final scenes ensures the horror is kept within the comic modality.

Pete's relish for violence, his nascent paedophilia, his lust for power - they have all been hiding in plain sight, but it is only now that we understand the horror of what we have been laughing at. Having critiqued the townsfolk's obliviousness, and through them the excesses of American exceptionalism, the novel now 'turns the table on the reader' (Eugenides xix)⁹⁰ to force us to contemplate our own obliviousness. Pete's difference from the townsfolk, while always somewhat tenuous, ensured that the novel's satire was held at one remove, but the collapse of that distinction is the collapse of that remove, and the satire, always unstable, now

⁹⁰ Jeffrey Eugenides writes: 'I can hardly think of another novel that turns the table on the reader so completely... in its last pages...this very funny novel becomes truly scary' (xix).

engulfs us all. The recognition of complicity has been there from the start - in the profound familiarity of the habit of denial for example - but softened by comedy until now. And while the comedy was productive, allowing for both defamiliarisation and an avoidance of didacticism, it was also problematic, in excusing and accommodating ethical failings. Comedy kept 'us close to the unbearable...by adding pleasure' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 109), but in the ending, that pleasure falls away, and we find ourselves perilously close to something like evil. Jeffrey Eugenides suggests that in finishing the novel, our residual sympathy with Pete 'serves as a form of self-incrimination', his 'unawareness of the dark forces inside him... making the reader wonder how much this might be true of everyone' (xx). Comedy was largely the means by which that sympathy was won, and its abrupt cessation is the cause of our sudden awakening.

Chapter 5: Jordan Peele

Get Out, written, directed and co-produced by Jordan Peele, is, like *Elect Mr Robinson*, notable for its complex combination of horror and comedy. While ensuring 'proximity to the terror at hand' (Pinedo 112), in a way that parallels Antrim's novel, the film's use of comedy has an additional motivation, providing a judicious showcase of black comic gifts, running alongside, and offering a counter to, the central focus upon trauma. The comedy has two modes: the broad humour brought to the film by the protagonist's best friend, Rod, which in offering a form of comic relief or release, demonstrates a strategic use of humour frequently evidenced by other horror films; and the more singular, curtailed comedy of Chris's scenes in the white Armitage household, which works to feed tension. As I will show, while Rod's broad humour has multiple functions that obviate terror: providing comic relief, demonstrating black community and resilience, and supplementing our regard for Chris; the film's distinct comic variations ensure that Chris's vulnerability remains unaffected by Rod's comic obliviousness, thus making certain that Chris's terror - a terror that is entirely bound up in his race - remains the engine that powers the film.

The film follows Chris Washington, a young photographer, on a visit to his white girlfriend's family home. While the Armitages, Dean and Missy, seem welcoming, something is amiss. The family's black staff, a groundsman and a maid, seem oddly aggressive, as does Rose's younger brother, Jeremy. Chris's first night there is disturbed, and he wakes with a hazy memory of being hypnotised by Missy. Thrust into the Armitage's annual - all white - garden party, Chris notices one black guest, but he, like the groundsman and the maid, behaves strangely. By the time Chris realises the threat to his safety in this apparently welcoming 'liberal' white

household - that he needs to get out - it is too late, and it seems certain he will be forced to submit to the fate the Armitages have planned for him. The full details of that fate become clear once he is imprisoned in the basement, when it is revealed that the Armitage family have been kidnapping African Americans in order to transplant the brains of elderly white people into their bodies. Through Missy's powerful hypnosis and Dean's brain surgery, the remnants of the victim's consciousness are trapped in a 'sunken place' (only momentarily set free by triggers like the flash of a camera) while the white minds take control.

While the most obvious allegory here is with chattel slavery, the film's extreme figuration registers other instances of what Hortense Spillers calls the 'theft of the body' (67). The post-Emancipation commerce in African Americans that Douglas A. Blackmon describes in *Slavery By Another Name* for instance, a form of 'neo-slavery' in the South in which black prisoners were leased out by the state to 'mines, lumber camps, quarries, farms and factories' (6). Blackmon describes a deliberately reconfigured judicial system in which negligible crimes such as 'changing employers without permission, vagrancy, riding freight cars without a ticket' (7), led to arrest and enforced labour. The emancipation of slaves having hit the Southern economy hard, this new system of convict leasing solved the problem of the South's economic dependence upon slave labour. A similar form of racial bias is apparent in today's 'mass incarceration' (6), which, as Michelle Alexander argues in her influential account, begins primarily with the racialised 'war on drugs'.⁹¹ The

⁹¹ The so-called 'war on drugs' was initiated by Richard Nixon in the 1970s, and his former advisor, John Ehrlichman, subsequently testified to the racist intent of Nixon's policies. By getting the public to associate 'blacks with heroin' and then criminalizing the drug heavily, the government intended to 'vilify' the black community ('Drugs' par.4-5).

It is important to note, however, that not all commentators support Alexander's insistence upon drug convictions as the driver for mass incarceration; James Forman for instance, in *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (2017) suggests her account downplays the part played by violent crime.

discrimination is enacted through systematic juridical bias - from the disproportionately high numbers of young black men who are stopped and searched, to the heavier sentencing by prosecutors. Once released from prison, they are legally discriminated against 'for the rest of their lives - denied employment, housing, education and public benefits. Unable to surmount these obstacles, most will eventually return to prison and then be released again, caught in a closed circuit of perpetual marginality' (186). Mass incarceration thus ensures that in certain cities like Baltimore and Chicago, 'the vast majority of young black men' (181), are 'relegated to a racially segregated and subordinated existence' (4), in another iteration of the 'theft of the body.' A similar paradigm is evident in cases of medical appropriation: the hundreds of African American men in the notorious Tuskegee clinical trials whose syphilis was deliberately left untreated for example, as well as Henrietta Lack's stolen HeLa cells.⁹²

While the allegory of the 'sunken place' gestures to this pervasive theft of autonomy, which testifies to an overtly racist and utilitarian attitude to the black body, the white characters' hunger for black bodies also demonstrates the white fetishisation of blackness. The tendency to aestheticization is historically most evident in minstrelsy, which Eric Lott argues was underwritten by '[a] strong white fascination with black men and black culture' (25); a 'roiling jumble of need, guilt, and disgust' (37). White fascination with blackness has arguably only increased over time, and now blackness is 'openly envied ... and aestheticized' (Smith par.11).⁹³ Madhu Dubey claims that this is due in part to the on-going legacy of

⁹² Cancer cells from Henrietta Lack's biopsy were taken without her or her family's consent, and went on to produce the HeLa cell line, one of the most important cell lines in medical research (Applegate 38).

⁹³ Remembering Ta-Nehisi Coates's description of the 'diamonds' of black culture 'forged in the shadow of the murdered, the raped, the disembodied' (*Between the World* 120); we can see that the metaphor makes overt the sense of black culture emerging from the intense

state-sponsored discrimination, resulting in 'hardening spatial segregation and high levels of poverty and unemployment' (19), which have contributed to a sense of the black experience as uniquely authentic. Disproportionately impacted upon by 'the main indices of postmodern urban crisis',

African Americans are fetishised as the guarantors of everything that is felt to be at risk in the postmodern era - bodily presence, palpable reality, political intentionality... While the hyperreality of post modern urban existence attenuates bodily experience, the black body alone continues to shimmer with the aura of presence (8).⁹⁴

The black body is thus hugely freighted, and fraught, in ways which deny the possibility of the notional and the everyday; it is, like the female body, 'erotic in its over presence' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 117).

I turn now to examine the ways in which the visual sphere has both reflected and contributed to this hyper 'sociovisibility' (Wallace 135), in order to better understand the challenges Peele faces in giving expression to the seriousness of the outrages suffered by African Americans without reinforcing 'the spectacular character of black suffering' (Hartman 3). Largely seen as problematic for the black body, Nicole Fleetwood suggests that 'the visual sphere has been understood in black cultural studies as a punitive field' (13); and Michele Wallace agrees, noticing 'the problem of visibility in African American culture', and the ways in which 'the image of the black is larger than life' in mass culture (335). Taking up Wallace's sense of the inherent racism of 'visual regimes,' David Marriott examines representations of blackness that embody 'the wishful-shameful fantasies' of white culture (x) and explores their effects upon black masculine identity. He traces a line

pressure of historical trauma, creating 'diamonds' which are, in turn, 'plundered' by white culture.

⁹⁴ Dubey notes the glaring contradiction between the ways in which 'black urban culture is exuberantly exploited to feed global commodity capitalism' while at the same time, 'mass-media and academic debates cast the black urban poor as the catalysts of social and cultural crisis' (7).

from historical photographs of lynchings, and the psychological experience of castration they perpetuate (15), to Robert Mapplethorpe's erotic photographs of black men, which seduce his spectators 'into fascination with the surface and sculpture of black skin' (28). Alongside a cinematic history that is at best deeply ambivalent, such representations have helped forge the 'symbolic role of black men in the psychic life of culture' (vii), as either hyper-sexualised or abject. Marriott notices how these 'imagos' are interiorised, to the extent that black 'dreams and desires' are 'fixed by someone else's fascinations and repulsions' (41).

In her analysis of the spectacularity of the black body, Elizabeth Alexander also recognises the ways in which distorted images have informed black identity:

Black bodies in pain for public consumption have been an American national spectacle for centuries. This history moves from public rapes, beatings and lynchings to the gladiatorial arenas of basketball and boxing ... In each of these traumatic instances, black bodies and their attendant dramas are publicly consumed by the larger populace. White men have been the primary stagers and consumers of the historical spectacles I have mentioned, but in one way or another, black people also have been looking, forging a traumatized collective historical memory which is reinvoked at contemporary sites of conflict. (78,79)

Alexander is writing in the aftermath of the televised police beating of Rodney King in 1991, an event which she considers an 'aftershock, an event in an open series of national events' that includes both 'nineteenth century slave accounts of witnessed violence and the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till' (81),⁹⁵ examples of spectacular violence which are symptomatic of 'the ways in which traumatized African American

⁹⁵ Emmett Till was a 15 year old from the North visiting relatives in the South when he was falsely accused of whistling at a white woman. His mutilated body was later fished out of a river. At his funeral, his mother insisted on an open casket, so the world could witness the atrocity, and the photograph taken of his face became iconic. Frequently referenced, the image was recently used in a painting by a white artist, Dana Schutz, which attracted considerable controversy, as commentators argued over the right of a white artist to use such iconic black material.

viewers have been taught a sorry lesson of their continual physical vulnerability' (81).

While Alexander's analysis of the Rodney King trial focuses upon the reiteration of black vulnerability, Judith Butler's account of the trial examines what it reveals about white cognition; the ways in which racism structures 'what can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception' (16). In attempting to explain the seemingly inexplicable decision of the jury to use the video of King's beating as evidence against him, she suggests that what the jury "saw" was a body threatening the police', reading King's gestures 'not as self-protection but as the incipient moments of physical threat' (16). So entrenched is the imaginary schema that insists upon 'violence as the imminent action of [the] black male body', that the violence of the police, 'structurally placed to protect whiteness against violence', cannot itself 'be read as violence; because the black male body, prior to any video, is the site and source of danger, a threat, the police effort to subdue this body, even if in advance, is justified regardless of the circumstances' (19). The same event thus produces two entirely contradictory responses dependent upon the viewer's race: vulnerability for the black viewer and threat for the white.

The ongoing preoccupation with the cinematic and televisual representation of slavery is another way in which 'black bodies in pain' continue to be offered up for public consumption, and there is growing sense of fatigue with the narrative fixation upon suffering. bell hooks for instance, who criticised the sexual violence of *12 Years A Slave*, commented wearily, "I'm tired of the naked, raped, beaten black woman body" (Mirk par.11). Issa Rae, creator of the TV series *Insecure*, expressed a similar irritation with the 'obsession with depicting slavery,' (Mulkerrins par.18) one way in which blackness is exoticized, and made atypical. The reaction to recent

news of a planned HBO television series, *Confederate*, an alternate history set in a contemporary America where the Confederacy won the Civil War and slavery continues, demonstrates that many share this exasperation. Commentators condemned the concept, fearful of ‘slavery fan fiction’, predicting the painful history of slavery reimagined ‘with aggressive competence’ (Gay par.12) by the white show runners responsible for *Game of Thrones*, a series long criticised for its lack of diversity and depictions of spectacular violence and sex. The two African American executive producers, Nicole Tramble Spellman and her husband Malcolm Spellman, were quick to issue an assurance that denied any sadistic intent: “[t]he project is not antebellum imagery, it’s not whips, it’s not plantations, it’s not a celebration or pornography for slavery’ (Deggans par.11), but in the wake of the resurgence of white supremacy under Trump, the complacency suggested by a hypothetical history seems misplaced.

Alexander focuses upon the Rodney King case as a singular documented instance of police racism, but in recent years, mobile phone cameras have ensured abundant footage of police brutality, all of which contributes to ‘collective cultural trauma’ (Alexander 80). While Emmett Till was the ‘touchstone’ for one generation, there are now countless examples that form ‘a rite of passage’ indoctrinating young people ‘into understanding the vulnerability of their own black bodies’ (88)⁹⁶. Written in recognition of his own son’s rite of passage, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s bestselling *Between The World and Me* (2015) provides a partial list of some contemporary ‘touchstones’, as he laments his son’s loss of innocence:

I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in

⁹⁶ However, the evidence of such documentation has also ensured a widespread acceptance of police brutality, thereby strengthening the case for activism such as Black Lives Matter.

a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone's grandmother, on the side of the road. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body...The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. (9)

Given the continual reiteration of 'black bodies in pain', then, the urgency of affirming agency becomes clear: Chris's vulnerability may well be crucial in countering the racist paradigm of the menacing black man, but Peele has to be very careful to demonstrate his competency. And in order to supplement this sense of resilience, Peele uses Rod, Chris's best friend, to ensure an anchorage in the invulnerability or indestructibility of the comic modality. Rod's broad humour is also a way for Peele to ground the fantastical nature of the film's allegory, the comic materialism of both his dialogue and his physicality (bespectacled, slightly overweight, and at times somewhat sweaty) constituting a form of emphatic and textured realism which reinforces his role as representative of Chris's 'real' life, in contrast to the washed out quality of the cinematography of the Armitage world.

Before looking in more detail at Rod's broad comedy, I wish to examine the ways in which laughter is denied in Chris's scenes. Recognising, like Saunders, that comic pleasure can legitimise amoral behaviour, Peele uses a non-cathartic humour in the scenes that feature the white Armitage family and their friends. Isabel Cristina Pinedo suggests that the use of comedy in horror films allows for a 'bounded experience of terror' (108), a way of signalling both distance and illusion which ensures the threat of the film is experienced as only partial.⁹⁷ However, while this

⁹⁷ Pinedo cites numerous examples of 'the comic turn' in horror (111): the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series for instance, along with the *Friday the 13th* films. In *Evil Dead II*, the 'comic turn overtakes the horror,' (111) largely as a result of the self-reflexive nature of the genre. Philip Brophy agrees that textuality is often central to the humour in horror, noticing that 'horror is a genre which mimics itself mercilessly'; its textuality 'bound up in the dilemma of a saturated fiction whose primary aim in its telling is to generate suspense, shock and horror' (5). This

use of 'the proverbial comic relief' (111) is true of Rod's scenes, it does not account for the tone of those in the Armitage household, where the denial of relief deliberately feeds tension. Noel Carroll's explanation for the co-existence of humour and horror, outlined in the previous chapter, is also not entirely borne out by the film. Carroll notices the conventional opposition between humour and horror, but argues that both share a preoccupation with the 'violation, problematization and transgression of our categories, norms and concepts' (152), and thus a notable engagement with incongruity. Comedy occurs within the context of horror when the potential for fear is removed - when the incongruousness of the monstrous element is shown to be harmless, and, 'as a result, an appropriate object of laughter' (156). In *Get Out* however, the movement is reversed: often the comic incongruity is the primary element - in the form of the script, or the set-up - and the threat is added, through both the direction, and the score. Potentially incongruous or discordant incidents in the Armitage house are at first rendered gently comic, but increasingly the script is not played for laughs. Dean's genial greeting of Chris as "my man" when he first arrives at the house, is still 'an appropriate object of laughter' (156), as is his use of the word "thang" in his question about Chris and Rose's relationship - "How long has this thang been going on?" Like Chris, we want to see this as Dean's amusingly clumsy efforts at engagement, merely a middle-aged man with a tin ear for youthful slang, rather than anything more pernicious. Similarly, at dinner, talking about martial arts, Rose's brother Jeremy remarks upon Chris's "genetic makeup", which would make him a "beast" at the sport. The ambivalence of his comments seem to be proof of Jeremy's overly-competitive posturing rather than any sinister

comic awareness is also true of *Get Out*, in scenes towards the end of the film, when the surgery begins to transplant the white man's brain from his body into Chris's, and the top of his lopped off head is thrown nonchalantly into a bin. The surgery is framed as 'schlocky,' a kind of 'splatstick' (McCarty 1) which references the cheap, lo-fi effects of B-grade movies.

intent, but the muted harps and descending chords of the score indicates some unease. While the portraits are satirical, the direction and the score undermine the assurance of laughter. It is important to note here that just as comedy relies upon the building of tension and uncertainty about its release - Simon Critchley suggests that 'jokes stretch out time like elastic [and] we don't know when the band will be released' (*On Humour* 9), - so, clearly, does horror. In denying laughter, Peele is able to use that tension to intensify the feeling of unease.

Before writing and directing this film, Peele was known primarily for *Key and Peele*, a popular comedy sketch show he co-created, and as critics have noted, *Get Out's* script reveals his grounding in the economy of sketch writing; Richard Brody for instance commends the 'clearly delineated, skit-like scenes featuring sharply aphoristic writing and precise (often uproarious) satirical comedy' ('Get Out' par.2). However, while the efficiency and precision of Dean and Jeremy's portraits are certainly 'skit-like'; in working against the grain of the satire's comedy, Peele ensures that the effect is precisely not 'uproarious'. This 'performance of withholding' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 111) is particularly pronounced in the sequence of encounters Chris has the following day, when family friends arrive for a party: first an elderly golf pro eagerly tells Chris of his acquaintance with Tiger Woods; then another guest muses on shifts in taste which mean black skin is now "more fashionable", and then a flirtatious woman glances at Chris's crotch and asks Rose, "Is it true?" Recognising the compression and precision of sketch show satire, we might expect a 'lightness' that is essentially conciliatory, a comic mood that is 'socially lubricating' in enabling the 'contradictions and stresses' (Berlant and Ngai 236) of such encounters. (The Oxford English Dictionary defines a sketch as '[a] short play or performance of slight dramatic construction and usually of a light or

comic nature’). However, the menace implied by Michael Abels’s score ensures that the dissonance is not mitigated in any way, instead the micro-aggressions are left unvarnished. Interestingly, Abels’s own initial response to the scene’s scripted farce was ‘a baroque concerto in the style of Vivaldi’ (‘Interview’ par.40), a wry choice of appropriately white garden party music, but it was rejected by Peele as a distraction from Chris’s perspective, which is so crucial in structuring the film. With ‘a baroque concerto’ cueing the audience’s response, the focus would be solely upon satirising the comic crassness of the guests’ behaviour - thus signalling white middle-class complacency as the conventional comic butt. For a white audience this convention implies a teasing, conciliatory humour; however, the music frustrates that complacency and instead works to foreground Chris’s experience of unease. This deliberate play with ‘comic signalling’ (Robbins 257) is reminiscent of deadpan, cultivating as it does an uncertainty about feeling ‘included or excluded from the warmth of the joke’s absurd intimacy’ (Berlant, ‘Showing Up’ 111). Deadpan’s ambivalence can read as aggressive, particularly when used by an African American, given the social pressure to perform conciliation or appeasement. Like women, African Americans are often pressured into definitive forms of emotional signaling, and the neutrality of deadpan can be interpreted as hostile. In the garden party scene, then, the lack of emotional signaling is not merely unsettling, but actively disturbing.

Given the ways in which *Key and Peele* reveals the background to some of the film’s distinctive features, it is worth looking in more detail at the similarities and differences between *Get Out*’s complex and curtailed comedy and sketch shows’ more conventional courting of laughter. The early seasons of the show opened each episode with a genial introduction; the two men bounding onto a stage in front of a

studio audience to exchange friendly banter. The upbeat music along with the charm of the men's very evident chemistry, and shots of a delighted audience all signalled a willing accommodation with the conventions of the sketch show genre as entertainment. The sketches themselves, however, were consistently challenging and incisive in their examination of the 'code switching'⁹⁸ involved in both masculinity and race;⁹⁹ and their critique of racial inequality. The recurring skit, 'Substitute Teacher', which Emily Nussbaum highlights in her appreciation of the series, serves as an example; the skit features 'a rattled, pugnacious former inner-city teacher who insists on pronouncing his white suburban students' names ghetto style, changing Aaron into "A. A. Ron." "Insubordinate!" he snaps at the students who try to correct his pronunciation. "And *churlish*" ('Color' par.11). It is both a satire upon a specific disciplinarian streak in black masculinity, and an empathetic recognition of the structural issues that have created this type of 'African-American male anxiety' ('Color' par.11) - the lack of resources of predominantly black schools for instance, and the wider social neglect that leads to violence and disenfranchisement. While the show's material continued to be consistently exuberant, despite the weight of its commentary and critique; the framing seemed to grow darker as the seasons progressed; the final format replacing the cosy studio audience segments with interstitial bits of Key and Peele in conversation while driving together across a desert. The ambivalence of the scenario, which continued

⁹⁸ Penelope Gardner-Chloros suggests that code should be 'understood as a neutral umbrella term for languages, dialects, style/registers etc.' while switching 'refers to the alternation between the different varieties which people speak' (98).

⁹⁹ A sketch from the first-ever episode serves as good example of the kind of dynamics they explore: two men standing on a street corner are talking on mobile phones; overhearing each other, they get increasingly competitive in their performance of 'blackness', their talk getting more slangy, more 'street' with every line. Once 'the lights change, the man played by Peele quickly strides away and once out of earshot, his voice shifts into an alarmed effeminacy. "Oh my *God*" he says to his friend, "I seriously almost got mugged"' (Nussbaum, 'Color' par.9).

to showcase their friendship but figuratively sealed off by a windscreen, and therefore no longer as available to the spectator, speaks to a hesitancy both about the release offered by laughter and audience gratification more generally - white gratification and white laughter - which evolves further in *Get Out*.

Arguably, then, for Peele, the light entertainment sketch show format was ultimately restricting, and the move to horror allowed for a more uncompromising articulation of the black experience. As we will see, however, broad comedy does play a significant part in the film, but its function is more carefully delineated and directed than the sketch show. And while white laughter is often refused in the film, black anxiety is steadfastly acknowledged; indeed as Zadie Smith notes, 'It's not often [black viewers] have both their real and their irrational fears so thoroughly indulged' (par.5). The film offers a veritable 'compendium of black fears about white folk', including: '[w]hite women who date black men. Waspy families. Waspy family garden parties...well-meaning conversations about Obama. The police. Well-meaning conversations about basketball. Spontaneous roughhousing, spontaneous touching of one's biceps or hair' (par.4).¹⁰⁰ However, despite a localised distinction here between catharsis for black viewers, and a refusal of catharsis for whites; given that black anxiety is the engine for the film, the dynamics ensure that all viewers are pulled into identification with the protagonist regardless of race.

Before I discuss in more detail how carefully the film engineers our identification with Chris, I wish to explore a little further the part played by racial comedy more generally in the public articulation of the black perspective. While *Key and Peele's* 'thesis scenes' (Nussbaum, 'Color' par.9) have certainly been

¹⁰⁰ James Baldwin notices the risk of paranoia when he writes that, because 'sinners have always, for American Negroes, been white ...every American Negro... risks having the gates of paranoia close on him...it begins to be almost impossible to distinguish a real from an imagined injury' (*The Fire* 82).

innovative and even transgressive in their analysis of themes rarely explored on mainstream television, behind their achievement is the larger resurgence in racial comedy, newly popular and profitable in the last decade or so. Taking up the mantle of comedians like Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor, who in the 1960s and 70s, were 'brazen, rebellious and candid in their public discussions of race relations' (Green and Linders 241), figures such as Dave Chapelle and Chris Rock have used comedy to boldly acknowledge and clarify racial issues. Chapelle for instance, known both for his stand-up and his sketch show, performed casually incendiary stand-up bits about the differences in police treatment of whites and blacks, long before such observations became orthodoxy. Chris Rock, meanwhile, has been dogged in his insistence upon the fact of slavery and its repercussions; comparing slavery to the Holocaust, he noticed that unlike the latter, slavery had never received any real commemoration or closure, with no museums or postwar trials: 'No closure. Just over. As far as America is concerned, slavery and segregation were fads, just like pet rocks and disco' (qtd in Carpio 108).¹⁰¹ In his routine for the notorious 'so white' 2016 Oscars, he observed to a largely white audience of Hollywood celebrities that while the lack of black nominees had been an issue before, 'in the 50s, 60s..black people didn't protest. Why? Because we had real things to protest. When your grandmother's swinging from a tree, it's really hard to care about 'Best Foreign Documentary''. As Aaryn Green and Annulla Linders

¹⁰¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates also uses a comparison between slavery and Nazi Germany to illuminate the ambivalence around the Confederacy's defeat: while the 'surviving [Nazi] leadership was put on trial before the world, not one author of the Confederacy was convicted of treason. Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was hanged at Nuremberg. Confederate General John B. Gordon became a senator. Germany has spent the decades since World War II in national penance for Nazi crimes. America spent the decades after the Civil War transforming Confederate crimes into virtues. It is illegal to fly the Nazi flag in Germany. The Confederate flag is enmeshed in the state flag of Mississippi' ('The Lost Cause' par.6).

argue, such comedians challenge the discourse which espouses 'an era of colorblindness', 'the misbelief that society has moved beyond racism', with race having 'no significant impact on life outcomes' (242), by instead insisting upon the centrality of race. Indeed, comedy 'serves as one of the few openly racialised facets of popular culture', and allows for 'an environment where race can be spoken about directly' (241). This offers something for both marginal and dominant groups. For the former there is the potential for the validation of 'racialised social experiences' (245); and Mel Watkins's insight into the catharsis offered by Richard Pryor is true of other black comedians, when he observes that Pryor's humour 'afforded a cathartic experience, a public purging of the embarrassments and frustrations built up over decades of concealing real attitudes and cultural preferences, suppressing customs that largely defined existence for them' (559,560). And for dominant groups there is the chance to gain insight into 'the cultural world of minority groups' (244). Calvin, one of the white participants in Green and Linders's study commented that he got 'a ton of information from stand-up comedy' (259). These insights into black life are useful given the ongoing separation of black and white communities, with most people still living 'in homes and frequenting grocery stores, workplaces, schools, healthcare facilities, nightclubs and places of worship that are substantially segregated' (Green and Linders 246). For both groups there is a sense in which comedy is 'a safe zone' that allows 'the controversial topic of race to be addressed' (Green and Linders 258).

However, there are also real concerns about racial comedy reinforcing stereotypes and exacerbating racial tension. Dave Chapelle's notorious departure from the third season of his highly acclaimed sketch show in May 2005 was due in part to his growing fear that some of his white audience were laughing *at* his

characters rather than with them. Jelani Cobb wonders if the problem is an inherent one for any black comedian mining black 'foibles for material' (252) on achieving 'crossover' appeal, and asks 'what happens to an inside joke once the whole world is in on it?' (249). Chris Rock's increasing popularity changed the 'inside joke' quality of his material: he has said he will never repeat his early skit, 'Niggas versus black people'¹⁰² because it gave racists 'license to say nigger' (Hartsell par.3).¹⁰³ Both Chappelle and Rock are expressing a dilemma that has plagued 'a succession of black show business people, especially comedians - the conflict between satirising social images of blacks and contributing to whites' negative stereotypes of blacks in general' (Watkins 114).

It is interesting to note the degree to which the racial comedy of the 60s opened up what James Baldwin called the 'privacy' of the African American experience (*The Fire* 83). Writing in 1963, he suggests that there has been 'almost no language' for 'the horrors of the American Negro's life', and that '[t]he privacy of his experience...is denied or ignored in official and popular speech' (*The Fire* 83). For Mel Watkins, the new explicitness about this experience was largely enabled by comedy:

¹⁰² Hard-working, responsible members of the race versus the layabouts: 'Niggers always want credit for some shit they're supposed to do. They'll brag about some stuff a normal man just does. They'll say something like, "Yeah? Well, I take care of my kids".

You're supposed to, you dumb motherfucker!

"I ain't never been to jail!"

What you want? A cookie? You're not supposed to go to jail, you low-expectation-having motherfucker!' (qtd in Watkins 345)

¹⁰³ The explicitness of black comics has resulted in both genuine and feigned confusion about the boundaries of the sayable for dominant groups. In a recent case, white comedian Bill Maher used the 'N word' in a live television interview, and in his subsequent apology he could not resist defending his right to use it, given that "the word is omnipresent in the culture," and moreover, that as a comedian - "a special kind of monkey" (St Félix par.4). - he has special license. Doreen St Félix notices that 'what he would not explore was the way the word seemed to bring him a linguistic thrill' (par.5). The incident reveals both the thrill of breaking an intensely powerful taboo as well as the white envy of black semantic license.

The explosion of assertive black satire unleashed in America's popular culture during the sixties did not represent the sudden emergence of a new, militant perception or recently acquired penchant for ethnic chauvinism; instead, it was more a public unveiling of a covert or privately held sardonic view of America that many common black folks had held for decades (462).

Like *Key and Peele*, *Get Out* builds upon racial comedy's forthright address of racial experience, and avails itself of the explicitness won by comedians like Pryor, Chappelle and Rock among others. But the film situates its commentary within a very different tonal register: its 'compendium of black fears about white folk' (Smith par.5) can be read comically, as Zadie Smith proves in her list, but largely through the nuanced portrayal of Chris, Peele ensures that we take those fears seriously. Chris is not a comic character: far from being oblivious he is acutely conscious of his surroundings and markedly attentive to 'the outlines of the present situation' (Bergson 8), which ensures that he does not partake of the comic character's invulnerability. He has a good sense of humour, certainly, and laughs frequently; we get a flavour of his playfulness in an intimate scene with Rose, where he mocks her brother Jeremy's salacious observations about him being a 'beast' at sport: "D'you know, with my genetic make-up, shit could go down!... I'm a beast!" he growls in a silly voice, gently rolling on top of her. The line simultaneously mocks Jeremy's stereotypical presumption of athleticism and disarms the trope of the hyper-sexualised black man. And there is playfulness too in the way he defuses Jeremy's eager questioning. "Did you ever get into street fights as a kid?" Jeremy asks, and Chris answers drily, "I did Judo after school, 1st grade [Rose: "Aw.."], you should have seen me.." ¹⁰⁴ He transforms Jeremy's stereotyping into an opportunity to insist upon the comic pathos of his lived reality, thus demonstrating his resilience,

¹⁰⁴ Jeremy is hungry in the same way that Rose is hungry - however, while Rose's hunger is sexual, Jeremy wants to commandeer the black body; he fantasises about what he would use it for.

or his resistance to trauma, which as I suggest in the introduction, are a key aspect of what we might call the ethics of comedy. This subtle, understated humour is very different to the broad comedy of stand-up or sketch shows, which would risk extinguishing the growing sense of threat. Too much, or too overt comedy would jeopardise Chris's vulnerability, which is so central to the way the film 'flips the script', replacing the familiar, terrified white man with a terrified black man. Alenka Zupančič claims that 'the comic universe is, as a rule, the universe of the indestructible' (28), and the film's effectiveness depends upon Chris remaining at risk. Chris's best friend, Rod, played by stand-up comedian Lil Rel Howery, introduces a crucial element of broad humour to the film, as I will discuss shortly, but he is kept apart from the main action, interacting with Chris only by phone. For the majority of the film, the focus is upon Chris, and his increasingly uncomfortable experience in the Armitage household. Daniel Kaluuya's performance creates a compelling portrait of a sensitive and intelligent man, his quiet watchfulness adding to our sense of intimacy with him: after all, we too are watchful, waiting in suspense for clarity about the unfolding events.

The audience's knowledge surges ahead of his in a couple of key moments during the garden party: first, when he goes upstairs to call Rod, and the assembled party guests abruptly stop talking and listen, thus revealing how crucial Chris is to the event, which is ostensibly merely a reunion. Then, during the bingo game, when the camera pans back from a shot of Dean in front of his guests, to reveal a poster of Chris, the prize they are all competing for. At this point, while there are still many questions about the exact nature of the horror in store, the narrative has to work hard to justify Chris not leaving, and to ensure our continuing respect for him as hero. Peele's solution is an emotional scene between Chris and Rose, in which old

feelings of guilt and grief about his inert response to his mother's fatal accident motivate a renewed determination to stay with Rose, despite his urgent desire to leave. In the DVD commentary, Peele suggests that it is potentially the black audience, increasingly dismayed at Chris's failure to 'get out', that most needs appeasing with this scene. This suspicion perhaps signals a wariness about any narrative predicated upon black selflessness at the service of the cinematic fantasy of race integration, a wariness that James Baldwin observed in a Harlem audience's resentful response to the ending of *The Defiant Ones*, when Sidney Poitier, cast as the black fugitive bound but no longer chained to his white 'partner' (Tony Curtis), jumps off the train, refusing the promise of freedom because he refuses to abandon his friend. 'Liberal white audiences applauded when Sidney...jumped off the train in order not to abandon his white buddy,' but the Harlem audience 'was outraged, and yelled *Get back on the train you fool!* (*The Devil* 62). By emphasising Chris's complicated feelings for his mother as part of his motivation for staying, alongside his feelings for his white girlfriend, Peele is safeguarding the wary black audience member's identification with Chris, and thus their engagement with the film. The title of the film is itself an acknowledgement of a wariness that is distinctively black: a reference to Eddie Murphy's 'Amityville Horror' bit, when Murphy mocks white characters for taking so long to leave blatantly dangerous situations. "Why don't white people just leave the house when there's a ghost in the house? Y'all stay in the house too fucking long! Get the fuck out of the house!" And while whites stay too long, black folks leave immediately. Despite a gorgeous house, a beautiful neighbourhood, lovely neighbours, when the satanic voice intones "GET OUT", that's it, "Too bad we can't stay baby!"

Peele takes great care to ensure Chris's competency and autonomy during the suspenseful majority of the film when the horror remains only implicit. In his commentary upon the scene of Chris's hypnosis by Missy for instance, Peele notes how important it is for Chris to remain 'grounded' and 'continually resistant' (DVD commentary). Once the full horror becomes clear and Chris fights back, however, there is no longer any need to protect his competency - his ingenuity and determination are evident, and enormously satisfying. This scrupulousness demonstrates Peele's sensitivity to what David Marriott describes as 'black men's angry-anxious concern about being reduced to type - black types: imbecilic, oversexed, criminal, murderous, feckless, rapacious', a concern that is inseparable 'from the many, and conflicting ways in which black man were and continue to be stereotypes in European and American cultural life' (*Haunted x*). The trophy buck on the wall of the basement 'den' where Chris is held prisoner signals Peele's attempt to reclaim one abiding stereotype: what Donald Bogle calls the 'brutal black buck' (4) first introduced by D.W Griffith's notorious film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), as part of its attempt to discredit the abolitionist cause. And Chris will be brutal in his attempt to escape the Armitage house - the entire family dies - but his actions have absolute legitimacy, and the audience's wholehearted approval. The satisfactions of his agency are carefully managed, however, with the worst of the violence deliberately hidden by 'sharp editing and canny framings' (Brody, 'Get Out' par.8). One scene in his escape is, as Peele notes in the DVD commentary, particularly 'edgy', as Chris is forced to kill Missy when she lunges at him with a paperknife. A young black man killing an older white woman is clearly problematic, and Peele edits the scene so that the final, fatal stab happens off screen.

The issue of hyper-sexualisation is apparent very early on in the film, when we first see Chris, still damp from the shower, and shots of his muscular body are intercut with the gleaming pastries that Rose is hungrily eyeing, in a cafe on her way to his apartment. Both a sly reference to the way film fetishises black male bodies and a prefiguring of what we find out about Rose and her consumption of black bodies,¹⁰⁵ this is one of only two occasions Chris is not fully dressed. As with the violence, Chris's physicality is handled discreetly. This potentially mitigates the anxiety of black viewers vigilant about any reinforcement of stereotypes, particularly in the context of a mixed audience. Omotayo Banjo's research demonstrates that black viewers watching 'racially charged' television material with whites report greater discomfort and anxiety than when watching with other black subjects; preoccupied with the reaction of white viewers to material that potentially corroborates stereotypes, they report less absorption in the experience (665).¹⁰⁶ Using Carol Clover's insights into the ways the 'slasher film' invites and sustains the predominantly male audience's identification with the 'Final Girl', (the girl who, after all her peers have died, finally defeats the killer or monster) we can see that overt instances of sexuality might threaten Chris's role as a congenial stand-in for white audiences too. Clover argues that any explicit sexual activity on the part of the Final Girl would potentially 'disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality' (212) and thus threaten cross-gender identification. In Chris's case, any overt sexuality

¹⁰⁵ Rose, portrayed as a sympathetic character for the majority of the film, is only revealed to be part of the Armitage enterprise when Chris discovers a box of photographs in her room, documenting her many relationships with African Americans. One is the man now known as Walter, the groundsman, who is actually her grandfather, and another is the maid, now the 'vessel' for her grandmother. While her brother Jeremy finds new victims through violent means, Rose uses seduction.

¹⁰⁶ It is an example of what Du Bois called 'double consciousness', the habitual sensation 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' (14).

could potentially disturb the structures of *white* competence and sexuality and thus threaten cross-racial identification.¹⁰⁷ With this, as with the careful framing of Missy's death, Peele acknowledges the sensitivities of 'an audience conditioned by the dominant cinematic apparatus' (Clover 219) and schooled in racism.

In order to safeguard the audience's identification with Chris, Peele shrewdly employs multiple point-of-view shots that ensure we see what Chris sees: when Rose's car hits a deer on the way to the Armitage house, for instance, the handheld sequence shows Chris's perspective as he walks into the woods to look at the dying animal. Similar shots are used again, this time in darkness, when Chris is trying to fall asleep, and imagines returning to the deer.¹⁰⁸ At the garden party, each of the Armitages' friends are introduced from Chris's point of view, and Logan, the only other black guest, appears in Chris's field of vision 'with a sense of relief that the image itself captures' (Brody, 'Get Out' par.3). Later, when Chris first begins to fight back, having worked out how to avoid the hypnosis that sedates him, we see a shot from above of his hand reaching out to grasp the heavy ball he then uses against Jeremy, a shot which spatially locates Chris's arm as our own.

Our identification with Chris is further supplemented by his friendship with Rod; Rod's evident fondness for him working to cue our allegiance. The mutual ease of their phone conversations offers brief lulls in which the audience can momentarily relax, which both consolidates our affection and ensures variety in the film's affective dynamics. Noel Carroll notices that horror 'in some sense, oppresses'

¹⁰⁷ This raises the issue of the basic psychoanalytic distinction between identification and desire, and shows it to be, as Diana Fuss observes, 'a precarious one at best' (11): does the audience want to be Chris or want to have him? Peele clearly wants the focus to be upon the former.

¹⁰⁸ The deer - with which Chris feels an obscure kinship - prefigures his own near death experience. It is however, one of several deliberate misdirections in the film: unlike the deer, he is not doomed to die.

while 'comedy liberates'. 'Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it. Comedy elates; horror stimulates depression, paranoia, and dread' (147), and the dexterous application of one then the other, is clearly one way of sustaining momentum over the length of a feature film. The horror genre's wider use of humour is persuasively accounted for in Isabel Cristina Pinedo's description of the horror film as a form of cultural dream work in which repressed material is unearthed and rendered 'emotionally accessible' (107), and she suggests that '[j]ust as a dream must process repressed material so that the dreamer does not wake up, recreational terror must produce a bounded experience that will not generate so much distress that the seasoned horror audience member will walk out' (107). Given the urgency of Peele's attempt to render 'emotionally accessible' (107) the horror of racism, Rod's scenes function as an essential 'release valve' (DVD commentary), designed to ensure no one walks out. Like Antrim, then, Peele utilises comedy's ability to create 'proximity to the terror at hand' (Pinedo 112). And while distress is one problem that Rod addresses, distrust or disbelief is another - his early suspicions about the Armitages articulating a response felt by many in the audience. In articulating that doubt - perhaps primarily felt by a black audience - Peele once again safeguards the wary spectator's investment in the film.

Peele mentions the classic horror *The Stepford Wives* (1979) as a model for the film ('Jordan Peele' par.3), and here the protagonist's best friend, Bobbie, performs a similar affective function to Rod, in providing scenes of humour and warmth to alleviate the mounting tension. While release or relief explains one aspect of this strategic use of friendship, René Girard's theory of mimetic desire suggests another: far from freely choosing the objects of our desire we instead learn what to desire or admire through the imitation, often unconscious, of others, and in

performing affection for Joanna, Bobbie signals her value to the audience, thus guiding our admiration and allegiance. Rod's affection for Chris operates in much the same way. Furthermore, in *The Stepford Wives*, the intimacy between the two women, both white and of a similar age, allows for the frictionless performance of a simplified racial and gendered identification, a model which encourages the audience's identification, even across racial and gendered difference. Likewise, in *Get Out*, the intimacy between Chris and Rod, again, of a similar skin-colour and age, helps to formally align the audience's allegiance, regardless of racial or gender affiliation.

The comedy in Rod's scenes is of a different order to the deliberately uncertain satire of the Armitage household, and while laughter is denied in Chris's scenes, when Rod is onscreen, it is encouraged; his straight talking often giving voice to taboo subjects, thus, in Freud's terms, allowing the energy involved in keeping them in place release through laughter. Rod's address of taboos feels like a deliberate ploy on Peele's part, a way of maximising the psychic utility of these scenes. The dogged particularity and materialism of his dialogue is also crucial for the dynamics of the film as a whole, in providing a textural counter to the film's fantastical central conceit.

The other intention behind the particular weight of the film's comic scenes, I would argue, is to discreetly celebrate black comedy - to provide a kind of judicious showcase of black comic gifts, running alongside, and offering a counter to, the central focus upon trauma. In Chris's first phone call to Rod, for instance, we get a flavour of the easy abundance of Rod's invention as he grumbles about his work at the TSA (Transportation Security Administration): "Chris, tell me this, how can I get in trouble for patting down old ladies...it's standard procedure...people think just

because she elderly she can't hijack no motherfucking plane... The next 9/11 gonna be some geriatric shit.” This first conversation, Rod at work in the airport, and Chris on his way to the Armitage house, displays the easy intimacy between the two men, situating Chris within a larger community, itself something of an innovation in terms of the dominant culture's representation of black characters, who are often represented singly in 'white space.' Ed Guerrero notices that when a black actor is given 'top billing' in a white authored film, in general 'he or she is completely isolated from other Blacks or any referent to the Black world' (238). Offering an initial taste of Rod's comic dexterity, the phone call is also an introduction to his penchant for 'tendentious' jokes, which evade moral rules and cultural prohibitions and thus open 'sources of pleasure that have become inadmissible' (Freud, *Jokes* 103). The freedom or release offered by this habit of transgression, which augments and intensifies the work of the brief comic scenes, becomes more apparent in a subsequent call, during the garden party, when Chris admits he's been hypnotised by Missy. Rod is horrified, riffing on the possibilities for humiliation: “you could be...barking like a dog, flying around like a pigeon, looking ridiculous”, then a thought occurs, “or, I don't know if you've noticed, white people like making people sex slaves and shit...” Amused, Chris interjects: 'They're not a kinky sex family, dog'. However, Rod is indefatigable:

“Look, Jeffrey Dahmer was eating the shit out of niggers heads but that was after he fucked they heads. Do you think they saw that shit coming? *Hell no*. They just thought they were gonna be getting their balls licked or whatever.”

The insistence upon concrete physicality in Rod's dialogue is clear, and it accords with the traditional comic preoccupation with the material limitations of the body, thus asserting a sturdy immanence which tempers the necessary abstraction of the film's allegory. However, the characteristically tireless or indestructible quality of

Rod's monologue is significant; the way in which it 'persists, keeps asserting itself and won't go away' (Zupančič 47), provides an illustration of what Alenka Zupančič sees as the immoderation and excess of comedy; an analysis which complicates the conventional thesis that comedy brings us down to earth, 'returning us with joy to our embodiment and the knowledge that we are only human' (Ngai, 'Theory' 476).

More than just a performance of 'failed finitude' (Zupančič 50), or 'a finitude that leaks' (Ngai, 'Theory' 476), however, Rod's casual conjuring of Jeffrey Dahmer also represents a larger kind of rebuttal or refutation of trauma. Meeting the horror of Dahmer's racial murders with the 'tradition of directness' characteristic of much African American verbal culture (Rahman 71), Rod's matter-of-fact tone demystifies and punctures the symbolic power of the event. That power is attested to by David Marriott, who finds Jeffrey Dahmer symptomatic of a profound cultural racism, his notorious photographs of his dead and dying victims bearing 'witness to a demand to make black men absent from the scene of the human, while lining the eye with deep, libidinal satisfaction' (*On Black* 40). For Marriott '[t]his disinterring - in fantasy - of black male bodies from any sense of personhood is necessarily affiliated with a cultural obsession with black male sexuality as a *jouissance* incapable of any self-restraint or asceticism' (*On Black* 40). Through an incidental, throwaway piece of comic alchemy, Rod transforms the forcible abjection of this cultural obsession into comedy, thus, in a parallel with Chris's earlier refusal of Jeremy's stereotyping, performing a resistance to trauma.

In this defiance of objectifying paradigms, there is a notable kinship with July, whose comic transgression of social conventions effectively takes power over the rules concerning femininity, rather than merely submitting to them. Here, Rod's comic stream of consciousness similarly disregards any notion of shame or

victimhood,¹⁰⁹ and demonstrates ‘the prescription and extemporaneous formation and reformation of rules, rather than the following of them’ (Moten 64). Indeed, in the markedly improvised quality of Rod’s dialogue, we might see an invocation of what Fred Moten calls the ‘surplus lyricism’ (26) of black performance; that mobile, improvisatory sensibility that can be seen in multiple forms such as vernacular dancing (voguing and breakdancing for instance); ‘the dozens’ and freestyle rap; gospel, jazz, and the blues.¹¹⁰ The super-abundance or ‘surplus’ of Rod’s verbal riffing is further emphasised by the frequently truncated nature of the phone calls - he is often still talking when Chris hangs up. Through Rod, then, Peele is able to celebrate black culture in an understated, economic way, acknowledging African American linguistic fluency and invention, and its expressiveness and semantic license, as a way of countering the coercion of the traumatic or tragic paradigm. The men’s friendship is a key part of this, their intimacy consolidating a sense of what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the ‘private rapport’ that exists between members ‘of this tribe that we call black’ (*Between the World* 120).¹¹¹ Interestingly, the performance of friendship was also central to *Key and Peele*, similarly providing a secure affective base for the show’s free-wheeling exploration of risky subject matter.

¹⁰⁹ Sara Ahmed notices that racism and homophobia are ‘forms of discrimination [which] can have negative effects, involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression and shame, all of which can restrict bodily and social mobility’ (154). Rod’s blithe disregard for the boundaries of the sayable indicates a freedom from such restrictions.

¹¹⁰ George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut strike a cautious note when they observe that ‘issues of identity have been strongly connected with discussions of musical improvisation through such putatively African American cultural tropes as signifying, storytelling and narrative, personal voice, and individuality within an aggregate’ (6). Brenda Dixon Gottschild is more categorical, arguing that ‘the improvisation aesthetic...characterises so much of Africanist endeavour’ (117). Despite Gottschild’s enthusiasm, it remains true that the persistent identification of black culture ‘with oral and performance modes associated with the voice or the body’ (Dubey 8), risks reinforcing the essentialist dogma that ‘[i]ntellectuality is to whiteness what the visceral is to blackness’ (Wilson and Pope.L 55).

¹¹¹ Coates is delighted by the economy and simplicity of one particular encounter, ‘the briefest intimacy’, (120) which occurs when he pulls his bag from the luggage conveyor belt at the airport, and accidentally bumps into a young black man, and says, “My bad”. ‘Without even looking up’ the other man says, “You straight” (119).

And while black language and humour is celebrated, white humour is satirised: in the laboured witticisms of Logan for instance, the one garden party guest who seems black, but whose speech has none of the fluency and timing that characterises Rod and Chris's interaction. He says goodbye with a ponderous, creaky flourish: "you'll all have to proceed without the aid of my marvellous wit". Similarly, when Chris tries to speak to Walter, the Armitage's black groundsman, expecting a certain level of ease and mutual understanding, he meets instead an alien verbal pacing and vocabulary - Walter, it will transpire, is now actually Roman, Rose's grandfather, while Logan is an elderly white man who now inhabits Andre's body. Walter/Roman wants to talk about Rose, who, with grandfatherly pride, he feels to be, "One of a kind, top of the line, a real doggon keeper." These moments of black actors speaking 'white': awkward and stiff, with archaic vocabulary,¹¹² contrasts sharply with the kind of musical phrasing and easy slang of Chris and Rod speaking 'black'.¹¹³ There is a long lineage of this kind of opposition in African American comedy, perhaps first used overtly by Richard Pryor, who made much of 'the comic implications of white mechanicalness as against black coolness' (Limon, *Stand-up* 84). Comedians such as Sammy Davis Jr, Moms Mabley, Redd Foxx and Steve Harley had contrasted black and white style (or lack of it) before Pryor, but

¹¹² 'White voice' seems to be developing into a pervasive cultural trope - Lakeith Stanfield, the actor who plays Logan, also stars in *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018), a film about an African American who adopts a white accent in order to progress his career; while Jordan Peele produced a recent Spike Lee film, *BlackKkKlansman* (2018), in which actor John David Washington uses a white voice to infiltrate the Klan. We might suggest 'white voice' as a satirical response to 'blackface.'

¹¹³ African American Language (AAL), African American English (AAE) or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is indeed widely considered to be a different language, which, while not homogenous, does share some consistent characteristics: linguistic features such as absence of copula ('She not here'); multiple negation - 'He can't hardly see nothin'; habitual use of 'be' ('John be at the store') (Cukor-Avila 103); and lexical items like 'bro' and 'dog/dawg' (Kirkland 839). While AAL is frequently 'still disparaged as substandard, low-prestige, "ghetto" English' (Bloomquist 12) in some quarters (educational institutions for instance); in others, such as stand-up comedy and music, its prestige is high.

because his success ensured large, integrated audiences, his act signalled the most high-profile examination of the differences. As with the satire of the garden party, Peele's direction ensures that this is not played as broad comedy - this is the Armitage world where the risk to Chris is mounting, so the audience is cued - through the 'stings' in the score and Chris's perplexed, unhappy responses - to meet the humour hesitantly. The jokes are set up, but the withholding of comic signalling means that the 'pay-off' is denied, so the tension remains, exacerbating our sense of disquiet. In his discussion of deadpan, David Robbins usefully elaborates on the nature of such signalling: the ways in which an audience can recognise that characters or comedians are 'engaged in comedy'. 'The mugging, the exaggerated, fanciful postures, the funny voices, the bemused "aren't these people something?" tone, not to mention the joke itself - each of these signals to an audience the comedy is intended, that comedy is *coming their way*.' (Robbins 257, italics in original) When comic signalling is 'turned off', however, the audience has to work out whether there is indeed a joke, and whether they are in on it. Again, in this instance, the aggression of the withholding is arguably directed primarily at white audiences, another way in which the expectation of comic conciliation is denied.

If there is a sense in which Peele's scrupulously careful presentation of Chris speaks to prescriptive notions of cultural engagement, or what Nicole Fleetwood describes as 'a fixation on getting images of blacks "right" as a way of countering racist stereotypes' (12), then Rod's character is a way of injecting a more riotous energy. This is not to say that Rod is any less considered a creation than Chris, however, and in his commentary upon the film, Peele reveals his delight that Rod ultimately 'gets to be the hero,' thus reclaiming the role of 'token black friend', an enduring filmic trope that in white authored films works to signal the white lead

character's liberalism while also allowing for the appropriation of black 'cool'. The comic black friend, like the 'magical Negro' ('the noble, good-hearted black man or woman' whose good sense and 'folk wisdom' pulls a lead white character through a crisis (Appiah 80¹¹⁴) is a trope that is indicative of an enduring racism, which, while no longer as overt as the Hollywood stereotypes that Donald Bogle first delineated in his 1973 taxonomy (*Uncle Toms, Coons, Tragic Mulattos, Mammies and Bucks*), still insists upon black subordination. '[D]esexualized, depersonalized, subordinated, [and] vitiated' (Brody, 'Why Is' par.8), both roles articulate a fantasy of happy subservience and loyalty, in which black characters exist only in relation to the white lead, and have little life of their own. In many horror films in fact, the disposability of the black friend is entirely blatant, and their early death has become something of a cliché; Robin Means Coleman cites a wide range of films, including *Jurassic Park*, *Gremlins*, *Scream 2*, and *Alien*, in her discussion of 'the very, very high mortality rate' (3) of black characters in the horror genre.

Rod, however, not only survives, 'he saves the day' (Peele, DVD commentary). As the film draws to an end, the realisation dawns that Chris, having

¹¹⁴In the 'Michael Jackson Halloween' episode of *Key and Peele* season 2, the two comedians prepare for the subsequent sketch with a brief discussion of Stephen King's propensity for giving his black characters 'special powers'. King's *The Green Mile* (1999) in particular is often cited as an example of this, with the character John Coffey as the magical Negro who uses his abilities at the service of white characters without concern for his own preservation. In the sketch, Key's character arrives in a new office job, and while being shown around by his white boss, is addressed telepathically by a colleague (played by Peele), and is thus initiated into 'the Shining' ("all black people have the Shining"). Reeling from the new discovery, Key is at first delighted and then bewildered by the babble of voices in his head, and his - rather sinister - colleague urges him to "listen for Morgan, Morgan Freeman, he will guide you." 'Morgan Freeman' duly comes on-line and tells Key to "stay calm and focus on that white man" (his boss, increasingly perturbed by Key's distracted behaviour). The implication is that 'Morgan Freeman' will help Key to assume the correctly attentive and respectful posture towards his white boss, but instead he tells him to "pick up that letter opener and kill that white man"; and the final shot shows Key raising the letter opener in readiness to strike. Through this comic reversal, the sketch gleefully upends the convention of the calm and kindly assistance of the magical Negro, mocking the fantasy of happy black devotion, and moving the white character to the margins.

fought back against the Armitages, with their bodies strewn around the house, will be seen as the perpetrator rather than the victim. A car with flashing lights approaches, and so engrained is the expectation of police racism, that Chris's doom, as he eyes it with weary resignation, seems inevitable. Then the car door opens, revealing a TSA insignia, and rather than a white cop, Rod steps out, a rescue which elicits a collective gasp of delight. The final scene is thus structured like a joke, relying as it does upon a 'tacit social contract', which secures an 'agreement about the social world in which we find ourselves' (Critchley *On Humour*, 4), namely police racism. That consensus is the implicit congruence or tacit contract,¹¹⁵ while Rod's arrival provides the incongruity.

This is the only time in the film that he and Chris physically share the same space and at this point, the indestructible comic universe that Rod embodies is allowed to take over. Peele has acknowledged the difficulty of achieving the right tone for this shift: describing a variety of more broadly comic endings, in which Rod's humour risked canceling out Chris's trauma. The final version is fairly understated, as Rod restrains himself to a brief scolding, and Chris remains silent, his face exhausted and unreadable. For Zadie Smith, in this final reversal, 'the joke's on us', asking, '[h]ow, in 2017, are we still in a world where presuming a black man innocent until proven guilty is the material of comic fantasy?' (par.5). Remembering James MacDowell's account of the critical disparagement of happy endings, we can see here a characteristic mistrust - wherein the resolution of the ending can only be justified through 'recourse to notions of irony or subversion'

¹¹⁵ In a recent incident in the States, a white driver was stopped by a white officer, and when the driver was too scared to move her hands off her steering wheel to get her ID, having watched 'too many videos' of police shootings, the officer responded 'We only kill black people, remember' (Bever par.4-5). It has the structure of a joke, but unsurprisingly it was not interpreted as such.

(161). Smith seems to imply that the 'wish-fulfilment' here is in fact satirical, the joke being that the audience gratefully accepts as sincere, material intended as ironic. And certainly, by making it widely known that the original conclusion was a more 'realistic' scene in which Rod visits Chris in jail, Peele very deliberately ensures the happy ending is 'haunted by the spectre of apparent unrealism' (MacDowell 130). The shadow scene thus works with the tacit social knowledge about police racism to complicate the closure or the happiness of the ending. However, to describe it as only satirical or ironic, risks implying a specific aggression or negativity that denies the larger scope of the film's use of comedy,¹¹⁶ and ignores the way in which the final framing of the film answers to the implicit promise of survival made by the

¹¹⁶ It is useful to compare the use of 'comic fantasy' in *Get Out* with a *Key and Peele* sketch called 'Negrotown', which, like the film, is structured around an inversion or reversal. The sketch however, is more definitively satirical. A man (Key) is stopped without reason by an aggressive white policeman, and as the cop pushes his head down into the back seat, Key hits his head - suddenly everything changes: the gloomy evening is transformed into brilliant technicolour day, and a filthy man sleeping rough on the street (Peele) is transformed into a smiling showman, dressed in a dazzling suit. He becomes Key's guide to a bright, beautiful world, the costumes and the choreography familiar to us from the super-saturated colours of 1950s musicals. Weaving through the dancers, Peele's booming show tune introduces the delighted Key to 'Negrotown':

In Negrotown you can walk the street without getting stopped, harassed, or beat. There's always a cab when you need to get a ride and they also stop in Negrotown. You won't get followed when you try to shop, you can wear your hoodie and not get shot. No white folks to cross the street in fear, no trigger happy cops ..That loan application can't get turned down. You're always approved in Negrotown.. In Negrotown you live long and well, there's no disease, no sickle cell, no stupid assed white folks touching your hair or stealing your culture, claiming it's theirs. Hanging out in a group doesn't make you a gang, every word that you say ain't considered slang. No one trying to get in on the latest trend by making you their token black friend. There's a place where harmony is found, it's a motherfucking black playground.

As the song comes to its rousing finale, the smiling dancers in serried ranks, the voice of the policeman breaks through the music, and Key finds himself on the pavement by the police car; bewildered, he says: "But I thought I was going to Negrotown". The cop replies sardonically "Oh, you are", as he pushes him into the car, knowing Key is destined for jail. The sketch is only four and a half minutes long, but covers an impressive array of issues including the problem of black poverty (the homeless man); 'redlining' or the denial of financial services; retail discrimination; police brutality; racial stereotyping; cultural appropriation; everyday micro-aggressions and the disproportionate number of black men in jail. A world in which none of these things occur is shown to be the material of a lurid musical fantasy.

significance accorded to the earlier comic scenes. While a space is made for Chris's trauma through the opacity of his final silence, the happy ending is in keeping with the film's determination to offer an alternative to 'the language of trauma' (Carpio 13), which as Glenda Carpio notes, is often the conventional focus in much contemporary art dealing with slavery and its repercussions. So, while the film's central conceit insists upon the horrors of slavery and its ongoing effects, its celebration of black culture - the expressiveness, invention, and linguistic virtuosity brought to the film by Rod, and the resilience and deftness demonstrated by Chris, as well as the community represented by their friendship, is allowed the final word.

Conclusion

'We all know that there is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it', writes David Foster Wallace, indeed, 'we all know the weird antipathy such explanations arouse in us...a feeling of not so much boredom as offence, as if something has been blasphemed' (61). This fear of marring pleasure that is somehow sacrosanct is also noted by Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai when they observe the resistance to any interrogation of comic enjoyment. They argue this is partly because 'comedic pleasure involves surprise and spontaneity and therefore we take its contestation more personally, as an interference with a core freedom' (242). The often involuntary nature of laughter – that 'surprise and spontaneity' - is key to why we prize it so highly, and a resistance to unpicking it has arguably contributed to the lack of comic analysis that I find so notable. And while Foster Wallace prioritises offence, he is right to also mention boredom, given that comic analysis can provoke both. The scrutiny of comedy is thus fraught with risks. While my analysis may not always have avoided these risks, I remain hopeful that I have been successful in my larger ambition of demonstrating the degree to which comedy is central, rather than peripheral, to how the storytelling in this project functions. A demonstration which in turn, helps to prove the seriousness of comedy.

My project has considered only four artists, whose 'forthright address' (Lethem par.1) of critical contemporary issues is largely enabled by their use of comedy. As such, it is by no means comprehensive as an account of comedy in contemporary American storytelling, and there is clearly much more to be done to produce a more thorough overview of contemporary comedy, in particular the comic production of both women and people of colour. Jenny Zhang (*Sour Heart*, 2018)

and Paul Beatty (*The Sellout*, 2015) are two writers who could potentially be included in an expanded project. And beyond fiction and film, the somewhat neglected comedy of visual or conceptual art offers another area for exploration. I am particularly interested in the use of comic license in African American visual art, and the ways in which it offers an expressive freedom that resists the imperative to produce responsible, even didactic art; an imperative that is otherwise very potent, given the degree to which stereotypes concerning abjection, menace and sexualisation continue to dominate visual discourse.

In what ways, then, is comedy significant in the work I examine? Comic licence is perhaps the preeminent feature: and I have tried to show how the freedom generated by comedy allows for a substantial degree of representational latitude. In Saunders's case, for instance, the framing of his working-class narrators as comic allows him to create playfully generic portraits without risking any reductive claims about working-class subjectivity. And in his characters's obliviousness there is also a kind of freedom, this time for the reader, who is able to 'let their guard down'; the 'inhibitory expenditure' we would make in asserting or defending ourselves 'suddenly... unutilizable' (Freud, *Jokes* 182). The 'too-direct expression of a thought' ('What Makes' par.3). comically reveals the importance of prestige in communication, and disarms our defences, allowing Saunders to explore without didacticism how class distinctions are enacted. Cheryl's obliviousness plays a similar part in *The First Bad Man* - disarming the reader's inhibitions and thus allowing for a playful space in which to examine the heavyweight subjects of sexuality and the confinements of femininity. And similarly for Peele, who uses the license of his film's comic character, Rod, to both perform a rebellious freedom from the confinements of race and to maximise the psychic utility of the scenes designed

for comic relief. While the comedy of these texts is largely subversive, in *Elect Mr Robinson*, Antrim foregrounds comedy's ambivalence, revealing how it excuses ethical failings, and extends our tolerance of extremity. Comedy keeps 'us close to the unbearable...by adding pleasure' (Berlant, 'Showing Up' 109), and both complicates and enhances the extremity or the horror, making it harder to classify and therefore dismiss.

This recognition of comedy's ambivalence is worth dwelling upon. While I have argued for comedy's usefulness in creating a degree of detachment – which thus potentially counters the paradigm of trauma or victimhood, we must be wary of over-stating the case for anything like an ethics of comedy. In her recent Netflix special, *Nanette*, stand-up Hannah Gadsby offers further evidence for such wariness; making clear the individual cost in creating the conditions in which people can laugh, by foregrounding the concessions which transform painful autobiography (in her case, a lesbian growing up in the homophobic community of Tasmania) into jokes. One instance in Gadsby's routine is particularly striking, an account about nearly getting beaten up at a bus stop, by a man who had mistaken her for another man. In previous shows Gadsby had rendered the story comic by omitting its actual violence; in the final segment of *Nanette*, however, she tells the whole story: recounting how, on realising she was a lesbian, the man came back and proceeded to attack her, without anyone stepping in. In previously reporting a sanitised, comic version of the incident, Gadsby acknowledges her past complicity in the silencing of such stories, and in telling the whole story, she makes clear her refusal to continue to make such concessions, or to minimise her own pain. While I have sought to establish comedy as an alternative paradigm to trauma, Gadsby makes clear the individual cost in what Freud calls 'joke-work' - and thus usefully articulates some of

the ways in which comedy's occlusion of emotion can deny and even perpetuate trauma, rather than simply oppose it.

It is not simply the cost to the joke teller that Gadsby is addressing, but the wider cost of the habit of self-deprecation, a habit she argues is characteristic of minority humour. Critic Ellie Tomsett agrees that self-deprecation in female comics is problematic, signalling as it does an 'accommodation' with the perceptions of others, however, she also argues that self-deprecation can function as a pragmatic strategy which facilitates challenges to 'hegemonic views of women and their bodies' (10). It can operate both as a form of placation to the men in the audience, a way of decreasing the threat posed by a woman taking control, and as a form of reassurance to other women, an 'acknowledgement and validation' that, for instance, 'the pressures of body orthodoxy' (9) can cause feelings of inadequacy. Indeed, Tomsett suggests that it is difficult for women to avoid self-deprecation given their inferior cultural value, and the ways in which that value is interrogated through comedy (10).

Gadsby's deconstruction of stand-up has clearly struck a chord, exciting much commentary,¹¹⁷ but others have examined humour's capacity to inure us to pain. Paul Lewis for instance, in his parallel analyses of the Freddy Krueger movies, beginning with the first *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and the 'positive humor movement' inspired by Norman Cousins's *Anatomy of an Illness* (1979), which argues that Krueger's sadistic humor and Cousins's healing laughter share common

¹¹⁷ Matt Zoller Seitz suggests that the interest is partly because Gadsby has seemingly effected an enlargement of the genre. While others have previously combined 'funny and raw', with projects 'by Lily Tomlin, John Leguizamo, Eric Bogosian, Whoopi Goldberg, and Anna Deavere Smith' which are as much about storytelling as jokes. However, these performances are generally 'branded as... theater', while *Nanette* is being billed as "stand-up comedy", available 'on the Netflix menu along with Jerry Seinfeld' (par.3). This is probably due in part to the validation of Gadsby's project at the Edinburgh festival in 2017, where she was the joint winner of the prestigious Edinburgh Comedy Awards.

ground in their inuring to the reality of pain. His insight into the humour in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series echoes Isabel Cristina Pinedo's description of the horror genre's use of humour to produce a 'bounded experience of fear' (107); but while Pinedo sees this as a positive strategy in allowing for the articulation of repressed material, Lewis argues that the humour serves 'to distance viewers from victims by encouraging them to join in the amusement of violators' (36). In this way, Lewis suggests, Freddy invites viewers into the same kind of humorous sadism manifested by soldiers who torture prisoners, thinking particularly of the notorious incidents at Abu Ghraib. While it is important to note that Lewis is specifically addressing the 'killing joker' trend of the 1980s¹¹⁸ in arguing for the part played by comedy in these developments, his thesis provides further detail on the ways in which comedy can minimise pain and deny trauma. Of the works I consider, Antrim's novel is the most explicit in articulating this, the ending of *Elect Mr Robinson* effecting a deconstruction of comedy that equals Gadsby's *Nanette*. Indeed, to state as I did earlier, that the novel reveals both comedy's absolution of ethical failings and its enlargement of our tolerance of extremity, seems something of an understatement, given that much stronger terms would be apposite: in the light of Lewis's insights, we might say instead that comedy can both absolve evil and enlarge our tolerance of horror.

This is not to undermine the argument that comedy can serve as an alternative model to trauma, only to point out that comedy is equivocal, and that to position it in pure opposition is simplistic.¹¹⁹ John Limon makes exactly this point

¹¹⁸ Lewis argues that the 'killing jokes' inspired by Freddy became ubiquitous in the 1980s; in *Red Dragon* for instance, Lecter is not humorous, but as the 1980s advanced, the subsequent films develop the character into a killing joker (35). Jason in the *Friday the 13th* franchise is another well known example.

¹¹⁹ For more detail on the ethical limits of humour, see Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering's *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour and Comedy and the Politics of*

about humour's relation to power, arguing that the desire to position comedy as a 'pure resistance to power' ('American Humor' 309), ignores the fact that humour's relation to power is 'essentially obscure and vacillating' (306). What is clear, however, is that humour 'must be considered in different terms when it is on the side of power, including the power to wage war and to torture' ('American Humor' 312). The humour examined in this project is clearly 'not on the side of power' - but it is still necessary to note the ways in which humour cannot be guaranteed to 'play the constructive ethical role' we might wish for it ('American Humor' 314). Trump; Boris Johnson; Freddy Krueger; the Abu Ghraib soldiers, in all these instances, the shamelessness enabled by humour is all about power. Limon argues that if we assume powerful reprobates feel a distant discomfort due to 'the shame of pure hegemony', then 'the fun is all in the shamelessness' ('American Humor' 313). Shamelessness has an interesting relationship to obliviousness, which I have argued plays such a significant part in producing comic pleasure; there is clearly some overlap, but the brazenness in shamelessness implies a knowing or intentional lack of decency or regard for others' rights or feelings, whereas the lack of regard in obliviousness is often unknowing. Perhaps shamelessness is to power what obliviousness is to the lack of it.

Representation: Mocking the Weak edited by Helen Davies and Sarah Iltott, both of which scrutinize comedy that 'perpetuates exclusionary worldviews' (Davies 11).

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