ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LAUGHING TO KEEP HUMAN: DISRUPTIONS OF RACIST LOGIC IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR

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Abstract:

This project examines black humorists who challenge the Eurocentric, racist logics delimiting what it means to be human while demarcating blackness as inferior. While many scholars in black humor centralize humor as a means of resistance, a source of comic rage or redress, this project intervenes to suggest that black humor offers a space to celebrate black humanity as it broadens representations of blackness. By turning to the staged parodies of Frederick Douglass in the 19th century, the stand-up routines of Jackie Mabley and Richard Pryor in the 20th century, and the satire of novelist Paul Beatty, the project uses this unlikely assemblage to reveal a lineage of black humor that has effectively and cogently disrupted white supremacist logics while enacting a type of self-actualization of a fuller sense of humanity.

LAUGHING TO KEEP HUMAN:
DISRUPTIONS OF RACIST LOGIC IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR

by

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Dedication

To my parents, Donna and Philip, who kept nudging me to finish this project. And to my children, Zaemari and Zenia.

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Table of Contents

Dedication..ii

Acknowledgements…………………………………………………………………….....iii

Table of Contents…………………………………………………………………..iv

Introduction: ………..…………………………………………………………..……1

Chapter One: *Parodying the Master:* The Humor of Frederick Douglass………………………………………………………………………...…39

Chapter Two: *Reimaging Mammy:* The Humor of Jackie Mabley and The Harlem Renaissance…………………………………………………………………..87

Chapter Three: *Revising the (White) Literary Imagination*: Richard Pryor and the Black Arts Movement...131

Chapter Four: *To Plead Human:* Satirizations of Black Authenticity in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*…………………………………………………………………181

Bibliography..218

Introduction
On Laughing to Keep Human

This dissertation, "Laughing to Keep Human: Disruptions of Racist Logic in African American Comedy," argues that key black humorists of the 19th and 20th century creatively disassemble the racist logics of white supremacy while celebrating the breadth and expanse of black humanity. Drawing on the humor of Frederick Douglass, the stand-up routines of Jackie Mabley and Richard Pryor, and the contemporary satire in Paul Beatty's novel *The Sellout*, "Laughing to Keep Human" brings together this unlikely group of humorists to show how for centuries and across genre, black humor has resisted the assumptive logic that has grounded Western science's and philosophy's debates on how to distinguish human identity from that of the animal, the object (property), or an inherently inferior being. These particular humorists use literature and the stage to offer alternatives to racialized bondage and degradation, systemic alienation, violence, and death while continuing to reimagine representations of blackness. Without delimiting blackness to abjection or nonhuman status—as black people are already and always human—the project locates the ways in which black humor responds to "classificatory," xenophobic logic while illuminating an interiority to black life otherwise demoted in Euroamerican narratives. In this way, the project operates twofold: on the one hand it examines how black humorists disrupt racist paradigms through humor and on the other hand, it argues that black humor opens up a public space for blackness to exist, to define itself, and to celebrate its expanse outside of and regardless of the white gaze.

Within the scholarship in black humor as well as in black studies more generally, there has been a persistent question concerning the quality of black people's humanity.

African diasporic critics of Western humanism including Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Sylvia Wynter, Katherine McKittrick, Frank Wilderson III, Christina Sharpe, Alex Weheliye, and Achille Mbeme have pointed to the ways that Western constructions of the category of "the human," are fundamentally antiblack. These theorists call into question the presumptive rationale linking blackness to thingification or animality.

Recent scholarship, however, challenges the category of "the human" altogether, forgoing the parameters of liberal humanism as a remedy for black abjection, animality, or nonhuman status. One such instance is Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's 2020 book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World,* which argues against the demand for inclusion or transformation of Western thought. Instead, Jackson contends that blackness has always been human, and it is the racialized hierarchy, which services the notion of "human universality," that needs interrogation. Jackson asserts, "there is an implicit assumption that the recognition of one as a human being will protect one from (or acts as an insurance policy against) ontologizing violence" (20). Because black people have always been human, the bifurcation of "human" and "nonhuman" remains insufficient. This, according to Jackson, is not to deny the fact of black exclusion, but to draw attention to the fact that blacks *have been* included in or, as Jackson specifies, "dominated by" the category of "universal humanity" as "incarnations of abject dimensions of humanity." Put another way, Jackson asks, "If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of 'the human'?" (20).

"Laughing to Keep Human" also recognizes the potential futility in calling for the epistemological rupture of the category of "the human," but it also recognizes the ways in

which black humor engages these conversations. To that end, the project merges this African diasporic critique of the human with black humor—an unlikely stance because established studies that criticize Western conceptions of the human dwell in melancholic ideals of blackness as nonhuman. This intervention, however, is to call for a celebration of the expanse of (black) humanity. Derived from the blues adage popularized by Langston Hughes—"Laughing to Keep from Crying," his eponymous 1952 novel, and its more recent scholarly iterations—*Laughing to Keep from Dying* (2020); *Laughing Fit To Kill* (2008); *Laughing Mad* (2007)—the premise behind the title of this project, "Laughing to Keep Human" moves away from centralizing mortality, sorrow, or madness to urge that scholarship also include the ways that black humor celebrates black life rather than only react to systems of oppression. Not purely a frivolous revelry, this laughter is a celebratory one, steeped in an ancestral memory and intellectual self-making. Most integral to this notion of mobilizing laughter to keep human is this process of self-actualization and self-definition. Specifically, each humorist in the project relies on humor to challenge Western conceptions of blackness as inferior and in turn publically interrogates representations of blackness rooted in anti-blackness. "To keep human," in this case, is not just using laughter 'to keep from dying' or 'to keep from crying.' "Laughing to keep human," is using laughter to thrive, to subsist in the muck and mire of life's woes, in its joys and all that is in between. More critically, "laughing to keep human" is to define oneself against and in spite of a racial caste that systemically tries to strip black people of their selfhood.

Though invoked in its title, this project is not interested in mapping the historical trajectory of the category of "the human" or in the philosophical scholarship laid out in

the field of humanism. Instead, the research strategies for this project contextualize black humor and the processes of "keeping human," within a specific historic and material continuum. To that agenda, this project favors a comparative approach that situates black humorists within political-aesthetic movements not immediately associated with humor—movements traditionally periodized by the contention for (black people's) human rights. These political-aesthetic movements include abolitionism, The New Negro movement more commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, The Black Power and Black Arts Movement, and the post-Civil Rights Era and the mythological of the Post-Race Era. Within these contexts, the humorists in this project use humor to open a terrain for world building—a world that imagines blackness outside of and sometimes regardless of the tyrannical white gaze. In imagining blackness in spite of the white gaze, these humorists call into question specific narratives and the epistemologies that perpetuate racial hierarchies.

There is an existing discourse in black humor scholarship that suggests that humor is our route to a fuller sense of humanity. In particular, black intellectuals have maintained that humor has always elicited a freedom—a freedom unhinged from the fraught sensibilities of racist paradigms. Yet, the arsenal of black literary expression has not always recognized the prevalence of black humor as a viable critical discourse in this regard. Paul Beatty's 2006 anthology *Hokum*: *An Anthology of African American Humor* opens with his critique of the limited and often morose scope of the black experience. Beatty argues that all the other black tropes "have been anthologized to death," creating what he calls a "nappy-haired […] Frankenstein monster who growls in a bluesy a-a-b rhyme scheme but has no sense of humor" (4). Rather than succumb to limited

expectations, hackneyed tropes, and the cheerless autobiography, Beatty embarks on a quest to find what he calls "black literary insobriety." It is this quest that yields *Hokum,* a humorous hodgepodge of short stories, excerpts from novels, poetry, speeches, and news reports. Instead of offering a comprehensive, chronological anthology, Beatty instead uses three broad categorizations: "Pissed off to the Highest Degree of Pissivity," texts signifying black political rage; "(nothing serious) just buggin,'" texts that forgo easy racial labels, and "black absurdity," texts that embrace illogic and disorder. While Beatty's *Hokum* joins other contemporary anthologies—Mel Watkins's *African American Humor* (2002) and Daryl Dance Cumber's *Honey Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (1998)—it differentiates itself by including humor from less obvious figures such as W.E.B. DuBois, otherwise known for his sociological studies on African American life. The anthology also mines humor from unliterary sources such as former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson. In this way, Beatty's editorial groupings reject a narrow depiction of a black experience while also loosening the rigid definitions of what and who can be funny. And in its broader endeavors, *Hokum* argues that representations of blackness should remain boundless. Humor as *Hokum* suggests, embraces illogic and incites unity. It can edify and complicate; express rage and joy; and perhaps most inimitably, humor can defy genre and form. It is humor's contradictory nature that leads us to our humanity.

It is for this reason—humor's unique capacity to capture our humanity—that Beatty lauds the humorist, to which he refers as "the clown." "The clown," Beatty writes is "more than comic relief," but also "scapegoat and sage, unafraid to tell the world, as the Fool told Lear, 'Truth's that a dog must to kennel,' hence validating our humanity

through our madness" (11). In the end, *Hokum* argues that the clown confirms what it means to be human by acting as a conduit for truth. But what happens when one considers the fraught implication and history of "the clown"—the fool, the jester, the Stepin' Fetchits—as black people were often used as fodder for entertainment, and considered one dimensional beings for servitude rather than people with complex interiorities? And if the clown affirms humanity, as Beatty suggests, how might one assess the black humorist or the black comic in spite of a history that has subsisted on codifying blackness as inferior? How does humor express humanity in the face of inhumanity?

A rich history of African American thinkers, writers, and artists grapple with this question of black humanity by viewing laughter as double-voiced—a voice that operates on the one hand as a balm against white terror (or the threat of white terror) and another that speaks directly to its black populace. Long before W.E.B. DuBois's 1903 *Souls of Black Folk*, African American humorists ritualized what DuBois later termed the "double conscious"—the "peculiar sensation" or "gift of second sight" that views one's self through the eyes of others; a feeling of two-ness, — as an American, a Negro; […] two warring ideals in one dark body." This "two-ness," DuBois describes, appears in 19th African American literature and folklore as trickster tales and in rhetorical devices such as signifying ('dissing'), double-speak, and tonal semantics. Charles Chesnutt's 1899 *The Conjure Woman*—a collection of short stories considered to be the first sustained literary satire by an African American—relies heavily on the idea of the double conscious. His conjure tales act as a response to Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus Songs and Sayings* by revising the Uncle Remus character in Harris's tales. Although

Harris's collection appears innocuous, there is much debate around the stories' narrative framing through the stereotyped docile black man, Uncle Remus, and concern around Harris's acquisition and appropriation of black stories. Aware of this, Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* converts Harris's clichéd, blithe old storyteller into a clever trickster. In Chesnutt's collection, it is Uncle Julius, instead of Uncle Remus, who tells stories of magic, transmorphism, and voodoo that intrigue a white husband and wife. At the end of each story, Annie, the wife considers Julius to be an entertaining storyteller whereas the husband, John, suspects more. To counter what he presumes as deceit, and not magical tales, John attempts to outmaneuver Julius's logic. But Uncle Julius quietly outwits the couple every time. Through Uncle Julius, Chesnutt's *Conjure Woman* stories resist the notion that black entertainment exists for white consumption. In this way, Chesnutt's fiction demonstrates how a distinct brand of black humor exercised a subtle rebellion against racist tropes.

Rather than demonstrate an overt resistance to black stereotypes, Chesnutt's fiction indiscernibly reimagines black/white relations. In an 1879 journal entry Chesnutt describes the aim of his fiction:

> This work is of two-fold character. The negro's part is to prepare himself for social recognition and quality; and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea: and while amusing them to lead them on imperceptibly, unconsciously step by step to the desired state of feeling. If I can do anything to further this work, and can see any likelihood of obtaining success in it, I would gladly devote my life to the work.

Here, Chesnutt proposes that literature might lead the way to social recognition for the Negro, but humor provides access to it. By, "amusing the public (white) mind to the idea," humor can "lead them on imperceptibly." Nearly twenty years after DuBois's proclamation Jessie Redmon Fauset would signify on DuBois's double-consciousness by identifying "Negro laughter" as a "gift." Her essay, "The Gift of Negro Laughter," characterizes black laughter as a Janus-face: "The remarkable thing about this gift of ours [laughter] is that it has its rise, I am convinced, in the very woes which beset us. Just as a person driven by great sorrow may finally go into an orgy of laughter, just so an oppressed and too hard driven people breaks over into compensating laughter and merriment. It is our salvation." And anthropologist and author Zora Neale Hurston would articulate this duality in her 1934 *Mules and Men* stating,

> And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, 'Get out of here!' We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know that he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries […] 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song' (3).

Just as Fauset and Chesnutt conclude, Hurston highlights African American's strategic use of humor for social gain. For Hurston, laughter and humor act as social shield.

A host of additional scholars provide studies of African American humor that have furthered its understandings as a social and political influence. 20th century novelist and critic Ralph Ellison made substantial contributions to the field including *Shadow and Act* (1964), *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996), and *Going to Territory* (1986). J. Mason Brewer, Alan Dundes, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Lawrence W. Levine each provide anthologies or collections of African and African American folklore.

Several contemporary scholars analyze how African American humor arises from complex conditions of race and racism. The scholarship on 20th century humor ranges from an examination stand-up, sketch television, and literary satire. Bambi Haggins's *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007) examines what she calls the black "comic persona," which she defines as a performance intersecting multiple ideologies and a lived experience. Separating the person—the comedian—from this comic persona, Haggins observes how the persona is constructed under acculturation, industrial imperatives, and individual choice. By exploring the gaps between the black comic persona in stand-up and the one constructed for film and television "consumption," Haggins investigates the tension between contemporary representation of blackness and the dichotomies embedded in the term "crossover." Darryl-Dickson Carr's two books *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane* and *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance* provide the most sustained analysis of black literary satire in the 20th century, to date. In both, Dickson-Carr argues that satire was a necessary means for communication and expression for African Americans. In particular, Carr's studies

suggest that when other literary forms fail, satire maintains an accessible medium for black political resistance. As previously mentioned, Mel Watkins's extensive work on African American humor includes an anthology, an exhaustive social history of African American humor, *On the Real Side* (1994), a monograph, *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry* (2006) and an insightful "Forward" to Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara's edited collection of essays, *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface* (1996). Though true of all the abovementioned texts, Watkins's *On the Real Side* in particular makes a significant contribution to studies in black humor for its breadth and expanse. *On the Real Side* makes visible the richness of African American humor as well as the troublesome conditions from which it arises. Noting the lack of critical attention paid to humor, Watkins writes, "Still, the complexity of black humor and its impact on America's larger comic tradition has been largely ignored. This avoidance is partially the result of mainstream America's general reluctance to acknowledge black American's influence on American culture—particularly on an aspect of that culture that, by its very nature, is primarily cognitive and often critical of mainstream society" (11).

Similarly, Glenda Carpio in her 2008 book *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery,* also calls attention to the lack of critical attention to black humor. Carpio estimates that African American humor has been an undervalued realm of analysis due to "the challenges that humor in general presents for scholarly work, which tends for the most part to be woefully devoid of humor, as if to evidence the capacity or interest in laughter would make one appear less intelligent or not seriously committed to one's work"(27). Carpio's *Laughing Fit to Kill* is certainly a "serious" analysis of black humor.

Specifically, the text explores how slavery undergirds the fictions of black humorists. By "conjuring" the stereotype, Carpio suggests, black humorists turn to humor as catharsis for traumas linked to slavery and its aftermath. Her work provides a mixed-media approach as she analyzes the humor of figures like abolitionist William Wells Brown, the contemporary art of Kara Walker, Ishmael Reed's 1971 *Flight to Canada*, and the performances of comedian Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle. Building on Carpio and the work of these scholars, this project suggests that black humor not only resists and redresses slavery's trauma as Carpio suggests, but also how each use humor to re-envision and assert black humanity.

The most recent publication on African American humor to date, Danielle Fuentes Morgan's *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century* (aforementioned), offers a sophisticated examination of film, stand-up routines, *SNL* skits, twitter rants, and television series. Specifically, in her analysis of the horror-comedy film *Get Out,* the acclaimed HBO series *Insecure,* and problematic films such as *Precious* for its reliance on abject blackness (a film she marks as an inadvertent satire of the novel *Push* for its lack of black interiority), Morgan argues that African American Satire in the 21st century has left the didacticism of the 20th century in the past in favor of what she calls "calculated silences." These calculated silences she defines as sarcasm intended to make its audiences do the work within uncomfortable silences rather than delivering jokes with neat, often expository, punch lines. In further observing these silences, Morgan distinguishes between two types of laughter emergent in the twenty-first century. The first type of laughter Morgan explains is the "'feel like shit' laughter meant to implicate the offender and hold them accountable." The second type of laughter—also

the title of her book—is the" 'laughing to keep from dying,' in which through the implementation of the satire, the satirist asserts their own humanity, and the humanity of their in-group, in the face of its mainstream disavowal" (10). Through these two types of laughter, Morgan argues that a moral landscape unfolds for audiences. And though Morgan's argument hinges on the notion that African American satire has the potential to "keep one from dying"—a psychic, social, or even at times a physical death—she pauses to acknowledge satire's limitations. Morgan writes,

> Satire alone is not able to enact justice. Satire doesn't make demands—it reveals the social context and asks its audience to determine the next course of action. Satires open up a space for laughter and for calculated silences [...] these silences emerge in two contexts. The first is in what is *not* said, but already known and understood where, if we are engaged, we can begin to imagine what justice might look like. It is in thinking about what justice and freedom mean in the twenty-first century context that leads to the ethical terrain in which we consider how justice might be enacted. The second context is the self-conscious silences these satires create for audiences who are initially uncertain of how to respond. (27)

At play in Morgan's assessment, is both the black comic's self-actualization and the prospect of the audience's moral awakening. While getting the audience to stew in calculated silences and as they participate in a revelatory laughter, the satirist engages in a process of self-making. Similarly, this project explores the ways in which black humorists take advantage of this opened space for laughter, humor, and sarcasm. This

project looks outside of satire in the 21st century and argues that black humorists before then were asserting their humanity and the humanity of their in-group.

Classificatory Logic and The Human

As the aim of this project examines how black humorists disrupt racial logics while engaging in a type of self-making, it loosely draws on what cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter refers to as the "classificatory logic." Classificatory logic, Wynter explains, is the Euroamerican racial caste system deeming blacks nonhuman while naturalizing whiteness as human. Though this project pushes against condoning an ideological frame that deems blackness nonhuman (for this frame of thinking too easily denies the dominant caste culpability, but as discussed later, it elides black humanity), Wynter's assessment of the epistemologies that construct racial caste provides a useful framework for examining how it is that black humorists unsettle racist logic. In particular, this framework exposes how antiblackness infiltrates and then normalizes discourses justifying slavery, black stereotypes, black disenfranchisement, and the systemic murder of black people. In a 2015 collection of essays, "Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis," Katherine McKittrick recapitulates Wynter's work as it concerns definitions of humanism. McKittrick writes, "Wynter's ongoing concerns about the ways in which the figure of the human is tied to epistemological histories that presently value a *genre* of the human that reifies Western bourgeois tenets; the human is therefore wrought with physiological and narrative matters that systemically excise the world's most marginalized" (9). Wynter's body of work considers how the figure of the human has been tied to Western (white) branches of knowledge and understandings of the human that exclude a non-Western (non white) demographic—those Frantz Fanon has termed

Les Damnés de la Terre[1]. Since feudal-Christianity to the post-renaissance, evolutionary conceptions of the human, definitions of the human have been predicated on these white/black classifications. And often these classifications operate as invisible structures with lasting visible effects.

In the essay " 'No Humans Involved:' An Open Letter to My Colleagues," Wynter demonstrates how these invisible structures incur lasting, visible repercussions. In it, Wynter illustrates the real-world damage of white supremacist logics by examining the U.S. education system and U.S. laws that implicitly perpetuate racist rationality. As an example of this, Wynter recollects a radio news report just after the acquittal of the policemen responsible in the 1992 Rodney King beating case. She recalls the report stated that, "the judicial system routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved'" (42). Wynter cites Stephen Jay Gould's argument that 'systems of classification direct our thinking and order our behaviors.'" By marking young Black men as non-human, the police were green lighted to deal with this demographic as they pleased without legal consequence. Ultimately Wynter asks "how did [police and judicial officers] come to conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the *kind of terms* (i.e. White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban) within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived,* and *therefore behaved towards,* only as the *lack* of the human, the Conceptual

[1] Published in 1961, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth (Les Damn´s de la Terre)*, calls for decolonialization while offering an analysis on the dehumanizing effects of colonization.

Other to being North American?" At the core of Wynter's question and at the core of many black studies is the pushback against the notion of "universal humanity" only extending itself to whites. In the end, Wynter calls for a new humanism and a restructuring of current the episteme—one in which the young black inner city male can have access to human status. In this way, Wynter's work calls for what Walter D. Mignolo calls a kind of "epistemic disobedience." This disobedience, Mignolo argues, challenges us to rethink and unravel dominant worldviews that "protest the contents of imperial coloniality."

Wynter's and Mignolo's call to rupture the epistemologies of "the human" accompany several other black scholars, some of which aforementioned. Part of their mission identifies blackness as a condition and a vexed ontological state. Christina Sharpe's 2016 book *In the Wake: On Being and Blackness* participates in this call to rupture understandings of blackness as nonhuman. More specifically, Sharpe's study accompanies a collection of critical race scholarship that draws attention to Saidiya Hartman's theorization of "the afterlives of slavery" as a way of understanding the black condition. In her book *Lose Your Mother,* Hartman defines "the afterlives of slavery" as the enduring presence of slavery's violence in contemporary life. Using Hartman's theorization of the afterlives, Sharpe challenges Western configurations of blackness as non-human. Specifically, Sharpe personifies Hartman's notion of slavery's afterlives as living "in the wake" and the acts of disrupting the historical configuration of blackness as nonhuman, she calls "wake work:" "Keeping each of the definitions of wake in mind," Sharpe writes, "I want to think and to argue for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and to propose that to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by

the continuous and changing present of slavery as yet unresolved unfolding" (14). Positioning blackness as a form of consciousness rather than searching for solutions to the condition of blackness, Sharpe adds, "I use the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance" (14). "Wake work," then becomes an analytic through which, Sharpe suggests, we might imagine new ways of living in slavery's afterlives. She continues, "In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lives and un/imaginable lives" (18). By studying black artists, Sharpe asks what it means to "inhabit the Fanonian 'zone of non-Being[1]' within and after slavery's denial of Black humanity?"

While borrowing the model of "classificatory logic" from Wynter and tapping into the ensuing conversation within these threads in black studies, this project broadens the conversation on disrupting antiblack logic to include humor. But, the project also argues, like in Zakiyyah Jackson's abovementioned study *Becoming Human,* that blackness has always been human, and so the fundamental demand for inclusion into "normative humanity" needs reconsideration. Further, Jackson asserts that "inclusion does not provide a reliable solution because, in the main, black people have been included," but included on the lowest rung of the liberal humanist hierarchy. Again, while this project is not focused on the history humanism or even in the call for a different "genre of the human," it hopes to open the door on conversations about the ways black humorists have consistently staged contestations to anti-black exclusion while reimagining representations of blackness. Black humor, in this way, naturalizes antiracist

discourse by performing critiques of anti-blackness in plain sight, guised with laughter. In the same way that anti-black epistemologies naturalize whiteness while normalizing systemic racism, the black humorists featured in this project operate within the unassuming mode of humor to normalize antiracism.

To be clear, not all black humor responds to the condition of race, racism, slavery and iterations of its aftermath. To suggest that, reduces black humor's aptitude—as Paul Beatty cautions. Many are black fictions, performances, and poems that depart from race and its themes (Charles Johnson's collection of short stories *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* comes to mind as well as the racially innocuous 1960s stand-up of Bill Cosby). Yet, the origins of black humor began, as Carpio indicates, as a "wrested freedom." Carpio notes that, "Until well into the twentieth century, [black American humor] had to be cloaked in secrecy lest it be read as transgressive and punished by violence" (4). Watkins supports this idea by opening his book considering the enigma surrounding black laughter. He writes, "African-American laughter, in particular, has been something of a mystery, a dilemma, or, quite often a source of irritation for mainstream Americans from the time blacks first arrived in the Colonies in the seventeenth century" (16). Both underscore the implicit threat of the white gaze and white violence. Black humor in this regard, emerges in spite of and because of racial violence. Watkins, continues, adding that during the transformation from Africans to slaves, "a remarkably resilient and inventive manner of behaving and observing both themselves and the external world began to emerge […] to maintain respect for themselves or preserve any remnants of their native culture, subterfuge and lying were absolutely necessary for the Africans brought to America's shores" (47). Both as

preservation of culture and dignity, humor provided access to humanity. Moreover, humor offered a type of protection: "As Sterling Stuckey points out, slave deception aggressively 'worked against whites acquiring knowledge of slave culture that might have been use to attempt to eradicate that culture'" (55).

In keeping with the enduring maxim "Laughing to Keep from Crying," African American humor connects most apparently to the relief theory of humor, made popular by Freud. Freud's psychoanalytic study of jokes, Jokes *and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and later in his essay "Humor," posits that jokes operate as a type of wish fulfillment; we laugh to release our forbidden thoughts and to relieve pent up emotion. His analysis identifies the tendentious joke, which he marks as either being hostile or obscene. Of these the tendentious jokes, Carpio writes,

> Much, but certainly not all, African American humor can be understood as a kind of relief-inducing humor. Indeed, under the violent restrictions of slavery and segregation, African Americans developed the art of the tendentious joke so well, in particular those that mask aggression, that often they left whites, 'with the baffled general feeling that [they had] been lampooned [before their very eyes] without quite knowing how.' Among themselves, however, African Americans have expressed aggression against their oppressors much more openly" (5).

Chesnutt's Uncle Julius as a trickster figure in his *Conjure Woman* stories demonstrates Freud's relief theory.

A second theory of humor, the Incongruity Theory, the most popularly accepted theory of humor, suggests that we laugh when our expectations are disrupted. Established in Immanuel Kant's 1894 *Critique of Judgment* and Arthur Schopenhauer's 1907-9 *The*

World as Will and Idea, the incongruity theory suggests that our sense of amusement arises from our disrupted expectations. Søren Kierkegaard's 1941 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* confirms this theory noting, "Wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present." Though Carpio suggests that this theory of humor is rarely connected to black humor, the examples I use in this project suggest otherwise. Douglass's use of parody in his speeches relies almost entirely on irony and unsettling expectations. And as I discuss later, both Pryor and Beatty upset the logic of racist outcomes and conditions—Pryor in his revision of literary classics where the black character dies, and as I show in chapter four of the project, the humor in Beatty's novel *The Sellout* relies on incongruity by creating a black protagonist that owns a black slave. In this regard the collection of black humorists in this project strategically employ the theory of incongruity to disrupt racist logics.

The third theory of humor, the superiority theory, contends that we laugh at other's misfortunes. The superiority theory emerged from Plato's *Philebus*, Aristotle's *Poetics*, and later from Thomas Hobbes's *Human Nature.* Hobbes writes, "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others." Manifestations of the superiority theory appear in African American humor as the tradition of signifying, the play of the dozens, boasting and toasting, as well ass the verbal battle of capping and "yo mamma" jokes (Carpio, 6). A host of black comics, including Red Foxx, LaWanda Page, Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, Moms Mabley, rely on the superiority theory through signifying, but Richard Pryor transformed the art of signifyin' by bringing it to the mainstream.

The arc of "Laughing to Keep Human" begins with the grounding reference of slavery. Although connecting U.S. slavery and Frederick Douglass, to comedians and satirists in the 20th century may appear disjointed and possibly ahistorical, there is a scholarly precedent of academics using slavery as a springboard into rituals of black humor. To this end, many scholars have turned to Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech as indication of his intentional use of irony to impart the hypocrisy of an American nation founded on ideals of liberty while enslaving millions of people. However, little attention has been paid to Douglass's recurrent integration of humor throughout dozens of his speeches over the course of his career. Specifically, Douglass openly mocked Christian slaveholders using mimesis and parody to confront the theological justification of whites owning black people. This theological thread of what I am terming white supremacist logic, holds firm that blackness is innately abject and that it is God's will, or Biblically ordained, that blacks should live in bondage and whites reign in absolute dominion. Douglass vociferously detested the Christian slaveholder as one of "the worst" types of slaveholders. So deluded in their rationale was the Christian slaveholder, Douglass notes, that they used the Bible to vindicate their cause. But, it is Douglass's use of humor in unraveling this theological-pro-slavery debate that is most noteworthy. His performances included sarcastic uses of his voice and body mimic of white Christians who enslaved black people provided early iterations of black stand-up comedy. And, most critically, Douglass's parodies enacted a type of celebratory, self-actualization against the imprudence of white slave owning Christians.

After slavery ended, newly freed blacks, were dealing with questions of identity through humor. Like Douglass who used humor as moral suasion against slavery, African

American writers and folklorists participated alongside debates on U.S. race relations as they related to slavery and Emancipation. Take for instance this short anecdote titled "Quit Gummin' Yo Food!," which first appeared on June 13, 1867 in the *Atlanta Constitution* and later in Henry D. Spalding's *Encyclopedia of Black Folklore* (1972). It reads,

> The Union Army had just entered the city of Atlanta and the slaves of the Oglethorpe plantation were set free. All were deliriously happy, but Amos had his reservations. He was scolded by a Northern army officer.
>
> "Amos, I don't believe you realize you are a free man. You can go where you please, do as you please, eat what you please."
>
> "I already bin eatin' ez I please," grumbled Amos.
>
> The officer was taken aback. "I wager, Amos, you never tasted chicken before," he said.
>
> "I eats chicken ev'ry Sunday," maintained Amos doggedly. "An' whut's mo', Massa allus save me de tenderes' paht."
>
> "What part is that?"
>
> "De gravy, uv co'se!" said Amos.

Although, as Mel Watkins's notes in *On the Real Side,* that there is some uncertainty about this particular story's origin, the anecdote evidences how black humor dials into political questions concerning citizenship and identity. Amos, an outlier from the other "deliriously happy" emancipated blacks, represents the larger dialogue regarding the Reconstruction Acts and the "Negro problem"—what to do with a population of the newly freed. The tale responds to this Emancipation debate by using Amos's character to

act as tongue-in-cheek representative of the side suggesting slaves were content with their status as slaves. Playing up the guise of the black naïveté, the tale uses Amos to critique the logic that blacks are inherently inferior and designed for servitude. The Northern army officer (presumed white) symbolizes the white paternalistic hero, uplifting the simple-minded black. Witty anecdotes like "Quit Gummin' Yo Food," appeared alongside newspaper articles debating the Emancipation of the Negro. One editorial from *Southern Recorder* dated November 19, 1867 remarks in a lengthy diatribe,

> What do these reconstruction acts propose? Not negro equality merely, but negro supremacy. In the name, then, of humanity to both races—to the name of *citizenship* under the Constitution—in the name of a common history in the past—in the name of our Anglo Saxon race and blood—in the name of the civilization of the nineteenth century—in the name of magnanimity and the noble instincts of manhood—in the name of God and nature, we protest against these acts, as destructive to the peace of society, the prosperity of the country, and the greatness and grandeur of our common future. (1)

The speaker from this article represents a fear among Southern whites that the newly freed population of blacks would infringe on the "prosperity of the country" and gain "negro supremacy." Clearly, the "peace of society" and "the noble instincts of manhood," only includes those of the "Anglo Saxon race and blood." The language from the excerpt links civilization, God, and nature with black disenfranchisement and white enfranchisement by suggesting whites are divinely superior. Freed slaves, in this regard disrupt the social, political, and economic order. Pit alongside each other, the folkloric tale "Quit Gummin' Yo Food" and the excerpted article from *Southern Reporter* illustrate

how black humor consistently engaged a critical discourse concerning black/white identity politics. As Watkins notes, a "superficial view" of this type of story "disregards the effectiveness of one of black American's most inventive survival tactics, which from the time of their arrival in the New World fostered a dual mode of behavior and expression—one for whites and another for themselves" (32).

As well as joining debates concerning black identity, African American humorists believed in laughter's innate power to persuade. Take for instance this short tale "A Laugh That Meant Freedom." In it, Nehemiah a "clever slave," convinces his master to free him with a joke:

> One day David Wharton, known as the most cruel slave master in Southwest Texas, heard about him.
>
> "I bet I can make that darkey work," said Wharton, and he went to Nehemiah's master and bargained to buy him.
>
> The morning of the first day after his purchase, he walked over to where Nehemiah was standing and said, "Now you are going to work, you understand, You are going to pick four hundred pounds of cotton today."
>
> "Awright, Massa," answered Nehemiah, "but eff Ah makes yuh laff, won yuh lemme off fo' terday?"
>
> "Well," said the new owner, who had never been known to laugh, "if you make me laugh, I won't only let you off for today, but I'll give you your freedom."
>
> "Auh decla,' Boss," said Nehemiah, "yuh sho' us good-lookin' man."

"I am sorry I can't say the same thing about you," retorted David Wharton.

"Oh, yes, Boss yuh could," Nehemiah grinned, "ef yuh tole ez big uh lie ez Ah did."

David Wharton laughed before he thought. Nehemiah got his freedom.

Though the anatomy of the tale's joke follows conventional logic—the narrative set-up, the rising tension, and the punch line—it defies the presumed logics of slave/master relations. Not only does Nehemiah gain freedom through laughter, an atypical exchange, but Nehemiah also seems to get away with insulting his master—an unthinkable exchange. Yet, "The Laugh That Meant Freedom" suggests that laughter can break the chains of bondage. In the same way, Douglass's parodies sought to break the chains of bondage by challenging hypocritical logic.

Like the folklorists, black performers just after Emancipation and during the Reconstruction Era grappled with representations of blackness as inferior.
Though by the 1880s white minstrels met their demise, their impact was indelible. Watkins writes that,

> Minstrelsy had established a fraudulent image of Negro behavior (in both the serious and the comic vein) to which all African-Americans were forced to respond. And early black entertainers—perhaps even more than blacks in less visible occupations—bore the burden of working within the strict confines of that distorted standard. Indeed they were expected not only to corroborate white minstrels' illusionary specter but, because they were *authentic* examples of the type, to heighten it. (103)

Ensuing this period, the New Negro movement also referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, showcased the influx of black intellectualism and aesthetic expression dedicated to refashioning the image of black people. Named after *The New Negro,* a 1925 anthology of essay edited by Alain Locke, the movement dedicated itself to bringing new depictions of black identity into (white) American view. As blacks moved from southern rural life to northern cities, during the Great Migration, the image of black people as rural field laborers changed to an image of blacks as cosmopolitan, intellectual influencers. In addition to the well-known writers from the period, (including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen), artists such as Aaron Douglass and performers like Paul Robeson addressed race-related issues using their platforms. The black humor during this period varied from reproductions of black stereotypes as evidenced by comedic actors like Lincoln Perry better known as "Stepin Fetchit," who was billed as the "Laziest Man in the World" and biting satires as in novels like George S. Schulyer's 1931 *Black No More.*

Just as humor was an unlikely rhetorical tool during abolitionism, stage humor is also an overlooked aspect of the Harlem Renaissance. Progenitors of the movement intended for literary realism, poetry, and fine art to be its modus operandi. Lowbrow or burlesque humor like that of Jackie Mabley, countered the directive of the movement, and perhaps felt too proximal to minstrelsy. Yet, the influential comedian arises as a stand out figure during this black aesthetic renaissance. Philosophical debates around the movement's purpose, its affect, and its predominantly white patronage, manifested in essays such as George S. Schuyler's 1926 "Negro Art-Hokum" and Langston Hughes's response to Schulyer, "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." These disputes questioned

the fact of a definitive "negro art," Euroamerican influences, and the types of art worthy of production/consumption. Similar debates took place around the use of theater as a way to reconcile issues concerning black identity. DuBois, Locke, and Charles S. Johnson hoped that the theater would be a place to resolve these issues, but disagreed on the route to reconciliation. DuBois promoted a propagandistic route and argued that black artists should create black plays *for* blacks and *about* blacks; Johnson advocated for black artists to be free to create what they please; and Locke hoped to use the theater to eliminate stereotypes and replace them with more positive representations of black life.

To this end and as several scholars of the Harlem Renaissance point out, there were many movements happening *within* the movement. James F. Wilson underscores this notion in his 2011 book *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* arguing that despite the black intelligentsia's adamancy in parsing a highbrow and lowbrow distinction between forms of art during the Harlem Renaissance, that these two worlds intermingled. Wilson writes,

> …depictions of blackness and whiteness, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, highbrow and lowbrow merged and coalesced in the theater and performances of the 1920s and 1930s. While white and black political leaders, social scientists, and artists often attempted to fasten and delineate the divides between these identity qualifiers, a varying number of writers, performers, and producers of different races, economic classes, and sexual orientations were the creators of the popular entertainment of the era. Additionally, contrasted with fixed, unchanging published literary texts, performances and scripts were mutable, depending on individual

> artists' contributions and the desires of the demographically shifting audiences. (3)

The diversity of Harlem was undeniable and almost equally diverse was its artistic output. As Wallace Thurman points out in his 1927 *Negro Life in New York's Harlem,* "the social life of Harlem is both complex and diversified. Here you have two hundred thousand people collectively known as Negroes" (17). Thurman observes that the variety in cultural production was evident in the different theaters throughout Harlem. There were several different theater houses that staged different types of shows and attracted different crowds: "The Roosevelt Theater, the New Douglas, and the Savoy are less aristocratic competitors [than The Renaissance Theater and the Casino Theater] The Franklin and the Gem are the social outcasts of the group […] the Lafayette and Lincoln theaters are three-a-day combination movie and musical comedy revue houses" (37). In truth, Harlem was an amalgamation of cultures and classes: "pure-blooded Africans, British Negroes, Spanish Negroes, Portuguese Negroes, Dutch Negroes, Danish Negroes, Cubans, Porto Ricans (sic), Arabians, East Indian," white and black socialites and debutantes, cross-dressing performers, black lawyers, doctors, dentists, and real estate dealers as well as working-class citizens crossed paths.

Counterintuitive to the dominant ethos of the movement—which relied on detaching blackness from images of primitivism, plantation life, and crude racial stereotypes—Mabley established her "Moms" character as a type of stereotype from which the movement sought to flee. Specifically, Mabley's humor subverted prevailing images of primitivism and subservience through her use of parody and direct-address monologue. Emerging from vaudeville, Mabley was one of the first black performers to

use a direct-address monologue while addressing racial politics; this move spoke directly to the culture of the Harlem Renaissance. While the literary movement openly shunned the lowbrow comedy with which Mabley was associated, her rhetoric took a bold, refined, political stance. Just as Langston Hughes affirmed in his essay "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" that the spirit of the movement should embrace the quotidian nature of black life, so did Mabley. In particular, her performances during 1920s through the 1960s refashioned ways of viewing black women. In similar ways that Douglass used ironic inversions of white preachers in his speeches, Jackie Mabley performed her own ironic inversion of black stereotypes to subvert white laughter. Using her on-stage persona as "Moms," Mabley caricatured the Mammy in order shake loose the stereotype while offering a reinvented black woman. As I will discuss in the last section, Mabley used motherhood as a source of rhetorical power in her humor. By signifying the Mammy stereotype, Mabley played on Southern white nostalgia in order to undo static representations of black women during the Jim Crow era and Civil Rights Movement.

Disarming her audiences with humor, Mabley, like Douglass, baited her audiences with the joke only to reveal a racist dehumanizing logic. Take for instance, Mabley's appearance on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson.* After Carson asks Mabley what to call her, Mabley responds that in the U.S. South "they" call her "trigger." Feigning the antics of an old woman hard of hearing, Mabley pauses and says, "at least that's what I think they're saying," to which a speechless Carson, displays visible discomfort. Using the guise of the innocuous grandmother, Mabley disarms her (white) audience only to reveal a racist logic that considers her less than human. Like Douglass's

use of parody, Mabley's punch lines turned audiences to confront dehumanizing, racist sensibilities.

Richard Pryor, Mabley's fellow comedian, openly responded to issues concerning black disenfranchisement in his stand-up routines. Though Pryor differs drastically from Frederick Douglass, I draw similarities between the two by suggesting that both use parody to challenge narratives that rely on white supremacist logic. Pryor's comedic apex coincided the later half of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement during the 1970s. As I address later, this political context converged to influence Pryor's post-1968 comedy. Channeling a political rage, Pryor parodied white-authored literary classics in order to revise tragic endings for the black characters. In the same ways that Mabley embodied the mammy to call out its degradation, Pryor performed perceived racial stereotypes in order to challenge white literary renderings of blackness as "other."

Lastly, Paul Beatty's 2015 novel *The Sellout* suggests that racial logic altogether warrants dismissal. The novel turns the rationality of segregation on its head by having its black protagonist reinstitute segregation in order to save his town from erasure. Using this inverted racial logic, Beatty undermines the presumed fixedness of racial caste. Rather than present a world in which racial segregation does not exist or where its character methodically work to eliminate it in the name of justice and equality, the novel offers a black character that believes segregation will establish order and restore a sense of community—his community. Though in the end, the character faces U.S. Supreme Court indictment for slavery (he involuntarily owns Hominy) and for segregation, the novel rests on the belief that blackness can and should constantly exceed expectations,

defy boundaries, and exist in a space of unremitting development. In an interview with *Apogee Journal* editors Alexandra Watson and Cecca Ochoa Beatty Beatty bemoans,

> Everybody's trying to push writers somewhere, and so I try and push back. It trips me out how quick some people are to assume a writer has no imagination or narrative jurisdiction that extends beyond their implied experience or orientation […]So often people read in ways that notions and characterizations that impinge on one's "comfortable living space" are just erased and dismissed […]And we sometimes read and respond to texts like we're leading a wagon team, claiming our rightful land, our space, our entitlements. We go to illogical extremes to justify, reclaim, hold on to, and expand our "space." Literary space, racial, whatever, it's space that often exists only in one's mind (*sic)*. But we can't always deal when presented with the thing we can't imagine… we're so quick to disregard what it is we aren't comfortable with… (1).

That "thing we can't imagine" Beatty presents as a black, slave-owning segregationist in the presumed "post-racial" Obama era. Forgoing the redemptive black hero that purses an exacting, long march toward Black freedom, Beatty's protagonist exercises the flexibility available in the scope of what it means to be black and what it means to be human. In essence, while satirizing black leadership, Beatty allows his cast of black characters to do the absurd, the unimaginable, and ultimately the liberty to dumb things. As in *Hokum,* Beatty's *The Sellout* makes the case that the black literary experience should exceed limited expectations. To this end, Beatty's characters intentionally and absurdly breach their assumed racialized roles in service of imagining a world in which race does not bind us and black authenticity is merely illusory.

By bringing to together this seemingly disparate host of humorists *Laughing to Keep Human* mirrors the nature of humor. That is, humor transcends form and form. In traveling across two centuries, the project reveals an enduring conversation between these humorists that consistently reveals Black interiority and Black humanity. This genealogy of humor turns social and political terror and white supremacist dehumanizing rationale into edified laughter. In the same way that Beatty thanks the "clown" for telling the truth and in turn substantiating our humanity, *Laughing to Keep Human* recognizes how black humorists bear truths otherwise and historically inaccessible to blacks. By speaking up against and in spite of white terror, these black humorists (and black humorists writ large) become what Bambi Haggins refers to as "truth-tellers."

The chapters in this project hope to answer these larger questions concerning what it means to inhabit and rupture white supremacist epistemologies, but further adds that blackness can (and does) exist outside the bounds white epistemologies. In using slavery as the grounding reference, the project puts forth the theory of "keeping human," as one that both celebrates and articulates black humanity despite of and in the wake of white supremacist logics. Chapter one, "Parodying the Master: The Humor of Frederick Douglass," posits that Frederick Douglass's use of parody challenged theocentric racist logic defending slavery and in effect contributed to a black comic tradition. The chapter examines parodies of religious slave owners in Douglas's anti-slavery lectures and in his 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*. Douglass's use of parody in both written texts and in his speeches was a necessary component in unsettling rationale justifying slavery. Scholars James W. Clarke and Darryl Dance Cumber report that white readers and white viewers would perceive first-hand accounts of slavery as "more

believable" when their narrators used humor. This chapter uses Douglass's "sermon satires" to examine how the ex-slave used humor to assert personhood by critiquing Christianity as a classificatory logic. Not only did Douglass's use of humor in his speeches call out the hypocrisies of slavery, but Douglass's use of humor also acknowledged and resisted blackface minstrelsy as it began to shape an American consciousness. Douglass's choice to use humor contributed to later conventions and trends that would manifest in 20th century standup comedy.

The next two chapters transition from more covert forms of humor during abolitionism to two pioneering stand-up comedians, Jackie Mabley and Richard Pryor. Born Loretta Mary Aiken, Jackie "Moms" Mabley fled the limited job options for black women as domestic workers and turned to vaudeville. There, Mabley adapted the on-stage persona Moms—a feisty grandmother with an appetite for young men. From vaudeville, Mabley developed her act into a direct-address monologue and became the first black female stand-up comedian. Like successive comedians, Pryor and Bill Cosby, Mabley gained crossover appeal. Yet, unlike Pryor or Cosby, Mabley always donned a costume. Her maternal guise appeased white audiences enabling Mabley to criticize unjust race relations. Additionally, unlike the other humorists in this project, Mabley's comedy was visibly feminist. Illustrative of this, are what became known as Mabley's "old man jokes"—the comedian's oft-repeated series of jokes stating that "[she] don't want no old men." In one "old man joke," Mabley quips, "being with an old man is like pushing a Cadillac up a steep hill, with a rope." The punch line of the joke of course implies male impotency, intimating her sexual dissatisfaction. But further than that, Mabley's old man jokes engaged a feminist rhetoric that affirmed women's choice—

women's right to choose or *not* to choose sexual partners. In this way, Mabley's humor radicalized what (black) women could say in public regarding sexual choice and political freedom. Further, by counter intuitively embracing the black domestic character, Mabley invokes motherhood as a site of rhetorical power. Chapter two, "The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley," argues that Mabley's caricature of the mammy stereotype in her stand-up was an unlikely move in an attempt to humanize representations of the black woman. By summoning the mammy through her guise and comic demanor, Mabley's stand-up resisted the racial logic of Jim Crowism by reorienting the mammy stereotype, and the patriarchal edicts prescribing women to marriage and domesticity.

Several scholars, including Elsie Williams, examine Mabley's contributions to comedy; yet, few have contextualized her comedy as contributing to the Harlem Renaissance also referred to as the New Negro movement. On the heels of the New Negro movement, Moms Mabley's career burgeoned. While the New Negro movement flourished with aesthetic and intellectual output seeking new representations of blackness and black life, much of these endeavors focused on representations of black men. Just as Mabley's feminist humor stands out among the humorists in this project, her representations of the black woman stood out. This chapter analyzes Mabley's early work in the late 1920s and 1930s, as well as her later work after her crossover success in the mid-1960s. Though Mabley's early work is less characteristic of the "Moms" character featured in the latter half of her career, these early years showcase Mabley's development from vaudevillian to monologist. More importantly, Mabley's comic career during these years represents the emergence of political radicalism in the genre of stand-up.

Chapter three “Richard Pryor and the Black Arts Movement” argues that Richard Pryor’s comedy countered literary narratives of white heroism constructed against black villainy. Thus, Pryor’s comedy disrupts the white imagination manifested in literature as a racist logic. In his 1953 essay, *Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Mask of Black Humanity*, Ralph Ellison exemplifies this racist logic at work in white-authored fictions: “it is the unfortunate for the Negro,” he writes, “that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity” (134). Ellison continues, “the Negroes of fiction are so consistently false to human life that we must question just what they truly represent, both in the literary work and in the inner world of the white American” (136). In this regard, Ellison’s essay probes the fictions of notable white authors such as Mark Twain, Ernest Hemmingway, and William Faulkner. This chapter uses Ellison’s premise to suggest that Pryor’s comedy offers a critique of white-authored narratives representing blackness as inferior. In an off-the-cuff remark, Paul Mooney, Pryor’s friend and writer nicknames the comedian “Dark Twain.” Mooney remarks that if Mark Twain is the best storyteller to ever live, then Pryor is “Dark” Twain. Mooney’s comment makes evident the dual nature of black humor, but also Pryor’s antagonistic connections to U.S. narratives. In several of Pryor’s routines, he parodied literary classics. In a 1977 sketch titled “The Trial,” from *The Richard Pryor Show,* Pryor spoofs Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird.* In it, Pryor plays a corrupt white lawyer who ultimately fails to convict the black defendant. Whereas Lee’s black character dies in the end at the hands of an angry mob, Pryor’s black character lives. The sketch closes with the angry white lynch mob killing the black defendant’s lawyer (a

caricature of Lee's hero, Atticus Finch). In this way, Pryor rewrites the literary classic by saving the black character from death. But, more critically, Pryor unravels a white literary logic that parallels white heroism with black criminality.

This chapter uses Pryor's post-1968 stand-up routines, television sketches, and unpublished screenplays to suggest that by revising literary tropes, the comedian was writing into the contemporaneous Black Arts and Black Literary Movements. In 1968, after his infamous mental breakdown during a Las Vegas act, Pryor fled to Berkeley California. During his stay in Berkeley, Pryor befriended black writers and thinkers including Ishmael Reed and Cecil Brown. Simultaneously, in California, a young, hippie, counterculture thrived, inundating the young comedian. It was during this time that Pryor transformed from the clean-shaven Bill Cosby emulator to the salacious, iconized Pryor. Ultimately, Pryor's comedy developed a Black Nationalist ethos. This chapter shows how the convergence of Pryor's new ethos modified existing literary narratives of black subjugation. Further, this chapter makes an intervention by recognizing Pryor as more than bringing black humor into the mainstream by suggesting that the comedian acts a literary and cultural critic.

The final chapter departs from performances to consider satirical literature. Moving from stage performance, I hope to show a dialogue between black humorists across form. During stage performances the immediate audience is immutable; it is only after the filming and production that the audience broadens. Though Paul Beatty publicly rejects the label of satirist, his novels, including his 2015 *The Sellout* fits the definition of satire by offering a larger critique of society and its ills using a sardonic wit. Chapter four "To Plead Human: Satirizing Black Authenticity and Expanding the Scope of Black

Humanity in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout"* analyzes how Beatty's novel *The Sellout* invites its reader to dispel classificatory logic altogether. Contextualizing Beatty's novel within the influx of scholarship on the post-soul, post-race, and post-black, this chapter argues that *The Sellout* rejects racial logic by rejecting the idea of black authenticity. In the same way that Douglass introduced humor in his anti-slavery lectures to expose racist theology, Mabley embodied the controversial Mammy figure to resist fixed representations of black women, and Pryor countered the dehumanizing logics embedded in U.S. literature, Beatty's novel resists intrraracial expectations of racial logic. Taking its title from the protagonist's decision "to plead human" when faced with the choice to plead guilty or innocent to his crimes, this chapter uses *The Sellout* to observe ways that black writers are pushing that representations of blackness be expanded.

While the existing scholarship on African American humor consistently reveals humor as a critical mode of discourse against narratives of antiblackness, this project hopes to demonstrate how the satirical impulses stemming from slavery influence the contemporary comic landscape. Further, the historical trend in scholarship on black humor centralizes redress, resistance, and rage whereas this project is concerned with celebration, life, and self-making. Over centuries and across genre, the joke can serve as praxis for rethinking embedded racial paradigms Beyond a coping mechanism or an act of remedy, black humor is life-affirming in this way. As resistance and protection, as art and as protest, as entertainment and political output, black humor occupies a unique space in critical discourse that lends itself to reimagining the intersections of human identity.

Chapter One

Parodying the Master
The Humor of Frederick Douglass

What I have said respecting against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity for Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad corrupt, and wicked.

We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for mistresses, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus.

—Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave as Written by Himself*

Though many know Douglass in his many roles as slave, fugitive, orator, author, activist, and lecturer, Douglass was also known as a "funny man." This chapter argues that Douglass's use of humor laid early foundations for the comic ethos of black stand-up comedy in the 20th century by using mimicry and parody to mock white Christian slaveholders, and that in those performances, Douglass's parody's acted as a form of critical self-definition. Specifically, Douglass's humor set out to undo the theological ideology categorizing whiteness as deific and blackness as subordinate. Though Douglass's humor was *not* stand-up comedy, nor was his humor intentionally entertaining—as his resolve was always a serious and unremitting mission against slavery—his use of sarcasm and wit was calculated. Further, Douglass was not the only ex-slave or abolitionist to use humor to recant slavery and white supremacy. James W. Clark Jr. and Darryl Cumber Dance both account for the viability of abolitionist humor in the slave narratives. Each suggests that the paradoxical use of humor to recount slavery's

atrocities made accounts more credible for white readership. In the same vein, William Wells Brown, the ex-slave turned abolitionist, turned his traveling lectures into one-man performances of his comedic play *Escape; Or, Leap for Freedom.* Brown would perform the comic melodrama as the entire cast of characters, which included white and black women and men, slaveholders and the enslaved, at political rallies to promote anti-slavery. But what set Douglass apart from humor in slave narratives and Brown's inventive performance of his play was Douglass's oscillation between straight talk (as himself) and comical mimicry (as the persona of white slaveholders). This marked difference made Douglass's brand of humor more redolent of the stand-up genre, which emerged during the early-mid 20th century. And it is this type of direct castigation, of calling out white supremacy without the fictional apparatuses that obfuscates a direct-address critique makes Douglass's use of humor uniquely radical.

In what became known as his "satirical sermons," Douglass mocked Christian preachers and ministers delivering sermons to their slaves. These particular speeches reveal Douglass as having a distinct proclivity for satire in his written expression, but more pointedly in his performances. These "satirical sermons," which were quite popular during his lecture tour between 1841 and 1845 (just before the publication of his bestselling 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave*) characterize a younger Douglass than the mature statesman we often see in his later career. During these mock sermons or parodies of the "slaveholding religion," Douglass imitated white preachers who cautioned their slaves to "obey [their] master." Relying on parody as one of his signature modes of critique, Douglass's strategy operated twofold. First, using his voice and his body to caricature slave-owning ministers, Douglass

ultimately directed Northern whites to laugh at the Southern white man—a marked distinction from white audiences laughing at the "comic darky." Second, Douglass's use of laughter offset potential hostility from his white audiences, which opened a space for the abolitionist to critique a rigid, religious rationale justifying the enslavement of blacks. These two functions of Douglass's parody—the shifting of white laughter and the disarmament of white hostility—lay bare the hypocrisy and illogic of white supremacy while elevating representations of blackness to expose black interiority and black personhood.

Several reports of Douglass's anti-slavery lectures describe him as a charismatic man who reduced his audiences to laughter. It is through this laughter that Douglass procured a sense of egalitarianism—if only for that fleeting moment of shared mirth. One journalist from *Southern Reporter* characterized Douglass's audience as having eruptions of "uproarious laughter." In fact, Douglass's most well received speeches were the ones in which he used his humor.[2] Through this communal laughter, Douglass democratized the lecture space. Audiences, according to journalistic reports, laughed *with* and not *at* Douglass as he chided white supremacist sensibilities. And in this way, the laughter acted as a tonic that further revealed the abolitionist's intellectual complexity, but also sought to level a racialized hierarchy predicated on Biblical logic.

Specifically, Douglass's steadfast critique of what he called the "slaveholding religion," was a targeted attack on racist theological ideology. In nearly all of his written narratives and in several of his speeches, Douglass condemned a version of American Christianity that promoted American slavery as the natural or divine order. Beginning

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[2] John Blassingame *Frederick Douglass Papers*

with his first documented speech in 1841, delivered at the age of twenty-three, Douglass rebukes the hypocrisy of the pious slave owner. He begins, “I have suffered under the lash without the power of resisting. Yes, my blood has sprung out as the lash embedded itself in my flesh. And yet my master has the reputation of being a pious man and a good Christian” (3). In this excerpt, Douglass aligns the image of his bloodied body and his master’s cruelty with piety. Using the conjunctive adverb “yet” to connect the image of his wounded flesh and his master’s reputed piety, Douglass troubles an incongruous logic—a rationale that allows one to simultaneously brandish the lash while declaring godliness. Though subtle, this grammatical shift through the use of “yet” emphasizes the obvious contradiction, while turning to a vengeful sarcasm. As his career burgeoned, Douglass’s use of sarcasm grew more apparent.

Several scholars have addressed Douglass’s use of humor throughout his 1845 *Narrative* and many cite Douglass’s 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” as an example of Douglass’s intentional use of and *need* for irony in an act of self-actualization. Most recently, Danielle Fuentes Morgan in her 2020 book *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century* turns to Douglass’s speech to highlight several key factors. Observing the use of humor during this time reveals what Morgan terms “kaleidoscope” blackness—a medley of black identity untied from the static or limiting renderings of blackness. That is, viewing this part of history and its players devoid of humor fails to account for the nuances in black humanity, doing a disservice to a deeper understanding of African American experience. Morgan reproduces an excerpt from the speech, citing Douglass,

> At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be espoused; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

Using this 1852 speech, Morgan argues that satire has been a longstanding, necessary part of self-making in African Americans' cultural heritage. It is through a "revolutionary laughter" that might "keep [one] from dying" a psychic death, a social death, or a literal death, which Morgan argues wards off the brutality of the slave system that aims to erode black selfhood. "It is the honesty," Morgan writes, "unveiled by irony, by ridicule, by sarcasm, that might conquer hate and injustice by revealing it and leading to an ethical terrain […] because there is a disruptive possibility that creates space for self-making" (31). Morgan draws attention to Douglass's emphasis on the "*need"* for irony (emphasis mine) as a sharp contrast from the subtly of the humorist more customary during this time. This intentional irony is the act of social justice: "Douglass elucidates the idea that both the possibility and the practice of laughter may contain the revolutionary potential that opens into an ethical realm in which the conscience of the nation may be awakened for freedom" (31). Morgan's swift assessment of Douglass's use of laughter underscores humor's viability as disruptor, but also as a source for actualizing the self.

While many studies on Douglass's use of humor exist, Granville Ganter's 2003 article, "He Made Us Laugh Some: Frederick Douglass's Humor," is one of the few to account for the abolitionist's strategic use of humor as performance[3]. In the opening of the essay, Ganter characterizes Douglass as having the distinct ability to make attendees laugh: "Among Frederick Douglass's formidable skills as a critic of slavery and racial prejudice, he was widely remembered during the nineteenth century for being able to make his audiences laugh" (535). Tracing the humor in both Douglass's written work as well as in his speeches, Ganter adds that Douglass's use of satire illustrates his relationship with a "black comic tradition vexed by contrary impulses of assimilation and resistance" (539). Douglass's humorous dexterity arises from his ability to "assimilate"—successfully mimic white speech patterns—and from his simultaneous "resistance"—his subversive potential as "trickster" and use of a "double-voice narrative." A firm opponent of minstrel humor, Douglass also used his sarcasm to distance himself from the archetypes of the plantation comedies. In this way, just as comedian Moms Mabley employs the mammy character to counter representations of the black woman as servile and inferior—discussed in the second chapter of the project—Douglass harnesses the racial stereotype for anti-slavery suasion. Ganter writes, "Douglass borrows from the language of one group (a prejudiced one that laughs at stereotypes of lazy slaves) for the tools to push his auditors and readers toward a new sense of themselves as human beings and a nation" (537). Thus, humor acts as pedagogical tool for Douglass by shifting audience expectation. While Douglass's written work also features humor, the abolitionist's performance humor, Ganter adds, "exploit[ed] his audience's likely

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[3] "Mocking the Sacred" as well.

prejudices […] transforming himself from social pariah into an equal." While Douglass attempted to detached himself from the stereotypes of plantation comedy, he often deliberately invoked those genres of bigoted humor in the service of the abolitionist cause" (535). The act of laughing, in this regard, afforded Douglass a "complex oratorical rhetoric;" Douglass used laughter to reorient his audience's sense of community. By "exploiting the good mood of his laughing audience," Ganter concludes, "Douglass takes audience members from their prejudiced habits of laughing at plantation stereotypes and moves toward communal laughter at the slaveholder's hypocrisy" (537). In a sense, just as chapter two argues that Moms Mabley embodies the stereotype in an effort to defuse the fraught stereotype of the mammy; Douglass uses the "masters tools"—in the form of the theological language of the oppressor—in order to dismantle the "master's house."

This chapter builds on Ganter's analysis of Douglass's humor, but focuses on the abolitionist's choice of the sermon as the target of his satirical ridicule. In doing so, I suggest that Douglass's "satirical sermons" not only staged an anti-colonial attack on racist theological definitions of the human, but in parodying white ministers, Douglass stylized a black comic tradition (Erica Britt) . In nearly all of Douglass's speeches, he admonishes the Christian church for condoning and perpetuating slavery, but I draw attention to the ways in which Douglass challenges the Christian logic that constructs blacks as inherently made for servitude and whites as inherently dominant.

Douglass's satirical sermons reveal three outcomes. First, because Douglass's humor joined an existing discourse of fugitive slave humor, his rhetoric strengthened an anti-slavery movement grounded in humor. Second, Douglass's use of his body—a black

body regarded as property or stolen property as fugitive slave—countered the grotesque displays of whites in blackface in minstrels. And third, Douglass's satires politicized black humor through performance. To address these strategies, this chapter proceeds in three sections.

The first section, "Fugitive Slave Humor," links Douglass's use of humor to an existing tradition of humor in fugitive slave rhetoric. In narratives as well as in lectures, ex-slaves often turned to humor as persuasion. As abovementioned, James W. Clark Jr. and Darryl Cumber Dance both account for the viability of abolitionist humor in the slave narrative. Clark's 1974 essay "The Fugitive Slave as Humorist" notes, "the most humorous historians of slavery in America, paradoxically, have been some fugitives whose slave narratives were published during the Abolition Crusade as propaganda" (73). Clarke's article examines various types of humor in slave narrative, including the trickster narrative and religious humor. Dance's article "The Wit and Humor in the Slave Narrative," acknowledges that much of the humor in the narratives "capitalized on the ludicrousness of the white man's statutes and the contradictions inherent in the existence of a slave system" (126). Both scholars address fugitive slave humor's assault on the various logics that upheld slavery. Perhaps the most essential function of humor in the narratives of the former enslaved was how it made critiques of slavery (and whites) more palatable to white audiences and white readers. Clarke notes that humor, according to white reader reception, made slaves seem "more believable." Douglass's "satirical sermons" align with this trend of using humor to articulate slavery's debasement while making his message palatable for white reception. More specifically, Douglass's use of

humor to assault *religion* as a cog in slavery's machine was a strategy that many fugitive slaves employed.

This section also offers a reading of "A Parody"—a lampoon of the Southern Hymn "Heavenly Union." Douglass uses the parody to close his 1845 *Narrative.* A close reading of the poem emphasizes Douglass's persistent use of parody as an aesthetic choice across genre—in both his lectures as mini performances and in his written work. Douglass's concentration on the parody across genres oriented both his reading and viewing audiences to confront slavery's hypocrisy. And while many scholars have addressed the opening scene of the *Narrative*—the brutal beating of his Aunt Hester—to signal Douglass's entrance into slavery as the "making of a slave," I draw attention to the end of *Narrative.* Douglass's rhetorical choice to close with a sarcastic parody of the "slaveholding religion," gestures toward the logic used in the *making* of and sustainment of the slave masters.

The second section, "'Stylizing the Preacher,'" focuses on the sermon as a literal and symbolic site in Douglass's humor. One of the was that Douglass connects to the black comic ethos of later 20th and 21st century comedy is through his stylization of the preacher. The title of this section, which I draw from Erica Britt's 2016 essay "Stylizing the Preacher: Preaching, Performance, and the Comedy of Richard Pryor," calls attention to the trope of mocking the preacher and the sermon in comedy routines. While there are substantive differences between the stylized preacher in Pryor's routines (the preachers in Pryor's bit is black and Pryor performs for entertainment and for profit), and Douglass's humorous imitations of white ministers, this connection between the two reveal a comedic lineage worth noting. Granville Ganter notes that part of "the success of

Douglass's satire also needs to be understood in terms of commercial competition for audiences. The sermon parody was a very popular genre of American humor" (539). This section begins by tracing Douglass's early relationship with religion and his training in the church to distinguish his religious devotion from his castigation of religion. Douglass's 1855 autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* captures his first encounter with religion at the age of thirteen as an "awakening." Douglass writes, "After this, I saw the world in a new light. I seemed to live in a new world, surrounded by new objects, and to be animated by new hopes and desires. I loved all mankind—slaveholders not excepted; though I abhorred slavery more than ever" (Chapter 12). Douglass's spiritual enlightenment informed his derision of the "slaveholding religion" and contributed to his oratorical style. Most critically, in terms of his humor, his serious devotion to Christianity added to his rhetorical credibility. This sharp contrast Douglass created between true Christianity and "the slaveholding religion," gave credence to his straight man/fool act.

The second half of this section is devoted to reading two of Douglass's slaveholder's sermons—"American Prejudice and Southern Religion: An Address Delivered in Hingham, Mass." (1841), and "I Am Here to Spread Light on American Slavery: An Address Delivered in Cork, Ireland" (1845).[4]These two speeches represent an iteration of Douglass's satirical sermon modeled after his own Methodist priests and

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[4] Other speeches in which Douglass uses parody to portray the slaveholder include, "The Church is the Bulwark of American Slavery: An Address Delivered in Boston, Mass." (1842); "The Southern Style of Preaching to Slaves: An Address Delivered in Boston, Mass" (1842), "A Simple Tale of American Slavery: An Address Delivered in Sheffield, England," (1846), "Evangelical Man-Stealers: An Address Delivered in Manchester, England" (1846) Slavery Exists Under the Eaves of the American Church: An Address Delivered in Liverpool" (1846).

Methodist "class-leaders.[5]" In both speeches, Douglass imitates the pious slaveholder's directive to "Obey Your Master." The earlier speech, "American Prejudice and Southern Religion," characterizes Douglass before his *Narrative* made him one of the most famous black men in the U.S., whereas the latter speech represents his international reception just after the *Narrative's* publication. Though the speeches rely on a journalist record, the second speech, "I m Here to Spread Light on American Slavery" (1845) reveals a more developed comedic sense. Specifically, Douglass's second parodic sermon incites more laughter than the first and it also features journalistic record of Douglass's imitative gestures as he executes the slave-master persona.

The final half of this section suggests that Douglass "stylizes" the preacher in order to undermine representations of blacks in minstrels. As abovementioned, Douglass's choice in sermons also acts as counter to the blackface tradition of the "stump speech"—Negro dialect orations designed to satirize black preachers or other Negro intellectuals. But rather than an outright subversion of tropes in blackface, Douglass recognized their potential usefulness. Robert Nowatzki's 2010 *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* suggests that the concurrent rise of abolition and minstrelsy caused complex parallels between the two. Nowatzki writes, "Abolitionism overlapped with formulaic minstrel shows in the scripted performances that white abolitionists expected from former slaves at meetings; whites often discourages ex-slaves from expressing opinions and asked them merely to relate the horrid details of their experiences" (23). As a "professional fugitive" and a constituent of

[5] In both speeches Douglass refers to his master Thomas Auld.

white abolitionists[6], Douglass was well aware of the shared dynamics between abolitionism and minstrelsy. Distinguishing these dynamics, Nowatzki writes, "Though white abolitionists did not deride black social ambitions in the way 'Zip Coon' did, many of them did not recognize the intellectual potential and achievements of black people [...] white abolitionists had little more tolerance for assertive free black people than did the minstrel audiences who enjoyed the ridicule of northern black dandies expressed in these songs (17). Well aware of the interplay between minstrelsy and abolitionism, Douglass used humor to manipulate white audiences accustomed to racial stereotypes.

The chapter concludes by connecting Douglass to a tradition of radical black humor. Further, this section makes the bold claim that Douglass's parodies contributed to the trend of mocking or mimicking whiteness, later popularized in 20th century black-stand up comedy as "white people be like" comedy. Again, while this section does not label Douglass a comedian nor situate his humor as stand-up, I suggest that the satirical sermons anticipated the trope of personifying whiteness in black stand-up. McAllister's *Whiting Up,* brilliantly analyzes a history of black people "whiting up," through "whiteface minstrelsy"—the extra-theatrical, social performance of whiteness by black people in semi-private spheres (e.g. "white people be like" comedy)—and as "stage Europeans"—black actors physically and vocally manifesting whites often using white face paint and blonde wigs. Though Douglass does not engage in a strictly social or theatrical performance, he does construct an on-stage persona that reflects attributes of McAllister's "whiteface minstrelsy." Moreover, Douglass's satirical impulses align with the sarcastic rhetoric of figures like David Walker, Sojourner Truth, and later Malcolm X

[6] In 1841, the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society hired Douglass as a lecturer for three years.

as well as with the humor of figures like Richard Pryor. In this way, Douglass's sermons participate in a larger black comic tradition.

Just as Ganter points out that Douglass's humor illustrates his relationship to a black comic tradition, this chapter pushes the claim further and argues that Douglass's performances resemble later twentieth century comedic conventions. During Douglass's parodies, he often assumed the lilt and a demeanor akin to a stand-up comic. By alternating between an imitation of Christian ministers and an explanation of their hypocrisy, Douglass enacted the persona of the comic duo—as the fool (the ministers) and the straight man (himself). Additionally, accounts from *The Liberator* and *The National Anti-Slavery Standard* note that Douglass exemplified theatrical skill during his lectures. In the introduction to *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One Volume I,* editor, John Blassingame writes, "On the [lecture] platform he was tragedian, a comic, a mimic, and an occasional singer." Blassingame continues with an excerpt from an 1842 report in *The Liberator* "'[Douglass] evinced great imitative powers, in an exhibition of their style of preaching to the slaves…his graphic mimicry of Southern priestly whining and sophistry were replete with humor and apparent truth.' Thomas Wentworth Higginson asserted that Douglass 'was a perfect mimic. He could reproduce anything'"(xxxi). In this way, Douglass's use of humor in his lectures—specifically his racialized mimicry—resembles the behaviors of later black comedic performers who act as impersonators of perceived racial difference.

Again, while these speeches reveal that Douglass was in fact a "funny man," this chapter in no way suggests that his humor was mere farce or reduces the gravity of Douglass's rhetoric. Additionally, while the chapter situates Douglass within a collective

of black humorists, it does not suggest that Douglass was a comedian. As Dick Gregory aptly puts it in the forward to Mel Watkins's collection *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today,* "there is a *big difference* between humor and comedy. One of the strongest examples of humor is found in the black church. Preachers are not comedians, but they use humor [...] A comedian is someone who makes a living telling jokes [...] The professional role of a comic is to make folks laugh" (xiii). Given Gregory's example, Douglass seems to fuse the incongruous humor of hypocritical preachers with the comedic impulse to make his audiences laugh. Yet, unlike a comedian who might work solely for the laugh, Douglass's provocation of laughter coaxes social morality. For an ex-slave in front of white, sometimes cantankerous audiences, humor offered an aesthetic instrument for demanding human rights.

Douglass and the Tradition of Fugitive Slave Humor

Frederick Douglass's use of humor accompanied existing fugitive slave narratives that used humor to reveal the cruelties of slavery to white readers. Though seemingly contradictory, ex-slaves used humor in narratives to depict the harsh conditions of life as a slave. Twentieth century scholars account for the prevalence of slave humor in written narratives, suggesting that wit and laughter allowed slaves to transcend their earthly hell while also conveying to their readership a more credible account. As aforementioned, James W. Clark's essay "The Fugitive Slave as Humorist" opens with the declaration that "the most humorous historians of slavery in America, paradoxically, have been some fugitives whose slave narratives were published during the Abolition Crusade as propaganda" (73). Focusing on fugitive slave humor before the Civil War, Clark suggests that these texts warrant "special consideration" (73). Readers, according to the essay,

received slave narratives that chose to mix humor and tragedy as more “believable.” Clark writes that “given the slave narratives’ purpose of arousing and sustaining sentiment against slavery, it might have seemed to [William Lloyd] Garrison and others that recitals of that institution’s unrelenting horror would achieve that end most effectively. But the content of many authentic narratives suggest that through occasional humor this propaganda became more apt and believable” (73).

Clark accounts for two types of humor in fugitive slave narratives: duplicitous and religious. Duplicitous humor features the slave as a trickster, outmaneuvering an unsuspecting master, which often connoted a retributive distinction. For this reason, Clark notes, duplicitous or deceitful scenes in slave narratives pleased its anti-slavery readership the most. Clark writes, “Since the public that was committing itself to the abolition of slavery viewed the slave owners as adversaries, perhaps no passages in the narratives pleased crusaders more than those in which the slaves outwitted their masters” (73). From the 1846 *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke,* Clark recreates a scene illustrating how slaves would often wear deceptive, “verbal masks.” For their masters and mistresses, slaves would convey one persona and when in the privacy of their slave peers they would reveal their true persona. The passage states,

> *Do not slaves often say that they love their masters very much?*—Say so? Yes, certainly. And this loving master and mistress is the hardest work that slaves have to do. When any stranger is present, we have to love them very much. When master is sick, we are in great trouble. Every night the slaves gather around the house, and send up one or two to see how master [is doing]. They creep up to the bed, and with a very soft voice, inquire, “How is dear massa? O massa, how we

> want to hear your voice out in the field again!" Well, this is what they say up in the sick room. They come down to their anxious companions. "How is the old man? "Will he die? "Yes, yes; he sure to go, this time; he never whip the slaves no more." "Are you sure? Will he dies" "O yes! Surely gone for it, now." Then they all look glad, and go to the cabin with a merry heart. (74).

The humor from this passage arises doubly. There is humor in the form of accommodationist wit ("O massa, how we want to hear your voice out in the field again!"). And, the humor also arises from the blatancy of the ruse. The passage makes explicit the artifice of the verbal mask when it states, "Say so? Yes, certainly." That is, slaves "say" one thing—performing as an obliging servant—but when "they come down to their companions" they say another. Duplicity in slave narratives, Clark adds, was not always a ploy that slaves used against the slave master. The article points to several examples of slaves outwitting other black people, including a scene from William Wells Brown's narrative *The Narrative of William Wells Brown as Written by Himself,* in which Brown convinces "a black fellow" into taking a whipping intended for him. The rhetorical complexity in humorous narratives, evidenced in scenes like Brown's and The Clarke brothers', accentuated the slaves' human worth, which provided additional arguments against slavery (75).

The second type of humor that Clark recognizes is religious humor. Religious humor in the slave narrative often challenged the piety of Christian slaveholders—as in Douglass's satirical sermons—but religious wit also challenged the logic of divinity altogether. Clark points to Sojourner Truth as an exemplar of using religious humor. His article recalls one of Truth's exhortations from her 1850 *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*:

> Why, if God works by day, and one day's work tires him, and he is obliged to rest, either from weariness or on account of darkness, or if he waiting for the "cool of the day to talk in the garden," because he was inconvenienced by the heat of the sun, why then it seems that God cannot do as much as I can; for I can bear the sun at noon, and work several days and nights in succession without being much tired. Or, if he rested nights because of darkness, it is very queer that he should make night so dark that he could not see himself. If I had been God, I would have made the night light enough for my own convenience, surely. (76)

Truth's rationale evokes humor by questioning the omnipotence of God. In contrast from Douglass's parodies, which directly castigate the white preacher's hypocrisy, Truth deems her own abilities superior to God's. In this regard, Truth's humor goes beyond a criticism of the oppressor; her humor constructs the slave as superhuman. As she also does in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech, Truth uses religious humor in order to impart perspective on the impracticality and inhumanity of slavery's conditions.

Like Clark's essay, Daryl Cumber Dance's 1977 essay "The Wit and Humor in Slave Narratives" delineates different comic trends in the slave narrative. Dance acknowledges that the humor for a vast majority of slave narratives exploited the illogicalities of the white man's statutes. Just as for twentieth century humorists such as Richard Pryor—addressed in chapter three for his themes of U.S. disillusionment in his comedy—many slave narratives derided the paradox of slavery as an institution in the presumed land of the free. Primed for irony, these slave narratives, Dance adds predicated their humor on the inherent irony in the "existence of a slave system […] in a country which took great pride in its promise of democracy, freedom and liberty to all"

(126). From William Grime's *Life of William Grimes, the Runway Slave,* Dance uses the following excerpt to illustrate this invective humor, critical of hypocritical American ideals: "If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy *and free* America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty!" (126). Just as Douglass creates an ironical turn with his use of the word "yet" when describing the paradox of his master's brutality when he writes, "And yet my master has the reputation of being a pious man," Grime's narrative mocks the tenets of freedom in the U.S. Constitution. In constructing the image of the wounded flesh as "stripes on [his] back," Grime recreates a distorted image of the stars and stripes on the American flag. His skin becomes a grotesque reminder of American slavery's depravity. As an ironic jab, the passage begins "if it were not for the stripes on my back" and continues with "I would in my will leave my skin as legacy to the government." The overt sarcasm here relies on the notion that the American slave *is* the dark legacy of the American government; and the "skin" of the American slave *does* "bind the charter of American liberty." This derisive humor manifested most apparently in humor derived from outwitting or getting revenge on the master. Dance points to accounts of slaves stealing from their masters (Josiah Henson), physically beating their masters (Frederick Douglass versus Covey), and escaping from the master (Henry Box Brown).

Yet, ubiquitous throughout the humor in the slave narrative, Dance notes, is the tendency toward mocking the Christian ministers. Dance writes, "another paradoxical situation which the slave narrators treat with a great deal of irony and hypocrisy is of the

old slave masters and ministers who espoused Christianity while practicing quite the opposite of what they preached" (126). Of those who satirize "Christian piety," Dance includes, Frederick Douglass, Lunsford Lane, James Mars, John Brown, William Craft, Milton Clarke, Henry Bibb, John Thompson, and Henry Box Brown. One of the key differences in fugitive slaves' depictions of hypocritical Christian piety from those of their white abolitionist counterparts, such as Child, was the lack of black stereotypes.

Though Dance concludes that the humor in the slave narrative indicates the black man's ability to "rise above," fugitive slave humor also emphasizes the manifold inconsistencies of the slave system. Slaves often turned to humor in order to highlight the injurious *system* of slavery rather than point out the flaws of its individual perpetrators. More specifically, Douglass's religious humor attempts to collapse the pro-slavery, Christian logic denoting blacks as integrally subordinate than whites. While several scholars acknowledge how the slave narrative centralizes violence as critical in shaping the slave, Douglass's use of humor highlights the ideologies sustaining pro-slavery conscious.

[[Douglass's unwavering resentment of religious hypocrisy accompanied a larger Christian discourse in nineteenth century abolitionism. William Lloyd Garrison's Boston-based abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator,* almost always featured a critique of slavery and the role of the church. Take for example an 1841 issue of the paper—the year marking Douglass's official start as an abolitionist with Garrison and his employment as a lecturer with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. As in nearly all of its publications, this issue of *The Liberator* features varying expositions on the role of Christianity in the fight against slavery, including a short story, titled "The Black

Saxons" from Lydia Maria Child's *Liberty Bell.* Though the story features a stereotypical black character exemplifying the old benign black man (reminiscent of Stowe's Uncle Tom), Child's story advocates against slavery. Through character dialogue, the author emphasizes Christianity as both a means for slave masters to manipulate their slaves and as pacifist resistance for slaves growing restless with their conditions. In another example, a contributor expresses concern over the widespread effects that the Southern church imparts on the nation as a whole, writing:

> Slavery. How is it to be overcome? We answer, by destroying pro-slavery, which is its aliment and staff of life [...] Slavery lives and thrives because it is honorable, while it is admitted to be wicked. The South are directly guilty, and are therefore the interested *party.* The North stand indifferently [...] Who constitute the influences here on whom we are to work? The head and front of them all is the Church, headed by the ministers [...] they are an ungodly company [...] They are much in favor of slavery, as slavery is in favor of them.

And in another instance, a contributor interrogates the church's accountability in the fight against slavery, writing, "Look then for an instant, at the conduct of nations called Christians, in their *national* capacity [...] Has the Church done its duty? Have its members avoided all participation in these wrongs, or have they mingled in the mud chase after selfish indulgence, with scarcely a thought for the sufferings of their brethren?" Whether as short story or expository diatribe, Garrisonian abolitionism—to which Douglass subscribed until his break from it in 1851—adhered to the notion that "trusting in God," ensured the righteousness in the fight against slavery. Garrison's abolitionists sought to make culpable those minsters acting on "ungodly" impulse. Just as

throughout Douglass's oration and in his narratives, Christianity, the slavery debate, and politics often melded. One last example, excerpted from *Anti-Slavery Standard,* encapsulates this sentiment. The excerpt expresses feelings of "sadness" due to the "decreasing faith in moral influence, indicated by a large portion of anti-slavery newspapers [...] forget [ting] to trust in God." But rather than confessing feelings of sadness, Douglass occasionally turned to a sardonic humor. In using his wit, Douglass used laughter to create communal shame against slaveholders and the slaveholding consciousness. His burlesques deliberately attacked contradictory Christian logic, which used theology to justify owning humans.

[[[[In a recollection from his *Narrative,* Douglass explicates the ever-present risks for black people who spoke candidly to whites about the harsh realities of slavery. Douglass reminds the reader of a persistent vulnerability that slaves faced for telling the truth. In this scene from his *Narrative*, Douglass recounts a story of a slave who unknowingly speaks to his master. He writes,

> Colonel Lloyd owned so many [slaves] that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him. It is reported of him that, while riding along the road one day, he met a colored man, and addressed him in the usual manner of speaking to colored people on the public highways of the south: 'Well, boy, whom do you belong to?' 'To Colonel Lloyd,' replied the slave. 'Well, does the colonel treat you well?' No, sir' was the ready reply. 'What does he work you too hard?' 'Yes, sir.' […] He thought, said, and heard nothing more of the matter, until two weeks afterwards.

> The poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a meeting's warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions. (x)

For the slave, the act of telling the truth incurred tragic and life-altering consequences; albeit, to be black (and to be a slave), meant and still means to exist with the constant threat of white terrorism and violence. Like other abolitionists, Douglass confronted physical opposition. As Blassingame notes, "Douglass spoke to all types of audiences. Many were antagonistic and some were violent" (xlii). And though Douglass encountered antagonism from black audiences as well as from white audiences, the systemic threat of violence always loomed greater when addressing inimical white audiences. Congruently for Douglass, telling the truth by implicating whites for crimes against humanity came with extreme risk. Douglass encountered numerous threats throughout his career. He received threats of bodily harm—as evidenced in an 1861 handbill announcing, "Nigger Fred is coming," inviting citizens to "drive him from [the] city"—and threats from crowd hecklers. Blassingame notes that Douglass, as a proper Garrisonian, maintained non-violence as a practice until 1843 when a mob attacked him in Pendleton, Indiana.

Douglass met enmity with ridicule and wit. Part of humor's strategic usefulness for Douglass in conveying the crime of slavery was in its capacity to disarm in order to

eschew the threat of violence. Nothing pleased Douglass more, the editors of *The Frederick Douglass Papers* add, "than to find among a friendly audience a vocal dissenter to use as a foil. Since the heckling of abolitionists was a popular antebellum pastime, he was rarely disappointed" (xliv). Douglass often used his sense of humor and quick-witted rationale to address dissenters directly.]]]]

[[[Many scholars have drawn attention to the opening scenes of Douglass's *Narrative*—the brutal spectacle of his Aunt Hester's beating—to point to young Douglass's entrance into slavery. The epiphanous moment awakened Douglass to his status as a slave. Further, Douglass's However few turn to Douglass's use of parody at the end of *Narrative* Saidiya Hartman, for instance, uses her seminal text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (Race and American Culture)* to call attention to the ways in which quotidian forms of coercive cruelty—"slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law"—shaped the conditions of slavery. Though she chooses not to focus on the spectacle of violence against black bodies, Hartman opens the book by recalling Douglass's account of his Aunt Hester's beating and the ways in which witnessing this beating inaugurated his entrance into slavery. Hartman emphasizes that it is by seeing violence that Douglass psychologically enters slavery. Hartman writes,

> The 'terrible spectacle' that introduced Frederick Douglass to slavery was the beating of his Aunt Hester […] Douglass establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born.' The passage through the blood-stained gate is an

> inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved. In this regard, it is a primal scene […] the terrible spectacle dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another; this is confirmed by the event's placement in the opening chapter on genealogy. (3)

Though as Fred Moten suggests Hartman's decision not to reproduce the scene of Aunt Hester's beating is somewhat "illusory"—Hartman reproduces it in its reference—she recognizes the ways in which the spectacle of violence births Douglass the slave. Hartman's attention to Douglass's placement of the scene in the chapter on his genealogy parallels it to a moment of birth; by viewing of his master's violence, Douglass becomes a slave.

As was the convention, antebellum slave narratives relayed the violence of slavery in order to advocate its abolition. However, Douglass's exaggerated imitations of slaveholders invert the spectacle from violence of slavery of black body to the spectacle of a white slave-owner claiming to be a Christian. Correspondingly, if witnessing Aunt Hester's beating at the opening of the narrative represents the ways in which the spectacle of violence necessitates the making of the slave, perhaps Douglass's excoriation of the "slaveholding religion" at the end of the *Narrative* illustrates the ideologies that enable the making of the slave*holde*r. Careful to make the distinction between what he calls "Christianity proper" and the "slaveholding religion" or "Christianity of the land," Douglass makes clear his disdain for a religion that speaks doubly: on the one hand it proclaims virtue and on the other hand it espouses evil. He devotes the appendix of the *Narrative* to making this distinction between the two. He writes, "I find that, since

reading over the forgoing Narrative that I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose to an opponent to all religion." Douglass clarifies "what I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion"* (113). Douglass concludes the appendix—his denunciation of the "Christianity of the land"—with a parody. Using this parody, Douglass furthers the distance between the two types of Christianity. Douglass models the parody, aptly titled "A Parody," after the Southern hymn "Heavenly Union." By using a parody Douglass establishes a critical distance between the theology and its contradictory racism. Whereas the original hymn beings,

> Come, saints and sinners here me tell
> The wonders of Emmanuel,
> Who saved me from a burning hell
> And brought my soul with Him to dwell,
> And gave me Heavenly Union

Douglass's parody begins:

> Come, saints and sinners here me tell
> How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
> And women buy and children sell,
> And preach all sinners down to hell,
> And sing of heavenly union.
>
> They'll church you if you sip a dram,
> And damn you if you steal a lamb;

Yet rob old Tony, Doll, and Sam,

Of human rights, and bread and ham;

Kidnapper's heavenly union.

Linda Hutcheon defines parody as "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text." She continues, "Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). The differences in Douglass's opening signal an attempt to both call out hypocrisy but also signal an attempt to humanize black slaves in the face of their systemic dehumanization. Douglass writes that "pious priests" will "church you if you sip a dram" or "steal a lamb," but "rob Tony, Doll, and Sam, of human rights, and bread and ham." Here, Douglass personalizes the slaves by naming them while emphasizing Christian hypocrisy. Douglass compares the image of stealing a lamb with the pious priests stealing human rights (and bread and ham). With this, Douglass invokes the Biblical adage "he who is without sin, cast the first stone." But more importantly, Douglass implicates the pious priests for greater crimes against humanity while still holding them accountable for stealing bread and ham. The parody continues,

Another preacher whining spoke

Of One whose heart for sinners broke:

He tied old Nanny to an oak,

And drew the blood at every stroke,

And prayed for heavenly union.

Again, Douglass humanizes and personalizes the slave. In calling the slave “old Nanny,” Douglass familiarizes the victim. Though she remains nameless, Douglass creates a familial distinction in using the word “Nanny,” which implies both grandmother and caregiver. By using the slaves’ names, Douglass appeals to his readership’s pathos. In effect, there are no slaves in the sense of property in Douglass’s parody. Instead Douglass populates his parody with people—“Jack,” Nell,” “Tony,” Doll,” “Sam,” and “old Nanny.” While Douglass chooses to name the slaves in a rhetorical maneuver to humanize those deemed less than human under the dictates of slavery, he also chooses to leave the “pious priests” nameless. By doing so, Douglass underscores the inhumanity of the priest’s actions. Throughout the parody, after initially naming them “pious priests,” Douglass only uses the pronoun “they” to refer to the priests. Leaving the individual priests nameless, Douglass highlights a larger system of corruption operating as the semblance Christian doctrine.

Throughout the *Narrative* as well as in his speeches, Douglass imputes slavery as an injurious institution that harms all humanity. Constructing slavery analogous to a disease, Douglass notes that the system contaminates the slave masters and mistresses just as it does the slave. Douglass describes the shift of his once kind-hearted mistress writing,

> My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not

only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me […] Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one tiger-like fierceness. (48-9)

And later in the narrative, Douglass experiences the debasement of the auction block writing, "At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder. (56) In Douglass's recollection of his once "tender-hearted" mistress, he positions her as a casualty of slavery's system. Using this rhetorical move, Douglass personifies slavery, making "slavery" strip his mistress of her once "lamblike disposition." By positioning slavery as the corrupt system, Douglass rebukes the *system* of slavery, rather than blaming individuals. While placing culpability on a system that spoils both the slave master and the slave, Douglass exposes religion as one of slavery's critical influencer.

Douglass's choice to use parody as critique lends itself to Bambi Haggins's assessment of the black comic as a Bahktinian clown. Citing Mikhail Bahktin from *Discourse in the Novel,* Haggins writes that the clown has,

> the right to be "other" in this world, the right not to make common causes with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; . . . they see the underside and the falseness of every situation. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure: the entire being of characters such as these is, after all, utterly on the surface; everything is brought out on to the square...This creates that distinctive means for externalizing a human being, via parodic laughter.

Relating this to the black comic, Haggins explains:

> Given that the stand-up comic's persona might arguably be a conflation of the three (the rogue, the clown, and the fool), Bahktin's assertion that the clown is constructed in opposition to "everything that is conventional and false" (162) seems to capture the essential directive of the comic as cultural critic. According to Bahktin the laughter elicited by the comic is "of the public square"—understood and defined collectively by and directed to the very community, which the comic (necessarily) lampoons. Consequently, this definition, which extols the comic's conflation of the insider's knowledge of the community and the outsider's objective view, is part of what empowers the comedic cultural critic to expose the "internal contradictions" within myriad aspects of black life for "us" (African Americans), while still speaking to the multiple forms of hegemony one experiences while living as a black person in America. In order for the comedic discourse produced by the black comic to be effectively edifying, it must be self-aware and self-reflexive—able to illicit thought along with the laughter.

Though Haggins's point, excerpted from her 2009 book *Laughing Mad,* refers directly to the black stand-up comedian, Douglass's use of parody links him to this concept of the Bahktinian clown. As chattel and intellectual; as outlaw and as a victim, Douglass occupies this category of "other." As this "other," Douglass uses his humor to "see the underside and falseness of every situation." As Haggins points out, Douglass acts as insider and objective outsider.

Ultimately, connecting Douglass's humor to a larger tradition of fugitive slave humor underscores its viability in relaying an antislavery cause. Beyond endorsing

antislavery, however, humor, allowed fugitive slaves to voice their frustrations, enact their retribution, and display their intellectual aptitude through their complex verbal displays of wit. The parody, in this regard, because of its distinctive capacity to establish critical difference, offered an obvious mode of humor for Douglass. In using the parody to ridicule a Christian logic, Douglass turned the sermon into a site for critique and a space for enlightenment. Douglass's transition from the written parody of a Southern hymn to performance parodies of Methodist priests reorients laughter as a singular experience of a reader to the communal laughter of an audience. Further, the page to stage transition signals a transition from laughing at the representation of the slave system to laughing at representations of individuals. Thus, through performance parody Douglass manipulates the sermon to turn Southern white men into punch lines.

'Stylizing the Preacher'

Douglass's religious critiques stemmed from his personal relationship with religion. In all of his autobiographies, Douglass expresses a devotion to Christianity. In *My Bondage My Freedom* Douglass recounts his "religious nature awakened," writing,

> Previous to my contemplation of the anti-slavery movement, and its probable results, my mind had been seriously awakened to the subject of religion. I was not more than thirteen years old, when I felt the need of God, as a father and protector. My religious nature was awakened by the preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson. He thought that all men, great and small, bond and free, were sinners in the sight of God; [...]After this, I saw the world in a new light. I seemed to live in a new world, surrounded by new objects, and to be

> animated by new hopes and desires. I loved all mankind—slaveholders not excepted; though I abhorred slavery more than ever." (Chapter 12)

Douglass would continue to demonstrate this spiritual enlightenment throughout his career and throughout his life. In 1839, just before he began touring with the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), Douglass became an ordained minister for the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. In that same year, Douglass would hear Garrison speak for the first time, which in later remarks Douglass likened abolitionism to a "new religion."

Of Douglass's speaking style John Blassingame writes that, "there is little evidence that Douglass read many of the popular nineteenth-century guides to oratory. Instead, he derived his first rhetorical theories from the black preacher and the slave story teller" (xxii). Though Blassingame suggests that little evidence points to Douglass reading nineteenth century guides for oratory, Douglass in his 1845 *Narrative* suggests otherwise. From his *Narrative,* Douglass describes encountering *The Columbian Orator.* First published in 1797 by Massachusetts's educator Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator* was a popular manual intended to "Improve Youth and Others in Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence." As the notes from the *Modern Library Edition* of Douglass's narrative indicate, the manual extolled values of freedom, liberty, and democracy (381). Just after learning to read, Douglass, at the age of twelve got a hold of the manual. Douglass recalls, "Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book […] In the same book, I met with on of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest" (51). Though Douglass received little to no formal training in his

speaking style, the manual, as his narrative suggests, not only provided Douglass with oratorical instruction, but it also armed him with a newfound indignation toward slavery. Douglass describes reading the guidebook and encountering a story of a slave and his master. Douglass recollects the story:

> Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say something very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master. (50)

After reproducing this experience, Douglass links his new knowledge and his newly acquired literary with an embittered new passion for freedom. Douglass recalls that the more he read, the more he "was led to abhor and detest [his] enslavers" (51). Coupled with becoming literate, Douglass's relationship with religion greatly influenced his speaking style. David Blight's 2018 *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* also characterizes Douglass's emergence as a public speaker as an amalgamation of spiritual edification and a quest for freedom. In his downtime working as a field hand, Douglass, Blight writes, "Discovered his charisma and burnished his love of words." Douglass would practice speaking among a group of peers. Blight cites Douglass writing that, "It

was ‘in the woods, behind the barn, and in the shade of trees I began my public speaking’” (97). Blight continues,

> With *The Columbian Orator* in his hands, which he had somehow kept hidden from the Covey’s and Auld’s in his life, and with a Webster’s spelling book and a copy of the Bible, Frederick, now tall and with an adult’s deeper voice, stood before these young men and preached the power of literary as the means to freedom. Under an old live oak on the Eastern Shore on summer Sabbaths, practicing gestures with his arms and shoulders, and modulating the sounds and cadences of his words as *The Columbian Orator* instructed, the greatest antislavery orator of the nineteenth century found his voice (68).

Blight’s depiction of the budding young speaker brings together Douglass’s preacher-like style, an anti-slavery rhetoric, and Christian values.

Douglass’s use of the sermon as target of criticism in his slaveholder’s parodies signifies his admiration for the lecture as a form. In an1849 issue from his newspaper *The North Star* Douglass emphasizes his preference for speeches over the written word. Douglass writes, “The pen is not to be despised, but who that knows anything of the might and electricity of speech as it bursts from hearts of fire, glowing with light and life, will acknowledge the superiority over the pen for immediate effect […] humanity, justice and liberty demand the service of the living human voice, and the power of exalted eloquence, as their exponent” (1). According to Blassingame, effective speeches for Douglass, were logical, clear, and “*combined* admirable taste and judgment” (xxiv). Douglass’s ideal model of a good speech was the Sermon on the Mount. Among attributes including, sincerity, and consistency, Douglass believed that “moral heroism”

distinguished a good sermon, from a bad sermon. From an 1854 journal entry, Douglass writes that an orator should sense "himself supported by the Almighty, and by all the powers of the universe; and a conscious personal consistency as well […]. A good sermon from a bad preacher—a righteous denunciation from a bad man—a command to serve God emanation from the devil—an exhortation to give liberty to the oppressed by one not inspired by love for the oppressed, are unavailing and worthless.—There must be harmony between the speaker and the thing spoken, or these is no power, point or significance in the address" (xxxvi). Douglass's assertions underscore the foundation of his sermonic critiques.

Not only did Douglass's high moral regard for the lecture influence his criticism, but also in targeting the sermon, Douglass demonstrates the crucial role that signifying played for black abolitionism. Jacqueline Bacon's 2009 essay, "Taking Literacy: Signifying in the Rhetoric of African-American Abolitionists," addresses three forms of signifying that shaped black abolitionist rhetoric—the use of irony, ambiguity, and "the language of implication to reverse traditional hierarchy that gives the oppressor power over the oppressed." Bacon explains this reversal further as, "the deployment of strategies of indirection that feature language whose surface meaning encodes alternative confrontational messages; and the appropriation of canonical texts of white American in language that parodies and revises this discourse, challenging and undermining conventional interpretations" (272). Douglass's parodies engage all three of Bacon's identified signification. As an imitation, Douglass's satirical sermons engage an ironic inversion of white sermons (the canonical text) and white slaveholding rationale. Further, by bringing together parody and paradox, Douglass "preaches" as both chattel and man.

Douglass's anti-slavery rhetoric embodies his ambiguous position—he speaks from an authoritative position in a society that denies him authority. In this way, Douglass captivated his audiences as an atypical Negro. He was, Blight writes, "a Negro with intellect, a most unusual character to the imaginations of white-supremacist America. He was the ornament, the object, a former piece of property who could speak and write, who could match wits and logic [...] But he was also the preacher condemning sin and calling the fallen to repent, the analyst educating an ignorant populace that preferred comfortable stereotypes [...] to deeper knowledge of realties of slavery" (104).

THE SLAVEHOLDERS' SERMONS

In the following examples, Douglass's use of parody not only points out the inherent contradictions of slave-owning Christians, but these parodies point out the Christian rationale demarcating blacks as predisposed to physical slave labor or less than human. Throughout Douglass's critiques of religion in the fight against slavery, he confronted the logic that blacks were of lesser intelligence than their white counterparts, and therefore naturally inclined for physical labor. Douglass challenged this argument throughout his speeches and not just in his parodies[7].

Douglass delivered this first excerpted speech, "American Prejudice and Southern Religion" in Hingham, Massachusetts on November 4th 1841. Of the speech, a journalist from *The Liberator* Nov. 4, 1841 notes that Edmund Quincy had urged the audience to support a resolution condemning racial prejudice as "unnatural" and "not implanted by God." After retelling an account of racist encounter on the Eastern Railroad, Douglass

[7]In an 1855 address concerning the nature of the anti-slavery movement Douglass states, " ...I am quite aware of the common impression concerning the mental abilities of my race. It has been said, that the variety of human family, to which I belong, excels less in the intellectual, than in the emotional characteristics of men" (4).

begins repudiating the contradictions of religion. Then almost seamlessly, the abolitionist begins an imitation of Southern preachers:

> The Southern preachers say to the poor slave "Oh! If you wish to be happy in time, happy in eternity, you must be obedient to you masters; their interest is yours; God made one portion of men to do the working, and another to do the thinking; how good God is! Now you have no trouble or anxiety; but ah! You can't imagine how perplexing it is to your masters and mistresses to have so much thinking to do in your behalf! You cannot appreciate your blessings; you know not how happy a thing it is for you that you were born of that portion of the human family which has the working instead of the thinking to do! Oh! how grateful and obedient you ought to be to your masters! How beautiful are the arrangements of Providence! Look at you hard, horny hands—see how nicely they are adapted to the labor you have to perform! Look at our delicate fingers, so exactly fitted our station, and see hoe manifest it is that God designed us to be thinkers, and you to be the worker—oh! the wisdom of God!"—I used to attend a Methodist church, in which my master was a class leader; he would talk most sanctimoniously about the dear Redeemer, who was sent "to preach deliverance to the captives, and set at liberty them that are bruise"—he could pray at morning, pray at noon, and pray at night; yet he could lash up my poor cousin by his two thumbs, and inflict stripes and blows upon his bare back, till the blood streamed to the ground! All the time quoting scripture for his authority, and appealing to that passage of

> the Holy Bible which says "He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes! Such was the amount of this good Methodist's piety!"

Douglass's imitation of the Southern white preacher demonstrates the running thematic in pro-slavery rhetoric that slaves should "obey [their] master" for their own well-being. Blassingame's *Frederick Douglass Papers* report that when giving these speeches Douglass imitated the voice and countenance of a preacher. Ganter's essay adds that Douglass's audiences "exploded with laughter at Douglass's bathetic drop in tone"(527). In addition to using his body for comedic effect, Douglass's parody turns on the racist, theocentric logic that "God made one portion of men to do the working, and another to do the thinking." The humor arises from the combination of Douglass's mimicry, the rationale that slaves are anatomically built for slave labor, and from the conflation of slave master with God.

Though Douglass uses a scathing humor to critique white preachers, he maintains conventions prescribed by white abolitionism. Shrouded under what Blight calls a "Garrisonian ideological cloak," Douglass adhered to white abolitionists who encouraged him to "retain his plantation dialect, to expose his whip-scarred back, [and] to confine his speeches to personal experience" as not to appear too well-educated or intimidate his white audiences. Before splitting with Garrison in 1851 over disagreements about Union allegiance, Douglass's style followed these conventions prescribed by white abolitionists. Robert Nowatzki's 2010 book, previously mentioned, suggests that due to the concurrent rise in minstrelsy and abolitionism during the 1830s and 1840s, the two share conventions. In his first chapter, "Strange Bedfellows: Blackface Minstrelsy and

Abolitionism in America," the author suggests that abolitionist literature like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played into white audience's pity for Uncle Tom rather than recognize him as equal. Nowatzki points to this shared sense of condescension in blackface minstrelsy. He writes that, "White abolitionists may have seen themselves as more enlightened than blackface performers in their hatred of slavery, but both groups shared condescending attitudes toward African Americans, whom they often regarded as docile, passive objects of pity or as wards to be protected by paternalistic white benefactors" (11). In relation to Douglass, Nowatzki writes "Although white abolitionists enabled Douglass to make his voice heard, they also contained his voice by demanding that he focus solely on the evils of slavery and the passive virtue of slaves. In this sense, ex-slave abolitionists like Douglass may have felt somewhat like African American minstrel performers who were pressured to conform to the stage conventions that were established by white men in order to appeal to the racial fantasies of white audiences" (35). Douglass's parodic embodiment of the white preacher operates within this framework.

By constructing the image of a white man instructing his passive, "docile," slaves, Douglass maintains the visage of whites in authoritative role. In this way, Douglass's humor stays within the bounds of white abolitionism by portraying evils of slavery and the passive virtue of slaves. Furthermore, just as was the convention of the written slave narrative to feature a white abolitionist prefacing the text to assure readers the account was true, white speakers often spoke after Douglass's early lectures to verify his aptitude. After Douglass's 1841 speech, "American Prejudice and Southern Religion," Garrison follows it. From *The Liberator* it states that following Douglass's sermon, "Mr. Garrison

rose, and said, 'I am almost afraid to speak now, lest I should undo the impression made by our friend Douglass—a noble man indeed! Fitted to adorn any station in society! And such a man by slaveholders is called a '*thing,'* and treated as a beast! He is a miracle! A proof of what man can do and be in spite of station or condition" (Vol. XI—No. 50). Garrison's ensuing endorsement in some ways acts as condescension, but it also makes visible distinction between white and black abolitionists. Garrison acts as the paternalistic white benefactor, verifying Douglass's accounts as if his account lacks veracity without it.

Though Douglass expresses keen admiration for Garrison—in an 1846 speech, Douglass openly calls Garrison his "most steadfast friend" and "the man who has torn the mask of hypocrisy from the plundering slaveholder and a blood stained church"—he later expressed feelings of constraint at the abolitionist lectern. From his 1855 autobiography, Douglass recalls his thoughts concerning these feeling of constriction:

> "Give us the facts," said Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." Just here arose some embarrassment. It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story month after month, and to keep up my interest in it. It was new to the people, it is true, but it was an old story to me; and to go through with it night after night, was a task altogether too mechanical for my nature. "Tell your story, Frederick," would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. (361-362)

Douglass goes on to add that those instructing him to just give the facts, maintained good intentions, but too readily relied on stereotypes to convey an anti-slavery cause to white

audiences. For fear that Douglass might appear too educated leaving audiences incredulous that he was ever a slave, his white counterparts instructed the ex-slave to turn to a "plantation manner of speech." Of this, Douglass writes, "It was said to me, 'Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned.' These excellent friends were actuated by the best of motives, and were not altogether wrong in their advice; and still I must speak just the word that seemed to me the word to be spoken by me" (362). Despite, or perhaps because of Douglass's adherence to the conventions of white abolitionism, his parodies often amassed larger crowds and raucous laughter.

His 1845 Speech, "I am Here to Spread Light on American Slavery: an Address delivered in Cork, Ireland on 14 October 1845" offers a good example of his ability to stir laughter. This particular speech represents an iteration of the 1841 speech excerpted above. Blassingame writes of this speech that "it was, however, Douglass's extremely 'humorous method' of exposing the hypocrisy and duplicity' of American slaveholders which 'kept the meeting in a roar'" (39). Douglass delivered this speech a few weeks after arriving in Ireland just after the 1845 publication of his *Narrative,* which made him America's most famous black man and as a result drew more attention to his fugitive status. The *Southern Reporter's* Oct 16, 1845 article reports that the courthouse in which Douglass delivered the speech was "densely crowded in every part" and the that the building was "thronged with ladies." Unlike the first example, in this speech, Douglass interjects his own voice into his mimicry. This rhetorical strategy seems to rouse more laughter from the crowd than his previous speech. More specifically, by vacillating between his voice and the parody of the Southern white preacher, Douglass signifies the

double act or comic duo of the straight man and the fool. That is, Douglass acts as straight man and the white-man persona becomes the fool—a strategic reversal of depictions of blacks as fools and whites as intellectuals.

Further, this speech, delivered in Ireland exemplifies Douglass's international appeal. While slaveholder parodies generated laughter in Northern cities at the expense of the Southern preacher, Douglass's Great Britain tour generated laughter at the expense of the *American* slaveholder. In this sense, Douglass reinvigorated the anti-slavery cause. An 1846 issue of *The Liberator* quotes Catherine Clarkson, stating, "Mr. Douglass is making a great impression in this country [...] we have no pro-slavery party here, but too many seem to think that having paid 22,000,000 to redeem our own slaves England has nothing more to do" (lvi). In an "Address to Frederick Douglass from the Anti-Slavery Society of Cork" (read on 3 November 1845 in Cork, Ireland), the speaker explains after meeting with Douglass that they "have been stirred up to renewed and active life for the deliverance of the captive." The address continues, "We feel that if not associated with him by the ties of a common government, we are bound to this relief by the higher and holier claim, the revealed and universal truth of a common humanity, and a common origin" (489). The speaker adds, "By [Douglass's] Address, the mass of the people have had an opportunity—which they eagerly embraced—of gaining knowledge." And Blassingame points out, "After Douglass visited Dublin [...] Richard Webb asserted: 'His visit has occasioned deep interest in the anti-slavery cause, and many who never thought on the subject at all, are now convinced that it is one which it is a sin to neglect" (lvii). Perhaps because of Douglass's specificity in targeting the hypocrisy of the American pulpit, these speeches illustrate the more laughter than those on U.S. soil.

As Douglass stepped forward to deliver the 1845 speech, a journalist characterized the room as full of loud cheers. After spending some time reflecting on conditions of U.S. slavery, Douglass slipped into his parody:

> My own master was Methodist class leader (Laughter, and "Oh"), and he bared the neck of a young woman, in my presence, and he cut her with a cow skin. He then went away, and when he returned to complete the castigation, he quoted the passage, "He that knoweth his master's will doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." (Laughter.) The preachers say to the slaves they should obey their masters, because God commands it, and because their happiness depended on it. (A laugh).

The journalist pauses to describe Douglass's demeanor: "Here the Speaker assumed the attitude and drawling manner so characteristic of the American preachers, amid the laughter of all present, and continued" (43). Douglass's setup and cadence closely resembles later performances of a twentieth century stand-up routine. Like a stand-up act, Douglass engages a character comedy—a comedy that derives humor from an invented persona or stereotype—and an anecdotal humor. By performing different iterations of the "Methodist class leader," Douglass turns the white man into a stereotype. Simultaneously, Douglass tells the story of a young victim. By combining parody, the scene of violence, and quoted scripture, Douglass exemplifies how Christian logic buttresses the instruction of slavery. Douglass continues,

> Thus do these hypocrites cant. They also tell the slaves there is no happiness but in obedience, and wherever you see poverty and misery be sure it results from disobedience. (Laughter.)

> "You servants" […] "To what was this whipping traceable, to disobedience, and if you would not be whipped, and if you would bask in the sunshine of your master's favour, let me exhort you to disobedience. You should be grateful that God in his mercy brought you from African to this Christian land." (Great laughter)

Here, Douglass gets the crowd to laugh at the Southern minister's self-importance. But, as Ganter points out, the laughter exhibits a tension: "the scene's comic intensity comes from the interplay of both bigoted and non-bigoted laughter" (537). Ganter further suggests that this interaction between two types of laughter ultimately forges a new communal bond. Because the act of laughter often educes a moment of shared affection, Douglass, "takes audience members from their prejudiced habits of laughing at stereotypes of lazy slaves" to laugh at the hypocrisy of the slaveholder. As the straight man in the feigned comedic duo, Douglass's words become the truth and the Southern minister's the lies. Put another way, Douglass's rhetoric aligns with justice and the Southern minister's injustice.

Douglass's humor participates in a type of whiteface minstrelsy characterized in McAllister's aforementioned book, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance Comedy.* In it, McAllister defines "white people be like" comedy as a brand of black humor that mocks or mimics perceived idiosyncrasies of whiteness. He expounds:

> White people be like comedy, [is] a form of whiteface minstrelsy rooted in perceived racial difference. Media scholar Bambi Haggins typifies this observational humor as low-brow subgenre of black comedy popularized through

> programs like Russell Simmons's *Def Comedy Jam.* For decades, this somewhat reductive brand of humor, rooted in performance of social perceptions, comparisons appear in the repertoire of nearly every black comic from Eddie Murphy to Monique to Kat Williams.

Though McAllister's definition of white people be like comedy labels it a twentieth century manifestation in mainstream black entertainment, Douglass's parodies reveal an early iteration of this type of mimicry. Douglass's humorous invocation of the preacher summons later comedic performances such as Richard Pryor's parodic impersonation of the greedy preacher on *The Richard Pryor Show.*

Douglass's public antipathy of the minstrel[8], also suggests that his use of the sermon, participates in whiteface minstrelsy by offering a counter narrative to the blackface tradition of "stump speeches." McAllister points out, "within the blackface tradition [the] solo 'stump speeches' involve[ed] Negro dialect orations designed to satirize black preachers or other Negro intellectuals" (206). The following example from an 1868 collection titled, *Brudder Bones' Book of Stump Speeches and Burlesque Orations* illustrates an oration ridiculing a black political speaker:

> Feller Citizens:—Correspondin' to your unanimous call I shall now hab de pleasure ob ondressin' ebery one of you […] When in de course ob human events it becomes necessary fur the colored portion of dis pop'lation to look into and inquire into dis inexpressible conflict. It is—it is—it is—to return to our subject […] what do de folk mean talkin' bout de Norf and de Souf? Do dey want to separate us from our brederin' in de sunshiney Souf? Do Dey? Eh? Umph? […] I

[8] *The North Star* Frederick Douglass, Rochester: 27 October 1848

> ask you in de name ob de shaggy-headed eagle, what's flyin' ober de cloud-clapped sommits of de rockganey mountains; be we gwine to be so extemporaneously bigoted in dis yer fashion? Eh? Answer me, as Shakepeare says: 'Do not let me blush in ignorance,' nor—nor—any other man. What does our glorious constitution say on referrin' to dis lamentable subject? Does not our constitution—*shun*—*shun*—TUTION! Don't it? Eh? umph? I'll bet two dolloars and a half it does" (25-6).

The speech, written and delivered across the country by Byron Christy, represents the convention of using an assumed Negro dialect in order to lampoon or discredit black intellect. In a feigned black vernacular, this particular speech performs the persona of a fumbling, stuttering black politician, incapable of staying on topic. Douglass's use of the sermon in his burlesques tacitly resists the convention of this brand of stump speech. In this way, as Ganter points out, Douglass's performances were not only "powerful criticism of slaveholding consciousness," but his satire orientated his audiences to laugh at the Southern minister's Christian hypocrisy rather than at Douglass's "high jinx as a 'darky' humorist" (540).

CONCLUSION

Years after his split with Garrison and just before the close of the Civil War, Douglass delivered a speech revealing an uncharacteristic optimism. Addressing the concerns about what to do with the newly freed black population after Emancipation, his 1865 speech, titled "What the Black Man Wants," suggests that the end of the war brought an end to stereotypical misconceptions about the black man. Douglass states,

> “What shall we do with the Negro?” I have had but one answer from the beginning. Do nothing with us! Your doing with us has already played the mischief with us. Do nothing with us! […] If you see him going to the ballot-box, let him alone, don’t disturb him! [Applause] […] A great many delusions have been swept away by this war. One was, that the Negro would not work; he has proved his ability to work. Another was, that the Negro would not fight; that he possessed only the most sheepish attributes of humanity; was a perfect lamb, or an “Uncle Tom.”

Though Douglass declares that the Negro has “proved” himself as more than a sheepish Uncle Tom, his proclamation, though optimistic, was only somewhat true. Social historian Mel Watkins points out that despite a decline in minstrelsy during the war, stereotypical images of blacks remained. Watkins writes, “Just as it dramatically changed American society, the Civil War also permanently altered minstrelsy. From 1861 through 1865, as the war dragged on and the death toll mounted to heights unimagined […] minstrel shows naturally waned in popularity.” “Still,” Watkins goes on, “the stage image of blacks remained substantially unchanged” (96). Instead of strictly plantation imagery of blacks, after the war, during the Reconstruction period, the minstrel stage became a site to lambaste newly elected black members of the House and Senate. Minstrel stump speeches, as illustrated previously, often targeted these black officials. Watkins goes on to suggest that because of Emancipation, “even more than during slavery, white America needed justification for the subordination and repression of an ethnic group that had become its supposed social and legal equal” (123). Cultural representation and political and social degradation of black citizens operated in unison. Nonetheless, Douglass’s use

of humor—specifically irony and parody—throughout his career, maintained steadfast obstinacy toward these images and the rationale producing clichéd understandings of black men and women as inferior (e.g. the Sambo and its female counterpart the Mammy).

TOWARDS A RADICAL TRADITION OF BLACK HUMOR

I conclude by placing Douglass's humor within a tradition of radical black humorists to suggest that this brand of humor gave way to the black comedic ethos of the 20th century. Though numerous scholars recognize Douglass's rhetoric within a tradition of radical black intellectualism, I add that humor uncovers an overlooked aspect of his rhetoric. In a 1972 issue of *Ebony Magazine* devoted to "the black male," Jack Slater's provocatively titled article, " 'Crazy Niggers' Then and Now" draws connections between radical freedom fighters such as Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, David Walker, and Denmark Vesey, with twentieth century freedom fighters like Marcus Garvey, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwamé Ture), Malcolm X, and Muhammad Ali. A caption just beneath the title reads, "Exploding the 'docile sheep' myth, defiant, daring black men revolt against injustice in multitude of ways." In it, Slater defines the radical black man as the man proclaiming his manhood against a white supremacist rationale that denies it. Though Slater's article invokes a problematic rhetoric by inviting an exclusionary heteronormative proclamation of human rights through the frame of the black man, he highlights a legacy of black radicalism linked to claiming personhood. In stating, "I am man," Slater suggests that black men subverted the image of themselves as "docile sheep." Slater writes that by "embodying the inexhaustible voice of protest, the 'crazy niggers' of black history emerge as the real heroes of American history, for they were,

and still remain, the unhypocritical, uncompromised, true believers in independence" (68).

Slater's title, a sly precursor to Richard Pryor's 1974 comedy album with a similar title, *That Nigger's Crazy,* repurposes the epithet in order to assemble a history of radical black intellectuals. But this title also invokes larger implications for Douglass's humor. Perhaps implicitly, Slater's article summons a lineage of black thinkers and ideological links between figures such as Pryor. Like later humor in the speeches of Malcolm X[9] and in the performances of Richard Pryor, as I discuss later, Douglass's humor joins a tradition of black humor that pushes a political agenda by challenging white authority, but also making self-making a priority.

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[9] Malcolm X"s 1964 "Ballot or the Bullet" speech is a good example of his sarcasm. While Malcolm mimics the integrationist rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement in this speech, he also forgoes religious labels in order to call out the white man for denying the black man human rights. Throughout the speech, Malcolm X personifies Uncle Sam conflating the symbol of U.S. patriotism into the image of the white man, stating, "Uncle Sam has no conscience. [The white man] do[esnt] know what morals are." He goes on to criticize "the gospel of Christ," writing, "I have watched how Billy Graham comes into a city, spreading what he calls the gospel of Christ, which is only white nationalism."

Chapter Two

Reimagining Mammy
The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley and The Harlem Renaissance

Cunning and brash, the comedian, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, has no apparent connection to Frederick Douglass, the stern abolitionist, or, perhaps even an obvious connection to the Harlem Renaissance. But during the 1920s through the1930s, Mabley was a frequent performer in Harlem as well as in other venues across New York. At “rent parties”—in-home, social gatherings named for their entrance fee to pay exorbitant Harlem rents—and in prominent Harlem theaters such as Connie’s Inn and the Lafayette, Mabley’s name was a mainstay alongside the likes of Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters, and Cab Calloway. In these theaters and at these social gatherings, Mabley honed her comedy act and established her on-stage persona “Moms”— a bawdy, elderly matriarch. And though this chapter’s shift to Mabley from Douglass is an unlikely turn, this chapter demonstrates how the tradition of parody in African American humor transcends genre, while disrupting representations of racist paradigms. More broadly, Mabley’s humor emerges from the satirical impulses established during slavery. Douglass’s parodic sermons operate as a through line in 20th century comic traditions, particularly as his parody castigates the logic of white supremacy. While Douglass couches his parody of white men within political speeches, Mabley’s entire comedic repertoire exists within a parody of the mammy caricature. Fashioned as Moms, Mabley staged a calculated resistance against the narrow opportunities for black women in entertainment and in the workforce as

domestic laborers. Mabley's comedy promoted a feminist agenda that derailed the politics of respectability connected to the bourgeois, male-dominant rhetoric of the New Negro movement and complicated the ideology that "moral mothers" would help uplift the race.

Mabley's choice to inherit the persona of a stereotype presented an exegetical risk. Reimagining and performing the grotesquery of the mammy might appear as a replication of the stereotype, but her performance was a sly inversion of it. The use of didactic monologue in her comedy coupled with sexual vulgarity, countered contemporaneous debates during the New Negro movement that dichotomized black women as either immoral and sexually promiscuous or asexual and sycophantic. In this way, Mabley counter-instinctively liberated static representations of black women during the Harlem Renaissance—a contribution not readily recognized as part of the "highbrow" cultural movement. Invoking the rhetoric of motherhood and the politics of maternal representation through her "Moms" persona, Jackie Mabley radicalized comedy and broadened representations of black women. More critically, Mabley's comedy contributes black feminist scholars' theorization of black feminist intellectualism[1]. Mabley deconstructs the concept of an intellectual through her comedic, maternal rhetoric, suggesting that black feminist intellectualism be

[1] In *Black Feminist Thought,* Patricia Hill Collins argues that in order to further black feminist studies, we must "deconstruct" the concept of an *intellectual* (15). Collins writes, "Not all Black women intellectuals are educated. Not all Black women intellectuals work in academia [...] Historically, much of the Black women's intellectual tradition occurred in institutional locations other than the academy. For example, the music of the working-class Black woman blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s is often seen as one important site outside academia [...] the fact remains that far more Black women listened to Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey than were able to read Larsen or Jessie Fauset" (15-6).

broadened to include knowledge genereted outside institutional spaces such as academia.

Jackie Mabley was born Loretta Mary Aiken in Brevard, North Carolina, in 1894. Mabley's year of birth is just two years before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court Case *Plessy v. Ferguson* set the precedent for "separate but equal" and ushered in what would become the Jim Crow Era—the era of legal segregation and unchecked racial violence against blacks. Born into this era, Mabley's opportunities in the South were limited. Though the details surrounding Mabley's life are few, what is known, suggests that her early life was filled with tragedy and trauma. At the age of eleven, Mabley's firefighter father was killed in an explosion on the job. Shortly after her father's death, Mabley's mother was struck and killed by a truck on Christmas day. In her early teens, Mabley was raped by an older black man and later by a white police officer. The two assaults resulted in pregnancies from which the children were given away. And by the age of fourteen, Mabley ran away from home.

Refusing the limited employment options for black women as domestic laborers, Mabley joined the black vaudeville circuit in 1921 under the guidance of husband and wife comic duo Butterbeans and Susie. While the stories behind the exact reason for Mabley joining show business have varied, one version of a story recalls an exchange that Mabley had with a white woman. Of this moment, Elsie Williams writes that, "[Mabley] was nearly snatched [...] by a white woman who so admired her ability to handle a surly youngster in a department store that the woman (the boy's mother) wanted to take her home" (70). Mabley's response: " 'I don't do

no domestic!'" (70). Thus, motivated by this disdain for a life of childrearing and home making, Mabley entered show business.

Despite her self-proclaimed abjuration for the "domestic," Mabley sustained a career as an on-stage domestic caricature named "Moms" for nearly six decades. Though her costuming became more and more exaggerated as her career matured, Moms always wore a floppy hat, oversized shoes, and a floral-print housecoat or dress. As Moms, Mabley turned her audiences into her "children." And to her children, Moms would deliver comedic monologues framed as lessons—what the comedian often referred to as "hipping" her audience. These lessons ranged from politics and moral decency, to a woman's sexual choice. Similar to the ways in which Douglass turned the attendees at his lectures into congregations as he parodied white ministers delivering a sermon, Mabley turned the stage into a home.

Several works trace Mabley's career and its impact on the black comic tradition. In 2013 actor and comedian Whoopi Goldberg produced the HBO Documentary, "I Got Somethin' to Tell You"—one of the only documentaries devoted to examining Mabley's life and career. As Terrance Tucker adds in his 2018 book, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock,* before Goldberg's documentary and excluding Elsie Williams's landmark work *The Humor of Jackie Mabley* (1995), little attention has been given to the comedian. Tucker likens Goldberg's contemporary unearthing of Mabley's career to that of Alice Walker's excavation of Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s. In his book, Tucker aligns Mabley with a tradition of black comic rage, suggesting that her bawdy "blue humor" influenced the work of comedian turned activist Dick Gregory. As I do in this chapter

as well, Tucker draws connections between Mabley's folkloric humor and her political resistance to white supremacist constructs. But, rather than affix Mabley to a political rage, I observe the ways in which Mabley's use of humor becomes a means of celebratory, self-definition. Through humor, Mabley summons the dehumanizing stereotype in order to challenge its existence altogether.

Essentially, Mabley's Moms "keeps human" through a radical re-presentation of black womanhood—one that on the surface appears loutish, but in reality operates as a performance rooted in unity and self-love. Moms's pedagogical impetus to "hip" her "children" on the ways of the world simultaneously works to bring together audiences despite racial affinity and articulates intersectional justice. Though Mabley's humor does comprise political rage as Tucker suggests, her humor, like that of Douglass's, edified audiences. As discussed later, Mabley's familial, maternal costume acted as moderator for the social frustrations of black America, while also performing a maternal praxis of care.

There has been much attention on Mabley's later performances. Scholars, including Tucker, examine Mabley's career in the 1960s—many might argue her comedic apex. Bambi Haggins's aforementioned book *Laughing Mad,* analyzes the dynamics of Mabley as a crossover star after appearing on primetime and late night television shows such as *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson, Merv Griffin, and Ed Sullivan*—well after the comedian made a name for herself among blacks while touring the Chitlin' Circuit. Both Haggins and Tucker emphasize Mabley's political influence during the1960s freedom struggles and the Civil Rights Movement. Although this chapter references moments during this time of Mabley's

career, and the end of the chapter examines a series of Mabley's "old man jokes" popularized in the latter part of the comedian's career, this chapter emphasizes Mabley's rise to fame and her comedic contributions during the 1920s and 1930s at the height of the Harlem Renaissance.

A number of other works are devoted to Mabley's career including an essay by Elsie Williams in June Schonder's 1991 edited collection *Women's Comic Vision,* Trudier Harris's 1988 essay from *The Southern Review* "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing, and the Violation of Taboo," DoVeanna S. Fulton's 2004 article, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comedians," and H Alexander Welcome's 2010 essay, "Our Bodies for Ourselves: Lithe Phenomenal Bodies in the Stand-up of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley."

This chapter builds on these studies by examining how Mabley's early career operated against and within the context of the New Negro movement as a complex amalgamation of "primitive" models of blackness from the past and a cosmopolitan intellectualism of the contemporary moment. [surrogation] Specifically, Mabley's humor pushed against dichotomizing narratives that either conflated black womanhood with "moral" motherhood or considered black women as innately immoral. Further, by using the folkloric impulses from antebellum South and the hackneyed image of the black mammy, Mabley's comedy performs a sly rebellion against white supremacist logic. Though this chapter references and analyzes various jokes from Mabley's later career, it foregrounds these analyses by drawing attention to her reception from the late 1920s through the later 1940s. Various newspapers

from the time, reviews, advertisements, and descriptions of the Mabley as she performed her comedy in different venues on the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA, also referred to as the Chitlin' Circuit) and at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, reveal the comedian's rise to fame, particularly in Harlem, suggesting that Harlem served as the birthplace of Moms. But these accounts also suggest that against the black-middle class's intellectual endeavors to eradicate the primitive images of blacks (e.g. images of blacks as the Sambo, the Coon, and the Sapphire and the Buck), that Mabley's comedy offered another alternative. Rather than eliminating the image of the black servant as means to gain cultural competency in America, Mabley *mobilizes* the stereotype to channel a black feminist rhetoric.

[For Mabley to pivot to motherhood in her comedy as a source of liberation fit right into the ideological arguments prevalent during the early to mid-twentieth century. Several white writers and thinkers during this time argued that that detriment of the black community was due in part to the "immoral" and "unchaste" nature of black mothers. These characteristics, white leaders argued, were "innate" to black women; yet, conversely, they purported, that black mothers would also need to be the ones to uplift their race. Using Beverly Guy-Sheftall's important work *Attitudes Toward Black Women 1880-1920,* Anne Stavney's article, "Mothers of Tomorrow: The New Negro and the Politics of Maternal Representation," chronicles this prevailing notion that black women were inherently lewd and lascivious. Reverend A.H. Shannon, a white Southern Methodist minister, for instance, argued that the root cause of the deterioration of the black family was the "immorality of black women." Correspondingly, Stavney points to a white northerner, William Pickett, and his

assertion in *The Negro Problem: Abraham Lincoln's Solution* (1909) that " the black woman's failure to develop qualities of 'personal chastity' was the primary cause of 'the gravest deterioration in the moral standards of the community where such class exists" (535). So pervasive were these racist notions that even some blacks supported this belief about black women. Nicknamed the "Black Judas" by his biographer, William Hannibal Thomas argued in his troubling book, *The American Negro: What He Was, What He Is, and What He May Become* (1901) that "the moral status of a race is fixed by the characteristic of its women, but as moral rectitude is not a predominant trait in negro nature, female chastity is not one its endowments" (197). Thomas continues, "So far as we can discern, negro motherhood is not animated with profound convictions of truth and duty [...] they bring to the discharge of their domestic duties illiterate minds, unskilled hands, impetuous tempers, untidy deportment, and shiftless methods" (199). Thomas's and others' debased ideologies about black women did not go unchecked. Black male scholars, of which, included W.E.B. Dubois, Charles Chesnutt, and Booker T. Washington, attacked these ideas that black women lacked moral chastity. Collectively, these men defended black women, but also turned to motherhood as the beacon for racial uplift. And born from this resistance emerged a reformist ideology of black motherhood.

The reformist ideology of motherhood conflated the idea of True Womanhood with motherhood, arguing that the defining characteristic of ideal womanhood was motherhood. Issues of DuBois's *The Crisis* featured essays, artwork, and poems honoring black women as "moral mothers." A 1914 November issue of *The Crisis* featured DuBois's poem "The Burden of Black Women." In the poem, DuBois

acknowledges the hardships that black women have endured, but argues that it is "the white world's vermin and filth" that deserves the blame for black women's oppression. Pointing to this group of white people as "valiant spoilers of women," and "conquerors of unarmed men," DuBois shifts the narrative that black women are innately lascivious and turns toward the history of white men raping black women. In it the poetic persona bemoans,

> The White World's vermin and filth:
>
> All the dirt of London,
>
> All the scum of New York;
>
> Valiant spoilers of women
>
> And conquerors of unarmed men;
>
> Shameless breeders of bastards
>
> Drunk with the greed of gold,
>
> Bearing the White Man's Burden
>
> Of Liquor and Lust and Lies!

Turning the argument away from black women as the cause of social decay in the black community, Dubois points to the white men as the spoilers of the family unity. From across the Atlantic, from London to New York, these "shameless breeders of bastards," have succumbed to greed and lust and in effect are to blame for the destruction of the black community. Unabashed and bold, the speaker in DuBois's poem disavows the impulse that the black America's issues emerged unprovoked by whites. And in the last stanza, DuBois shifts his castigation of white "vermin" to

praise of the black mother. Summoning the reformist ideology, DuBois honors the black mother writing,

> Black mother of the iron hills that guard the
>
> Blazing sea,
>
> Wild spirit of a storm-swept soul a-strug
>
> gling to be free,
>
> Where 'neath the bloody finger marks, thy raven bosom quakes,
>
> Thicken the thunders of God's voice, and lo!
>
> A world awakes!

Just as white discussions of black Americans pinned the destruction of the family and the society on mothers, DuBois's poem turns to black mothers as the vectors of possibility. Uplifting the black mother to deific status, the last lines of DuBois's poem suggest that in spite of her burdens—beneath the "bloody finger marks"—she arises. Aligning the black mother with the "thunder of God's voice," DuBois's speaker suggests that with her the world can awaken. Many black intellectuals and artists connected this moralistic hope and optimism to black motherhood as a path toward racial uplift during the New Negro movement.

Despite this reformist ideology of black motherhood or "domestic piety" as Stavney calls it, some black women writers were resistant. Nella Larsen, for instance—one of Harlem Renaissance's more influential novelists—demonstrates a sustained derision of motherhood in both of her novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). As both novels navigate the complexities of racial passing, socioeconomic mobility, the trope of the tragic mulatto, and questions of racial

progress, they also ruminate on women's labor. In both, Larsen presents motherhood as a burden that women must either endure or die from carrying. In *Quicksand* for example, after marrying and becoming a mother, Helga Crane begins a slow demise. Rendered spiritually destitute after marrying and having her children, Helga eventually dies during the birth of her fifth child. In Larsen's second novel, *Passing,* the scorn for motherhood and traditional gender roles is less subtle. Throughout the novel, Irene Redfield, the protagonist, participates in a sexless marriage while quelling her erotic desire for her childhood friend Clare Kendry. Among other anxieties, Irene's suppressed homoerotic desires surface as irritability and contempt for Clare's decision to pass as a white woman. Despite this, Irene maintains the guise of a dutiful mother; she is "wrapped in [her] boys," the "running of the house," and in effect takes "being a mother rather seriously." Yet, Larsen suggests that Irene merely maintains the role of a dutiful wife and mother while wanting something more. In an exchange between Irene and Clare—also married and also a mother—Clare complains, " 'I think [...] that being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world,' " to which Irene responds, "'yes' " (52). The scene continues, "Irene softly agreed. For a moment she was unable to say more, so accurately had Clare put into words that which, not so definitely defined, was so often in her own heart of late"(53). Though quiet, Irene's "yes" is a confession. She is—if only momentarily—free to reveal her contempt for her role as a mother, but quickly reorients back to the rote roles of wife and mother. Readjusting her thoughts, Irene again says, " 'Yes,' [...] 'and the most responsible, Clare. We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children' " (53). As if reapplying the mask of domestic piety, Irene subsumes the

narrative linked to the obligations of motherhood. Despite this, Irene's soft accordance to Clare's complaint has exposed her subterfuge.

Mabley's comedy hinges on the narrative of black women's domestic labor, motherhood, and political import. Rather than further dichotomize the "Madonna/whore" ideology, Mabley combines the two. [Old men jokes,] Don't sit on my bed] In one joke, Moms conveys a certain didacticism that advances the moral motherhood narrative and then in the next, Moms tells her audiences that she prefers young men to old because old men lack sexual stamina. Through comedy, Mabley diversifies the politics of maternal representation during and after the Harlem Renaissance. The choice to perform as a mother allows Mabley to reject domestic piety and embrace sexual freedom. Furthermore the use of comedy to parody the mammy adds yet another layer. The re-appropriated mammy acts as what Joseph Roach calls the surrogate.

In his 1996 book, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance, Roach* defines the process of surrogation as the way a culture reproduces and recreates itself. A "surrogate," according to Roach attempts to fill the recurrent void in the social text, but often fails because they produce a surplus or a deficit. Roach writes, "in the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric […] because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds" (2). Roach continues, "the very uncanniness of surrogation […] may provoke many unbidden emotions ranging from mildly incontinent sentimentalism to raging paranoia" (2). Mabley's mammy-

adjacent rendering of "Moms" serves as a surrogate for the pre-ear clichéd image of the mammy. However, Moms acts as trickster in this process of surrogation—one that subverts the subjugation of the stereotype. Because the era of Harlem Renaissance adamantly preoccupied itself with distancing blacks from those falsified and primitive images of the plantation black, Mabley's caricature simultaneously provoked "sentimentalism" and a "raging paranoia." [comment on DuBois's death to the mammy]

Though it may seem out of step to place Mabley's comedy within the realm of the Harlem Renaissance, Mabley's output during this cultural surge is undeniable. *The New York Age* as well as contemporaneous studies of Harlem place Mabley right at its heart. The diverse range of cultural output during the Harlem Renaissance was unquestionable, and to this end, Mabley was certainly part of the movement's cultural zeitgeist. As abovementioned, rent parties, parties used to pay the rent, were a common occurrence during this time of which Mabley was a frequent participant. As the black population increased in Harlem, its housing did not, which led to overcrowding and an unfair rental hikes for blacks. In a 1931 essay titled "Harlem Reviewed," anthropologist Nancy Cunard explains how overcrowding, "white flight," and racial prejudice marked the character of Harlem during the time. Cunard explains,

> In his book, *Black Manhattan,* James Weldon Johnson has made a map of Harlem showing the rapid increase of Negro occupations [...] The Negro population is always increasing, but the houses do not expand; hence overcrowding in all but the expensive apartments and the middle-class lodging [...] And why then do the Negroes continue to flock to Harlem? Because in

> most other parts of New York they simply ‘don’t let to coloured,’ at least never *en masse*. More and more of the ‘white’ streets on the fringes of Harlem ‘go black’ and become part of it. [The landlord] won’t make [repairs], and for the Negroes he can *double the rent* (this is invariably so), and no repairs need, or will, ever be made. (67-8)

A similar contemporary, observational study, Wallace Thurman’s *Negro Life in New York’s Harlem* (1927), also describes how increasing rents and overcrowding affected Harlem’s black residents. Thurman writes, “It can be seen then that then the average Negro workingman’s salary is considered (he is often paid less for his labors than a white man engaged in the same sort of work), and when it is also considered that he and his family must eat, dress and have some amusements and petty luxuries, these rents assume a criminal enormity” (40). Out of this demand, emerged house rent parties. And these parties become part of the cultural milieu in Harlem. “Hence,” Thurman continues, “we have hundreds of people opening their apartments and houses to the public, their only stipulation being that the public pay twenty-five cents admission fee and buy plentifully of the food and drinks offered for sale” (41). In addition to the dance clubs and theaters, these gatherings defined the nightlife in Harlem.

Because rent parties were often salacious in nature and attracted police attention, advertisements were done privately. Newspapers of the time, including *The New York Age,* occasionally featured reports of fights at these parties. Thurman describes, “Private advertising stunts are resorted to, and done quietly so as not to attract too much attention from the police, who might want to collect a license fee or

else drop in and search for liquor. Cards are passed out in pool halls subway stations, cigar stores, and on the street" (42). Thurman reproduces an example:

Hey!   Hey!
Come on boys and girls let's shake
that thing
Where?
At
Hot Poppa Sam's
West 134th Street, three flights up.
Jelly Roll Smith at the piano
Saturday night, May 7, 1927
Hey!   Hey!

Full of "barbarous" and "slow" music, these private homes brought together a hodgepodge of characters: prostitutes, "pool hall johnnies," and "drug store cowboys." "Here, "Thurman concludes, " 'low' Harlem is in its glory, primitive and unashamed." In *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies,* James F. Wilson describes these parties as having distinct importance for the Harlem Renaissance. Wilson notes, "Theatrically, the parties served an important function. Many of the gatherings featured entertainers, ranging from famous jazz and blues performers, including Thomas "Fats" Waller and Bessie Smith, to popular comedians, such Jackie "Moms" Mabley, to infamous bizarre 'specialty' acts that played the uptown party circuit" (14). For these performers, the parties, Wilson explains, offered an environment in which to try a new song or a new comic sketch or a vaudeville routine. Citing Wallace Thurman's article "Where Jazz Was Born," Wilson suggests, "the private Harlem parties were the birthplace of many dance crazes that were subsequently performed for, and then appropriated by, mainstream audiences" (15).

As Mark Helbling observes in his book *Harlem Renaissance the One and the Many* there was more than one Harlem Renaissance. Echoing this reflection, Wilson

explains that while Helbling focuses on the "high" and "low" distinctions between art during the Harlem Renaissance, one might also make the case for the "performance traditions of the 'ordinary people' in Harlem, which reflect the uneasy merging of social classes and same-sex activities" (12). As was common during the 1920s and 30s, Mabley occasionally performed her acts outfitted in the wardrobe of a man. And though Mabley never publically announced her sexuality or gender identification, it is well-documented that off-stage Mabley enjoyed the romantic company of women and went by the name "Mr. Moms*." Mabley's "cross dressed" acts place her within the social scene of the cultural milieu at the time. Several of her contemporaries, including Gladys Bentley, Ma Rainy, and * participated in "rent parties." [More than just a vaudevillian or stand-up comic, Mabley presented to the viewing public a black feminist intellectualism.]

While the goal to produce "serious" literature made the case for a particular type of art—poetry, the novel, and fine art—there was another cultural movement happening among the "ordinary," or working-class black people.

A few studies on the Harlem Renaissance debate its periodization. Some mark its start at the close of the First World War while others suggest its literary inception came with Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" (1919), a response to white-terrorist attacks on black people across the U.S.—termed the "Red Summer." For the purpose of this study, I mark the start in the 1920s (with *Shuffle Along* [1921] remaining the benchmark from a theater perspective) and its ending in the mid-1930s (the 1935 Harlem Riots and the Great Depression curtailed black performance and idealism in Harlem) (Wilson, 4). There are also disagreements in naming this era the

Harlem Renaissance evident in its various references as the Negro Renaissance, the New Negro movement, the Negro Awakening, and the Jazz Age. As Wilson notes, these labels fail to accurately account for the movement. While citing James Hatch, Wilson explicates:

> None of these titles is completely accurate, for there was nothing 'new' about the Negro, and the sense of 'renaissance' implies 'rebirth' (from what?), and 'awakening' connotes 'sudden awareness' (of what?). And certainly for the millions of blacks who were faced with poverty, enforced segregation, and frequent threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the notion of nonstop music and dance as suggested by the *Jazz Age* terminology would have been highly conjectural. (4)

And lastly, Wilson, as well as others including David Levering Lewis, notes that though Harlem was a cultural epicenter for the movement, many of its contributors either migrated to Harlem or lived in outlying cities or communities (Claude McKay and Jean Toomer—two writers attributed with launching the movement—were Harlem outsiders, though within walking distance of 135th Street and Lenox Avenue). And those not in close proximity to Harlem, lived in other urban centers across the country, mainly Baltimore, Washington D.C., and Chicago. Despite these disagreements, the label *Harlem Renaissance* is most often the term used to describe the cultural movement.

Another lasting and often interchangeable label for this period is "The New Negro movement," which came after Alain Locke's 1925 collection of essays *The New Negro.* After an influx of black families moved from the rural south to northern

cities in search of better living conditions and job opportunities, in what became known as the Great Migration (beginning in 1916) the north became a place for blacks to get a fresh start. As the Reconstruction Era came to a close, black intellectuals including W.E.B. DuBois and Charles S. Johnson also saw an opportunity to cultivate black artistic expression for political gain. Literary titans such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay contributed to some of the movement's most celebrated output. Harlem, hosted a hodgepodge of black entertainment acts including the music of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton, performers such as Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker.

Though there was an array of artistic modes, the impetus of the movement focused on racial uplift through literary realism and fine art. The focus on the highbrow art suggested that the dominant attitude of movement tailored to the black middle-class and white patronage. Yet, as Langston Hughes's 1926 essay "Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," illustrates, this propensity toward the middle-class is misguided. Reproduced here at length, this excerpt from Hughes's essay shows how the pedestrian black American also deserves a space in discussions of literature and art:

> But then there are the low-down folks, the so-called common element, and they are the majority—may the Lord be praised! The people who have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they

> do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

Mabley's body of work, particularly as it flourished during this time, is befitting for Hughes's description of "common people." Though her act is artifice—a comic persona designed for the stage—the Moms character engendered a hyperbolic banality. For a particular group, Moms comedy encouraged familiarity. From her outlandish matronly costume, her use of a distinct black vernacular, to her topics, her brand of comedy imbibed a commonplace ethos that made her humor both relatable and charismatic for some.

As Mabley toured theaters at various Harlem venues, her rise to fame coincided this black artistic wave, and she was often billed as "Harlem's Funniest Woman." It was during the 1920s and 1930s that Mabley transitioned from blackface minstrels to delivering direct-address monologues as "Moms." Unlike any of her

contemporaries (Pigmeat Markham, Tim Moore, Dusty Fletcher), who performed jokes as short situational comedies or within a comic duo, Mabley began telling jokes in the form of a monologues, which later manifested into the stand-up model recognized today. In this way, Mabley revolutionized the genre of performance humor.

[[[[[The following example—a joke from a 1965 album *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*—reveals how Mabley relies on racialized relics from the past in order to redefine black female identity in the present. In this example, Mabley tells a comedic anecdote about an encounter with a Southern Ku Klux Klansmen:

> Come right back from the conference and had to go back
> down home. Had to go back down there […] them people
> down there terrible […] Rough down there, baby
> […] it's impossible down there. Man, I swear them people think
> we still have to mind them, do what they say *do!* Some ole
> Klan come talkin' about: "Mammy." I said, "no damn mammy!
> *Moms.* I don't know nothin' 'bout no log cabin; I aint never
> seen no log cabin—split level in the suburbs, *Baby!*"

Using this fictive dialogue, Mabley addresses the Southern Jim Crow logic, described as "down there." Intimating toward irrational sensibilities of Southern racism, Mabley emphasizes how "rough" it is "down there," how, "terrible" and "impossible" it is "down there." Setting up the joke in this way, Mabley rejects the unreasonable, "impossible" racist logic. While assuming the Moms persona, the comedian redirects the fictive Ku Klux Klan member and corrects him from addressing her as Mammy.

With this, Mabley points out the stereotypical rationale used to name and mark black women. In this way, Mabley performs a grammar lesson for the Klansman, which operates twofold: she metaphorically corrects racist norms in proclaiming, "no damn mammy," and second, she performs a renaming with her emphatic assertion that it is "*Moms.*" Though more emblematic of Moms's vernacular than a strategic linguistic turn, Mabley's truncated sentences "no damn mammy! *Moms*" speak to a collective renaming as opposed to a strictly personal renaming. Rather than stating, "*my* name is not Mammy; it is Moms," Mabley symbolically strikes out the name "Mammy" for the collective. Further, the comedian stresses an antiquated sensibility connected to the Klansman with her use of the word "ole" to mean "old" when describing the character. Further by using "Moms" as a proper name, Mabley performs a resistance to what Hortense Spillers refers to as the violent "misnaming" of black women. Not "Mom" not "Mammy," but "*Moms*," Mabley defines her own sense of maternity through this linguistic variation. Through this fictional encounter with the Klansman, Mabley challenges the restrictive stereotypes of black women as Mammy in order to offer an alternate. The fact that she "ain't seen no log cabin," furthers Moms's detachment from the Mammy. With the announcement that she lives in a "split-level in the suburbs," Mabley inscribes a cosmopolitan sensibility against the Klansman's racist, antiquated ideals. Additionally, by addressing the Klan as "baby," Moms again illustrates the vernacular of the time, but she also infantilizes the patriarchal and oppressive figure of the Klansman within the mother-child dialectic. Symbolically, Mabley unravels representations of black female servitude and in order to actively create new representations of black women.

Using the Klansmen joke as demonstrative of Mabley's humor and as a reference in the framework of the chapter, I consider how Mabley's performance of motherhood challenges controlled representations of black women by turning black humor into public intellectualism. Against the backdrop of the black bourgeois' ambitions to elevate black aesthetics beyond primitive images of blackness, Mabley uses concept the black mammy to reconsider what it means to be human. Just as the black renaissance encouraged literary realism and urbane artistic expression to uplift the black population, Mabley's humor participates within the ethos of the movement by resisting gender norms and white hegemonic constructs. By becoming Moms, Mabley disrupts the racist rationale paralyzing representations of black women as domestic servants and black motherhood becomes rhetoric of empowerment.]]]]]

[[[[This chapter proceeds in three sections. The first section "The Birth of Moms and The New Negro movement," offers a brief overview of Mabley's career in order to contextualize her contributions to black comedy. Though this section offers an overview of Mabley's career, I spend the bulk of the section spotlighting Mabley's early career on the Chitlin' Circuit during the Harlem Renaissance. While many link the Harlem Renaissance to writers and public figures such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Counteé Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alain Locke, this section emphasizes how Mabley's increasing popularity during this time as a comedy star. Additionally, Mabley was writing and working alongside figures such as Zora Neale Hurston; the two wrote and co-starred in a 1931 play *Fast and Furious*. As the black bourgeoisie's set out to eradicate stock images of blacks as stereotypes, Mabley's humor differed in this regard. Her embodiment of the mother persona—what Haggins

refers to as “a stone’s throw away from the Mammy”—operated in contradistinction from the respectability politics of the New Negro movement while staging its own resistance to the stereotype.

The second section, “The Mythic Value of Black Mammies: Motherhood as Rhetorical Power,” analyzes Mabley’s performance as mother in order to promote a feminist agenda. This section considers the subversive power of motherhood as rhetoric to suggest that Mabley uses the limited stereotypical representations of black women to reshape racist, misogynistic ideology. The third section and final section, “No Old Men” closely examines series of “Old Men” jokes as a disruption of ideological apparatuses used to police the black female sexuality or asexuality. Mabley’s old men jokes, which became one of her comedic signatures, were the first of their kind. Rarely did a (black) woman speak publically about sexual preference while denouncing patriarchy. Mabley’s Moms performance manipulates the Southern anachronism in order to engage progressive discourse. In this way, Mabley fashions the black maternal body to undo the racial logic typecasting black women as subservient.

Though this chapter’s focus examines black womanhood through the frame of the black mother, the chapter does not universalize or conflate womanhood with motherhood. Nor does it aim to perpetuate the enduring stereotypes scripted onto black women as mammy or sapphire. Rather, this chapter intends to show how Mabley’s matrifocal comedy evinces intersections of identity in order to challenge white supremacist thought and articulate more universal definitions of the human. Like the other humorists in this project, Mabley calls out racist incongruous logic that

defines blacks as less than human. Using the maternal body as epistemic lens, Mabley turns what Hortense J. Spillers calls the “locus of confounded identities” for the black woman into source of rhetorical power. Yet unlike the other humorists in this study, Mabley is the only woman and the only humorist pushing an overt black feminist rhetoric. Additionally, Mabley is also the only humorist in this project that maintained an intentional caricatured persona throughout her career, which highlights the limitations for black women in entertainment.

The question of audience, as it did for Douglass, remains critical. For Mabley, her audiences shifted from immediate (live in theaters) to mediated (viewed as recordings on screen). *

By considering Mabley’s comedic career within the context of the Harlem Renaissance, I align her humor with a type of public intellectualism perhaps not readily associated with the movement. Just as the impetus of this black Renaissance aimed to use art to advocate for blacks’ political and social acceptance in America, Mabley’s humor encouraged new representations for black women using comedy. Keeping this in mind, this chapter poses several questions: How does Mabley use the ubiquity of motherhood as pedagogy for self-definition? How does Mabley’s performance of motherhood disrupt narratives of white supremacist universality?]]]]

I

THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT & THE BIRTH OF MOMS

> Naturally it proves disagreeable, at first, for many American white people to turn from the old to the new Negro: from the patient, unquestioning, devoted semi-slave to the self-conscious, aspiring, proud young man.
>
> —William Pickens, “The New Negro” (1916)

Excerpted from his1916 collection of essays, *The New Negro,* William Pickens's assertion captures white America's reluctance in accepting blacks as American citizens. The Reconstruction Era and the First World War, in some ways brought on greater hostility from white Americans disinclined to change. Black soldiers, even after risking their lives fighting in the war, were faced with a particular sense of white intransigence. David Lewis Levering describes racist sentiments of white soldiers during the war in his book *When Harlem was in Vogue* writing, "Their tragedy, and the nation's was to be that reformed racists were very much a minority. Far more typical than the emotions of the Mississippi sergeant was the drawling threat of a New Orleans white man. 'You niggers are wondering how you are going to be treated after the war. Well, I'll tell you, you are going to be treated exactly like you were before the war'" (13).

The unidentified speaker from Levering's description was accurate. During and after the war, blacks faced increased violence and routine terrorism. The 1915 resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan—inspired by Thomas Dixon's 1905 book "The Clansman" and D.W. Griffith's 1915 film "Birth of a Nation"—sought to reaffirm antebellum Southern values through its repression of blacks. Despite the targeted terrorism of radical white conservatism on blacks, many writers, activists, and scholars fought back. White, as well as black intellectuals openly rejected postwar racist authoritarianism. Watkins adds that "the designations 'Jazz Age' and Roaring Twenties' aptly reflects the enthusiastic way in which much of America gravitated toward an urban lifestyle that zealously defied staid tradition and rejoiced in rebellion." He continues that "out of that upheaval came the prominent social

symbols of the decade: speakeasies, the Charleston, bathtub gin, flappers, and the acceptance and glorification of gangsters who controlled bootlegging and urban nightlight […] Nowhere was that interest more evident than in Harlem" (204).

Accompanying the artistic and musical hubbub of the early twenties was an attempt of black intellectuals to establish new representations of "the negro" apart from those stemming from the bygone days of chattel slavery using literature. Levering writes that for these young black thinkers, "literary creation was both the highest measure of a race's achievement and the most effective present tactic to advance [the] race" (123). In March 1924 a group of black writers including Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Alain Locke, and sociologist Charles S. Johnson met in lower Manhattan's Civic Club to discuss the possibilities of using literature to challenge racism. The rationale behind this literary impetus, Watkins adds, was fueled by the idea that there were fewer obstacles to blacks in publishing and in entertainment. "There they felt," he writes, "the battle for racial equality could best be fought by presenting a more complete view of black life and by demonstrating that blacks could make worthwhile contributions to higher culture" (205). In the following year, Alain Locke would publish *The New Negro*—a collection of essays under the same name as Pickens's ten years prior. In it, Locke—just as Douglass in his 1855 speech addressed in the previous chapter—proclaims that the days of clichéd portrayals of blacks are gone. "The days of 'aunties,' 'uncles' and 'mammies' is equally gone," Locke announced, "Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the 'Colonel' and 'George' play barnstorm roles from which they escape their relief when the public spotlight is off" (5).

Critical response to Locke's *New Negro* was generally positive. In a December 1926 *New York Times Book Review* H.L. Mencken writes that Locke's collection is proof of "the American Negro's final emancipation from his inferiority complex, his bold decision to go it alone…the Negroes who contribute to this dignified and impressive volume have very little to say about their race's wrongs: their attention is on its merits. They show no signs of being sorry that they are Negroes. For the first time one hears clearly the imposing doctrine that, in more than one way, the Negro is superior to the white man." Jeffrey C. Stewart author of *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* describes the initial impact of Locke's collection writing, "It burst into American consciousness in the middle of the vogue of the Negro, just as urban Whites, breaking out of Victorian bounds in the roaring twenties were open to a new definition of what it meant to be urban in America […] the term 'New Negro' branded the new movement […] for it suggested that new identity, a new way of being American, had emerged" (511).

Though Locke's *New Negro* generated favorable critical acclaim, it also resounded as resolutely masculine. "A paean to a new Black masculinity," Stewart writes, "the portraits were overwhelmingly of Black men and not Black women, in contrast to the *Crisis,* which featured photographs of Black women prominently" (512). Evidenced in both Pickens's, Locke's, and Mencken's gendered diction, the new Negro refereed to the new Negro man. As the opening excerpt exemplifies, the initiative to turn white Americans away from conceptions of the old Negro meant turning to the Negro as "the self-conscious, aspiring, proud young man."

Additionally, the collective push for new images of blackness was primarily the initiative of black writers. Though artists such as Aaron Douglass and performers including Josephine Baker and Ethel Waters were popular forms of black expression during this time, poetry and literary realism served as the dominant aesthetic forms that black intellectuals relied on to upend racist depictions of blacks. These black literati turned away from stage comedy as a viable medium to promote black intellectualism, particularly any performance comedy with remnants of minstrel's racial tropes. Despite this, black comedy was growing as a popular form of entertainment during the earlier half of the twentieth century. Because black acts were generally constricted in mainstream Hollywood—often forced to perform "white washed" versions of their acts—black performers took their stage humor on traveling circuits in the South and in the Midwest. Seeing the economic viability in these traveling shows, F.A. Barrasso, a Memphis based Italian businessman, founded the Theatre Owners Booking Association, also referred to as the Chitlin' Circuit. At its peak during the 1920s, the association included over forty venues for which blacks to take their routines. Performers along this circuit included Pigmeat Markham, Bill "Bo Jangles" Robinson, Count Basie, Sammy David Jr., Bessie Smith, Stepin Fetchit, Bessie Smith, and Jackie Mabley. The venues on the circuit, included, Lyric in New Orleans, the Royal in Baltimore, the Palace in Memphis, the Howard Theatre in Washington, D.C., the Regel and Monogram in Chicago, and the Lincoln and Lafayette in Harlem, New York. Though the TOBA provided venues for black artists to perform, they did not offer travel expenses and they often required blacks to travel in the South—an unwelcomed locale for blacks and especially black artists. As

Goldberg in her documentary on Mabley comments, many black entertainers also knew the acronym TOBA to stand for "Tough on Black Asses."

Though the TOBA was crucial in developing a unique sense of African American entertainment—away from the gaze of white Hollywood—it still revealed traces of the clichéd images from which the middle-class blacks of the New Negro movement sought distance. Bourgeois blacks, though unfairly Watkins suggests, deemed the stage acts featured on the TOBA lower class. During the twenties, for instance Watkins notes, that Howard Theatre in Washington D.C. only admitted light-skinned "presumably middle-class" blacks. And though, comedy was not the focus of the TOBA, the comedian, according to Red Foxx and Norma Miller's *The Red Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor,* was the best part of the show (77).

Because the TOBA featured mostly all-black audiences, the comic acts gradually shifted from the buffoonish black caricature to a more salacious brand of comedy. Since the direct-address comedy popular in stand-up comedy today—exemplified by Pryor's direct address toward audience members—did not yet exist; the comedy on the TOBA operated in the form of situational jokes and witty banter between comic duos. Popularized by Pigmeat Markham, the "Here Comes the Judge" skit, illustrates the situational joke, which often featured a cast of comedians. Introducing the judge, the joke begins,

> Here ye, hear ye, the Court of Swing
>
> Is now about ready to do its thing.
>
> Don't want no tears, don't want no jive
>
> Above all things, don't want no lies.

Our judge is hip, his boots are tall

He'll judge you jack, big or small.

So fall in line, his stuff is sweet,

Peace, brothers, here's Judge Pigmeat.

The joke continues as different comedians stand before the judge:

Lawyer: Your honor, that's not fair! I object!

Judge: *Object!* Object! You all the time comin' in here and objectin' me outa decisions. Why man, I got all these years in my book and somebody's gotta do 'em! Ain't gonna be me! Where's your first client…he *guilty!*

Client: Judge, please, don't you remember me? I'm the man who introduced you to your wife!

Judge: Introduced me to me wife? *Life*…you sonofagun!

Though Pigmeat Markham is often credited with the "Here Comes the Judge" jokes, Watkins notes that its writer is unknown. As was custom for the black acts on the TOBA circuit, many performed jokes already scripted. This emphasized the uniqueness in the comedian's delivery of the joke rather than the individual inventiveness of the joke's content.

The comic duo was the most popular form on the TOBA. Watkins describes this type as comics walking onto the stage, chatting with one another, allowing audiences to overhear their routines (374). In a more sexually suggestive joke, two characters—one an expectant father the other the doctor—discuss the new arrival of twins.

The Father: How come one of them is so black and the other is so white?

Doctor: That's just the way they was born. Must come from the father.

The Father: Yeah, well I don't think I'm gonna pay that bill for $200.

Doctor: Here's my half….[Blackout].

Distinct from the urbanity of Harlem's literary movement, the lowbrow, burlesque humor of black comedians dominated on the Chitlin' Circuit. And despite the general critique of a black bourgeois that black comedy lacked social or intellectual depth, black comedians were cogently developing their own sense of social criticism. Mabley was a standout in this regard. It was on the Chitlin' Circuit, that Mabley developed her satiric sensibilities and the Moms persona that she performed in the ensuing six decades. While many of Mabley's contemporary merely performed stock jokes, Mabley wrote and performed her own material.

After facing economic pressures from the Great Depression, many of the Southern venues on the TOBA were forced to close. Harlem became a thriving space for black comedians. Of the major theaters that allowed blacks to perform, included The Crescent, Lincoln, Lafayette, and the Apollo Theatre. It would be in these New York clubs and theaters that Mabley perfected her Moms character. The bawdy, brash nature of Moms grew quickly in popularity, and also set her apart from other female and male comedians at the time. Eventually, Mabley would earn $10,000 a week for her recurring act at Harlem's Apollo Theater.

While most other black acts relied on comic duos or situational puns with a cast of other actors, Mabley was developing a direct-address monologue similar to later twentieth century stand-up comedians such as Richard Pryor. Her Moms

character, she modeled after her own grandmother, whom Mabley describes as "the most beautiful woman [she] ever knew […] gentle, but kept her children in line" (391). With her distinct voice "buzz saw" voice as one reviewer put it, her apron, and her floppy shoes, Mabley used the maternal guise to establish a level of comfort with her audiences and then break into a sexually suggestive pun. Her old man jokes—as discussed in the last section of this chapter—best represent this. In a short quip Mabley remarks, "The only thing an old man can do for me is show me the way to a young man." Though sexually evocative, Mabley kept her material "clean"—devoid of blatant obscenities. Instead, she relied on innuendo and enthymeme. Mabley's old man jokes pushed the envelop in terms of broadcast censorship during the time, but as I discuss later, the jokes also functioned as a social and political narrative that articulated women's sexual freedom.

Though scholars such as Darryl Dickson-Carr recognize the literary satire during the Harlem Renaissance, few attribute Mabley's comedy to the movement. Perhaps because the movement's dominant figures included professional, black intellectuals, and Ivy-League graduates pushing for highbrow aesthetic expression, black comedy akin to Mabley's is largely ignored in this capacity. As a strategic blend of the antebellum Southern mammy and a modern "earthly" mother, Mabley as "Moms" provided an alternate voice for black expression limited to the literary realism of the New Negro movement and the expectations of the black middle-class.

In her own way, Mabley's Moms persona blended the "old negro" with the new. Mabley's comedy, like the literary humor of Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Simple, reported the happenings of everyday folk while channeling a black political

agenda. Though subtle, Mabley often told quick, ostensibly clean jokes that addressed the racial climate of the time. Take for instance this joke on racial segregation Mabley delivers as Moms:

> I was on my way down to Miami… I mean *They*-ami. I was ridin' along in my Cadillac, you know, goin' through one of them little towns in South Carolina. Pass through a red light. One of them big cops come runnin' over to me, say, 'Hey woman, don't you know you went through a red light?' I say, 'Yeah I know I went through a red light.' 'Well, what did you do that for?' I said, 'Cause I seen all you white folks goin' on the green light…I thought the red light was for us!'"

The humor of the joke operates doubly. Mabley invokes humor through her grandma antics; she feigns a misunderstanding of traffic laws presumably due to her old age. But, just as in the Klan joke, Mabley simulates an encounter with a white male authority figure to render Jim Crow segregation illogical. Just as Mabley infantilizes the fictitious Klansmen in the Klan joke using the vernacular "baby," she undermines the police officer's authority. By sarcastically referring to the officer as "one of them big cops," Mabley mocks the officer's sense of importance. In this way, Mabley acts as trickster; she invokes an accomdationist wit by pretending to follow the rules of segregationist logic while making a fool of "them big cops." Thus, the core of the joke relies on the assumption that Moms was just trying to follow the rules; albeit racist rules. Commenting on the brilliance of Mabley's comedy Watkins writes that,

"The comic who most successfully and frequently combined the emerging mood of assertiveness and increased worldliness with traditional black stage motifs in the thirties and forties was Jackie 'Moms' Mabley" (388). Mabley's political assertiveness operates within the ruse of the folkloric trickster.

In another example, Mabley takes herself outside of the joke and tells a story of two men. She begins,

> Two men—one white fellow and one colored fellow—held up the bank, killed three bank tellers, two policemen, wounded a bystander woman. [indiscernible mumble] sentenced them to be hung. They gonna be hung. White fellow said to himself, crying, "I don't wanna be hung" [Mabley takes on the voice of the white fellow and begins crying in dramatic fashion; Laughter] "I don't wanna be hung!"[Laughter] Colored fellow says, "Ole man! We done killed up all them people and you talkin' bout you don't wanna be hung. Why don't you face it like a man!" White fellow say, "That's easy for you to say, cuz you used to it!" [Laughter]

Here, Mabley takes herself out of the joke, but still makes commentary on racial violence. Though the printed transcription does not convey the Mabley's use of voice to incite the laughter, her portrayal of the white fellow emasculates him. Just as she did with the Klansmen and the police officer, Mabley undermines the assumed authority of whiteness. In mimicking the white man with exaggerated cries, Mabley suggests that he "can't face it like a man." Further, by positioning the white man's fear against the black man's stoicism in the face of violence, Mabley implies that the

white man can dish it, but he cannot take it. Her use of the noose as the method of punishment for the crime, summons the image of the hundreds of actual white lynch mobs hanging black people as a way to affirm white supremacy.

Beginning in late 1920s through the 1930s, Mabley was a mainstay at black entertainment venues. Nearly all of the black weeklies featured a review, announcement or favorable description of the comedian. Several journalists in the late 1920s and early thirties spotlight Mabley as a crowd favorite. From *The New York Amsterdam* dated July 27, 1927 one journalist describes the act: “It is the story of runaway lovers […] In this little comedy, Drake himself, Sambo Reid, and Jackie Mabley go through some of the funniest stage ‘business’ that is has been the good fortune of audiences to see and hear.” The writer continues, “At the Monday matinee, Jackie had to respond to six calls for encores” (7). From a 1937 issue of *The Philadelphia Tribune* a journalist reviews Johnson Small’s “Paradise Band,” writing “Pigmeat and Johnny Lee Long keep the house in an uproar appearing throughout the show with funny gags,” but adds that “A special added attraction is that ever popular favorite, Jackie Mabley, who is always a riot of fun. Jackie as usual holds a big spot crammed full of whoopee and is encored until she refused to come out again” (7). And another from *The Baltimore Afro-American* dated May 29, 1930 states, “When the management of Alhambra theatre, New York signed Jackie Mabley to do her comic antics and sidesplitting monologues, it undoubtedly knew what it would mean to the box office public. Jackie is a real artist and with such a strong team as Jackie and Dusty Fletcher, the Alhambra will undoubtedly pack ‘em in with renewed energy” (A8).

Though box-office statistics alone hardly account for Mabley's comedic skill, journalists at the time also remark over her skill as a mimic. Beyond mimicking blackface tropes, Mabley was an exemplar at mocking fellow performers, which set her comedy apart from others. From a 1931 issue of *The Baltimore Afro-American* Louis Lautier reviews "Blanche Calloway" at the Howard Theatre. He writes, "Jackie Mabley, comedian, is the high light of the show which opened at the Howard Theatre last Saturday for an engagement of a week. Miss Mabley continuously draws laughs while she is on the stage. Her best bit of work, however, is her impersonation of Rudy Vallee, Belle Baker, Ethel Waters, Al Jolson and Bessie Smith" (2). And in a more critical review of Mabley in "The Pleasing Devils" from the *The Afro,* a journalist writes, "Jackie Mabley as comedian gives some good entertainment, if you like that kind of stud. Miss Mabley is just as un-suggestive as she dares be and still hold part of the house who want a little 'risqueness' along with their entertainment menu. She even got away with the old Hall-Cohan-Smith impersonation stunt" (9). While it is unclear, who exactly Hall-Cohan-Smith is, it seems the journalist, though critical of Mabley, was impressed with her comedic aptitude for mimicry. Frequent descriptions of Mabley's acts during this time often included phrases like "Harlem's funniest" and "inimitable."

Not merely, a comic performer, Mabley co-wrote the 1931 revue *Fast and Furious: A Colored Revue in 37 Scenes* with Zora Neale Hurston. The revue, presented by Forbes Randolph's production company, began its short run on Broadway September 15, 1931. Perhaps as a result of the revue's poor reception, a complete transcript does not exist and only four scenes exist in print (not Mabley's).

Despite this, the revue's Playbill indicates the scenes which Mabley wrote and starred in include, "The Court Room" (written by Hurston and Mabley plays Mrs. Mullins), "Runbastism" (sung by Mabley with words and music by Mark Gordon and Harry Revel), "Gymnasium" (dance performed by Mabley), "Football Game" (written by Hurston and co-starring Mabley and Hurston as "cheerleaders") and "Macbeth" (performance by Mabley as Lady Macbeth). Though the play opened to overwhelmingly dismal reviews, reporters often highlight Mabley as a standout. One reviewer of the from *Afro American* (1931) writes,

> Twicetimes the little heavyweight cutie—now watch her blush—who is called Jackie Mabley—and more than twicetimes—did she send staid sophisticated Washington down in tears—natural tears—but they came because she was making them laugh so hard,…when better comedians come or are made—take it from us, Jackie Mabley will be dead. She is the most natural comedian ever seen on any stage. How 'Fast and Furious' folded up with folks like Jackie in the cast is more than I can see. (4)

This and other reviews of the play suggest that Mabley's comedic skill outshined the play's failure. In a 1931 issue of *The New York Amsterdam News* an article titled "Lewis Sees 'Fast and Furious' Here," offers one of the fullest reviews of the play. Unlike most of the reviewers, which express their dislike of the revue providing only a few sentences, this reviewer offers one of the drawn out reviews, while highlighting Mabley's performance. Reproduced at length, the report begins:

> "Fast and Furious," the sepia and charcoal revue which has been previewed and reviewed all the way from Flatbush to Broadway, did not remain in the

latter vicinity long enough to afford your favorite sundown reviewer an opportunity to report upon its merits for your information and, I hope your amusement. Thanks to Mr. Frank Schiffman, the enterprising entrepreneur of the Lafayette Theatre, the piece has been fetched uptown to Mr. Schiffman's own emporium of diversion, where it may be seen twice daily for comparatively small and insignificant sum of fifty cents, one half-dollar. It's worth the money. But it's not worth much more […] To let the cat out of the bag, "Fast and Furious" is not a first rate show […] It presents chorus girls with bandaged legs limping on crutches, it presents chorus girls with feathers around their haunches wallowing on the floor, it even presents Tim Moore in the titles role of "Macbeth"—still it fails to come off except in spots. In spite of its mighty effort to be smart and racy and modern it remains just a good show for fifty cents.

There are spots, as I have hinted when the show clicks […] There is a pansy number which is a genuine novelty. It is more than that—it is diverting and daring and civilized, and I am quite persuaded that if more imagination and money had been spent on it, the revue might have enjoyed a longer run on Broadway […] And there are Jackie Mabley and Tim Moore.

Jackie, sans cork, is at her best in the revue and Tim is as at his second or third best. Miss Mabley's "Rhumbatism" number is a personal success. What the chorus does with it after she has finished her part is not her fault. She steps on it again as Lady Macbeth, a burlesque of the famous tragedy by William Shakespeare.

Though the revue was met with critical disappointment across all contemporary accounts, Mabley appeared in every account as a standout. In one other report after an initial screening of the revue, the journalists writes that " 'Fast and Furious' adds nothing startling new to the lore of Negro revues, but it provides […] entertainment." The writer continues, "An outstanding song number is 'Rhumbatism,' a frenzied jazz affair […] This is something new, and worth more play, it appears than it is given here." The reviewer concludes, "Jackie Mabley shines in several sketches as a good comedian" (10).

As Mabley was emerging as a standout comedian in spite of her connection to production flops, she was also experimenting with and developing her Moms character. During the 1930s there were a number of accounts commenting that Mabley performed dressed as a man. As illustrated in a 1939 review of a play "Faces About Town" from the *Baltimore Afro-American* (*The Afro*), writer Louis Lautier describes the performance but adds that "Jackie Mabley, the comedian, [was] wearing breeches." From the same newspaper, in 1956, an article titled, "Grandma Keeps 'Em Laughing: Thirty-five Years and Still Going Strong," traces Mabley's visual transformation in the 1930s. The article's author, Ralph Mason, uses three different images to chronicle the optical evolution from Mabley to Moms. In the first image from 1937, Mabley appears in a bandana and a men's tailcoat, the second, dated fifteen years later, Mabley appears in a red wig, apron and floppy shoes. And in the third image, which Mason describes as Mabley "today," features the comedian in street clothes with a "silly hat" and "moccasins for comic effect." Mason adds a fourth photo, which he describes illustrates Mabley off-stage. The black and white

image portrays Mabley with pressed hair, a pearl necklace, and an off-the-shoulder dress. This fourth depiction of Mabley with pearls differs from personal accounts of the comedian's off-stage appearance as masculine. Whoopi Goldberg's HBO documentary features the Christmas postcards that Mabley would send to friends, which portrays the young comedian dressed in menswear with a low tapered haircut. Additionally, Apollo Theater historian, Billy Mitchell, added in an interview, that during Mabley's stint at the Harlem Theatre, he served as her errand boy. He remarked that on-stage Mabley was known as "Moms," but off-stage, she was "Mr. Moms." Mitchell went on to describe Mabley as "one of the guys:" playing dice backstage with the men and having women come in and out of her dressing room. [2] Though Mabley's sexual identity is not the main focus of this chapter, reports of her evolving on-stage persona evidence the strategy of the Moms persona. Additionally, while "cross-dressing" (women dressing in menswear) was a standard convention for during vaudeville, Mabley's choice to perform as an elderly black mother in some ways also functions as cross-dressing considering Mabley's off-stage masculine attire.

The 1930s also gave Mabley her silver screen debut; in 1933 she appeared in Paul Robeson's *Emperor Jones*. From the 1930s to the 1960s Mabley held a residence at Harlem's Apollo Theater—the first comedian to do so. Mabley continued her film career into the 1940s and in 1942 she appeared in *Boarding House Blues,*

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[2] Mabley hardly spoke about her sexual identity off-stage or announced her sexuality, but many sources describe the comedian as an "out lesbian." See Lou Chibbaro's 2014 article, "Moms Mabley was 'out' as lesbian to Friends, Entertainers" from *Philadelphia Gay News (PGN).*

Killer Diller and hosted a radio show, "Swingtime: National Minstrel Audition." During the 1950s and 1960s, Mabley took her singing, dancing, and comedy act through the Jim Crow south.

It was not until the 1960s that white audiences discovered Moms. As for many crossover performers, her newfound visibility with whites gave Mabley unprecedented success. Mabley received and accepted invitations to perform at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, Copacabana as well as white and black college campuses. By the 1960s, Mabley had produced over twenty-five recordings with her first comedy album *Funniest Woman in the World* going gold. In 1962 and '63 Mabley was headlining at the Apollo, earning a reported $10,000 a week. In 1974 Mabley starred in her first full-length motion picture *Amazing Grace*. This would be her final performance. After suffering an illness, Mabley died on May 23, 1975.

II

STAGING MOTHERHOOD

> "I wanted to do something to make my children and my great-grandchildren proud of me, like all mothers do."
>
> —Jackie Mabley, 1975

Although the dominant narrative of the New Negro movement rang resoundingly male, Locke's 1925 collection of essays featured an essay outlining "The Task of the Negro Women." The essay's author, Elise McDougald articulates four types of Negro women in the struggle for racial equality—the leisure group (wives and daughters of businessmen), businesswoman and professionals, women in trade industry, and those "struggling on" in domestic service. Though McDougald's essay connects the Negro

woman's conditions to the poor conditions of "her men" she emphasizes the particular degradation that black women face. She writes,

> [The Negro woman] is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her. She realizes that the ideals of beauty, built up in the fine arts, have excluded her almost entirely. Instead, the grotesque Aunt Jemimas of the streetcar advertisement proclaim only an ability to serve, without grace of loveliness. Nor does the drama catch her finest spirit. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity not peculiar to Negroes.

McDougald's point reverberates as a twentieth iteration of nineteenth century abolitionist Sojourner Truth's 1851 "Ain't I a Woman" speech. The impromptu speech, which later assumed the title "Ain't I a Woman," drew attention to the omissions of black women from (white) women's rights rhetoric. Truth, an ex-slave and religious leader, like Douglass, use sarcasm to point out exclusionary white supremacist logics. McDougald's mention that the Negro woman "is conscious that what is left of chivalry is not directed toward her" echoes Truth's speech when she states, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" Though chivalry was not the end goal for neither Truth nor McDougald and the notion of chivalry often accompanies its own set of troubling gender concepts, each

use it as an example to highlight black women's exclusion from the discourse of human rights.

To underscore the complexity of black women, McDougald's essay takes a moment to praise the black mothers. McDougald writes,

> One cannot resist the temptation to pause for a moment and pay tribute to these Negro mothers. And to call attention to the *service* she is rendering to the *nation,* in her struggle against great odds to educate and care for one group of the *country's* children. If the mothers of the race should ever be honored by state or federal legislation, the artist's imagination will find a more inspiring subject in the modern Negro mother—self-directed but as loyal and tender as the much extolled, yet pitiable black mammy of slavery days [emphasis mine].

As in Truth's speech, McDougald posits that the Negro mother functions beyond a personal familial role to serve the community by caring for the children. Truth's 1851 speech also draws attention to the labors of the mother. To demonstrate her own physical and mental strength as a woman, Truth centralizes her capacity as a mother:

> Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

In telling her audience to "look" at her, to "see [her] arm," Truth argues to be both seen and unseen; seen as a (human) woman and unseen as chattel. Further, Truth thwarts sexist notions of women as weaker than men in her boasts that she "eats as much as a man," "bear[s] the lash" as a man, "work[s] as much as a man" and ploughed and planted when "no man could head" her. Despite exclusionary assumptions deeming women fragile and black women as objects for reproduction, Truth demands, "Ain't I a Woman?" In essence, the speech confronts the audience of whites in order to challenge discriminatory beliefs that correlate what it means to be human with whiteness while relegating blacks to nonhuman. The echoed refrain and focal query, "Ain't I a Woman?" acts multifariously as ironical question and answer—as a steadfast proclamation of self and as a critical doubt in racist sensibleness. Just as McDougald uses the modern Negro mother to argue for the Negro woman's social and political recognition, Truth uses her personal experience as a mother to articulate and demand human rights.

Though McDougald recognizes that the grotesque images of Aunt Jemimas have buried the "finest spirit" of the Negro woman, she draws attention to the ways in which the modern Negro mother exists as a complex blend of mammy-like virtues. Arguing that "the modern Negro mother [is] self-directed but as loyal and as tender as the much extolled yet pitiable black mammy of slavery days," McDougald motions toward the rhetorical power that Mabley's Moms persona invokes. Presumably counterintuitive to the edicts of movement, which seek distance from the stereotypes stemming from slavery days, McDougald's point appeals to the sense of maternal fortitude expressed in Truth's speech and the folkloric wit of Mabley's Moms.

Both Truth and Mabley, although separated by nearly a hundred years, use the black motherhood to advocate human rights. Despite their differences, both use the rhetoric of a mother addressing her "children." While Mabley uses the joke and punch line as standup comedian, Truth uses satirical witticisms to convey her points. Both however turn audiences into their "children" in order to assertively redirect misconceptions of black women as less than human—as property or as stereotyped mammy. Take for instance, Truth's speech, delivered at the Women's Rights Convention, which opens by addressing the clergymen and white women in the audience with greeting, "Well Children." Correspondingly, when taking the stage or in interviews, Mabley as Moms, rarely made an appearance without referencing her audiences as her "children." This 1969 appearance on *Ed Sullivan,* demonstrates Mabley's recurring greeting to her audiences. In her buzz saw voice, Mabley introduces herself to what would have been a predominantly white audience as well: "for the benefit of some you children that don't know Moms, that's the name—Moms. M.O.M. frontwards. M.O.M. backwards. Upside down W.O.W. Wow." In her essay, "Moms Mabley and the Afro-American Comic Performance," Elsie Williams explains the significance of Mabley as Moms referring to her audiences as her children. Williams writes,

> Mabley's reference to her children and her great-grandchildren includes, of course, not only her biological family but her ethnic community and Moms's 'other children' as well. In adopting the title 'Moms' for professional use, Mabley claimed her community and the world as her family and craftily

orchestrated a comic performance stitched together from the cultural shreds of the Afro-American people. 160-1

In assuming guise of the black matriarch and using rhetoric of a mother addressing her children, Mabley takes on the role of caretaker of "her ethnic community" as well as taking on "the world as her family." In this way, just as did Truth, Mabley stages "motherhood as a site of power."

Mabley's Moms persona connects to an existing archive of black feminist theorist. I borrow the phrase "motherhood as a site of power" from bell hooks's discussion of the marked differences between black and white motherhood in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* and from Andrea O'Reilly's discussions of motherhood in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart.* In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* hooks acknowledges that motherhood has been defined differently for white women than for black women. For white feminist scholars, hooks suggests, motherhood has operated as site and source for oppression, whereas for black women, motherhood functions as a role of freedom. hooks writes, "Some white, middle class college educated women argued that motherhood was the locus of women's oppression. Had black women voiced their views on motherhood, it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women. Racism, availability of jobs, lack of skills or education…would have been at the top of the list—but not motherhood" (133). Writing during second feminism's second wave, hooks recognizes the blind spots of feminist rhetoric. She highlights the intersections of identity as it concerns motherhood. The concept "motherhood as a site of power" resists the generalized idea of motherhood as

oppression as its regarded in white feminist thought. Refocusing discussions of motherhood to also include a black experience, black feminist theorists such as hooks argue that when we value motherhood, rather than deem it as oppressive we might encourage community empowerment.

As well as conceptualizing motherhood for rhetorical power, O'Reilly's notions of "othermothering" and "homeplace" provide useful frameworks for understanding Mabley's Moms character. Using Stanlie James's definition from "Mothering: A Possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformations, O'Reilly defines "othermothering" as the "'acceptance of responsibility for a child not one's own, in an arrangement that may or may not be formal'" (5). Nuancing this definition with Njoki Nathani Wane's, O'Reilly continues, "'in contrast, community mothers 'take care of the community. These women are typically past their childbearing years'" (5). The practice of othermothering, O'Reilly adds, "as it developed from West African traditions, became in African American culture a strategy of survival in that it ensured that all children, regardless of whether the biological mother was present or available, would receive mothering that delivers psychological and physical well-being and makes empowerment possible" (5). Additionally, the concept of "homeplace," O'Reilly suggests, becomes another way to differentiate black motherhood from dominant models of motherhood. Citing hooks O'Reilly writes,

> African-American people believed that the construction of homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the

> issue of *humanization*, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world (10; emphasis added).

In this way, for hooks as well as for O'Reilly's "homeplace" not only provides a site for refuge against the wounds of white hegemony, but it also establishes a site for empowerment—for black children and for black communities. Through othermothering and homeplace, motherhood serves as a source of communal empowerment and self-actualization.

As Moms, Mabley turns the stage into homeplace by naming the audience her children and performing a praxis of care. Further, by performing as Moms, Mabley becomes "othermother" by accepting responsibility of those not her own; she assumes responsibility for the community. Mabley often signals this praxis of care by opening her jokes with statements such as "let Moms tell you about the good ole days" or "Let Moms hip ya." Mabley typifies this praxis of care in a 1963 interview with Morton Cooper of the *Chicago Defender* stating, "I believe in God and nothin' else […] Well, one other thing: loving. I hate nobody, got no malice towards anyone." Later in the interview she reaffirms, "I love everybody. I love America. I love our President. I love Adam Clayton Powell and my church. I'm crazy about Caroline Kennedy." Cooper adds that Mabley then "winks and confides in that gravel voice, 'I'm Caroline's grandmother, you know'" (10). Assuming a universal role as everyone's grandmother, Mabley exercises her praxis of "love" across the color line. Rather than

harboring rage as Terrance Tucker suggests, Mabley instead disperses affection. Cooper's note that the comedian "winks and confides, I'm Caroline [Kennedy's] grandmother," somewhat dubiously signals toward the U.S. history of black grandmothers who raised wealthy white families (i.e. the mammy).

THE MYTHIC VALUE OF THE BLACK MAMMY

In a series of 1980s interviews, Toni Morrison posits the inherent value of the mammy. Underscoring the "ancient properties" of black women, which for her encompass the ability for black women to be both "the ship" *and* the "safe harbor," Morrison reminds us of a history of black women as "the history of women who could build a house *and* have some children and there was no problem...[who] have known how to be complete human beings, so [they] did not have to give up anything (O'Reilly, 20). Adding to that, Morrison expounds her thoughts on the mammy:

> [This ancient property is] a quality that normally one associates with a mammy, a black mammy. She could nurse, she could heal, she could chop wood, she could do all those things. And that's always been a pejorative word, a bad thing, but it isn't. That stereotype is bad only when people think it's less…Those women were terrific, but they were perceived of as beastly in the very things that were wonderful about them (21).

By stripping the mammy of the racist detritus, Morrison recognizes the significance in the **motherwork** of real-life mammies. Yet, Morrison's contemporary celebration of the black mammy remains a minority perspective. "'From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery, to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes,'" O'Reilly writes citing Collins, " 'ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images

applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression'" (2). While for Morrison a character with potential for insight into an ancient tradition of black women, for many, as Collins demonstrates, a troubling caricature tied to a history of oppression.

Accordingly, the figure of black mammy has become a mythic site where fiction, history, autobiography, memoir, and popular culture meet. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders's book *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* examines the impact and complexity of the mammy figure on American culture. As both invented character and real-life person the mammy has almost always been connected to a black female surrogacy rooted in slaveocracy. The mammy, Wallace-Sanders contends, acts as a signpost "pointing to concepts and ideals extending far beyond the stereotype; the wide-ranging representations of the mammy figure reflect the various ways in which this image has shaped and continues to influence American concepts of race and gender" (3). Informing her work by Michel Foucault's theory of the body as a site of struggle, Wallace-Sanders complicates reductive dismissals of mammy as simply a stereotype and instead considers the possibilities the character yields for reading and understanding American culture. In a rather lengthy definition, Wallace-Sanders describes the most recognizable mammy character as,

> a creative combination of extreme behavior and exaggerated features. Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence—she often sings or tells stories while she works—and a strict disciplinarian at the same time. First as slave, then as free woman, the

> mammy is largely associated with the care of white children or depicted with noticeable attachment to white children […] Her clothes are typical of a domestic: a headscarf and apron, but she is especially attracted to brightly colored, elaborately tired scarves […] She is typically depicted as impatient or brusque (sometimes even violent or abusive) with her (6).

Wallace-Sanders's use of the phrase "creative combination" signals that in fact the mammy operates as cultural product or construction. Several scholars bolster this idea, attributing its creation to white supremacist imagination. Chanequa Walker-Barnes's *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* adds evidentiary descriptions from scholars noting "the Mammy figure was a figure that existed almost exclusively within White racist imaginations and had a very little basis in reality." Melissa Harris-Perry continues, " 'domestic servant were most often teenagers or young women, not 'grandmotherly types…It was white supremacist imaginations that remembered these powerless, coerced slave girls as soothing, comfortable consenting women.'" And, Patricia Hill Collins discerns, "the life expectancy of enslaved women was 33.6 years […] Mammy was a largely mythological figure with little basis in the lived experiences of Black women" (86). As these scholars and others attest, in reality, there were very few actual antebellum mammies. Historian Catherin Clinton is cited as stating, "I went in search for the mammy and couldn't find her" (Horwitz, 1). Little evidence documents white households that actually housed black women for domestic duties. Clinton reports that the mammy was created by white Southerners to "redeem the relationship between black women and white men within slave society in response to the

antislavery attack from the North […] hard evidence for its existence," she continues "simply does not appear" (201-202; *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South)*.

There are several iterations of the mammy[3], but Harriet Beecher Stowe standardized the stereotype after the overwhelming popularity of her 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe depicts Aunt Chloe, the novel's mammy, as having a "round, black, shiny face," "turban," "plump," "round countenance." In this version of the stereotype, the mammy's loyalty to her white family often resulted in her negligence of her own biological family. Stowe's illustration also rendered the black character asexual, good-humored, cook, and housekeeper. After Stowe's novel moved into stage productions, hyperbolic caricatures of minstrel actors eclipsed many of the other representations. The proliferation of the mammy, by whites, in popular culture manifested on vaudeville stages, later in films like D.W. *Griffin's The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Imitation of Life* (1934), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which featured Hattie McDaniel who like other black actresses was typecast as a servant throughout her career.

The denouement of the civil war led to nostalgia for the lifestyle of the antebellum South. After the Reconstruction Era, the 1900s ushered in a new age in music with the Jazz age and a cosmopolitan modernism as new skyscrapers ascended, but the 1900s also brought with it Jim Crow, widespread lynching, and the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. "White supremacy," historian David Blithe says, "had few better moments in [U.S.] history." Some of the romanticized longings for pre-war life

[3] See Wallace-Sanders

manifested in the proposal for a monument dedicated to the southern mammy. In 1923, Mississippi Senator John Williams along with the Daughters of the Confederacy recommended a statue memorializing, “The Black Mammy of the South” to sit on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. The *Sunday Oregonian* announced the proposal describing the design in an article “Unique Monument for Commemorating Virtues of ‘Mammy’ is Projected,” as “a seated figure of a middle aged woman of ‘the real mammy type’ with a pickaninny on one side holding her hand and a white child on the other to symbolize the mothering she has given to two races” (1). The black press and the National Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) met the proposal with outrage. Professor Neval H. Thomas drafted a letter in opposition that circulated several news outlets. In the *Cleveland Gazette* he writes, “if the South has such deep gratitude for the virtues of this devoted group from which it has reaped vast riches, let it remove the numberless barriers it has gone out of its way to throw up against the progress of the noble Negro womanhood who sprang from these ‘mammies’. Democracy is the monument which the ‘colored mammy’ wants erected to her, and not a marble shaft, which at best will be but a symbol of our servitude to remind white and black alike that the menial callings are our place in the scheme of things.” Though a visible saga of contention surrounds the figure, the image of the mammy has endured.

As a fictional creation, the mammy has become a prism to view American racial, sexual, and gender politics. Characterized through the physical appearance and through her behavior, the static renderings of the stereotype have almost always been white-authored. Mabley’s referential performance of mammy, as Moms, does not

simply subvert the stereotype; Mabley humanizes the stock figure. Rejecting servitude and humility, Moms claims all as her children, while making whites culpable for oppressive ideologies. Her comedy becomes a didactic experience—calling out racist logic and then retools it to imagine alternative possibilities.

In part, Moms's later crossover successes relied on white America's idealization of and cultural familiarity with the mammy. Correspondingly, Mabley's performance as community mother acted doubly, recognizable for black audiences. Reminiscent of Charles Chesnutt's Julius McAdoo dubious storyteller, Mabley uses the mammified guise to guide her audiences in one direction and then upends expectation. While appearing on the *Merv Griffin Show* in 1969, Mabley again showcases this trickster-like dexterity. The host, Griffin asks Mabley what they call her, to which she responds, "What's that man got that horse in pictures . . . that Western man?" she asks Griffin. "Roy Rogers?" he replies. "They name me Roy Rogers' horse…" starts Moms. "Trigger?" Griffin suggests. "Yeah, everywhere I go, they're, 'Hello, Trigger. What you saying, Trigger?' At least I think that's what they say." Mabley's feigned ignorance as she stats the last phrase delivers the punch line. Griffin's visible discomfort, nearly palpable, matches the audiences'. Here, Mabley's use of the enthymeme allocates accountability while moralizing her audience. She essentially places the word "nigger" in the minds and mouths of her audience. The initial, genial exchange between Griffin and Moms halts and the once benign grandmother—Mabley's contrived loyal mammy—shames her white audience.

III

NO OLD MEN

> Wasn't nothing but a child. Fourteen going on fifteen years old. When I come along, your parents picked who you marry. And my daddy picked this old man. Old man. Older than dirt. My daddy liked him. My daddy should have married him.
>
> …And this ollllllllllllld dead…puny…moldy man…I mean an ollld man. Santa Clause look like his son. He was older than his mother. He was old. His died we went to the funeral. After the funeral, the minister tapped him on his back and asked, "how old are you son." He said, "ninety-one" (Moms uses a deeper voice). Minister said "aint no need for you to go home." [Laughter]. And his brother was older than he was and married a girl thirteen. He ain't live but five days. Took three undertakers a week to get the smile off his face…
>
> The next thing to death you've ever seen in your life. His shadow weighed more than he did. He got outta breath threadin' a needle. And UGLLLLLY. He was so ugly he hurt my feelings.
>
> —Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No*

Mabley's series of "old man" jokes became a signature in her comedic repertoire. As the first excerpted joke illustrates, Mabley often framed the joke as part of her genealogical history. Though Mabley delivered these jokes in jest, her old man puns hint toward her own trauma as a survivor of sexual abuse as a young woman. In this way, Mabley's old man jokes speak the unspoken narratives of sexual assault victims. Her jokes—emphasized in the details of the joke above—also critique the problematic patriarchal custom of involuntary marriage.

These jokes take on a distinctly active role in asserting sexual choice and sexual agency. Mabley's "feminist position," Williams notes, "challenges the double

standard which society has traditionally respected in allowing the male to choose a marital partner often much younger than himself, while holding the female in contempt who exercised the same freedom” (80).

Through this storyline of wanting “no old men,” Moms constructs a feminist discourse that undermines patriarchal hegemony. As it refuses prescribed relationships, this narrative embedded in Mabley’s “old man” jokes, incites a new narrative of choice concerning female sexuality and sexual relations. Whereas cultural representations of the black female body portray it as a site of violence (e.g. Douglass’s Aunt Hester), Mabley, through her brand of humor, subverts this passive position. The “old man jokes,” strategically gender and sexualize the black female body in order to claim a sense of authority.

Almost akin to a refrain, Mabley almost always adds a witticism about her contempt for old men, “Anytime you see me with an old man,” she starts, “I’m holding him for the police.” This habitual rejection of an old man, inserts consent and authority, historically denied from black women, but she also furthers her control as she holds him for the police.

Rousing her maternal wisdom, Mabley schools her “children” on relations with old men. In a later performance on a 1969 episode *Merv Griffin Show*, Mabley closes with her old man bit: “Childrens always askin’ me, they say, ‘Moms what is it like to be married to an old man?’ I say, ‘honey the only way I can explain it: it’s like pushin’ a Cadillac…up a steep hill…with a rope.’” Mabley as Moms, addressing her children, takes on the taboo topic of male impotency and female sexual needs. The substitution for the impotency of the old man’s genitalia for the image of pushing a

Cadillac up a hill with a rope, not only works to comedic affect, but it also invites a public dialogue around a topic traditionally off-limits for women on the stage. Mabley's continual revocation of this old man, a man who in previous jokes she says that her father picked, so he should marry him engenders a sense of choice for women.

CONCLUSION

> Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasure of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented.
>
> —Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 1987

Hortense J. Spillers's landmark essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," addresses the phenomenon that is the black female body. In her seminal essay, Spillers examines what she calls the "ungendering" of the black female captive. To do so, the essay makes a distinction between the "flesh" and "body" in order to highlight the rupture between the two at the moment of captivity. The black female captive body, for Spillers suffered the violence of ungendering when it became a body for reproduction of cargo rather than a woman reproducing children. Motherhood and matrilineal connections are for Spillers a "misnaming" of relation. When we speak of the enslaved person, Spillers argues, "a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; this actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such

naming is false," she continues, "because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false once again, because the female could not, in prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance" (80) This misnaming for Spillers reproduces a cycle of violence by refusing to address the calculated rupture of a dominant, symbolic, familial structure as a material trauma of slavery. Mabley's adept caricaturing of the black matriarch summons this troubled history of racial violence against black women.

Beyond a referential performance of the black mammy and beyond Mabley's Moms's comedy contributes to a lineage of black women rearticulating themselves through the concept of the maternal body. Collins defines the process of rearticulation:

> Through the process of rearticulation, Black women intellectuals offer African-American women a different view of themselves and their world from that forwarded by the dominant group…By taking the core themes of a Black woman's standpoint and infusing them with new meaning, Black women intellectuals can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes Black women's everyday, taken-for granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, Black feminist thought affirms and rearticulates a consciousness that already exists. More important, this rearticulated consciousness empowers African-American women and stimulates resistance (2).

This connects to a long history of black women asserting their rights through the combination of humor and motherhood.

Chapter Three
Revisions to the (White) Literary Imagination
Richard Pryor and The Black Arts Movement

In a 2009 interview with talk-show host Tavis Smiley, Paul Mooney the author, comedian, and longtime friend of Richard Pryor quips, "If Mark Twain was the best storyteller to ever live then Richard [Pryor] was 'Dark Twain.'" Pryor, known for his unprecedented live concert films, an extensive movie career, and his comedy sketch show *The Richard Pryor Show*, transformed the landscape of American humor, much like Twain. Twain, widely accepted as progenitor of U.S. humor and lauded as one of the best storyteller's in the West for travel narratives, short stories, and novels, like Pryor embodied the complexity of race in U.S. literary and cultural traditions. Twain's depictions of regional life in his writing—his use of local vernacular, African American folkloric themes, and his treatment of race in his work—idealized prewar southern life, and concretized a sense of white cultural nostalgia. Though his work generated variegated reception,[4] and his patriotism for the U.S. accompanied an anti-imperialist critique, Twain, for a vast many, symbolized and still personifies a distinctly American identity. Mooney's moniker for Pryor as the "dark" Twain speaks doubly; it distinguishes Pryor as the best (dark) *black* storyteller and it signifies the "dark" satire in his many of Pryor's routines. As cultural foil to Twain, Pryor's use of vernacular, folkloric themes, and controversial treatment of race in his work,

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[4] See Robert McParland's *Mark Twain's Audience: A Critical Analysis of Reader Responses to the Writings of Mark Twain* (2014), especially Chapter 7, "Variety of Readers" for more on this.

intentionally counters Twain's pre-war, nostalgic America. Instead, Pryor's humor centers sociopolitical disillusionment as a mainstay of black Americanism.

In his *New York Times* review his 1993 comedy "Race," Stephen Holden remarks that for Mooney, a white person's cultural nostalgia can easily be a black person's nightmare. Mooney censures film adaptations such as "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" for choosing to romanticize a time when "black people like [him]self were in chains." Correspondingly, Pryor uses comedy as a critical lens to spotlight the hypocrisy embedded in the history of American values. Mobilizing what scholar Luigi Pirandello calls the tragicomic, Pryor pinpoints the tragedy in seemingly innocuous storylines that end in death or prison for its black (male) characters while lauding white female innocence and white male heroism.

Pryor's comedy targets U.S. narratives and literary tropes within those narratives built on championed ideals of U.S. nationalism—freedom, individualism, and democracy. His humor bares the "dark" truths of a U.S. identity predicated on routine marginalization of blacks. In this way, Pryor's humor aligns with the premise of Ralph Ellison's 1953 essay, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity." In it, Ellison asks, "How is it […] that our naturalistic prose—one of the most vital bodies of twentieth-century fiction, perhaps the brightest instrument for recording sociological fact, physical action, the nuance of speech, yet achieved—becomes suddenly dull when confronting the Negro?" Though Ellison uses Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to suggest that it represents one of the last examples of U.S. depicting blacks in a fuller sense of humanity, his question remains apt. Ellison continues,

> Despite their billings as images of reality, these images of Negroes of fiction are counterfeits […] whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrument, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain anti-democratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. (137)

With foreboding cynicism, Pryor's routines, like the other humorists in this project, confront definitions of humanity that exclude nonwhite persons. As Mooney's allusion to Twain suggests, Pryor challenges white-authored fictions that create images of the Negro as "counter*feit*," but Pryor also challenges images of the Negro as counter*parts* to those championed nationalist ideals. Put another way, Pryor's humor disrupts narratives of (white) freedom necessitated by enslaving blacks; (white) democracy predicated on (black) inequality; and (white) individualism as it counters (black) stereotypes. If Mark Twain tells the story of white America, then Richard Pryor tells a story for black America.

In her chapter on Pryor, Glenda Carpio asks, "how does Richard Pryor mobilize black humor to redress American slavery?" (73). Her focus on Pryor locates his manipulation of stereotype as one that oscillates between grievance and laughter. She suggests that Pryor's humor seeks remedies to the crimes of slavery while giving voice to "'freedom dreams'" unrealized. In this way, Pryor's comedy "mobilizes" the "negro stereotype" from white literary pages to stage a critique of racial tropes.

Building on Carpio's work, this chapter argues that Pryor's comedy challenges a white literary racial logic that implicitly and explicitly dehumanizes its black characters. Pryor makes these literary interventions by 1) integrating into his comedy a Black Nationalist ethos 2) infusing black vernacularism and folkloric traditions into his routines 3) by revising and altering depictions of black-white interactions in white-authored texts. Pryor aligns with black literary traditions in order to deconstruct those damning white literary traditions. As the "Dark Twain," Pryor recuperates themes, tropes, images, and symbols in 19th and 20th century U.S. literature to re-imagine the normative logics of Western conceptions of the human predicated on stock caricatures of blackness. In this way Pryor actively participated in redefining American comedy while contributing to the culture of the Black Power and the Black Arts Movement.

Pryor's post-1968 stand-up as well as his 1977 television program *The Richard Pryor Show* introduced a new racial consciousness to the American public. This new consciousness imbibed the contemporaneous character of the late 1960s and 1970s (the debut of black studies programs in academia, the rise and seeming failure of the Civil Rights movement, the subsequent Black Power movement and its aesthetic output—the Black Arts movement). During this time, civil unrest and frustration within the black community characterized the political climate. Several studies[5] highlight the music, poetry, theater, and literature that defined the Black Arts and Literary movements. But few link the freedom struggles of the 1960s and 70s with the aesthetic and political contributions that black comedy offered. Whereas

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[5] Trey Ellis's *The New Black Aesthetic*

poets, writers, and thinkers such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Larry Neal typify the Black Nationalist character emergent during this moment of artistic development, black humorists like Pryor and his contemporaries—Dick Gregory and Moms Mabley—were using comedy as a platform to engage in civil rights issues. Several black comedians during this era gained new visibility as crossover stars—gaining access to primetime television programs and amassing mixed-race audiences for their stand-up shows. This newfound visibility for black comedy afforded a different outlet than the overt militancy of the era's other genres. In staged and televised performances, comedians such as Pryor brought sociopolitical issues into white American view, using laughter to dispel difficult truths about American identity.

Several studies including the aforementioned Haggins's *Laughing Mad* (2007) and Tucker's *Furiously Funny* (2018) devote time to Pryor's more popular concert films and his comedy albums. However, this chapter focuses on Pryor's lesser-celebrated 1978 comedy album *Black Ben the Blacksmith* and a short sketch from *The Richard Pryor Show* titled "The Trial." *Black Ben the Blacksmith* captures an experimental phase of Pryor's career. Pryor performed *Black Ben* in front of a live audience in 1968, but the album was released in 1978 as an audio album. 1968 marks a pivotal moment for Pryor. It was during this time that Pryor began using an uncensored voice that spoke openly to white audience members—an unprecedented move by any stand-up comedian. Additionally, during this time, Pryor began interacting with black activists, writers, and professors, which developed his more radical perspective. "The Trial," also referred to as "To Kill a Mockingbird," is a

short sketch from his 1977 show. The sketch, which parodies Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* features Pryor as a white lawyer with an ironical likeness to Mark Twain.

Both routines exemplify how Pryor was writing into a black literary tradition. Pryor's *Black Ben* makes critical allusions to satirist Charles Chesnutt's "Web of Circumstance" from his 1898 collection of short stories *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line.* Using Chesnutt's story as reference, *Black Ben* upends its tragic ending, saving the title character from death. In the end, Pryor's *Black Ben* offers a utopian answer to Chesnutt's closing plea in his story when he calls for a "golden age, when all men will dwell together in love and harmony." In both performances, Pryor's comedy invokes racial and gendered stereotype, while bearing witness to racial violence through a literary lens. And though on one level his sense of humor might convey a retributive overtone—as the endings sabotage white authority—these sketches disassemble normative racial logics in order to imagine their alternative.

This chapter proceeds in three section. The first, "Pryor and the Black Arts Movement" investigates the experimental time during Pryor's career. This section examines Pryor's time in California's Bay Area during the late 1960s and early 1970s to contextualize his proximity to Berkeley's developing counterculture and its impact on his art. It was during this time that Pryor stopped imitating Bill Cosby's routines and started developing his own voice. Also, Pryor's relationships with black writers, professors, and activists influenced his new style. Ultimately, the comedian's stint in Berkeley exposed him to black intellectual life and provoked a consciousness that

surfaced as his newfound critical voice. In this section, I use several examples of Pryor's work, including an unaired screenplay titled "Uncle Sam Wants You Dead, Nigger," and an example from *The Richard Pryor Show* in which Pryor plays the first black president of the United States of America. These examples reveal a clear sense of Pryor's Black Nationalist sentiments and the mutual influences of the Black Power Movement. While several scholars note the comedian's involvement with Black Power movement, I use this section to contextualize the Pryor's transformation against this backdrop in order to suggest that this informed his on-stage literary critiques.

Section two, "Dark Twain" and the White Literary Imagination," interrogates how Pryor's new political and racial awareness specifically targeted the white literary imagination. This section connects Pryor to African American literary traditions while drawing on what Toni Morrison terms the "Africanist presence." In her 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Morrison explains that the "Africanist presence," is a "nonwhite, Africanlike […]presence or persona […] the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify" (x). Like Ellison, who criticizes twentieth-century fiction for its drawings of the negro as "an image drained of humanity," Morrison queries "the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population [the Africanist presence]" (6). This section focuses on a brand of U.S. humor, linked to figures like Mark Twain, that depicts whiteness as normative/ superior and blackness as alien and disposable. Pryor mobilizes black literary traditions by bringing folkloric characters like Mudbone—an

old wino philosopher reminiscent of Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple—to the stage.

The final section, *Black Ben the Blacksmith* and "The Trial/To Kill a Mockingbird" reads these two performances considering their literary allusions. Beyond stereotypical portrayals of blacks, Pryor animates white characters to parody and revise tragic endings. "The Trial," lampoons Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird.* And, *Black Ben the Blacksmith* makes reference to *Gone with the Wind,* but more acutely alludes to Charles Chesnutt's 1898 story "The Web of Circumstance." In these readings, I pay particular attention to Pryor's rewriting of literary endings. Though Chesnutt is an African American writer, Pryor's act operates in tandem with Chesnutt's critiques of race-relations and blackness in white-authored fictions. Marked as one of the first black literary satirists, Chesnutt's humor, exemplified in his 1899 *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales,* revises stereotypical black characters. As discussed in the introduction of this project, Chesnutt's Uncle Julius character from *The Conjure Woman* collection serves as a counter to Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus. In this way, *Black Ben* acts as pastiche and parody in order to upturn the tragic ending for the black character. Similarly, "The Trial" spoofs the courtroom scene in Harper Lee's 1960 novel in order to save the accused black man from hanging. Whereas Lee's black character is killed, despite his innocence, Pryor's character evades death. And, in a sardonic twist, Pryor instead has the angry white mob carry away the Atticus Finch character. Both routines resist and reimagine narrative logics as well as racial logics.

The focus on literary intervention is a departure from the other chapters that focus more on comedians challenging blackface minstrelsy and stereotype. Yet, central to the argument are the ways black humorists in this project confront logics that characterize blackness as inferior or less than human. Each humorist in this project imparts a type of truth telling or what Haggins calls "common sense ideology" to rearticulate definitions of the human. Frederick Douglass challenged theocentric definitions of the human by impersonating slaveholders' use of religion to justify chattel slavery. His staged mockeries of white preachers sermonizing to slaves that they must "obey [their] masters," worked to undo the stalwart rationale denigrating blacks as non-human. For Moms Mabley, as addressed throughout the second chapter, her use of the mythologized and romanticized mammy stereotype challenged white nostalgia bound up in stereotypes of black female identity. Her comedy functioned as the wise grandmother offering truth to her children. For Pryor, criticizing literary traditions allowed him to simultaneously expose whiteness as a racial construct and the cultural narratives that inform that knowledge. Further, Pryor participates in a genealogy of humorists that use dominant representations of blackness to "trouble" those visions[6] of blackness *and* whiteness.

PRYOR AND THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

[6] Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* argues that blackness becomes "knowable" through visual cultures. Fleetwood suggests that over and over again visual representations of blackness are epistemic in Western discourse. Her study invites new ways of knowing by drawing attention to the ways that blackness "troubles" vision and circulates Western thought. For Fleetwood, blackness is "not rooted in history, person, or thing," but through performative acts of visual demonstrations of blackness, "attach[ing] to bodies and narrative codes […] but always exceed[ing] these attachments" (6). I push this idea to suggest that Pryor's performances use visions of blackness to "trouble" whiteness as well as blackness.

> For the first time in my life, I had a sense of Richard Pryor the person. I understood myself. I knew what I stood for. I knew what I thought. I knew what I had to do. I had to go back and tell the truth.
>
> —Richard Pryor, *Pryor Convictions*

Sometime between 1969 and 1971, Richard Pryor entered what the *New York Times* describes as the wilderness years. Escaping the chaos and drama of his life in Los Angeles, the disheveled comedian submerged himself into Berkeley, California's thriving counterculture. For Pryor, this period marked a pivotal artistic awakening. In his 1995 memoir *Pryor Convictions and Other Life Sentences* he writes,

> It was the freest time of my life. Berkeley was a circus of exciting, extreme, colorful, militant ideas. Drugs. Hippies. Black Panthers. Antiwar protests. Experimentation. Music, theater, poetry. I was like a lightning rod. I absorbed bits of everything while forging my own uncharted path. I indulged every thought that popped into my sick head. I read and reread a copy of Malcolm X's collected speeches. I put Marvin Gaye's song 'What's Going On' on my stereo and played it so often it became the soundtrack for my life up there. (115)

Though Pryor's memoir glosses over the particulars of his time in Berkeley, his fragmented summation of its atmosphere—"Drugs. Hippies. Black Panthers. Antiwar protests. Experimentations. Music, theatre, poetry," captures the spirit of the countercultural movement that defined the 1960s. The movement, which began in earnest after the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, represented the anti-establishment character of a disaffected youth. Demonstrations against the Vietnam War, anti-nuclear protests, the emergence of second-wave feminism, the rise of the

New Left, the prevalence of the hippie movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the inception of the Black Panther Party amplified political tensions across the nation. College students at University of California, Berkeley earned national spotlight for their series of demonstrations, including The Free Speech Movement. Pryor stepped right into this epicenter of political and civil unrest when he fled to Berkeley. Adopting a life of austerity in order to find "the truth," these "bits of everything," as Pryor puts it, primed what would become the comedian's new political attitude.

Though the Berkeley years represent what Keith Harris calls Pryor's "second incarnation," Pryor would continually evolve and devolve over the course of his career. Before the "wilderness" period, Pryor's comedy mirrored the top-billed comedian at the time, Bill Cosby. Looking for instant success, Pryor decided that copying Cosby's easy-going, non-confrontational humor was the way to thrive as a comic. In his memoir, the comedian describes Cosby's impact: "Bill Cosby was the guy who was most envied. I remember seeing a picture of Bill on the cover of *Time* magazine. Every comedian I knew had seen it and was jealous as an ugly whore" (72). Pryor continues, "I decided that's who I was going to be from then on. Bill Cosby. Richard Cosby" (72).

As "Richard Cosby," Pryor emulated Cosby's racially innocuous routines. Just as in Bill Cosby's, Pryor's routines promoted family life and middle-class values—a far cry from the sexually explicit, scatological humor that dominated his comedy during the late 1960s and 70s. On August 31, 1964 Pryor made his first television debut on *On Broadway Tonight,* Rudy Vallee's summer variety show. In his Cosby-esque mode, a clean-shaven Pryor appeared in a suit with a skinny black

tie and shiny conked or straightened hair. Instead of the observational and anecdotal humor from his later material, Pryor's jokes are quick punch lines. He opens, "I'm from an average type family…eleven kids (laughter). My mother's Puerto Rican and my father's negro. And we live in a real big Jewish tenement building…in an Italian neighborhood. Every time I go out into the neighborhood, the kids say, 'get 'em he's all of them!' (laughter and applause)." Though Pryor makes mention of racial and ethnic difference, the picture he creates circumnavigates the more direct, critical race humor evident in his later work. Infusing "all" racial identities into this on-stage persona, Pryor evokes an integrationist sentiment—a philosophical contrast from the post-1968, segregationist Pryor. Further, the Puerto Rican mother that the comedian claims in this '64 monologue is as fictitious as his conked, silky-straight hair. The bit continues with quick punch lines and mundane, vanilla themes: jokes about a bachelor struggling to make a cup of coffee, reading signs while riding the New York City subway, and watching commercials about laundry. Despite this Cosby version of Pryor, the comedian's acuity in creating characters using his voice and gestures was already evident.

Nearly ten years later in a 1974 taping of the *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, Pryor exemplified the shift from Richard Cosby to Richard Pryor. Sporting an afro and his now familiarized mustache, the comedian took the stage with a similar autobiographical introduction: "I'm from Peoria, Illinois. It would get kinda dull and I'd go and hang out with the winos on Sundays because they knew everybody, especially they'd speak to everybody." Although he uses the similar narrative framing as he did performing the Cosby persona, Pryor's routines shed the

race-neutral middle-class family themes. His routines were now filled with winos, prostitutes, cussing preachers, and fights with the police.

Stories from Pryor's life almost always surfaced in his comedy, but his upbringing was far less ostensibly comical. Pryor was born Richard Franklin Lennox Thomas Pryor III in 1940 during the dead of winter, in the small town of Peoria, Illinois. Raised by his father and paternal grandmother who he called, "Mama," Pryor's unconventional upbringing would give him plenty of material for his later acts, which initial reviewers of his acts described as "exaggerations" (need citation, Phil Elwood). Raised in his grandmother's brothel, Pryor spent a great deal of his childhood surrounded by pimps, prostitutes, and the melee that accompanies brothel life. By the eighth grade, Pryor dropped out of school and at the age of fourteen began working a series of odd jobs before enlisting in the army. By the 1960s, realizing he had a knack for comedy, Pryor began performing at black and tan clubs in Peoria. And soon, like his fellow comedians Red Foxx, Dick Gregory, Moms Mabley, and Godfrey Cambridge, Pryor took his act to the Blackbelt Circuit (Chitlin' Circuit). With his act still underdeveloped—a hodgepodge of singing, reading the newspaper with funny voices, and pretending to play the piano—the comedian eventually set himself up to meet Sammy Davis Jr. and comedian Donnie Simpson, which encouraged him to travel to New York. In New York, Pryor booked regular gigs at clubs like *The Bitter End*, *The Living Room*, and *Papa Huds*. New York exposed Pryor to a variety of comedic influences and eventually he would meet major industry figures like Woody Allen and his idol, George Carlin.

But on Friday, September 15, 1967 during his opening night at the *Aladdin Hotel and Casino* in Las Vegas, Pryor had an epiphany. Standing in front of the crowd, Pryor realized—he would later tell Mooney—that his grandmother—the women he called Mama, would not have been allowed to sit in the audience. Her only access to the building, he concluded, would be on the stage as an entertainer or through the kitchen as a server. In his memoir, Pryor confesses feeling like a fool. It was then, he says that he lost sense of himself.

Other varieties of this moment suggest a more sensational account. In a 1974 interview with *Rolling Stone,* Pryor recollects, " […] people would tell me, "You can't do that." If I said "ass" or something, they'd say, "Hey, you can't have that in there." And I'd think, "Why in the *fuck….?* Fuck these people, man, *fuck* this way of livin', *fuck* it."(2). In another account Pryor joked with a reporter, that he stripped naked, ran through the casino, jumped onto the 21 table, waved his "cock" in the air, and screamed Blackjack. Newspaper headlines deemed Pryor's walkout and subsequent firing, the end of his career. This assessment was only partially accurate. Regardless of the details or even the exact date, which also remains nebulous in Pryor's accounts, the infamous walkout redirected Pryor's path to a new, more racially conscious comedic approach.

Just as accounts of the infamous Vegas meltdown vary, the timeline detailing Pryor's departure from life in L.A., his stay in Berkeley, and his creative transformation remains somewhat elusive among his biographers. David and Joe Henry's 2013 *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World that Made Him* pin the comedian's long-term stay in Berkeley to 1971. However, the Henry brothers note

that Pryor's experimental phase began earlier than Berkeley. Beginning sometime after 1967, the Henry's state that Pryor "devoted himself to woodshedding his newfound voice(s) at the Troubadour, the Red Foxx Club, and John Daniels's Maverick Flat" (100). They highlight his changing attitude in a 1970 appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in which Pryor presented himself as a "defiant, in-your-face-poet," delivering diatribes against "whitey" (101). The biographers add that producer and activist Harry Belafonte also did not recognize the comedian from a 1967 special he produced for an ABC showcasing on African American humor. Will Butler's 2015 article "Killing It in Berkeley: Richard Pryor Crushed His 'Cosby' to Become Comedy's Top Badass" also marks 1971 as the year that Pryor left Los Angeles to find the new version of himself. Butler traces the comedian's sojourn through his performances at clubs like Basin Street West in San Francisco and the Hungry i.

Still, UC Berkeley Professor and novelist Cecil Brown, friend to Pryor, claims in his 2013 *Pryor Lives! How Richard Pryor Became Richard Pryor or Kiss My Rich, Happy Black…Ass!* that the year was 1969. "The year 1969," Brown writes, "when Richard came to Berkeley, was the tipping point" (27). Delivering a first-hand account, beginning with the two meeting in Berkeley in 1969, Brown recounts seeing Pryor in his first performance as his new comedic self at *Mandrake's*—a social club in Berkeley. "So in 1969," Brown writes, "he hitched a ride from a fan to Berkeley and performed at a small club, Mandrake's […] Throwing out the entertainment role, he became an artist—Richard Pryor. It was this change that would not only transform his act but would also transform the role of stand-up comedy forever […] Because of this single act he changed himself and twentieth century American culture, too" (5).

But Scott Saul's 2014 biography *Becoming Richard Pryor* offers one of the most comprehensive records of Pryor's early life and the happenings of the comedian's Bay Area stay. Saul's extensive and unprecedented depiction of Pryor's life and time in Berkeley provides detailed record of various venues he played and samples of Pryor's unpublished experimental material. Saul's quest begins in the archives, where he learns that Pryor DJ'ed for a bit for KFPA, Berkeley's Pacifica affiliate. After learning about Pryor's short stint as radio DJ, he affirms that Pryor came to Berkeley in 1971. Saul's search at the radio station leads him to Alan Farley, the late Berkeley radio DJ and also the man on whose couch Pryor squatted during his Berkeley stay. Farley offers Saul a horde of untapped Pryor artifacts, including what Saul calls the "Farley tapes"— recordings of Pryor performing at local clubs, ideas for unproduced screenplays, poetry, and an avant-garde sound collage. The tapes reveal a Pryor not often pictured in public view (xli). Though the tapes remain unreleased, Saul reproduces examples of Pryor's written work, which reveal the counterculture's impact on the comedian. Saul writes, "A snatch of one stream-of-consciousness poem, recoded in the fall of 1971, captures the blend of disillusionment and yearning, exhaustion and ambition, that filled Richard during this interval. His voice on the recording is scratchy and eerie, like a phone call from beyond the grave:

> *Back up on myself and dim the lights*
> *Poetic justice stems from my lips…*
> *A fading car goes by, it whispers in my voice*
> *A creakiness untold that I haven't heard before*
> *A challenge to me to stay here who I am*
> *To be, to live, to realize*

Not to justify, not to inherit,

I lay claim to all and nothing

I survived from my will,

My will to survive in life's endless bloody dream. (258).

After hearing the tape, Saul suggests that Pryor voice sounds as though he is speaking from "beyond the grave" (258). Yet, these lines also show a lively interiority. The speaker wrestles with his own voice—a voice that whispers from fading cars. The "challenge to stay *here* who [he is]/ to be, to live, to realize," reveals an existential conflict that his time in Berkeley came to symbolize (l.5-6). The "endless bloody dream," represents the familial and personal headache publicized in the media as the reason Pryor fled to Berkeley. But, this "bloody dream" also characterizes the political strain manifesting in local race riots and anti-war protests during the early 1970s. This stream-of-consciousness snippet personifies the self-discovery happening for Pryor; this process of "understand[ing] [him]self] to get "a sense of Richard Pryor the person," which he would later reference in his aforementioned 1995 memoir.

Beyond giving him a place to stay while in Berkeley, Farley produced and co-wrote projects with Pryor. Farley produced a compilation of Pryor's poetry, featured a 1972 broadcast of Pryor's comments on the Attica prison rebellion. Additionally, Farely produced one of Pryor's virtually unknown comedy albums, *The Button-Down Mind of Russell Oswald*—a comedy about the Attica uprising, which broadcast on KPFA in May 1972. Together, the two would also publish a television screenplay for *The Great American Dream Machine* titled "Uncle Sam Wants You

Dead, Nigger." Though *The Great American Dream Machine* rejected the script, *The Realest,* a satirical periodical that ran from 1958 to 2001, published the piece in 1971.

The macabre tone pervading Pryor's stream-of-consciousness poem from "the Farley tapes" emerges in the screenplay, "Uncle Sam Wants You Dead, Nigger." Just as in his Grammy-award winning album *Bicentennial Nigger* (1974), this short sketch excavates the ironies of the "American Dream" for the black man by satirizing patriotic iconography. The short piece chronicles a young black man from the ghetto named Johnny. Throughout the sketch, the omniscient voices of his hard-working mother and father pressure Johnny to "get a job" and to stay out of jail. The piece opens with a jet plane landing at an airport "in America," which then cuts to a casket carried off the plane by soldiers. As if personifying the perceived failures of the Civil Rights integrationist movement, the voiceover of a preacher begins: "He *tried* to serve his country [emphasis mine] (congregation answers with him) um hm *um/* And Johnny was a good boy, yes/ um hm *um*" (39). The call and response between congregation and preacher signifies the centralization of the black church in civil rights rhetoric. Despite being "good," a word synonymous with the tenets of nonviolence and civil disobedience—morality, virtue, and righteousness—violence, in this instance as represented by the casket, won. Amid his parents' complaints that they have worked "hard" to try to send him to school, Johnny finally succumbs to enlisting in the army. In a "white voice" an army recruiting poster says to Johnny, "'Uncle Sam wants you. Uncle Sam wants you. Uncle Sam wants you. That's right nigger, Uncle Sam wants you.'" The original army recruitment poster features the slogan "Uncle Sam Wants You For U.S. Army," pointing an accusatory finger

perhaps denoting moral responsibility to join army efforts during World War I and World War II. Though its illustrator, J.M. Flag, designed the poster after a British recruitment poster in 1917, some sources suggest that the "Uncle Sam" character portrays Samuel Wilson, a New York City meat packer who supplied meat to troops during the war of 1812. Since the 19th century, Uncle Sam has been a symbol of US cultural and a personification of US patriotism. Using a "white voice," Pryor's depiction of Uncle Sam, aligns him with values of US culture that have only benefitted whites while denigrating blacks. Switching the words in the poster from "for US Army" to "nigger" Pryor encapsulates a history of Uncle Sam's abuses toward the black community.

Next to the "Uncle Sam Wants You" poster, a black man in a Dashiki appears and stands beside Johnny. Dashiki, a representative of the black separatist ethos, appears: "Yeah, nigger, Uncle Sam wants you *dead.* Man, you don't want to join the Army what you want is to join our army." Eventually, Uncle Sam and Johnny's father convince the boy to enlist and fight in Vietnam. In his excitement to "be good," Johnny exclaims "Damn, can't wait to get to 'Nam/ I'm gonna get me some of them gooks, too, Jack/ […] that's right I'll be a hero." The scene cuts to stock footage of troops landing in Vietnam and B-52 bombing raids accompanied by a musical soundtrack—a mixture of Shirley Temple singing "On the Good Ship Lollipop," and "Stepin-Fetchit-type voices saying all the old hack phrases from racist movies, 'Well, time to eat dinner, heah, heah, heah!'" Eventually, Grisby, Johnny's Captain, orders Johnny to kill a group of Vietnamese people and then collect the ears of the dead. In a spell, Johnny retrieves the ears and "looking at the bodies, instead of the Vietnamese,

he sees the bodies of his family lying there, dead." Soon after, Johnny finds himself staring down the barrel of a rifle and then dead in the field. The same preacher's voice that opened the sketch returns. As the hearse approaches a graveyard, the preacher hums: "And he lived a good life, um hm/ And he was a good boy, yes he was./ And he never done no harm to nobody. Um hm um/ And he tried to do the best he could. Yes he did." The scene closes with the echoing voiceover of a "white cracker" guard: "I don't care what kind of hero he is/ We don't bury no niggers in this graveyard." The final words of the scene come from Dashiki: "Uncle Sam wants you dead, nigger…" Johnny's body hits the ground. Fade out.

Although Pryor's burgeoning political consciousness eventually rerouted American stand-up comedy by altering representations of race in a larger sense, his comedy joined an existing dialogue of black satirists. Gil Scott-Heron's *Small Talk at 125th and* Lenox although not stand-up comedy, infused critical sarcasm with spoken-word poetry and music. The 1970 album parallels the militant spirit evident in Pryor's sketches, and similarly aims its critique at the U.S. government's negligence for the immediate needs in black communities. The poem "Whitey on the Moon," the ninth track on the record, delivers a caustic humor that criticizes the nation's preoccupation with space travel while abandoning and exploiting people of color down on earth. Scott-Heron's refrain, "Whitey's on the moon," enters every stanza as critical jab and as a juxtapose to the sundry list of concerns plaguing the black community:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.

(with Whitey on the moon)

Her face and arms began to swell.

(and Whitey's on the moon)

I can't pay no doctor bill.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.

(while Whitey's on the moon).

The man jus' upped my rent las' nights.

('cause Whitey's on the moon)

No hot water, no toilets, no lights.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

The repetitive rhythm of the refrain "Whitey on the moon" coupled with the shift in conjunctions—"*and* Whitey's on the moon/ *but* Whitey's on the moon/ *while* Whitey's on the moon, *'cause* Whitey's on the moon"—links the source of enduring struggles in the community to the government's frivolous endeavors. Using these conjunctions, the poem's speaker inserts the irony of launching a billion-dollar government-funded initiative while Americans dwell uninhabitable conditions, without health care, and up against the rising cost of living. The figure of "whitey,"—a conflation of whiteness and the U.S. government, or more apt in 70's terminology "the (white) Man," invokes Pryor's Uncle Sam. Just as "Uncle Sam, Wants You (Dead Nigger), Heron correlates the government's directives with the demise of the black family. Just as Johnny sees his family dead instead of the Vietnamese, Whitey's

trip to the moon, left his sister Nell with a rat bite and no money to pay the bill. The satire in both underscores the futility of the American dream for blacks and the widening economic gap inextricably connected to race.

Pryor's literary influences maintained the same acerbic sarcasm in their work. "The Black Pack," as journalists would later call them, were a revolutionary black literary crowd in Berkeley with which Pryor associated and who heightened his literary awareness. The "pack," which included a mix of writers and professors included Al Young, Ishmael Reed, Walter Mosely and Professor Brown, furthered the comedian's interest in and introduced him to new black literature.

Reed's 1976 *Flight to Canada* in many ways revises white literary themes, tropes, and motifs just as Pryor's post-68 material. Reed's novel takes the reader on an anachronistic ride through slavery. Predicated on run-away slave Raven Quicksill's poem, which takes the form of a letter titled, "Flight to Canada," *Flight to Canada* the novel features an unlikely depiction of Abe Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe, among others. Additionally, the novel evokes William Wells Brown's 1858 satirical play *Escape, Or, Leap for Freedom.* The satire of the novel emerges through its narrator. As narrator, Reed critiques Lincoln, by re-imagining the national icon and poking holes in myths depicting the former President as the Great Emancipatory hero. Throughout the novel, moments of comedy for the large part appear through anachronism and historical reinvention. For instance, Reed's novel takes place during the nineteenth century, but features slaves who sleep on waterbeds and take airplane jets to freedom.

As Cecil Brown describes, his friendship with Pryor as well as with the other writers, was one invested in these types and other forms of black expression. Brown explains the moments he introduced Pryor to iconic blackface comedian Bert Williams. He describes their shared passion for Bert and watching 16-millimeter film of the comedian playing cards. And though the two expressed interest in doing a film about the Williams called *Nobody* for which Brown wrote a script, the film never materialized. The significance of these literary encounters elevated and expanded Pryor's comedic reach. Saul writes that, "'All these new friends were artists who, like Richard, had found a way to turn the language of the streets into the language of art" (9).

But it was Pryor's performance at Mandrake's in Berkeley that changed trajectory of American stand up. During this performance, Pryor solidified his newfound alliance with the philosophies of Black Nationalism and the Black Power movement. And, it was during this performance that the first glimpses of this new consciousness and style publicly materialized[7]. Outside of the act's critical reviews, Phil Elwood and Gleason of the *San Francisco Examiner* were the first to review Pryor, Brown gives lengthy first-hand depiction of his first encounter with the comedian. During this performance Pryor performed an experimental version of *Black Ben the Blacksmith,* which I analyze in the last section of this chapter. Brown adds that this performance was the time a comedian ever spoke directly to members of the audience—an unprecedented move that transformed the stand-up genre. Further, during the Mandrake performance, Pryor no longer simply alluded to "Black

[7] Although Brown dates this Mandrake's performance to 1969 in *Pryor Lives!*, Mandrakes set-list documents three Pryor performances in May 1971.

Power" as he did through the Dashiki character's voice in "Uncle Sam Wants You Dead, Nigger." Instead Pryor spoke directly about his support for the movement and The Black Panthers. In his essay, "'That Nigger's Crazy': Richard Pryor, Racial Performativity, and Cultural Critique" Keith M. Harris terms this recuperative moment as Pryor's "second incarnation." Harris writes, "This ethos is not colorblind, [it] is aggressively black, [it] is a source of action, a source of doing, calling attention to social condition of African Americans, but is also informing aesthetic practices of cultural production. This ethos was also one inspired by The Black Power Movement, The Black Arts Movement, and the Black Panthers, as well as the perceived failure of the Civil Rights Movement" (25-6). By directly aligning his humor with Black Power, Pryor's comedy became more than light amusement; it became means to express black racial pride and notions of black efforts toward self-determination.

Although some pin the first use of the term "Black Power" to Richard Wright's use of it in his 1954 non-fiction work *Black Power,* the phrase became widely recognized after Stokely Carmichael's use of it during a 1966 protest speech. In it Carmichael, chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), later known as Kwame Turé declares, "We been saying 'freedom' for six years. What we are going to start saying now is 'Black Power.'" His 1968 book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, clarifies the meaning of black power. Turé explains, "It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations." A departure from Dr. Martin Luther King's integrationist rhetoric, the Black Power movement prided itself on black

autonomy. This surge of political, economic, and aesthetic pride within the black community prompted the initiation of Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Founded in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton—also friends to Pryor—the organization developed free breakfast programs and operated under the insistence of self-defense. Counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) conducted by the FBI would eventually lead to the organization's demise.

The interplay of black power and its aesthetic expression was crucial in shaping new directions in black stand-up comedy. Larry Neal's landmark text "The Black Arts Movement" asserts

> The political values inherent in the Black Power concept are now finding concrete expression in the aesthetics of Afro-American dramatists, poets, choreographer, musicians, and novelists. A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world it their own terms […] The Black artist takes this to mean that his primary duty is to speak to the needs of Black people. *Therefore, the main thrust of this new breed of contemporary writers is to confront the contradictions arising out of the Black man's experience in this racist West. Currently, these writers are re-evaluating Western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art.* Implicit in this re-evaluation is the need to develop a 'black aesthetic.' It is the opinion of many Black writers, I among them, that the Western aesthetic has run its course: it is impossible to construct anything meaningful within its decaying structures. We advocate a cultural revolution in art and ideas. (15)

Pryor's comedy directly confronts and re-evaluates western aesthetics. Later, he would become the first black person signed to a forty-million-dollar deal with Columbia Pictures, but before this unprecedented feat, Pryor gained access to primetime television.

September 13, 1977 marked the premiere of *The Richard Pryor Show*. Wedged in the eight o' clock slot just after the NBC News and Hollywood Squares, the first episode featured Pryor as his beloved character Mudbone, at a Star Wars Bar, and in a press conference as the first black president of the U.S. The variety show—a mix of improvisation, slapstick, social commentary, satire, abstract comedy, and controversy—gave Pryor creative control as executive producer and head of production along with Producer Rocco Urbisci. Despite its short lifespan—the show was cancelled by October of that same year—the program shifted representations of blacks on television.

With Pryor in creative reign, *The Richard Pryor Show* often showcased a militant Black Nationalist attitude that targeted U.S. national identity. In one of the show's sketches, Pryor plays the first black president. Though the scene begins generally relaxed with a calm, demur Pryor standing as president behind his lectern, tensions soon escalate. As Mr. Bigsby from the *Mississippi Herald* stands to ask a question about the president's mom. Audience members eventually expose a more radical ideology. A journalist from *Jet Magazine* asks the president if he is including the name of Huey Newton for the FBI, to which Pryor responds no one knows the ins and outs of the FBI better than Newton: "he would be an excellent director." Next, a Black Panther from *Ebony Magazine* by the name of "Brother Bell" stands and greets

the president with the Arabic greeting used by Muslims, "As-Salaam-Alaikum," (peace be upon you) to which the president replies without pause, "waʿalaykumu as-salām" (and upon you, peace), eliciting laughter from the audience.

By presenting a black president during the 1970s, Pryor's sketch imagines black futurity while also conversing with other black satirists challenging oppressive authorities. The scene also makes allusion to "Whitey on the Moon." Pryor as President says, "I feel it's time for black people to go to space; white people have been going to space for years."

The burgeoning presence of blacks in media contributed to Pryor's successful reception. Evan Cooper's 2007 article "Is it Something He Said" offers a reception analysis of what he calls Pryor's "intimate humor." Cooper distinguishes satirical humor from "intimate humor." Instead of pointing out the hypocrisies and shortcomings of society at large as satire does, culturally intimate humor points out the shortcomings within their own culture:

> Pryor's culturally intimate humor would not have gone over as well with a non-Black audience without the increased visibility of Blacks in American culture during the 1960s and 1970s. In essence, the palatability of cultural intimate humor to a mass audience depends on a broad awareness of cultural stereotypes […] This increased African American presence was manifested in the aforementioned Civil Rights and Black Power movements, a pervasive 'ethic chic' ethos, as well as the increased visibility of Blacks in various popular cultural forms in the early 1970s (229).

Cooper goes on to cite *Sanford and Son, Good Times, The Jeffersons, The Flip Wilson Show,* and various "Blaxploitation" movies as contributors to Pryor's broad appeal.

Pryor's show was not the only show to feature racialized and politicized content, but many claim that Pryor was one of the first comedians to exercise parrhesia—frank honest criticism. Dr. Cornel West attests in his review of *Furious Cool* that Pryor was "the most plain, frank, honest, unintimidated speech we had in the sixties, even more than Martin and Malcolm." Calling upon Pryor's comedy as a rhetoric rooted in truth, West's assertions immediately connect Pryor to a political agenda. Pushing this, Jonathan P. Rossing suggests that Pryor's parrhesia acts as public pedagogy. His 2014 essay "Critical Race Humor in a Postracial Moment: Richard Pryor's Contemporary Parrhesia," argues that Pryor's parrhesia confronts and defies dominant Western narratives that perpetuate privilege and racial hierarchy. Critical race humor, Rossing adds, acts as a type of public pedagogy, operating as truth. While studies like Rossing's account for truth-telling and critique as part of Pryor's comedy, little attention has been given to the ways Pryor's comedy reads and responds literary trends using this "common sense ideology."

Pryor's comedy operated as a quintessential example of African American oral expression. "'The oral voice is the essence of African American writers like Zora Neale Hurston,'" Professor Brown tells his Afro-American literature class in *Pryor Lives!* "I wanted to tell [my class] about Richard Pryor," Brown continues, "and his voices that I had heard that evening in Mandrake's. Richard's voices were portraits of

black people who belong in the novels and short stories. Whereas black authors wrote their stories, Richard delivered his stories out loud" (47).

In *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* Christine Acham writes that the few scholarly analyses of black television during the Black Revolution primarily dwell on perceived stereotypes and anti-progressive television texts" (xii). Achem argues that evaluations of black television during the 70s as merely perpetuating racial stereotypes fail to account for the "hidden transcripts" of resistance. --- contributed to reconstructions of black identity, but also to ways of seeing and hearing white identity. Perhaps not so "hidden," Pryor's comedic transcripts not only resisted dominant images of blacks, they articulated whiteness and white lives unlike his predecessors and contemporaries.

DARK TWAIN AND THE WHITE LITERARY IMAGINATION

> Almost singlehandedly, [Pryor] is creating a new style in American comedy, a style that some of his admirers have called "theater" because there is no other category available for what he does. His style relies on extremely subtle dimensions, which must be observed and heard at the same time in order to be completely understood and appreciated. Indeed, there is no way his brand of comedy can be described in writing without the generous use of parentheses noting nuances in sound and facial expression.
>
> —James Alan McPherson, 1975

As "Dark Twain," Pryor critiqued racialized tropes in white-authored literature by signifying African American literary traditions. Beyond themes of militant Black Nationalism, Pryor's humor summons the folklore from early African American oral and written expression. Evidenced in characters like his beloved Mudbone, Pryor's "new style [of] American comedy," described in the excerpt above, relied on conventions of black vernacularism and themes from a lineage of black

writers. The church songs, the blues, the ballad, the sermons, and the stories—that populate the literary works of Hurston, Sterling A. Brown, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, also populate Pryor's comedy. While several scholars point out Pryor for contributing to black folkloric traditions, including Maxine LeGall in her essay "Br'er Richard: Fascinatin' Storyteller," this chapter adds that Pryor does so in order to critique white-authored constructions of blackness. As the final section of this chapter suggests, Pryor stages these critiques as revisions. To do so, he uses a mix of parody and pastiche, caricatured stereotypes, and exaggerated perceptions of racial difference in order to rewrite tragic endings. While invoking black literary tropes and using black vernacularism, Pryor's humor intertwines a critique of racial tropes in the works of authors such as Mark Twain and Harper Lee as the next section addresses, while simultaneously establishing a lineage with African American writers.

Using black vernacular and literary traditions, Pryor's comedy frequently relied on the art of signifying—word play within African American culture involving verbal strategy such as playing the dozens, lying, "putting on," "cracking," "toasting," dissing," and "capping." Pryor's signifying manifests in several instances, including through recurring characters (e.g. Mudbone and The Preacher), and during his parodies of perceived racial differences. Henry Louis Gates' 1988 *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism Signifying Monkey* defines signifying or signifyin' as a rhetorical strategy of repetition and difference. Using socio-linguist Roger D. Abrahams landmark studies (1962; 1976), Gates acknowledges the inherent complexities of signifyin(g) as a living form of black

vernacular. He tracks Abrahams as the first scholar to define signifyin(g) as a language technique. More specifically, Gates adds that signifyin(g) is the "act of language" that turns upon indirection. Citing Abrahams, Gates writes, "'with *signifying* we have a term not only for a way of speaking but for rhetorical strategy that may be characteristic of a number of other designated events'" (85). The following terms, Gates offers as synonyms of Signifyin(g): *talking shit, woofing, spouting, muckty muck, boogerbang, beating your gums, talking smart, putting down, putting on, playing, sounding, telling lies […] shucking, jiving, […]cracking […] rapping*" (85). These synonyms for signifyin(g), highlight it as double-voiced—one that speaks between texts. Further, Gates identifies four types of double-voiced signification: "tropological revision," "speakerly texts," "talking texts," and "rewriting speakerly texts." Gates defines tropological as the way specific tropes repeat with difference between two or more texts. He points to specific tropes that recur in African American literature like descent underground, vertical ascent from South to North (e.g. the Great Migration), and figures of the double, which comprise iterations of W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double conscious. Talking texts refers to forms of black intertextuality. And, rewriting speakerly texts, Gates explains is a form of direct and indirect revision, analogous to parody and pastiche. Though Gates's study centers on written texts and the ways in which these texts impart vernacular and oral traditions, Pryor's humor stages all four types double-voiced modes of signification. As discussed in the final section of this chapter, Pryor's *Black Ben the Blacksmith* as well as the sketch "The Trial," offer examples of talking texts and tropological revision.

Analyses of black folklore surged in the 1960s and 1970s. Though collections of original folklore dates back before this time (e.g. Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps eds, *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1958), Mason J. Brewer *American Negro*), few sustained analyses of black folklore or black humor existed before this time. Alan Dundes recognizes this absence in critical attention to black folklore in his 1972 collection of critical essays *Mother wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*. Dundes writes, "many American Negroes have relatively little knowledge of black history—thanks to the unfortunate editorial bias in American education for the past hundred years" (xiii). Dundes credits this ignorance, in part, to white racist stereotypes linked to black folklore.

The use of black folklore in white-authored texts, Gretchen Martin contends, does not always denote racist sentiment. Martin's 2015 study, *Dancing on the Color Line: African American Tricksters in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* complicates the idea that white authors' use of black folkloric traditions and black vernacular techniques in depictions of its black characters produced racial stereotype. In her readings of novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, John Pendleton Kennedy, and the lesser-known short stories of Joel Chandler Harris, Martin argues that these authors signify on black narrative practices, like African American trickster tales, in order to sabotage "dangerous" racist ideology (12). Further, Martin suggests that the same attention devoted to authors who adapt black aesthetic techniques derived from slave culture in their work should be given to those white authors who feature black folklore in their works.

Nineteenth and twentieth century readers provide varied perceptions of white authors' use of black voices and dialect. Robert McParland's *Mark Twain's Audience* charts the perception of common readers to discern Twain's cultural impact. McParland's study highlights Twain's broad international appeal after the publication of *Innocents Abroad,* emphasizing Twain's authority over depictions of Western life through the travel narrative. Concerning Twain's reception among its black readers, McParland highlights mixed responses. McParland includes discussions of Twain in black newspapers during the late 1880s that championed the writer as a "kind hearted man, and anxious for the welfare of the race."[8] Contrastingly, following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the NAACP deemed *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* racist for its 211 mentions of the word "nigger," which compelled the group to advocate for the book's banning. Despite negative assessments of *Huckleberry Finn*, its popularity endured. Like Martin, McParland asserts that Twain's depiction of race acts a critique of systems of oppression. "Jim, the runaway slave," McParland notes, "is drawn with full humanity in this novel. *Huckleberry Finn* represents both the first time that a common boy was narrator of an American novel and also one of the first occasions of a black individual as a central protagonist of an American novel. Jim is, overall, a more complex character than the comic-minstrel show Jim, who some critics recognize at times in the novel's pages" (131). Further, Twain's anti-imperialist views toward U.S. foreign affairs and his philanthropic endeavors to fund black students' college education further complicate simple conclusions about the writer's racial attitude.

[8] "Our New York Letter," Eleanor Kick from Brooklyn (February 1887), *Washington Bee,* March 5, 1887.

Thus, Mooney's title for Pryor as "Dark Twain" comes with racial baggage. Said doubly as deference and as criticism, the nickname ties Twain to the tradition of (white) American humor. And while Twain is not the first or the last influential figure in American humor, Twain's stamp on the American literary tradition, popular culture, and U.S. humor as one of "the best storyteller[s] to ever live" remains evident. Twain's frontier humor emerged as a way to forge a national identity. Using vignettes and archetypes like the Yankee, Twain delineated America identity against British identity. Further, Twain's novels such as *Tom Sawyer* featured cultural pastimes like the blackface minstrels, which were instrumental in framing this national identity.

Take for instance Twain's 1897 short story, "How to Tell a Story," from a slightly larger collection of stories *How to Tell a Story.* In this short story, Twain sketches the rules for telling what he calls the most difficult type of story to tell—the humorous one. He distinguishes the humorous story from the comic and the witty story by pointing out that the humorous story is distinctly American:

> The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, and the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the matter of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter. The humorous story may be spun out to great length, and may wander around as much as it pleases, and arrive nowhere in particular; but the comic and witty stories must be brief and end with a point […] the humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it. The art of telling a

> humorous story—understand, I mean by word of mouth, not print—was created in America, and has remained at home.

Not only did readers receive Twain as the premiere American humorists, but Twain himself took authoritative claim of the genre.

Twain's second example of the humorous story, "The Golden Arm," highlights notions of American humor that rely on white mimicry of the "other." Just before the story, Twain informs the reader that the tale is an old "negro ghost story" that the story, as is the case with all humorous stories, is best told aloud. Twain uses "The Golden Arm" to demonstrate the importance of performing and timing the pause in telling a story. Yet, this moment in Twain's story more importantly reveals ways that the "negro" voice enters humorous, and in this case, "American" narratives. Stressing the preference for oral humorous story-telling over written, Twain writes the story by taking up a "negro" dialect. Thus, Twain's brand of American humor often depends on a type of ventriloquist voice of the "other." Specifically, Twain's explanation implies that aspects of American humor rely on a white interpretation of blackness.

Not just as a cynical nickname, "Dark Twain" critiques the racist rationale at the core of the history of American humor. In doing so, Pryor exposes what Toni Morrison calls the "Africanist presence." In her 1992 text *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* Morrison defines the Africanist presence as a black presence in the white literary canon on which championed ideals of national identity rely. Morrison intends to challenge the assumption that U.S. canonical literature is "free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old

presence of, first, African and then African-Americans in the United States" (4). *Bicentennial Nigger,* Pryor's sixth album, released in 1976, summons the voice of this Africanist presence. Against the backdrop of the "Battle Hymn Republic," Pryor evokes the voice of an old slave: "Ise sooo happy cause I been here 200 years…Im just thrilled to be here [with a chuckle that intersperses the rest of the performance]." As an ironic gesture, Pryor's obsequious slave points out the glaring omissions in the narrative of U.S. independence. The buffoonish slave character serves as a sardonic example of the ways in which narratives of American identity depend on the exploitation of nonwhite groups, in this case black slaves.

Pryor's critique of U.S. hypocrisy and the white literary imagination thrive by conjuring the Africanist presence through his use of recurring characters. His most beloved character, Mudbone, a wino philosopher from Tupelo, Mississippi, who first appeared on his 1975 album *Is it Something I Said,* embodies black literary traditions most recognizably. The voice of Mudbone prefaces Pryor's memoir: "If we were sittin' 'cross from each other right now, your ears would be filled with a muddy voice that sounds something' between a preacher's Sunday mornin' sermonizin' and a grizzled seen-it-all coot sittin' at a bar drinkin' and spinnin' some wild bullshit, and you know what? That voice would belong to me. Mudbone." Though Mudbone always appeared on stage, this written introduction to the character illustrates his connection to folkloric tropes and signification.

McPherson connects Mudbone to Uncle Bud, "'the archetypal junkman who picks up bits and pieces of things and turns them into something new,'" loosely reminiscent of Red Foxx's junkman Lamont Sanford from *Sanford and Son.* In an

interview for *Black Camera* McPherson recalls an interview he had with Pryor. In the interview Pryor claims he was unaware of the tradition of Uncle Bud, but explains in his own creative process he gathered information from listening and watching people in different cities across the country to create characters that people love.

Though McPherson connects Pryor to Uncle Bud, Mudbone more closely recalls the sensibilities of Langston Hugh's Jesse B. Simple. As literary ancestor to Pryor's Mudbone, Simple also spelled Semple first appeared in Hughes's weekly column for the *Chicago Defender* in 1942 during World War II and later in five collections under the title *Simple Speaks His Mind*. Just as Pryor explains to McPherson that Mudbone is the amalgamated residue of overheard conversations and people watching, Hughes notes that his literary character is about "the many and the particular—those we all know from walking around in Harlem, listening to a conversation in a bar" (98). Hughes continues, "there evolved the character in this book, wondering and laughing at the numerous problems of white folks, colored folks, and just folks—including himself […] usually over a glass of beer he tells me his tales, mostly high humor, but sometimes with a pain in his soul as sharp as the occasional hurt of that bunion on his right foot. Sometimes as the old blues says, Simple might be 'laughing to keep from crying.' But even then, he keeps you laughing too (98-9). Using the quotidian voice of the innocuous old black man, Simple and Mudbone manipulate the paternalistic image of the Uncle Tom stereotype to offer critique on social ills.

Set up as a double act or a comedy duo—a comic pairing of a straight man and the funny or comic man—Hughes constructs the Simple persona as the humorous

counter to a Hughes persona. Using this frame, Simple speaks directly and candidly about "white folk." In the short story "Color of the Law" Hughes as Simple explains,

> Last Sunday, I walked some thirty blocks down Seventh Avenue straight through Harlem, and in all them thirty blocks I did not see a single *white* person, other than cops—nothing but Negroes […] weekdays you see plenty of white folks in Harlem, since they own most of the stores, bars, banks, and number banks. But they do not live with us. On Saturday nights, these white folks take their money they have got from Negroes and go home to big apartments downtown, or nice houses with lawns out on Long Island—and leave me here in Harlem […]They make their money out of me. Then they want to tell me *not* to vote for Adam Powell or listen to Malcolm X because they raises too much hell! Do I tell them how to vote or who to listen to? (77).

Though Simple was not known for overt militancy, his remarks indicate inklings of black separatist sentiment. Hughes frames his grumblings concerning black money leaving black communities to support white ones, as commonplace observance rather than political diatribe.

Hughes's rendering of Simple's unpretentious wisdom likened him Twain. Arnold Rampersad notes the connection in the introduction to *Simple Speaks his Mind*: "Writers […] saw the connection between the creation of Simple and a grand tradition of humor in American writing, of which Hughes, who admired Mark Twain's work, was well aware" (xxi). Linking Hughes's Simple to the larger tradition of 19th century humorists including Artemus Ward and Josh Billings, Rampersad continues, "all drew the for their most powerful effects on the living, breathing

American language as represented by one version or another of the American family of dialects" (xxi). Rampersad credits the "American language's most significant literary achievement" to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—a revolution in American writing for its "tragedy and comedy, lyricism and savagery, in the uneducated speech of a country boy." Though unlike Twain, Ward, and Billing, Hughes offered direct commentary on racial oppression, targeting "white folk" and their "ways." Simple's quotidian sensibility-not a racial divide, but like Twain, whose popularity soared through his circulation newspaper subscriptions, Hughes, despite his frank color commentary, received praise for the column from blacks as well as whites.

Pryor's connection with black folk humor remains a feature in scholarship. Bambi Haggins suggests that "Pryor's comic personae existed in this intersection of contemporary black comic sensibility and folk humor as exemplified by the Pryor character with the greatest longevity, Mudbone" (53). Mel Watkin's argues that the very tradition of African American humor emerges from traditions of signifying. Maxine LeGall's essay "Br'er Richard: Fascinatin' Storyteller," directly connects Pryor's humor to these literary early traditions:

> Although revered as a stand-up comic and comedic actor, his uniqueness derived from his gift as storyteller whose work was saturated with the folklore of Africa, the southern plantations, and the black enclaves of Eatonville, Harlem, Detroit, Peoria, and other centers of black like. His use of the black oral tradition can be compared to the work of his predecessors, cultural folklorists/preservationists Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. (79)

While linking Pryor to early folklorists like Hughes and Hurston, LeGall suggests that Pryor was an "accidental folklorist," rather than a learned one, conveying an authenticity through unintentionality (80). The comedian's ability to capture 'everyday black folk' or 'the ghetto,' as Bill Cosby once described, gave him unique appeal. LeGall continues, "As a folk artist, Pryor was deeply concerned with societal ills. He chose to showcase the stories of winos, junkies, prostitutes, and preachers who didn't quite hit the spiritual mark" (85). Unearthing the stories of the 'prostitutes,' 'the winos,' and the 'junkies,' Pryor's comedic ethos gave voice to the underdogs and the marginalized much like early trickster tales of African and African American folklore. Pryor's contribution, LeGall concludes, was his preservation of folklorist history. By filming and recording his work, Pryor preserved an aspect of black history generally overlooked in the annals of American history.

An early review of Simple grounds Hughes's success in those narrative or artistic devices, rooted in African American oral traditions, which later emerged in vaudeville and burlesque routines. Phyllis R. Klotman's 1975 essay *Jesse B. Simple and the Narrative Art of Langston Hughes* outlines four narrative techniques that made the Simple tales highly successful: "1) the sure-fire appeal of the skit technique, 2) an apparent artlessness and simplicity in the development of theme and character, 3) reader identification and 4) the intermittent sound of blues in prose" (66). In this way, Simple and Mudbone seem to operate as distant cousins or relatives in the same family living in different regions of the U.S.

The cross-generational, intertextual dialogue between Hughes/Simple and Mudbone/ Pryor, meets at the junction of what Gates theorizes as the living form of

language. In a 1975 interview Pryor alludes to bridging the distance between the written word and performance:

> "I couldn't do it just by doing the words of the person," he says. "I have to *be* that person [emphasis mine]. I see that man in my mind and go with him. I think there's a thin line between being [an Uncle] Tom on them people and seeing them as human beings. When I do the people, I have to do it true. If I can't do it, I'll stop right in the middle rather than pervert it and turn it into Tomism. There's a thin line between to laugh with and to laugh at. If I didn't do characters, it wouldn't be funny.

In recognizing the thin line between character and stereotype, Pryor suggests that bringing a character off the page brings them into view as a human being. And though, LeGall marks Pryor an "accidental" folklorist, his sentiments expressed here might suggest otherwise. Further, Pryor's post-1968 career appears deeply invested in and connected to African American folklore and literary patterns.

BLACK BEN THE BLACKSMITH & THE TRAIL/TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

In both *Black Ben the Blacksmith* and in the short sketch "The Trial," Pryor performs revision using parody and pastiche. *Black Ben the Blacksmith* illustrates a complex interplay between black literary and performance traditions. Pryor establishes this interplay by constructing the plot of *Black Ben* against Charles Chesnutt's 1898 short story "Web of Circumstance" and by performing *Black Ben* as a one-man show. As Carpio highlights, *Black Ben* recalls the ways in which abolitionist William Wells Brown performed his comedy *The Escape* as a one-man act on the anti-lecture circuit, playing women, men, and both sides of the black/white

color line. Ultimately, Pryor's *Black Ben* stages a revision by saving Chesnutt's protagonist, Ben Davis, from death. As Chesnutt's fiction illustrates the unfair plight for the black man, Pryor responds by rewriting the tragedy. Discussed in the latter half of this section, "The Trial," also referred to as "To Kill a Mockingbird," illustrates one of Pryor's most apparent revisions as it parodies Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird.* In this sketch, Pryor also saves the black character from death. Yet, in "The Trial" the white man suffers at the hands of an angry lynch mob instead of the black man—an absurdist twist to Lee's plot. Though apparent differences mark these two performances—*Black Ben* was performed as a solo, stand-up act and "The Trial" was a scripted sketch for a television show with a cast of comedians—both demonstrate Pryor's investment in modifying racial literary tropes. Further, both offer an example of the ways in which Pryor's comedy destabilizes the narrative logics that construct blackness as disposable.

Recorded in 1968 and released as an audio album in 1978, *Black Ben the Blacksmith* functions as a play within a play. The skit parodies a minstrel and loosely alludes to a play Pryor actually saw while he was in prison. Using only his voice (manipulating his pitch and tone) Pryor puts on a one-man show complete with a cast of six different characters. In effect, Pryor plays a white prison guard, an inmate, the actor introducing the play to the inmates, a white planter, the planter's father, his sister (the southern belle and love interest) and "Black" Ben, the title character. The plot of the play, although somewhat disjointed at times, follows a simple tale. Ben, the black blacksmith falls in love with a white southern belle despite the disapproval of her brother, a southern planter. The utopic ending between "Black" Ben and his

white love interest, the southern belle, upends the narrator's (played by Pryor) initial promise at the start of the play that "the nigger gets killed." In this way, the ending of *Black Ben* operates as a trickster narrative; the title character Ben and Pryor himself act as the tricksters. Ben acts as trickster by "getting the girl," in a happily-ever-after ending. And Pryor acts as the trickster by upsetting the promise that Ben would die. Ultimately, Pryor's one-man performance undercuts storytelling and blackface minstrel traditions (white bodies in blackface, white writers using "negro dialect" and various literary stereotypes[9]).

By using his voice and "freeing the black body from those stereotypes" Pryor thwarts the logic of visual racial markers. The comedy emerges in Pryor's use of exaggeration; his use of exaggerated high-pitched voices of the female characters, his use of an obsequious voice for the black character, and his feigned authority in portraying the white character. Using only his voice in this performance not only showcases the comedian's skill, but it also points out the artifice of race. In this regard, Pryor turns assumed racial logic on its head. But rather than simply exposing race as a construct, the performance levels the racial hierarchy.

As Carpio notes, Pryor's play recalls abolitionist, playwright, and performer William Wells Brown's play *The Escape.* Similar to Pryor, Brown performed each character in a one-man show and used his play to satirize minstrelsy. She writes, "Like Brown in his dramatic readings, Pryor is the nexus for the different perspectives of each character across differences of gender and race. By setting the performance of the play in a prison where he is an inmate, however, Pryor also

[9] Here I am referring specifically to Mark Twain's *How to Tell a Story*, Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus*, blackface minstrel performers like TD Rice, etc.

indirectly links three distinct time frames: the antebellum past; the early twentieth century, when minstrel shows were routinely performed in jails in America; and the late twentieth century of his performances in Hollywood" (82).

Though Carpio accounts for Pryor's connections to Charles Chesnutt (she draws the title of her book *Laughing Fit to Kill* from Chesnutt's 1899 *Conjure* tales), I add that *Black Ben* specifically alludes to Chesnutt's short story "The Web of Circumstance." Chesnutt's "The Web of Circumstance" tells the tragic tale of Ben Davis, a blacksmith. The reputable blacksmith falls victim to unfortunate circumstances after being falsely accused of stealing Colonel Thornton's prized whip. After receiving an unfair sentence of five years in prison, Ben emerges only to learn that both his children are dead and his wife has left him for Tom, his assistant, and who is also the man that framed him. Seeking revenge, Ben heads to Colonel Thornton's home to kill him, but reconsiders once he sees the Colonel's young daughter. As Ben attempts to flee, he inadvertently crosses paths with the young girl. Colonel Thornton, upon seeing Ben considers him a threat to his daughter, shoots, and kills him.

While not an exact mirror to Chesnutt's short story, *Black Ben's* similarities with "The Web of Circumstance" offer symbolic implications that suggest conscious connections between the two. Both Bens work as blacksmiths. For Pryor's play, the image of the horse recurs as a both a subtle and overt intimation toward sexual fixations on black male virility and phallic imagery. Upon meeting Black Ben, the southern belle—played by Pryor using a high-pitched woman's voice—compliments him on his "lovely biceps," to which Ben replies, "want to feel my ass"? Both the

audience and the woman laugh—the audience laughs at the slapstick play on words and Pryor's southern belle's laughter operates as coy laughter. For Chesnutt, the animalistic imagery is less pronounced and certainly not facetious. Instead Chesnutt uses animalistic imagery to mark Ben Davis's demise. As the story progresses and Ben continues to suffer misfortune under his "circumstances," Chesnutt's diction transforms him from a "blacksmith" into an animal. "The eyes of the prisoner [Ben]" Chesnutt writes "were glued to the jury-box, and he looked more and more like a hunted animal." After receiving a sentencing of five years despite no real evidence to prove any guilt, the protagonist is freed from jail only to encounter more misfortune. "One morning in June," Chesnutt writes, "*a black man* limped slowly along the Lumberton plank road." Here, Chesnutt's word choice strips the character of his name and he becomes "black" Ben in this regard (akin Pryor's Black Ben). In this same paragraph Chesnutt continues to morph Ben with animalistic portrayal. Chesnutt writes, "though he limped painfully with one foot, the other hit the ground impatiently, like the good horse in a poorly matched team." This figurative transformation signals Ben's end. While Chesnutt turns Ben Davis from blacksmith to "hunted prey," Pryor's performance subverts the victimhood sentiment by using animal imagery to play up sexual fantasies and taboo to Black Ben's gain.

Though both texts foreshadow an imminent death, only Chesnutt's Ben actually dies. After his sentencing, Ben Davis tries to escape the jail and gossip travels amid the townspeople. Chesnutt writes, "They spoke on awhile, using the past tense as if they were speaking of a dead man." Here, as in other moments, Chesnutt silences Ben, leaving it to others to portray him, underscoring his powerlessness. An

excerpt from the courtroom scene reads, “Ben Davis listened to [the] testimony with half-open mouth and staring eyes. Now and then he leaned forward to speak perhaps a word, when his attorney would shake a warning finger at him he […]fell back helplessly, as if abandoning himself to fate […].” Chesnutt further mirrors Ben’s silence by leaving the narrative gaps. For instance, part one ends with Ben and his wife happily discussing the day. Without description, part two begins with the sentence, “The case of the State of North Carolina vs. Ben Davis”. Conversely, in *Black Ben*, Pryor takes narrative control by changing the course of the plot (the “nigger” does not get killed). In the end, Pryor turns tragic victim to victor.

The most poignant revision in Pryor’s play upsets tragedy while denouncing constructions of whiteness as “pure” or “innocent” and blackness as threat. Chesnutt describes the young white child in his story using heaven-like imagery. He writes, “Ben Davis watched her through eyes over which had come an unfamiliar softness […] Under the lingering spell of his dream,” Chesnutt continues, “her golden hair which fell in rippling curls, seemed like a halo of purity and innocence and peace, irradiating the atmosphere around her.” Here, Chesnutt paints the image of Thornton’s daughter by highlighting white as innocent and blackness, specifically black masculinity as threatening. Aware of Ben Davis’s innocence, Chesnutt paints this contrasting image of white innocence and black guilt to challenge this false dichotomy. Pryor’s *Black Ben* altogether overthrows the idea of white female purity. In the play, the southern belle’s brother attempts to lure “Black” Ben by tying up his sister and stripping her naked. To his chagrin, Black Ben and the southern belle fall in love. Yet, in another twist, the southern belle’s brother accepts the couple. With this,

the prison guard (played by Pryor) interjects yelling, "Now wait just a goddamned minute! You said the nigger got killed." And the play ends…with laughter. Ultimately, alluding to Chesnutt's story, Pryor's comedy participates in a literary tradition while offering alternatives to the tragic narrative. As trickster, Pryor upsets narrative and racial logic.

The second episode of *The Richard Pryor Show* features a parody of the penultimate courtroom scene in Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The short sketch titled "The Trial" also referred to as "To Kill a Mockingbird," features a cast of young comedians including Robin Williams as the white defense attorney, John Witherspoon as the defendant, Sandra Bernhardt as white spectator, Tim Reid as a blind man, and Richard Pryor as the prosecutor, "Big" Ed Garvey—a Mark Twain look-alike described as the "meanest white prosecutor in the South." Set in Beauville, Mississippi, in 1926, the plot follows Wilfred Smith, "a colored man," who is on trial for his life after being accused of attacking a young white woman. In the end, the jury finds Wilfred not guilty. But in a twisted turn of events, the jury decides to hang the defense lawyer for "getting [Wilfred] off." In some ways, the incongruous ending parallels the ending in *Black Ben the Blacksmith.* In *Black Ben,* Pryor upsets the narrative expectation and presumed racial logic that "the nigger gets killed." And, the ending operates as a narrative rift for the white prison guard who initially refuses to watch a play about interracial love. Despite this, the play proceeds and concludes in amity—with "Black" Ben, his beloved white southern belle, and her brother the Southern white planter hand-in-hand. In "The Trial," however, the ending is far from harmonious. Ultimately, "The Trial" uses parody to get at multiple concerns—it

offers parody of Lee's novel and the figure of Mark Twain—to highlight a history of white paternalism and racist logics that criminalize blackness.

The definition of parody, as discussed in chapter one, is a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion. Further, applicable here, is Linda Hutcheon's description. She writes,

> there is no denying that parody is what Mikhail Bakhtin might have called a form of authorized transgression […] however, parody by its very doubled structure, is very much an inscription of the past in the present, and it is for that reason that it can be said to embody and bring to life actual historical tensions. It is true that as a way for art to engage history through purely *textual* appropriation, though, parody is again going to be potentially suspect in some people's eyes; that it is, nonetheless, not ineffectual can be seen in the powerful parodic art created by artists with a variety of interventionist social agendas focused on issues such as gender, class, sexual choice, race, ethnicity, and so on.

Hutcheon's assessment underscores the art of parody as having a critical, "interventionist" agenda. Further, Hutcheon's point that parody, despite Bakhtin's evaluation of it as a "transgression," embodies and brings to life "actual historical tensions," speaks to the core of Pryor's sketch. As complex interplay of racialized, class, regional, and gendered tensions, "The Trial," layers a history of generational trauma. Operating in the tragicomic mode, the laughter throughout the sketch arises from its attention to this history of racist logic.

As a parody of *To Kill a Mockingbird,* "The Trial" critiques a tradition of white-authored depictions of white, racial heroism. Loosely based on her on life, Lee's coming of age novel is set in 1933-1935 in the fictional town of Maycomb, Alabama. The protagonist, Jean Louise Finch (Scout), lives with her older brother Jeremy Finch (Jem), and their widowed father, Attitcus Finch a lawyer. Eventually, the town's judge assigns Atticus to defend Tom Robinson, a black man accused of raping a young white girl named Mayella Ewell—describe in the novel as "white trash." Despite evidence that Mayella made unwelcomed sexual advances toward Tom and that he in fact did not rape the young girl, the jury finds Tom guilty. While trying to escape jail, Tom is shot and killed. Though controversy surrounds *To Kill a Mockingbird* for its use of racial epithets and its one-dimensional depiction of Tom Robinson, among other criticisms, the novel has received numerous honors included the Pulitzer Prize in 1961. Further, many laud the character of Atticus Finch as an exemplar of heroism in the face of injustice.

Juxtaposed against *To Kill a Mockingbird, "*The Trial" problematizes Lee's characters. Take for instance, the white woman accusing Wilfred Smith, the black man, of rape. In Lee's novel, the young girl who accuses the black man is Mayella Ewell. In Pryor's sketch, she is "Ora Lee Dupri." Said quickly, the first two names sound like the word "orally," which when changed from adverb to verb becomes "oral." This minor detail operates as sexual innuendo by intimating her connection to "oral" sex. More obviously, during the trial Ora Lee's lawyer must stop her and a member of her defense team from kissing, which further upsets the narrative logic of white innocence or sexual purity. Whereas in Lee's novel Tom is convicted, which

presumes Mayella's innocence, Pryor's sketch links Ora Lee with sexual desire from the outset. When asked for her testimony, Ora Lee begins recounting her side of the story. Yet, the audience and Garvey soon realize that Ora Lee's testimony is merely bits from popular fairytales. She begins,

> It was a beautiful evening, the moon was full, the frogs was croaking, the jasmine was in full bloom [...] I was out on the road all alone…just me and Toto (audience laughter) We had just eaten porridge at the bears' house (audience laughter; Garvey begins signaling Ora Lee to stop). And we was just walking down the road when this here rabbit and a Chesire cat jumped out of a tree (Garvey continues motioning for Ora Lee to stop). And then, humpty-dumpty fell off a wall (audience laughter; Garvey finally interjects).

By constructing Ora Lee as sexually aggressive and then turning her testimony into a fairytale, the sketch points to the ways in which the court systems fail its black denizens despite obvious lies and corruption. Additionally, as a critique of Tom Robinson as a one-dimensional victim in Lee's novel, Wilfred remains silent throughout the sketch. With the white Sheriff pressing a shotgun to his head throughout the duration of the scene, the only form of communication Wilfred is afforded is gestural; he silently pleads with his hands to his lawyer.

The most absurd character in "The Trial" is Mr. Big Ed Garvey played by Pryor himself. Pryor plays the "white" prosecutor without altering the color of his own skin, essentially leaving Garvey's skin brown. Costumed with a white wig, white mustache, and a bulging belly Pryor, as Garvey, resembles a version of Mark Twain.

Presumably, Garvey's resemblance to Twain is not mere happenstance. Considering Mooney's nickname for the comedian as "Dark Twain," as well as the sketch's attention to Lee's novel—an accepted exemplar of U.S. fiction and southern humor—the Twain-guise invites broader discussions concerning U.S. cultural imagination. Further, Garvey's prosecuting arguments elicit laughter from the audience for their seeming illogic. For example, when Garvey addresses Wilfred's alibi that he was in jail during the time of the rape and therefore could not have committed the crime, Garvey suggests that Wilfred is "slippery." After the Sheriff confirms that Wilfred was "booked and incarcerated," he adds, "you know how slippery they are." To which, Garvey replies, "slippery is the key word your Honor." He then enunciates each syllable, using his hand in a snakelike gesture, "Slipp-er-ry (audience laughter)". Pryor as Garvey continues, "I found a book about [the magician] Houdini in his cell. It's obvious he learned a little trick from reading that book, and let himself out of the jail […] then let himself back in. Slipp-er-ry (audience laughter)." Here, not only does Pryor's costume provoke laughter through what Professor Faedra Carpenter calls "linguistic whiteface[10]," but also the laughter arises from Garvey's impossibly racist rationale. In effect Garvey's xenophobic rationale is at the core of the parody.

[10] In her 2014 book *Coloring Whiteness* Carpenter defines Linguistic Whiteface as the self-conscious and often-exaggerated manipulation of the voice intentionally used by storytellers, comedians, actors, etc. to portray the persona of "whiteness" to suggest the speaker is white. Though Pryor acts as caricature of Mark Twain, his use of Linguistic Whiteface speaks to larger implications of the white literary imagination. In this way, Twain acts as a stand in or symbol for literary and cultural thought.

Not limited to Garvey's prosecution, a pervasive racial logic runs throughout the sketch as a source of its humor. Take for instance "The Trial's" short, seemingly insignificant opening:

> The scene initially opens to a courtroom. On the back wall of the courtroom are two signs—one is a neatly typed sign that reads "Whites Section," and the other a scrappily hand-written sign that reads, "Colored Section." Amongst chatter, a blind man enters. Using his cane, the man feels his way into the courtroom and unsuspectingly takes his seat next to a white man in the "Whites" section. Upon seeing the blind man, the white man immediately shifts in his seat, aghast. Almost simultaneously, the blind man takes a sniff. Sensing something wrong, the blind man pauses. He then feels the white man's hair, stiffens in his seat, stands, and speedily taps his cane to get to the colored section. To ensure he has found the appropriate space, he feels the man's hair next to him, pats it reassuringly, and takes his seat with a convivial head nod and a smile. The audience laughs. And the main plot of the scene begins.

Although this bit runs for less than a minute, the implications speak to a racial logic historically used to facilitate or justify white superiority and black inferiority. In his 2006 book, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses,* Mark M. Smith examines the history of racist sensorium and how it facilitated southern white paternalism. His study explores how southern white slaveholders used sensory stereotypes to reinforce the black-white racial divide. Tracing the history of racialized sensory stereotypes in antebellum South, Smith contends that focusing only on those

visual markers of race fails to account for the ways race is learned. Ultimately Smith asks, what happens when we "restore the other senses—hearing, smell, touch, taste—when understanding the ideology of race and racial identity in southern history?" Like Smith's assessment of race as an experience beyond the visual, Pryor's sketch as well as moments in *Black Ben* point to several examples multisensory racial indicators. For instance, the white journalist covering the trial mentions that the courtroom is "sweltering" and that "even some of the coloreds are sweating." Garvey's claim that Wilfred is "slippery," points to the logics constructing race as a multisensory experience. And during a brief moment in *Black Ben* the white planter enters the room, but finds no one present. Yet, he states, "it smells like a nigger's been in here." These moments incite laughter from the audience perhaps both because of their seeming absurdity and because their logic is connected to the racism of U.S. history. As the black man, devoid of sight, navigates the courtroom, he discerns racial markers with his sense of smell and touch. Though Smith highlights the ways in which Southern whites used sensory stereotypes to justify slavery and its racial hierarchy (e.g. erroneously claiming that black people were made for the hard labor for slavery because their skin was rougher than white), the blind man in the sketch shows how blacks might interpret multisensory racial markers in order to navigate potential dangers of the color line. In this way, the humor in this sketch signifies a DuBoisian double consciousness or the "gift of second sight." The comedic ethos of the blind man's scene intervenes Smith's study to further suggest that while whites may have used the various senses to establish a racial hierarchy that justified white

superiority and black inferiority; blacks have a similar and necessary process in navigating racialized sensory experience.

Though Pryor's parody maintains a steady laughter from the live studio audience throughout, "The Trial" draws critical attention to the traumas linked to racial violence in African American communities. Not just limited to Lee's novel, the courtroom in the scene, symbolizes legal corruption and racialized injustice. As a symbol for this generational trauma, "The Trial" features a weeping black mother. At one moment during the sketch, the mother interrupts Garvey's opening statement, grovels at his knees and cries out, "please don't kill my son." For a moment the skit goes silent as both the members of the courtroom and the audience watches the woman plead. But, the comedy immediately resumes when the judge stops the disheveled woman to say "uh…that ain't your son." The audience laughs and after a brief moment of recollection, the woman heads back to her seat. The mother's misidentified bereavement for the defendant emphasizes the continuance of this particular racialized narrative of violence against black men and women.

In what might read superficially as retributive parody (implicated by the killing of the white man instead of the black man), the crying black mother in the sketch suggests otherwise. While the mother weeps for a son who is not present, in effect she weeps for everyone. In this way, Pryor makes allusion to black women depicted in black literary discourse left in the wake of the aftermath of racial violence. Though inserted into a parody, the mother personifies figurative and literal black mothers left to mourn the dead. "The Trial" as well as *Black Ben* connect to a rich literary history of black authors and poets capturing this personal and collective

bereavement. Gwendolyn Brooks's poem for "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," for example captures the literary persona of Emmett Till's mother. The 1955 murder of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman, in essence, started the Civil Rights movement. His mother's radical decision to leave the casket open, despite her son's disfigurement not only shocked a nation, but also invited a type of collective mourning. Brooks's short poem reads:

(after the murder,
after the burial)

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy.
She sits in a red room,
drinking black coffee.
She kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.
Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.

The mother in Pryor's sketch exists in a state of perpetual grief—the state of sorrow *after* tragedy. Brooks's mother also lives in a state after tragedy "(after the murder,/ after the burial). Like Pryor's unnamed mother in the sketch, Brooks's portrayal of the mother leaves her nameless; she is "Emmett's mother." Though she is "pretty-faced," she is a "thing," characterized by her brown skin and her sorrow. Like the

mother in Pryor's sketch, "Emmett's mother" is alone. Though she does not visibly weep as Pryor's mother does in the sketch, "she kisses her killed boy./And she is sorry" (l.7-8). In this regard, the word "sorry" parallels the weepy mother in "The Trial." "Sorry," which generates synonyms such as "forlorn," "miserable," and "sad" is also synonymous with the terms "apologetic," "remorseful," and "regrettable"—words associated with perpetrator rather than victim. Thus, the word "sorry," as for the crying mother in Pryor's sketch, represents tears beyond the immediate victim. Ultimately the mothers mourn their boys while also mourning a system allowing the violence.

After the jury condemns the white "Yankee" lawyer to death, and after finding the defendant Wilfred not guilty, a white juror states, "however your Honor, we find this carpet baggin', communist […] Jewboy lawyer boy guilty for getting him off!" To which the judge responds by waving a noose, implying his agreement. As the sketch ends, an angry horde carries out the surprised lawyer to be hanged. And, as the courtroom empties, the crying mother reappears. Only this time, she cries after the lawyer. In this way, Brooks's compounded use of the word "sorry" as apology and as mourning corresponds with Pryor's unnamed mother. She weeps for the lawyer just as she would weep for her own son; she mourns a racist system condoning injustice. The mother's return to the sketch symbolizes the recurrence of racial violence, and her displaced grief echoes the "chaos" in Brooks's poem.

By ending "The Trial" in this way, Pryor does not allow happy endings like in *Black Ben.* Perhaps this difference is indicative of the ten-year gap separating the two performances. Pryor performed *Black Ben* at the start of his stay in Berkeley whereas

The Richard Pryor Show aired at during the peak of the Black Power Movement. Though read against each other, both engage an underlying assumption that asks, what happens when we challenge dominant narrative constructs? Both provide answers to the question without easy conclusions.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by thinking about broader implications of humor as revision and as a mode allowing viewers to reimagine alternative race relations. At the end of Chesnutt's "Web of Circumstance," after Thornton murders Ben Davis, Chesnutt closes with a coda. It reads, "Some time, we are told, then the cycle of years has rolled around, there is to be another golden age, when all men will dwell together in love and harmony, and then peace and righteousness shall prevail for a thousand years" (322). Pryor's *Black Ben* seems to offer a direct response to Chesnutt's coda. Using the absurdity of the upturned plot and the voice of the white planter Pryor proclaims that, "[the southern belle, Ben, and the planter] will be big family and the first in the south to know true freedom and true love." This easy, harmonious ending signifies Chesnutt's hope that "all men will dwell together in love and harmony." Through comedy, Pryor pictures a "big family" of racial harmony.

Chapter Four

I Plead Human: Satirizing Black Authenticity in Paul Beatty's *The Sellout*

The previous chapters in this project focused on black humorists that parody the pro-slavery sermon, the mammy stereotype, and the white literary imagination. Using an ironic inversion in each of their performances, these humorists challenge white supremacist systems that delimit blackness as inferior. This chapter returns to Paul Beatty from the introduction but uses his satirical novel *The Sellout* to consider how this text challenges the intra-racial limits placed on representations of black identity. As it makes the final move in an expansive timeline, this chapter also makes the jump from a study of humorous performances to the novel.

While many writers critique black authenticity, Beatty's *The Sellout* disrupts in-group demarcations of racial identity. In this way, this final chapter differs from the preceding chapters. Rather than solely focus on the resistance to white supremacist classifications of blackness, this chapter uses *The Sellout* to examine how the intraracial definitions of black authenticity policies black identities. Contextualized by many critics as a post-modernist, post soul and post-black text, *The Sellout* becomes a useful archive to explore how contemporary black writers continue to use humor to challenge rigid definitions of blackness and racial constructs altogether. Further, Beatty's novel uses humor to expand representations of black humanity, even if those representations are problematic.

While the novel participates in many conversations—familial dynamics, the absurdity of Jim Crow segregation—the text makes most apparent a satirical critique on this nagging notion that there is a such thing as "authentic blackness."

This finite definition of blackness emerges almost innocuously in discussions of black political resistance and in the historical narratives of black progress. During and before the civil rights era, black resistance necessitated a united front against white supremacist oppression. Evidenced in the Black Nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s discussed in chapter three and in the New Negro initiative addressed in chapter two, post-Civil Rights literature, such as *The Sellout,* challenges these narratives of black progress in order to privilege individual identity over collective racial identity. What does it mean to disrupt this logic of black collective resistance for the sake of individuality? How do rigid definitions of blackness and black authenticity become buoyed to black identity? In what ways does the black community propagate these definitions? And, how does humor play a critical role for all of these questions?

Awarded the National Book Critics Award for Fiction and the Man Booker Prize, Paul Beatty's 2015 novel *The Sellout* subsists on a schizophrenic logic; its plot upends historical systems of racial segregation, its characters challenge rational thought, and at times its narrative feels less like a work of satire and more like a work in magical realism. The novel's protagonist, who remains unnamed for nearly the duration of the novel (and even then all we get is his last name, "Me"), is born and raised in the "agrarian ghetto" of Dickens, California. He grows up with a psychologist father and the object of Pavlovian experiments and twisted racial mind

games. As a result, the narrator resents his father's odd childrearing practices, but also relies on them for guidance in his adulthood. After his father dies and after his loses his hometown, Me decides that the only way to save the town is to reinstate racial segregation. Along his journey, the protagonist acquires a slave named Hominy—the last remaining member of "The Little Rascals"—who prefers a life of slavery to freedom. In the end, the protagonist faces Supreme Court criminal charges for his role in segregating his town as well as for owning a slave.

Though Beatty rejects the label of satirist, many of his novels beginning with his first, *The White Boy Shuffle,* established a new voice in black literary satire. Nearly all academics working in black satire including Darryl Dickson-Carr, Derek Maus, and Bambi Haggins, mark Beatty a satirist and establish his work as leading this post-civil rights assembly of black satirists. In his first novel, *The White Boy Shuffle,* Beatty's protagonist, Gunnar Kaufman, is a black surfer, poet, and basketball sensation. After his mother senses that her children are not connecting to their black identity, she moves them to Hillside, which Beatty describes as the hood. Gunnar soon learns that he does not fit into the dictates of blackness because others make fun of the fact that he 'talks like a white boy' and that he dresses differently. His father, a sketch artist for the LAPD seems to haunt the narrative but never makes an actual appearance; only appearing over the phone or through memory and in the end through a poem. Along with the story of Gunnar's personal narrative, we also get the drama of the Rodney King beating and a not-guilty verdict for the police officers responsible for the beating. Ultimately, as in *The Sellout,* Beatty's protagonist upsets racial expectations affixed to black identity. Gunnar's inability to connect to a "black

cause" and his inability to connect to an "authentic sense of blackness," evinces his failure to authenticate. Beatty's *White Boy Shuffle* recognizes racial markers and boundaries merely to dismiss them.

The preceding chapters examined performance humor across a long historical span—Frederick Douglass during antebellum slavery, Moms Mabley within the context of the Harlem Renaissance, and Pryor during the height of the Black Power Movement. Douglass's satirical sermons criticized the theological logic that slaveholding preachers used to justify using black people for slave labor. And as a result, Douglass's sermons presented an alternate form of humor by distinguishing itself from blackface minstrels. And as chapter one discussed, Douglass's humorous anti-slavery lectures impelled white audiences to laugh at Southern slaveholders instead of the comic darky. For Mabley, by becoming a mammified character, she uses humor to reject the stereotype of the Mammy. Performing as "Moms" throughout her 70-year career, she used her on-stage persona to challenge ideologies of Jim Crowism linked to black servitude. In chapter three, I focus on the ways Richard Pryor embraced a Black Nationalist ethos in his performances to critique civil injustice. Though not a topic addressed by many of his scholars, Pryor contributed to the political momentum of Black Arts Movement by writing satirical plays about "Uncle Sam" and parodying black-white exchanges in his performances. Pryor's performance as a white lawyer in his parody of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and his vocal performance of all the characters on his comedy album *Black Ben the Blacksmith* critique narratives of injustice for black characters by tapping into black literary traditions. But, rather than just staging a resistance to white

supremacist consciousness, these humorists imagine alternatives through parody and sarcasm.

Moving away from stage and televised performance, this chapter pivots to Beatty's novel to examine how literary satire critiques intra-racial pressures to subscribe to an authentic sense of blackness. To do so, this chapter asks a series of questions. How does literary satire participate in performances of revision and resistance; that is, how does contemporary literature revise racial tropes? How has black literary satire sustained a lineage with black humorists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries? What does it mean to be authentically black? Specifically, how does Beatty's satirical novel rewrite tropes of black identity in the black novel?

This chapter proceeds in five sections. The first section "A Tradition of Black Literary Satire" uses Darryl-Dickson Carr's two studies on African American satire, *African-American Satire: The Sacredly Profane*, previously mentioned, and *Spoofing Modern the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance* to frame an understanding satire as a necessary aesthetic tool for African Americans to assert identity. Dickson-Carr, the leading scholar on African American satire, offers that literary satire has consistently been an available means of public expression for African Americans. Literary satire, specifically in the novel, he suggests, provides a required skepticism toward changes in culture and politics. "The satirist," Dickson-Carr writes, "frequently thrives upon heteroglossia, polyphonic scenes, or apparent chaos." He continues, "the contemporary African American satirist in turn draws upon the inherent complexity of the voices that are part and parcel of black existence for material, reducing those voices to their most ludicrous level to confront them

ironically" (168). Beatty's *The Sellout* constructs scenes, characters, and voices that rely on apparent chaos—specifically characters that disrupt the black progress narrative and invert racist logic. Hominy, for instance, exists as a living and breathing stereotype who prefers slavery to freedom.

The second section "Failing to Authenticate," argues that Beatty's use of satire challenges the definitions of cultural authenticity. To do so, this section uses E. Patrick Johnson's explanation of black authenticity and Wahneema Lubiano's conceptualization of Black Nationalism as "commons sense ideology." In her essay, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense," Lubiano provides a more expansive definition of Black Nationalism as "black American common sense." "Black Nationalism," she writes "is plural, flexible, and contested; […] its most hegemonic appearances and manifestation have been masculinist and homophonic; […] its circulation has acted both as a bulwark against racism and as disciplinary activity within the group." She suggests that one way to understand black nationalism, is to understand the way it functions. She outlines five functions of black nationalism: 1) as a narrative of political history 2) as a language that connects seemingly disparate entities 3) as an aesthetic 4) as a rally cry or utopian narrative and 5) as a critical analysis—"an ongoing-, ever-renewed critique of black existence against white racial domination as well as an evaluation of black existence within the group" (233). In this way, Lubiano suggests that black nationalism as common sense ideology functions as a type of in-group control. While it functions against white dominion, Black Nationalism as common sense ideology polices black identity under the pretense of black authenticity. Against these concepts—of black authenticity and

Black Nationalism as common sense ideology—Beatty's protagonist fails to demonstrate classifications of black masculinity.

The third section "Pre-Black, Post-Black, and Post-Soul" examines Beatty's critique of contemporary scholarship invested in post-soul aesthetics and post-blackness. As a result, Beatty's novel both rejects racial classifications altogether. Scholars define post-soul aesthetics as the artistic and literary expression linked to the disillusionment after the perceived failure of the civil rights movement. Post-blackness is the notion that there are manifold ways of defining blackness and being black. Beatty's characters address this explosion of "post" scholarship by discussing it directly. Using what Dickson-Carr terms "polyphonic scenes"—scenes using multiple voices—Beatty discards the post-soul label as well as the label authentic blackness. Instead of embracing definitions of blackness, Beatty's novel erases these definitions for a more inclusive and expansive understanding of identity.

To broaden representation of black identity, Beatty uses the novel's prologue. Specifically, Beatty's novel refers to other prologues in the black literary catalogue. Making intertextual connections with the prologues from novels such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Beatty departs from protagonists who use a collective racial history as a facet in their identity formation. In this way, Beatty's prologue performs a revision of the black literary identity. Though despite characters like King Cuz who refuses "post-soul bullshit," *The Sellout* epitomizes a post-soul aesthetics. That is, *The Sellout* demonstrates what Mark Anthony Neal suggests in his own definition of post soul aesthetics, a "borrowing from black modern traditions" in order to "obliterate" them.

The fourth section “Father and Son: Who am I and How can I become myself?” examines the protagonist’s relationship with his father. This section suggests that Beatty uses the father-son relationship in the novel to place the narrator outside definitions of black authenticity, in order to show a humanistic quest for the self. Beatty combines a psychoanalysis lens (using the protagonist’s psychologist’s father) with discussions of post-blackness and the post-soul. In doing so, Beatty’s depiction of a son searching for himself through his dead father’s memory enacts a type of Jungian quest for individuation. His father’s omnipresent refrain: “who am I? And how can I become myself?” echoes throughout the novel as both a quest for the protagonist to find himself and also as a quest for place and belonging. Beatty links the protagonist’s search for identity, his father’s memory, and his mission to recover his lost city to emphasize a black character’s sense of identify outside the bounds of race. Though the novel’s plot centers around a sense of illogic—a black character promotes segregation and slavery—the novel’s father-son relationship and the narrator’s relationship to his home exists as recuperative and stabilizing elements. Despite the chaos of his childhood and the undesirability of his hometown, the protagonist follows in his father’s footsteps and clings to home because it “[makes him] feel loved by the world” (89). His hometown and his father’s memory become one in the same. The father-son relationship prioritizes the personal and individual experience in forming identity rather than linking black identity to a racialized collective.

The final section “The Sellout, The Segregationist, and The Voluntary Slave,” focuses on the most pervasive question Beatty’s novel prompts: what does it mean for

a black man in the 21st century to reinstate segregation and to own a black slave? The sellout's role as slaveholder and racial segregationist upsets any leanings toward racial authenticity and post-racial sentiments by subverting racial logic. This section devotes much of its attention to Hominy Jenkins—the narrator's voluntary slave and Beatty's most enigmatic character. Hominy, the last surviving member of the Little Rascals, represents the embodiment of American primitivism. For the main character, Hominy exists as an unwanted sidekick and mentally unstable liability. Hominy's presence in the novel prompts a shame in the African American community for his apparent lack of dignity and self-worth. As the narrator struggles to answer his father's lingering queries: "who am I? And how can I become myself?" Hominy seems to have already answered it for himself. Despite Hominy's befuddling mental instability, the narrator states, "[the] wizened old black man […] knew only one thing—his place. Hominy couldn't fix a wagon wheel. Hoe a fucking row. Tote a barge or life a bale. But he could genuflect his ass off" (81). Like the deferential slave statue kneeling beneath Abraham Lincoln "the Great Emancipator," "who Hominy is" remains fixed, willingly embodying stereotypes, embracing beatings, and welcoming a life of servitude. As a result, Beatty uses Hominy to show what happens when one exists *within* the limitations of racial confines while simultaneously illustrating an unsettled racial logic.

A TRADITION OF BLACK LITERARY SATIRE

In his 2001 book *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane* Darryl Dickson-Carr argues that in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, "African Americans face[d] the challenge of articulating a new meaning for the category of

'race […]'" (166). One of the first sustained analyses on African American literary satire, Dickson-Carr's book suggests that the post-civil rights period presented a moment in U.S. history when "the forces against which African Americans have had to struggle," such as slavery and Jim Crow laws, were less defined. The strategic essentialism found in segments of the New Negro movement, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Power/Black Arts movements' sublimated blackness under one rubric (168). The means of a collective resistance used to fight against white supremacy and oppression, often elided the complexities and diversity inherent to black people.

One of the goals of post-civil rights literature produced by African Americans was to incorporate varied categories of blackness. Paul Beatty's literary archive epitomizes this post-civil rights literary initiative. His novels, beginning with *The White Boy Shuffle,* have sustained a blatant critique of the finite boundaries used to define blackness. In *The White Boy Shuffle* for instance, Beatty recreates the drama of the Rodney King police beating and the ensuing Los Angeles riots after the outrage over the not guilty verdict. Rather than presenting black characters dissatisfied with the police officers' acquittal, Beatty's characters participate in the looting. In this way, Beatty's characters decline critical participation in a collective racial protest. Through the characters' political apathy, Beatty challenges the strategic essentialism that Dickson-Carr suggests previous political eras and movements such as the Civil Rights Movement necessitated. And in *The Sellout,* as I discuss later, performs this type of political disassociation in order to incorporate these varied categories of blackness.

Dickson-Carr's attention to the satirical black novel develops twofold: first, Dickson-Carr notes that the African American novel came into proper existence in at the beginning of the 20th century. The proliferation of black publishing companies and the dawn of the "New Negro" prompted a new literary visibility for black writers. Secondly, Dickson-Carr uses the novel to highlight Mikhail Bahktin's "heteroglossia." Citing Bahktin's "Discourse in the Novel," Dickson-Carr explains at length,

> Bahktin goes on to say that the novel's tendency to incorporate these forms of discourse opens up a space for heteroglossia—diverse voices—to enter the novel. The novel thus allows through these voices opportunities for sustained investigations and/or critiques of a wide range of subjects and permits an author to develop his or her plot, characters, and potential messages or arguments—thoroughly and in a unified manner. Obviously the essay, short story, or novella, long poem, and play also possess some of these qualities and therefore some of the same potential. The novel's greater length however, extends the process that facilitates development of ideas, characters, and discourses, whether simple or intricate, over hundreds of pages […] The satirical novel then poses an extra opportunity for fascination precisely because it frequently develops material that is arguably even more difficult to sustain: the ironic joke. (6-7)

Thus, for Dickson-Carr, the heteroglossia of the novel offers a useful frame to dissect diverse voices within the larger frame of the sustained ironic joke. But, for African American satirists the ironic joke distinguishes itself as an "ontological condition."

This ontological condition stems from chattel slavery and "coded" discourse: "African American satire's earliest purpose in both oral and written form was to lampoon the illogic of chattel slavery and racism itself" (3). After the 1865 Emancipation Dickson-Carr suggests that African American satire pulls from African Americans enduring historical and political struggle for the ideals set out in the Declaration of Independence.

Satire has maintained a steady presence in the African American literary tradition. Since Charles Chesnutt—the first recognized African American literary satirist—published his 1899 collection of short stories, *Conjure Woman,* satire has offered a way for black writers to participate in critical cultural commentary. Defined broadly as "trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly," satire, since the age of Aristophanes— "the Father of Comedy"—has existed as an aesthetic that both entertains and critiques. Dickson-Carr surmises that satire has always afforded a space for black writers to articulate collective disenchantment with the long-since broken promise of the mythic American dream. Because both the physical and psychological experience of blackness in the United States has existed and still exists as a state of social and political alienation, the defiance embedded within the satire as a genre and mode fuses to a shared black American conscious.

In his second book, *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance,* Dickson-Carr suggests during the Harlem Renaissance, satire provided the most penetrating cultural criticism for African Americans. Unlike, the intellectual juggernauts of the time, which opted for literary realism to critique social ills, the African American community during the 1910s through the 1930s, according to

Dickson-Carr, *needed* satire. The book opens by suggesting that given this period of disfranchisement; neo-slavery in the forms of peonage, chain gangs, sharecropping, and tenant farming; and the terrorism of lynch mobs (Ku Klux Klan and The Regulators), it may have seemed that African Americans had limited resources for satire. But, these very circumstances, the author insists, "primed black communities for sharp wit and wry comfort of the satirist's perspective like no other in their collective history […] The horrors of chattel slavery in the United States *required* the enslaved to use humor and indirection to cope with the unspeakable" (1; emphasis added). Dickson-Carr makes mention that those who gained freedom from slavery, though still a restricted freedom, gained public access to express their thoughts. Though often aided by white abolitionists and contained within the lens of the abolitionist movement, black thinkers relied on parody, irony, and sarcasm in their narratives, lectures, and other forms of written expression vying for human rights. Just as the first chapter of this project examines the humor of Frederick Douglass, Dickson-Carr points out figures like Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Douglass, and David Walker who each used ironic wit in their respective diatribe against oppression. Though Dickson-Carr's books are some of the only to examine 20th century African American satire, his focus remains on the early to mid-20th century novel. Beatty's 2015 novel invites an analysis of 21st century literary satire.

Across time and despite changes in form and mode, African American satire has maintained what Dickson-Carr explains as a "stylistic continuum and ideological genealogy." What binds black satirists he continues is "their sense of purpose, one that transcends political and temporal boundaries." I push this continuum and

ideological thread beyond the novel, and extend it to those aforementioned stage performers and to the public the rhetoric of early black activists. Satire remains a necessary literary and aesthetic mode for the black artist. But beyond critique and incisive timbre, black satire imagines alternatives to racial dehumanization. Among other modes of humor, African American satire has consistently imagined alternatives to degradation and the circumstances of white supremacy. From novels like George S. Schulyer's 1931 *Black No More*, Ishmael Reed's 1971 *Flight to Canada* to Matt Johnson's 2011 *Pym* the satirical voice has yielded the flexibility to speculate what life might be like if the existing racial order crumbled. Black humorists use satire beyond "expos[ing] and discredit[ing] vice or folly." Instead, black humor envisions alternate race relations.

In an interview, Paul Beatty rejects the label of satirist. Frustrated by the need for critics and the like to classify him, he states, "You can just hide behind that word [satire]. You can say something is a satire, okay, but what does that really mean? It's an easy word to just hide behind and not have to really deal with or confront, whether, as a reader or as a reviewer, one is implicated or not'" (3). But, Beatty's novels, particularly his first and most recent novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* and *The Sellout* respectively, encapsulate an overriding and at times overbearing satirical tone that makes it hard not to label him as such. To label *The Sellout* satirical, reveals rather than hides its implications and despite Beatty's reluctance toward the satirical label, it is through wit that Beatty's critiques surface. Like Dickson-Carr's assertion that some of African-American's most penetrating cultural criticism appeared during

the Harlem Renaissance as satire, Beatty's *The Sellout* offers rich cultural criticism on black identity during an unfolding moment in contemporary U.S. history.

BLACK AUTHENTICITY: PLEADING HUMAN & FAILING TO AUTHENTICATE

The protagonist of Beatty's *The Sellout* fails to authenticate what Wahneema Lubiano defines as "common sense ideologies" of Black Nationalist ethos. In her 1997 essay, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense," Lubiano defines Black Nationalism as "a sign, an analytic, describing a range of historically manifested ideas about black American possibilities that include any or all of the following: racial solidarity, cultural specificity, religious, economic, and political separatism […] that has been deployed to articulate strategies of resistance" (234). Lubiano's "common sense ideology" takes up a more universal notion for a black experience than previous definitions of Black Nationalism that oppose Eurocentrism. The fifth function of common sense ideology—the in-group policing of black identity stemming from resistance to white racialized oppression—is a constant function in Beatty's novels. In *The Sellout,* this fifth function manifests as shame. Specifically, the protagonist's dead father looms over the novel as a posthumous voice shamming the narrator.

The narrator's "failure to authenticate" comes to a head in his failure to recover his "lost city" of Dickens, which ends with a trial at the U.S. Supreme Court. As he stands before the bench in a marijuana-induced stupor, the protagonist

contemplates his limited options. “Dumbfounded,” he states, “I stood before the bench trying to figure out if there was a state of being between ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent’ […] Why were those my only two alternatives? […] Why couldn’t I be ‘neither’ or ‘both’?” He continues, “After a long pause, I finally faced the bench and said, ‘Your Honor, I plead human’” (15). As intransitive verb, “to plead,” means both to beg and to argue a case. “To plead,” as a transitive verb, insinuates a response to a charge in a court of law, to give a reason as an excuse. For Beatty’s protagonist, “to plead human,” is to plead imperfection. More specifically, to plead human is to acknowledge the universality of imperfection. The simple action of pleading human implies the innate nature of guilt and innocence akin to all. Situating the narrator in the courtroom as he “pleads human” to an egregious crime, Beatty provokes a history of the overrepresentation of black criminality. In pleading human, the narrator severs troubling dichotomies of ‘guilt’ and ‘innocent’ in order to make space for the reality of human nature—more pointedly, to make space for black personhood.

The first sentence of the novel’s prologue provokes the reader’s racial bias. “This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man,” the narrator begins, “but I’ve never stolen anything” (4). Assuming the reader’s incredulity in black innocence, Beatty aligns the narrator’s blackness to criminal acts while at once distancing him from them. Occasionally, dropping off the “I” from each sentence, Beatty offers a specific list of misconduct to establish the narrator’s profile. The description reads:

> Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum-wage expectations. I’ve never burgled a house.

> Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, say in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America […] 1.

Beatty disrupts erroneous assumptions that blackness equals criminality with the phrase "this may be hard to believe, coming from a black man." Yet, Beatty seems to endorse the stereotypes linked to black men. The choice and specificity of the images linked with the crimes—the liquor store, cheating at cards, the exchange with the drugstore cashier, burgling a house, sexual aggression and the "gigantic penis"—allude to spaces and entities often misrepresented as black crimes.

Like the other humorists in this study, courtrooms, among other institutions like the church for Douglass and the symbolic home or what Andrea O'Reilly defines as "homeplace" for Jackie Mabley, provide satirical space to consider what it means to be human. The previous chapter addressed Richard Pryor's sketch "The Trial" and his use of the courtroom space to challenge representations of black males as sexual predators and white women as innocent victims. In Beatty's novel the courtroom space also becomes a place to reimagine black male identity against accusations presuming criminality.

Whereas Pryor's sketch presents a crooked legal system upheld and perpetrated by authoritative whites, Beatty presents a black character that acts as slaveholder and segregationist—roles historically held by whites in the U.S. and upheld with white supremacist ideology. For both Pryor and Beatty, race remains

articulated, but its rationale revised. Through their performances of blackness (and whiteness), both contest specious notions that blackness or whiteness is something definable. Both query racial essentialism while inviting challenging questions about what it means to be human. For Beatty the inquiries concerning racialized essentialism emerge as questions of "black authenticity." The novel opens and closes with questions that ask what is blackness? What happens when presumed logics linked to a black experience fall apart? How do politics of black authenticity hinder humanist outcomes?

BLACK AUTHENTICITY

Historically debated, definitions and the politics surrounding the notion of black authenticity remain obscure. Claims of an authentic blackness have been driven by particular social and political movements, frequently as resistance to white oppression. In his 2003 book *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, E. Patrick Johnson catalogues examples of this throughout U.S. history:

> …even in relation to nationalism, the notion of 'authentic' blackness has always been contested: the discourse of 'house niggers' vs. 'field nigger'; Sojourner Truth's insistence on black female subjectivity in relation to the black polity; Booker T. Washington's call for vocational skill over W.E.B. DuBois's 'talented tenth'; Richard Wright's critique of Zora Neale Hurston's focus on the 'folk over the plight of the black *man*; Eldridge Cleaver's caustic attack on James Baldwin's homosexuality as 'anti-black' and 'anti-male' […] these examples belong to the long standing tradition in black American

> history of certain black Americans critically viewing a definition of blackness that does not validate their social, political, and cultural worldview" (4).

Beatty's characters in *The Sellout* navigate these politics of black authenticity. From the Dum Dum Donut Intellectual's leader and slippery opportunist, Foy Cheshire to Hominy Jenkins the reincarnation of Uncle Remus, Beatty uses the array of characters to critique "authentic" blackness. For the protagonist or "The Sellout," as Foy Cheshire names him, Foy represents what Johnson notes as the "long standing tradition in black American history of certain black Americans critically viewing a definition of blackness that does not validate their social, political, and cultural worldview**."** In the novel, Foy also represents what Beatty delineates as "Stage II Blackness." "Stage II Blackness," the narrator explains, "is a heightened awareness of race. Here race is all consuming, but in a more positive fashion. Blackness becomes an essential component in one's experiential and conceptual framework. Blackness is idealized, whiteness reviled. Emotions range from bitterness, anger, and self-destruction to waves of pro-Black euphoria an ideas of Black supremacy" (276). Foy's mission to change works of U.S. literature like Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* to titles like *The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and his Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit* and *The Adventures of Tom Soarer* embody what Beatty describes as "Stage II Blackness" and a "heightened awareness of race." Foy's revisions of Twain echo Pryor's revisions of Twain and Lee's fiction. Foy's reworking of Jim's character in *Huck Finn* to "Captain African-American Jim," is reminiscent of Pryor's reworking of Superman as "Super

Nigger" on his 1968 debut album *Richard Pryor* (95). Moreover, throughout the novel, Foy Cheshire's presence is one of constant shaming—shaming the narrator for not readily aligning with this brand of blackness and shaming him for not subscribing entirely to his father's ideas about race. Despite the last section of novel, which Beatty titles "Closure," he leaves the reader with no conclusions. As Foy celebrates the victory of "the black dude [being] inaugurated," he again shakes his head to shame the narrator. When the protagonist asks, " 'what about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the air […]," Foy shakes his head and responds, "[your] father would be ashamed and [you'll] never understand," to which the narrator agrees thinking, "he's right. I never will" (289). The indefinite ending parallels the instability of blackness and the illusion of a definitive blackness. Further, the protagonist's apparent apathy concerning the inauguration of the first black U.S. president baffles Foy and would most likely confuse the hordes of black people envisioning Obama's presidency as a victory for black progress. His dispiritedness toward this widely recognized achievement for black Americans emphasizes what Michel Dyson calls the "plasticity of Blackness." Dyson suggests that "the sheer plasticity of Blackness, the way it conforms to such a bewildering array of identities and struggles, and defeats the attempt to bind its meanings to any one camp or creature, makes a lot of Black folk nervous and defensive." The novel's inconclusive ending coupled with the narrator's seeming nihilism belies any sense of presumed blackness.

PRE-BLACK, POST-BLACK, AND POST-SOUL

Hey, look, fool, save that post-soul bullshit for somebody who gives a fuck, 'cause all I know is that I'm *pre*-black. Dickens born and raised. Homo sapiens OG Crip from the goddamn primordial giddy-up, nigger (220)

—King ("Kang") Cuz, *The Sellout*

King Cuz's "little soliloquy" denounces any attempts at racialized classificatory logic. [context] King (pronounced "Kang") Cuz, Beatty describes as the archetypal California O.G. with a sensitive side. "With tufts of perm-straightened hair," Beatty writes, "fastened to hot pink rollers stuffed underneath a see-through shower cap and giant hoop earrings dangling from both ears […and] metal rimmed teeth," no one has ever "had a real conversation with him beyond 'No doubt, nigger" (101). In this rare momentary outburst, Cuz announces himself as "homo sapiens OG Crip," referring to the species to which all modern human beings belong. Latin for "wise human" or "the clever human," Homo sapiens taxonomizes the bipedal primates distinct from the subspecies the Neanderthal. For Cuz, rejecting the "post-soul bullshit" means affirming a time *before* race. Cuz declares his humanness, despite encasing his proclamation in 20th century raced language. In essence, Cuz offers another version of pleading human—one that recognizes the classification of humans contradistinctive to plants and animals and without racial inclination.

Perhaps "Kang" Cuz's exasperation with the post-soul "bullshit" is warranted. An incursion of scholarship on post-race, post-black, and post-soul/ post-soul aesthetics dominated the early 2000s and the 2010s. This explosion of scholarship set out to define the type of work that black writers and artists, coming of age after the Civil Rights movement were producing. Though iterations of these terms— "post-

race," "post-black," and "post-soul"— overlap, each describes slightly different characteristics of the post-1968 period.

Many identify James T. Wooten's 1971 *New York Times* article as the first to use the term "post-racial." The article, titled "Compact Set Up for a 'Post-Racial' South," suggests that the U.S. South reached an era in which "race relations are soon to be replaced as a major concern by population increase, industrial development and economic fluctuations" (1). While the article goes on to recognize what may have been a premature dismissal of race relations, the article spurred a conversation on the possibilities of an epoch when race might be behind us. The idea of post-race, a world free from racial prejudice and racial discrimination emerged if only as a naïve ideal.

In 1993, Nelson George was one of the earliest critics to mark the post-soul era with his text *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture.* Several years after George's work, the onslaught of scholarship was certainly not limited to but included Mark Anthony's Neal *Soul Babies* (2002), Roopali Mukherjee's *The Racial Order of Things: Cultural Imaginaries of the Post-Soul Era* (2006), Bertram D. Ashe's essays, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction" (2007) and "Dreams from my Father and the Post-Soul Aesthetic" (2010), Bambi Haggins's *The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007), Nelson George's *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Black Before and Before that Negroes)* (2004), and Derek C. Maus's and James J. Donahue's edited collection of post-soul essays *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity after Civil Rights* (2014). Though these scholars examine different elements of the post-

soul moment, many agree on the definition pertaining to the ethos produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement. Citing Mark Anthony Neal, Bertram D. Ashe writes that the post-soul era refers to, "'the black youth […] divorced from the nostalgia associated with those successes [of the Civil Rights movement] and thus positioned to critically engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and in capable of doing' […] post-soul writers critique the events or mindset of the Civil Rights movement in their fictions and I believe it is important to this sense of African American being 'post' that these artists have no lived, adult experience with that movement."

In his 2002 *Soul Babies* Neal parses the phrase "post soul aesthetics." Using Nelson George's use of post-soul as a general description of black culture after the Blaxploitation era and the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* as a starting point, he provides a lengthy description:

> In the post-soul aesthetic I am surmising that there is an aesthetic center within contemporary black popular culture that at various moments considers issues like deindustrialization, desegregation, the cooperate annexation of black popular expression, cybernization in the workforce, the globalization of finance and communication, the general commodification of black life and culture, and the proliferation of black 'meta-identities,' while continuously collapsing on modern concepts of blackness and reanimating 'pre-modern' (Africa?) concepts of blackness. I am also suggesting that this aesthetic ultimately renders many 'traditional' tropes of blackness false and even

> meaningless; in its borrowing from black modern traditions, it is so consumed with its contemporary existential concerns that such traditions are not just called into question but obliterated. (3)

In addition to recognizing the myth of post-race and characterizing the post-soul and its aesthetics, intellectuals define post-blackness to uncover the range of black identities. Scholars define post-blackness as a philosophical movement that rejects static definitions of blackness. The concept originated in the late nineties' art-world by Ligon and Thelma Golden. Dubbed by Mark Antony Neal as one of the "quintessential voices of the post-soul," author and journalist Touré argues that we should always consider the diverse possibilities for blackness. In his 2011 book, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness: What it Means to be Black Now* he writes, "To experience the full possibilities, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African-American culture and also from within it. These attempts to conscript the potential complexity of Black humanity often fly in the face of the awesome breadth of Black history" (4). Citing Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., Tourè expounds on the multiplicity of blackness: "There is no dogmatically narrow, authentic Blackness because the possibilities for Black identity are infinite. To say something or someone is not Black—or is inauthentically Black—is to sell Blackness short […] if there are forty million Black Americans then there are forty million ways to be Black" (5). *The Sellout* certainly echoes this idea. From Foy Chesire's Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals' pro-black rhetoric, to King Cuz's rejection of any racial theories, to the protagonist's role in racial discrimination, Beatty, although problematic, pushes for the diversity for black existence.

Through a satirical lens, Beatty advances this idea of post-blackness by outlining three "stages of blackness." Hampton Fiske, the narrator's lawyer (his name an obvious reference and commentary on historically black colleges and universities as well as a nod to the Fiske Jubilee Singers), explains:

> 'My client's father F.K. Me […] hypothesized that black identity is formed in stages. In his theory of Quintessential Blackness, Stage I is the Neophyte Negro […] Here the black person exists in a state of pre-consciousness […] the Neophyte is afraid of his own blackness. A blackness that feels inescapable, infinite, and less than […] The distinguishing feature of Stage II blackness is a heightened awareness of race. Here race is all-consuming […] Blackness is idealized, whiteness reviled. Emotions range from bitterness […] to waves of pro-Black euphoria and ideas of Black supremacy […] Stage III blackness is Race Transcendentalism. A collective consciousness that fights oppression and seeks serenity.' (275-77)

Beatty accompanies images of popular figures with each stage: Stage I, Michael Jordan, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Cuba Gooding, Coral from the MTV reality show *The Real World* and Morgan Freeman: Stage II, Foy Cheshire, Jesse Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Moms Mabley, Kim Kardashian, and his father; and Stage III, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Sitting Bull, César Chávez, Ichiro Suzuki, and Bruce Lee. The unofficial fourth stage of blackness, not articulated F.K. Me, but by his son, is unmitigated blackness. As he pulls marijuana smoke from a makeshift Pepsi can

bong, he thinks to himself, “there should be a Stage IV of black identity—Unmitigated Blackness” (277). He continues,

> I’m not sure what Unmitigated Blackness is, but whatever it is, it doesn’t sell. On the surface Unmitigated Blackness is a seeming unwillingness to succeed. It’s Donald Goines, Chester Himes, Abbey Lincoln, Marcus Garvey, Alfre Woodard, and the serious black actor […] It’s the realization that there are no absolutes, except when there are. It’s the acceptance of contradiction not being a sin and a crime but a human frailty like split ends and libertarianism. Unmitigated Blackness is simply not giving a fuck. Clarence Cooper, Charlie Parker, Richard Pryor […] Frida Kahlo […] the Wu-Tang Clan […] Unmitigated Blackness is coming to the realization that as fucked up and meaningless as it all is, sometimes it’s the nihilism that makes life worth living.

The narrator knows well and dismisses his father’s three stages of blackness in lieu of an unmitigated blackness that refuses absolutes. Though he admits uncertainty, the protagonist acknowledges that blackness cannot be limited and the nihilism serves a humanist purpose by making life “worth living.” [This list of “stages” function in Beatty’s novel as a satirical dismissal of what it previously meant to be black.]

While Beatty’s satire seems to advance the malleability of blackness, the “stages of blackness” also seem to parody the dominant scholarship on post-blackness. Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness* features the voices of numerous black thinkers, academics, public speakers, and artists. In it, Touré describes “three

primary dimensions of Blackness," as defined by Michel Eric Dyson. Dyson calls these three dimensions "accidental, incidental, and intentional." Touré calls them, "introverted (or accidental), ambiverted (incidental), and extroverted (intentional)" (9). Introverted or accidental blackness maintains the mindset that "'I'm an American. I'm a human being. I happen to be Black. By accident of my birth I am Black. It just happened that way'" (9). Touré gives the celebrity examples of Clarence Thomas and Condoleeza Rice (both appear in Beatty's novel). For the ambiverted or incidental blackness, Dyson and Touré explain, "Blackness is an important part of [the person], but does not necessarily dominate their persona" (9). In this group Dyson places Barack Obama, Colin Powell, and Will Smith. The third dimension of blackness, extroverted or intentional blackness, Dyson explains as, " 'I be Black, that's what I do, that's what my struggles are about.' This is Malcolm X, Dr. King, Jim Brown, Jay-Z" (10). Beatty appears to be punning on these "dimensions of blackness" with his "stages of blackness." While Dyson groups black Americans, Beatty's groupings of blackness include Mexicans, Native Americans, Armenian Americans, Japanese, and white Americans. In this way, Beatty's stages of blackness function almost as a tongue-in-cheek response to Dyson's dimensions.

Further, Beatty's "stages of blackness," also resemble James Weldon Johnson's "three classes of colored people." In his 1912 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.* Johnson writes, "The colored people may be said to be roughly divided into three classes, not so much in respect to themselves as in respect to their relations with the whites" (Chapter V). The first class, Johnson's protagonist observes are "the desperate class." This class includes ex-convicts and bar loafers. This class, he

suggests, maintains a hateful relationship with whites. The second class consists of the servants, the simple, and kind hearted; white people like this group because they offer little friction. And, the third class includes the independent work class; this class of blacks has gained wealth and can exist apart from whites.

The Sellout's linkage with black literary traditions not only appears in Johnson's attempt to parse blackness, but also appears in the form of prologue. Throughout 20th and into the 21st century black literature, the prologue or the preface have offered a way for black writers to rewrite and write the black literary body. Writers and poets like Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, John Oliver Killens, and Percival Everett use the fictional space to mirror the autobiographical. The prologue or introductory remarks for these writers opens as announcement of the self, addressing and undressing the racial detritus of the white gaze. Many of these writers use the speaker, sometimes unnamed protagonists, to state what they are by what they are not. Beatty's narrator, as stated earlier, introduces himself by assuring the reader of what he has never done, provoking racial biases toward black men: "This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man," he begins, "but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier…" Nearly seventy years earlier, Ellison's unnamed protagonist famously opens with the narrative proclamation in his 1947 *Invisible Man*: "I am an invisible man," and lists the things he is not—"a spook" nor a "Hollywood movie ectoplasm"—and the things he is—"a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids." John Oliver Killens's 1971 novel *The Cotillion; or, One Good Bull is Half the Heard* also opens with a retrospective forward—a letter

addressed to "Whom it May Concern (and to all of you who ought to be)." Killens's protagonist writes, "My name is Ben Ali Lumumba, and I'm free, Black and twenty-three. Okay, Lumumba is my given name. Dig. The name I gave myself, that is. My slave name was—well to hell with it. I'm a writer, understand. And I just finished the novel that I'm forwarding to you, dear readers." Killens's Lumumba echoes Langston Hughes's speaker in his 1951 poem "Theme for English B." In it, the poetic persona pens for his teacher an autobiographical page. After reflecting on the direction from his instructor to, "Go home and write/ a page tonight./ And let that page come out of you then it will be true," the speaker begins, "I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem" (1.2-5; 7-8). He continues, "I went to school there, then Durham, then here [...] to Harlem." The speaker continues, listing selected attributes of his identity:

> Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
> I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
> I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
> or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.
> I guess being colored doesn't make me *not* like
> the same things other folks like who are other races. (l.21-26)

Throughout the poem, the speaker explores what it means to write a page that "come[s] out of you," what it means to write the self. Like Lumumba in Killens's *The Cotillion* and the unnamed man of "substance" in Ellison's *Invisible Man,* Hughes's speaker writes himself into existence against the racialized gaze. Lumumba declares his freedom, his age, and his chosen name after tossing away his slave name.

Ellison's speaker affirms his invisibility because people simply refuse to see him. Yet, in his description he claims this invisible identity, as he admits, "I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves." This narrative form appears again in Adam Mansbach's (a Jewish writer) 2008 novel *Angry Black White Boy*. Mansbach's prologue, subtitled "Letter from a Birmingham Bus," begins, "I'm here to tell the white man in the mirror the truth right to his face. I have seen the enemy and he is me. No competition, I battle myself. I'm Macon Everett Detornay, *a white nigger in the universe,* to paraphrase both LeRoi Jones—whose middle name I share, or I would before he changed his—and the Aryan Nation vis a vis yours truly, with whom I share nothing but low melanin and politics unacceptable to mainstream America. Or so I thought." Mansbach's Macon Everett Detornay is a "white boy," however, throughout the novel and in this prologue, Mansbach reenvisions what it means to write a black literary identity. Affirming himself a "white nigger in the universe," Macon attempts to claim blackness through the appropriation of the word "nigger" and by aligning himself with Black Nationalist poet LeRoi Jones, whose renaming as Amiri Baraka also stages a reclamation of self against the slave name. And, Percival Everett's 2001 *Erasure*

So what to make of this lineage of the autobiographical prologue? In professing their identity, the male protagonists in these texts reveal a crisis rooted in race and perception. Each text stages and performs the writing and the rewriting of the black literary body by claiming the self. The central question of the Hughes's "Theme for English B," "so will my page be colored that I write?" operates as the central question

underlying each of the texts. For Beatty's character, the question of race is open-ended and apathetical. Like Neal's assertion that the post-soul aesthetic" renders many 'traditional' tropes of blackness false and even meaningless; in its borrowing from black modern traditions, it is so consumed with its contemporary existential concerns that such traditions are not just called into question but obliterated," the narrator declares he does not care about race. Despite 'borrowing from black modern traditions,' the protagonist admits, "if I had my druthers, I couldn't care less about being black."

FATHER AND SON: WHO AM I? AND HOW MAY I BECOME MYSELF?

The novel begins with the protagonist's relationship with his father. Beatty uses the father-son relationship to place the narrator outside definitions of blackness in order to show a human journey for a sense of self. After stripping away the messy racial bits of the novel, this is a story about a son searching for himself in the shadow of his father. This relationship in the novel not only demonstrates a breakdown in the labels attributed to authentic blackness, but it also displays a character's personal, individual experience. Beatty frames the relationship within a Jungian psychological frame as commentary on the human condition. In the description of his father he states, "My father was (Carl Jung, rest his soul) a social scientist of some renown. As the founder and, to my knowledge, sole practioner of Liberation Psychology, he liked to walk around the a.k.a. 'the Skinner box,' in a black laboratory coat [...] I [...] his gangly, absentminded lab rat was homeschooled in strict accordance with Piaget's theory of cognitive development" (27). The reader later learns his father's name, F.K. Me, a nod to the behaviorist and American psychologist B.F. Skinner, but also a pun on the

expletive “fuck me”—the narrator’s presumed sentiments on his relationship with his father and his childhood. As “gangly lab rat,” the narrator adds that he “wasn’t fed” but instead “fed lukewarm appetitive stimuli; he “wasn’t loved, but brought up in an atmosphere of calculated intimacy and intense levels of commitment” (27). Throughout the novel, the narrator jokes about his less than ideal childhood, his “missing mother,” and his father’s disagreeable methods. But, after his father is killed in a police shoot-out, the protagonist oscillates between denying that he misses his father and missing him; refusing to follow in his father’s footsteps and then doing just that.

The introduction to the narrator’s father nearly conflates him with Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. Read aloud, the introductory phrase, “My father was (Carl Jung, rest his soul) a social scientist of some renown,” initially sounds as if the protagonist says “my father was Car Jung, rest his soul.” Though Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung initially worked together, Jung deviated from Freud’s emphasis on libidinal biological factors affecting personality. Instead Jung’s focus was on areas of the mind that create the psyche: the persona, the shadow, personal unconscious, collective unconscious, and archetypes. According to one of the basic premises of Jungian thought is the quest for individuation. The Jungian definition of individuation is the process through which the self is formed by integrating elements of the conscious and unconscious mind. More plainly, individuation is the development of the individual from the universal; the process by which by which individuals in society become differentiated from one another. The recurring expression throughout the novel, “Who am I? And how may I become myself?” cultivates this Jungian rationale.

This refrain reverberates for the protagonist as a reminder of his father's cryptic advice to his "clients." As the town's "nigger whisperer," his father used his psychological prowess to talk distraught members of the Dickens community off the suicide ledge. In an exchange with his son, the protagonist's father reveals **he** secret to whispering success; he simply asks whisperees two questions: who are you? And, how can you become your best self. He tells his son, "You want the client to feel important, to feel that he or she is in control of the healing process. Remember that shit" (39). Though his father never gave his son the advice directly, the narrator does in fact "remember that shit" for his own healing process after he loses his father and the town. But, the questions "who am I? and how may I become myself" remains an answered refrain, and a burden for the narrator throughout the novel.

The protagonist's relationship with his father coincides his connection with his hometown Dickens. Immediately after introducing his father, the narrator introduces Dickens, the "ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles"—a farm in the inner city. After the narrator's father dies, Beatty writes, "You won't find Dickens, California, on the map, because about five years after my father died, and a year after I graduated college, it too, perished" (58). In linking the two, Beatty constructs a narrative that interweaves home, memory, and identity. The protagonist's sense of self is grounded in his dual relationship with Dickens and his father. In a 2017 essay, "Home and Dwelling: Re-Examining Race and Identity Through Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Paul Beatty's *The Sellout,*" Scott Astrada asks "how one dwells within one's home" in order to examine how "*one* exists" as they try to find their place in the world. Astrada argues that examining how the *The Sellout's*

protagonist dwells within his home provides insight into how race, identity, and history impact the idea of dwelling in a global age (1). In his reading of *The Sellout* Astrada uses Martin Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" to consider how locations and spaces contribute to the emergence of "Being." Astrada writes, "these spaces actively shape what occupies them, and influence what is connected by the circumference of their core emptiness, thereby creating a manifestation of Being that is arbitrary yet full of being" (1). That is, individuals materialize in history through the location and spaces that produce them. The breakdown or disappearance of the protagonist's hometown that Astrada suggests presents a "radical separation of being and self, as it exists outside of its foundational environment […] the subject does not disappear, but remains restricted in limbo without a central referent to ground it." He continues, "However, this marginal space resists the postmodern onslaught of the proliferation of labels to define and give voice to it. It is this contradiction that leaves the narrator unfulfilled [and unable to] answer the question "who am I?" (114).

The apparent disconnect between the narrator and a sense of collective African American history manifests in several instances throughout the novel, but most profoundly in his fraught relationship with his father. As the narrator stands before the bench at the Supreme Court, he attempts to conjure up feelings of guilt for his unconstitutional crimes. Yet he fails to cultivate this sense of historical identity. Astrada points out that, "He tries to focus on the civil rights movement, the violence it imposed, Selma, and other major historical milestones in African-American history, but can only envision the participants in these events as zombies, with 'the head

zombie' looking 'exhausted from being raised from the dead every time someone wants to make a point about what black people should and shouldn't do, can and cannot have'"(113). Here, Beatty's cynicism toward the lingering reliance on and nostalgia toward the civil rights movement surfaces. Framing civil rights leaders as "exhausted" zombie-like relics of the past, Beatty invokes this challenge for post-civil rights literature to articulate new meanings for the category of race. The narrator's inability to envision a living history connected to these milestones, moreover, his lack of contrition for his inability to feel this connection, exposes this void for new meanings of blackness. But, this disconnection from history appears throughout the narrator's ironic recollections of his father's failed attempts to indoctrinate blackness into his consciousness. Astrada notes, "Symbols of identity (blackness) are imprinted solely in a historically later sense, as lynch-pins of identity, devoid of the historical culmination of social relationships. What results is not a socialized individual, but rather a detachment and exclusionary basis of identity that the subject cannot grasp" (113).

In "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black Fiction," Toni Morrison writes, "When the Black American writer experiences the country or the village, [as opposed to the urban city], he does so not to experience nature as a balm for his separate self, but to touch the ancestor" (39). Morrison continues, "When he is able to [touch the ancestor], he is regenerated, balanced, and capable of operating on a purely moral axis" (39). But in Beatty's novel, the village or the country exists within the inner city. Further, the boundaries of the village are eradicated from the map. For the protagonist, the loss of his village and his father tilts

his moral axis and prompts him to restore Dickens through racial segregation. This hero's journey, which manifests as a quest to redraw the lines of Dickens, will restore his connection with his father. Until then, Beatty describes, the narrator as lost: "Like the entire town of Dickens, I was my father's child, a product of my own environment, and nothing more. Dickens was me. And I was my father. Problem is, they both disappeared from my life, first my dad, and then my hometown, and suddenly I had no idea who I was, and no clue, how to become myself" (40).

THE SELLOUT, THE SEGREGATIONIST & THE VOLUNTARY SLAVE

After the death of his father and the loss of his town, the narrator unwillingly enlists Dickens resident Hominy Jenkins as his accomplice to reestablish Dickens. As somewhat of a living stereotype, the surrounding community members view Hominy as "a mark of shame on the African-American legacy, something to be eradicated, stricken from the racial record, like hambone, Amos n' Andy, Dave Chappelle's meltdown, and people who say Valentime's Day." After the protagonist saves Hominy's life from a failed suicide attempt, Hominy dedicates himself to be a slave to the narrator. Of his many monikers, Hominy Jenkins, the "personification of American primitivism" feels most fitting. He is the living version of "Uncle Remus" and a self-lynching voluntary slave. His antics almost seem to depict a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder lingering from his time in Hollywood in the early 20th century. His name, "Hominy," which refers to a coarsely ground corn used to make grits.

The schizophrenia of the novel lives in its plot to re-instate racial segregation and breathes through Hominy. If the narrator's disconnection from a racialized past

broadens the scope and possibilities for representations of black humanity, then Hominy exists in the novel to show what happens when one remains fixed within racial bounds. Beatty reduces Hominy to a performer trapped in an ongoing blackface minstrel. Hominy's willingness to perform this role insinuates mental instability. But, despite the discomfort that Hominy's obsequiousness evokes for others in the novel, the protagonist at times envies Hominy's obliviousness. Beatty describes Hominy's usefulness for maintaining a willed ignorance in the U.S. psyche. Beatty writes,

> For Hominy any day when he could personify American primitivism was a good ol' day. It meant that he was still alive, and sometimes even the carnival coon in the dunk tank misses the attention. And this country […] needs people like him. It needs somebody to throw baseballs at, to fagbash, to nigger-stomp, to invade, to embargo […] Anything that, like baseball, keeps a country that's constantly preening in the mirror from actually looking in the mirror and remembering where the bodies are buried" (87).

True to satire, no one escapes Beatty's castigation. But, here, Beatty acknowledges Hominy's role as the object of U.S.'s displaced guilt. Hominy's obliviousness, coupled with his self-destructive antics, exposes Beatty's critique on what happens when we limit blackness to raced articulations. In a 2015 *Rolling Stone Interview*, when asked about Hominy's seeming dissonance with black progress, Beatty responds, "I don't think the discrepancy between how one lives and how one believes they live is a dissonance limited to white folks […] I just have to remind you that the rest of us have the freedom to be as full of shit as anyone else. And while we often act

like it, neither moral rectitude nor moral turpitude is the bastion of any one group of people. Though it'd be nice if we stopped acting that way." This seems to be the premise of the novel's logic.

Conclusion

Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* is like a Rorschach test for racial attitude. Instead of ink splotches, Beatty's pages are splattered with peculiar characters, incongruous settings, and skewed racial logic. Dickson-Carr ends *African American Satire* with the literary satire in the post-civil rights era. He suggests that the key question black satirists must ask is, "What shall be the place of the current generation of African Americans in history" (206)? Dickson-Carr addresses Paul Beatty's novels *Tuff* (2000) and *The White Boy Shuffle* to suggest that Beatty maintains a cynicism with black leadership. Beatty's critique, Dickson-Carr writes is that, "African-American leadership has become alienated from its power base [...] the result is a cadre of leaders making generalizations about people who no longer fit into generalities, if they ever did" (206). Certainly, *The Sellout* sustains skepticism with the lack of black leadership. Foy Cheshire's apparent disconnection with "The Sellout" and with the community, despite his yen to lead, proves this. But, by *The Sellout* Beatty's cynicism has matured from critiquing a dearth of leadership to sarcasm about a general lack of direction. The narrator reflects, "Growing up, I used to think all of black America's problems could be solved if we only had a motto" (10). In *The Sellout* not only is leadership missing, but without a motto, any sense of collective belief for the black community lacks as well.

The Sellout not only emphasizes the black community's apparent lack of direction, it embraces it. But rather than ending with nihilism, Beatty leaves the reader with broader questions about human strife. As aforementioned, the protagonist's final remarks in the novel appear pessimistic to his elder, Foy Cheshire. After Foy claims Obama's victory demonstrates that the United States of America has "finally paid off all its debts," the narrator responds, "And what about the Native Americans? What about the Chinese, the Japanese, the Mexicans, the poor, the forests, the water, the air, the fucking California condor? When do they collect [their debts]?" Though Foy views the protagonist's lack of enthusiasm as a counterattack on black progress, his final statement illustrates an inclusive discourse on injustice. The protagonist includes endangered species, the land, U.S.'s indigenous population, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexicans to suggest that social, political, economic, environmental advancement must include all. Perhaps, the larger aims of Beatty' *The Sellout* offer that to plead human is not just acknowledging the universality of imperfection, but also to acknowledge responsibility.

Conclusion:
On the Limits and Possibilities of Black Humor

I conclude by thinking about the limits and possibilities of "laughing to keep human" as a theoretical framework. Though not a feature of study in the body of this project, August Wilson's 1984 play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is worth pointing to for its illustration of a celebratory laughter rooted in ancestral memory as it simultaneously conjures possibilities for black futurity. While on the whole *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is not intentionally comical, the penultimate scene of the play interrupts the action of the drama with laughter. The play, which is the second installment in Wilson's century-cycle series (ten plays affixed to each decade of the 20th century), is set in 1911 in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. Its plot follows a traumatized and mysterious black man named Herald Loomis. As the play progresses, the characters learn that Herald was kidnapped by a white man named Joe Turner who forced him to work on a chain gang. After seven years of involuntary servitude, Herald is released, but he has lost everything including his family. Forlorn and wayward, Herald manages to reunite with his now eleven-year-old daughter and makes his way to the boardinghouse as he searches for his wife. With his life undone, Herald carries with him a quiet, seething fury and an embittered sense of the world. Bertha, the co-owner of the boardinghouse with her husband Seth, offers a modest remedy for Herald's trauma. As she speaks to Mattie and Bynum—two other boarders in the tenement—Bertha states,

> I been watching that man for two weeks…and […] the only thing that man needs is somebody to make him laugh. That's all you need in the

> world is love and laughter. That's all anybody needs. To have love in one hand and laughter in the other. (BERTHA *moves about the kitchen as though blessing it and chasing away the huge sadness that seems to envelop it. It is a dance and demonstration of her own magic, her own remedy that is centuries old and to which she is connected by the muscles of her heart and the blood's memory.*)
>
> You hear me, Mattie? I'm talking about laughing. The kind of laugh that comes from way deep inside. To just stand and laugh and let life flow right through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you're alive. (*She begins to laugh. It is a near-hysterical laughter that is a celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing.* MATTIE *and* BYNUM join *in the laughter.* SETH *enters from the front door.*)

Soon after Seth enters the room, he begins to laugh with the trio. Bertha's laughter illustrates that beyond the notion that laughter keeps one from crying, laughter becomes the vehicle to "let yourself know you're alive." In this demonstration, Bertha's laughter creates a space for others to join and the laughter here is remedying. Bertha's insistence that "all one needs" is "love in one hand and laughter in the other" turns both laughter and love into tangible forces that give life and yield magic. The laughter here disrupts the linearity of time, reaching back to an ancestral, "blood," memory.

More notably, this celebratory laughter—celebratory for its practice of self-actualization, self-making, and self-love—emerges unprovoked. And in this fleeting moment of spontaneous mirth, Wilson's play demonstrates an instance of "laughing

to keep human;" its laughter—though brief—thwarts white supremacist logics without grounding black existence in it. And as a play, the genre merges the literary text and the stage performance, perhaps congealing the varying genres in this study.

Pulling from "way deep inside," Bertha shows that despite the happenings of the external world, an internal laughter lives. And, without impetus, Bertha "begins to laugh," suggesting that Bertha inherently possess this power to laugh. Though Joe Turner (who has in fact come and gone) looms over Herald's life, Wilson shows here that black joy and black life exists without being defined against whiteness. And although Bertha's laughter here is artificial—a performed laugh in the play—the representation of laughter's aptitude remains relevant.

Though full of possibility, Bertha's laughter never reaches the ears of Herald, presumably for whom the laughter is intended. This paradoxical fact underscores the intrinsic *im*possibilities rooted in laughter as a celebration and as a path toward justice. Just as Danielle Fuentes Morgan's asserts that "satire alone is not able to enact justice," that "satire doesn't make demands," [but instead] it "reveals the social context and asks its audience to determine the next course of action," the laughter in this scene opens up the space, but never fully allows for the trauma to subside for Herald. Wilson's depiction of laughter then, becomes a way to consider its psychic possibilities and its real-life limitations. In the end, perhaps because the laughter never reaches Herald or because laughter alone is not enough, Herald's trauma manifests itself as self-inflicted harm and he cuts himself.

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