

Fall 2016

What is Really Funny: Humor Ahead of Its Time in the Twentieth Century American Novel

Timothy Baffoe
Governors State University

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What is Really Funny: Humor Ahead of Its Time in the Twentieth Century American Novel

By

Timothy Baffoe

B.A., Governors State University, 2007

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts,
With a Major in English

Advisors:

Dr. Christopher White

Dr. Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad

Dr. Rosemary E. Johnsen

Governors State University
University Park, IL 60484

December 2016

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Governors State University

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DEDICATION

To my parents,

You planted seeds of knowledge and its pursuit in me from the time I could talk, often against my wishes. I did not appreciate that until decades later, but know that I am forever grateful for that, and you are loved.

And to my students,

Not a year in ten in my classroom has gone by without you reminding me that there is no one way to read a text. You constantly open my eyes to new ways of thinking about our readings, and you consistently refuel my desire to pursue new outlets and avenues to learning with you and on my own.

Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first acknowledgment goes to my English advisor, Dr. Christopher White, for his help throughout the entire process of completing this thesis. From my initial proposal to the final product, Dr. White was more than supportive while giving me the utmost free range to come up with a paper on American literary humor the route of which I wasn't even quite sure when I began. The germination of this thesis began with our study of Nabokov's *Lolita* in his American Literature graduate seminar course, and had I not been in that class or read that novel, this thesis never would have been.

Dr. Rashidah Jaami' Muhammad has been my instructor in more of my college English courses than any other, and I have thus crafted my academic writing under her watch more than anyone. Several of the texts studied in her classes have become some of my favorites, notably two novels that I teach in my own classroom—*The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz from her World Literature graduate seminar course, which I would not be teaching had she not exposed me to it, and, of course, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Though I had read *TEWWG* multiple times prior, as I studied it through a postcolonial and feminist (womanist) lens in her Rhetorical and Critical Theory seminar course it dawned on me that this novel had a distinct comedic blueprint that I wanted to explore further. When I mentioned that as a side note to the tasks at hand in that class, Dr. Muhammad encouraged me to pursue an examination of the novel's humor, leading to the chapter that follows.

I was not expecting to find the works in Dr. Rosemary Johnsen's British Literature seminar course all that provocative—a silly prejudice against British lit on my part. By the end of the course I had written a paper on George Harvey Bone created by this wonderful and new-to-me author Patrick Hamilton in *Hangover Square*. I found the paper a challenging yet thoroughly fun task—I mean, I got to examine how booze played a part literally and figuratively in the biology and psychology of a pathetic yet sympathetic drunk and his darkly comic saga. I was pleasantly wrong in my presuppositions, and Dr. Johnsen's course led to my first graduate level literary analysis involving humor. While this thesis does not involve any British texts, Dr. Johnsen's use of Hamilton's work definitely helped my comedic literary analysis.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to examine a specific function that humor has played in twentieth century American literature and that is reflective of American culture today—that being a constant testing of boundaries of who and what are allowed to be considered funny. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) gives readers a woman whose struggle for a Black female voice lands her on an informal standup comedy stage. *Lolita* (1955) by Vladimir Nabokov walks a tightrope of taboo subject matter, encouraging readers to appropriately—though maybe uncomfortably—laugh at the inappropriate, and this decades before such routines like that of Louis C.K. became the norm in clubs and on television specials. Kurt Vonnegut's antiwar novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) was not only a bridge between the counterculture comics that attacked sacred cows in the 1960s and those who would take the torch toward century's end but also a forerunner to the sketch comedy programs like *Saturday Night Live*, *The Muppet Show*, and *Mr. Show* that would become cultural TV standard beginning in the 1970s.

Certain comedic taboos and sacred cows exist during any period of history, and it is the job of comedians—American authors included—to challenge them in order to break barriers, force social progress, and sometimes resist against taking ourselves or our institutions too seriously. Once those comedic steps are made, we can look back on them as cultural benchmarks often taken for granted in the humor we are accustomed to today.

American humor does not seem to get the scholarly attention that some of the other aspects of literary analysis do. There is a lot of subtlety and skill to American

fictional humor. But literary humor is seen as mere novelty rather than being appreciated for what it is: a cultural and political tool—a particularly necessary one in a tumultuous twentieth century fraught with global wars and domestic sociopolitical struggles.

Twentieth century American novelistic humor prior to the last quarter of the century also shows itself to be a precursor to late-century performance comedy that would become the norm. Hurston, Nabokov, and Vonnegut were the counterculture comics and Not Ready for Prime Time Players of their day because status quo America wasn't ready for them.

There has always been a quarrel in this country as to what and who is funny. Hurston, Nabokov, and Vonnegut didn't shy away from that quarrel but chose to meet it head on instead.

Introduction

In America, there has always been a quarrel going on as to what or who is really funny.
– Thomas Keough (xvii)

Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh.
–Richard Wright, *New Masses* book review, 1937

Mr. Nabokov, whose English vocabulary would astound the editors of the Oxford Dictionary, does not write cheap pornography. He writes highbrow pornography. Perhaps that is not his intention. Perhaps he thinks of his book as a satirical comedy and as an exploration of abnormal psychology. Nevertheless, "Lolita" is disgusting.
– Orville Prescott, *New York Times* book review, 1958

"You know what's really funny? . . . My books are being thrown out of school libraries all over the country—because they're supposedly obscene. I've seen letters to small-town newspapers that put Slaughterhouse Five in the same class with Deep Throat and Hustler magazine. How could anybody masturbate to Slaughterhouse Five?"
–Kurt Vonnegut, "The Art of Fiction No. 64," *The Paris Review*, 1977

All hail the opening act. That performer who precedes the name on the marquee who has been deemed worthy enough to keep the audience's attention and grease the wheels of applause and outward emotion in order that the "big name" find smoother terrain when he or she takes the stage. A performer whose purpose isn't existence as much as filling idle time.

I see three prominent American novels as comedic opening acts of sorts. While their titles and authors are popular, the role they play in American humor goes underappreciated if considered at all. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969) aren't typically picked up for a laugh; rather, respective analysis and

criticism tends to focus on the “big” traditionally academic umbrellas—feminism, author/characters of color, war, class struggle, etc. (while maybe ignoring that all those things have involved humor). Yet each novel discussed in the following pages serves to anticipate the brand of performance humor that became standard in the later twentieth century and into today. What is funny on screen or stage today was being planted in the soil by these three authors decades ago, sometimes deep enough where we may have missed an angle of the humor or the humor entirely the first time we read them. And these works deserve appreciation for their respective comedic value, particularly as they stand in an American canon that is hardly regarded as rife with laughs. Hurston’s Janie as anthropological study of the failed attempted silencing of black female voice that bursts through with humor. Nabokov’s Humbert as standup comedian in the vein of today’s controversial professional joke tellers. Vonnegut’s antiwar farce that models biting performance comedy that hadn’t yet cemented itself in pop culture. What we gain from reading these works in a new light is a better awareness of that which we currently appreciate in distinctly American humor—particularly in the evocative performance comedy genres—having existed in controversial print form before the physical stage made it acceptable. Also, beyond canonical literary value, these novels are then not only their own revolutionary pieces of works of marginalized communities or postmodernism but also pioneers in letting America know their respective topics were not off limits. These are not texts that happen to be funny; instead, they are texts that demanded a new consideration for what we were allowed to laugh at and who could make the jokes while twentieth century America was still relying on the privileged or status quo to do so or increasingly turning to non-print comedic forms. They are also texts so ahead of their

respective times that established performance comedy was only just getting “there” if it had reached such a level of subversive humor at all yet. When various audio-visual outlets of humor were first pushing boundaries in clubs and on televisions, these novels had already gone “there” in their own respective ways.

Each of the novels examined here represents comedy of various “others.” Humor itself is a break from the norm, and the person bringing about laughter is different by that alone, but these three authors and their protagonists and sometimes secondary characters, too, are differently different. They have been cast outside the status quo for reasons superficial and/or dogmatic: an African American woman in the rural South fighting a battle on two fronts of race and gender, an admitted and unapologetic pedophile holding up a sort of mirror to us and our scruples, and a veteran with PTSD as one of the first ambassadors counteracting the very American cultural idolization of the soldier and the mythmaking of the wars s/he fights. All the while, each novel manages to be unconventionally funny in the process, stabbing at figurative social giants while in an underrated way priming the pump for later humor now seen as standard that defined the changing of centuries.

Name five truly funny canonical American novelists or playwrights. Go ahead.

“Well, there’s Twain, of course. And then... um... and there’s the guy who... oh, Philip Roth. And, um, Heller—yes, Joseph Heller and *Catch-22*. Then there’s, um... wait, I know there are more. A woman, right? But...”

There certainly are more great comic American plays and novels, but they don’t often get the marquee bookings of, say, a decidedly serious Hemingway novel. Or they

are so few and farther between the dominant heavier content that has defined a literature, and this aversion to difficult truths avoided in humor but often more embraced in a dramatic work is ironic since the reflex to the painful rap on the kneecap that is American history should be a funny kick. The canonization of overtly serious literary responses to American history maybe conditions us to forget to even want to laugh at actual (albeit covert) humor in works maybe not classified as humorous. That or we sometimes fail to realize how important the comedy is in the works that do get the rare label of comedic in the canon. And because writing humor is so damn hard to do. William Keough writes in *Punchlines*:

American humor reveals a complicated process--the powerful ridiculing the powerless (ethnic jokes, negative caricatures of women, etc.); the powerless fighting back with duplicity and masks (early “darky” entertainers, for example). Furthermore, American humor not only has a pecking order but political overtones and is not always in good, clean fun. When Thomas Morton ridiculed the Puritans, they had him arrested. When Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor pointed out the reality of racism, they lost bookings. When Lenny Bruce *spritzed* on dirty words, he was arrested for obscenity. In America, there has always been a quarrel going on as to *what* or *who* is really funny. (xvii)

American literature has not received a proper examination of its humor, particularly in the twentieth century, probably because so often what Keough mentions is true—we don’t agree on what and who is funny. Plus, as comedy is harder to pull off than tragedy, so is each’s respective analysis, and topics like the American Dream, minority struggles, and the journey to find the self are so much meatier for critics to sink their teeth into.

(Look no further than how American culture gives awards to dramatic/“serious” pieces of art in overwhelming numbers compared to comedic pieces). Other than the rare piece like Constance Rourke’s 1931 *American Humor: A Study of the National Character*—a historical and anthropological study of the growth of a country as its humor also evolved in the pre-revolutionary Yankee and backwoodsman, through appropriation and exploitation of Native Americans and Blacks in operas and minstrelsy, often misunderstanding the American woman who though “was not comic she was placed in the realm of comedy” (V.2) and onward—examinations of American humor were lacking well into the twentieth century. Although studies would pick up coincidentally as comedy entered electronically into American living rooms, scholarship still hasn’t tackled American literary humor with the “serious” energy it has other aspects, and, therefore, relatively little criticism on humor in American literature exists. Exceptions to this critical dearth that will appear in the subsequent chapters include multiple works from Wayne State University Press’s unique series of texts on humor: Sarah Blacher Cohen’s collection of essays by critics looking at laughs in contemporary American writing, June Sochen’s collection of essays examining humor and the American woman, Joseph Boskin’s collection of essays by writers examining how humor—particularly in writing—shaped twentieth century American culture, Will Kaufman on the comedian as conman, Lance Olsen on postmodernism and the comic vision. Several other scholars are included who have studied literary comedy’s intersection with gender, race, and that which challenges the comfort of the majority (as comedy is supposed to do), such as Keough and his examination of the violence of American humor. As Ronald Wallace points out in *The Last Laugh*, “We tend to define ourselves in terms of war, violence, sickness,

despair, loss, guilt, and social and political fragmentation, rather than laughter” (1).

Because those heavy life truths are too often ironically easier to pour onto paper and subsequently wax on afterward than the much tougher venture of the comic and absurd.

Maybe the lack of voluminous American literary humor critique is due to comedy traditionally being a product of the marginalized. “The best of all humor,” says Keough, “particularly the best of American humor tells the truth--and we also, often, resist that truth” (236). That would be truth like our country’s history of oppression of non-whites, nonmales, nonstraights, and anyone who bucks the status quo. Comedy—at least that which is more than sophomoric—is a vehicle for truth, and the truth usually is uncomfortable. (Cue the Freudian explanation of laughter as response to emotional discomfort.) I have long leaned toward humor-as-distasteful-nugget-of-truth-wrapped-in-tastier-laughter, but not all critics agree. Though Lance Olsen writes about postmodernism that “there is no truth in humor, rather, an incessant questioning that yields no ultimate answer. Such a vision goes back at least as far as Socrates whose thought, as Kierkegaard points out, is ‘not subject to interpretation, in the traditional sense, since there is no underlying message’” (Lang 3) (30), he is at the very least in agreement with Keough that humor is a *pursuit* of truth even if there is acknowledgment that no satisfactory destination will be achieved.

There is a parallel in historically ignoring humor as has been done to the rest of cultures of oppressed people. Take comedy by women, for instance, examined in my chapter on Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her introduction to *Women’s Comic Visions*, June Sochen writes:

The long absence of domestic humorists from our anthologies and college courses points to another long-held cultural value in America: the denigration of domestic activities, practitioners, and products. Women as the primary agents in the domestic realm, a realm decidedly inferior to the public arena--the business world, the government, and the public museums and concert halls--have been undervalued; so have their efforts. Therefore, it is entirely logical and consistent to underrate the writings of domestic humorists. Men avoid the kitchen and the nursery, the cleaning and the cooking in the home, as much as they can. Their work is surely superior. Humor associated with politics, business, and other male pursuits ranks higher in the hierarchy of humor than women's events; [Frances Miriam] Whitcher jokes about gossipy women and the annoyances of homemaking. Guess whose humor is preserved? (11)

Just as Hurston's work received sexist criticism by her male peers and ended up virtually disappearing from study for multiple decades, the rediscovery and appreciation of *Their Eyes* still largely neglects Hurston as important American anthropologist of humor.

With an admitted pedophile narrator in *Lolita*, many critics and readers are prevented from approaching it comically because conditioned reflexes of decorum scream cruelty or vileness. On the surface I would agree. But the comedy in this work is hardly about what is on the surface. The novel is not celebrating or encouraging laughing at victims of sexual assault either, even though a reader's humanity toward that victimized group is an initial obstacle toward embracing the humor that laughs with such a group and not at it. Initial reviews of Nabokov's work exemplify such obstacles, and early criticism branded *Lolita* as taboo work ever since. Of reviews collected by Olsen, in

The Saturday Review Granville Hicks said it was “not one of the more memorable novels (38).” In his *Nation* review, Robert Hatch said it was “not a very inventive book--beyond the initial audacity (563).” E.F. Walbridge wrote in *Library Journal* that “thousands of library patrons conditioned to near-incest by ‘Peyton Place’ may take this book in stride. However, better read before buying. Although the writer prides himself on using no obscene words, he succeeds only too well conveying his meaning without them (2183).” Orville Prescott in the *New York Times* said that “there are two equally serious reasons why [*Lolita*] isn’t worth any adult reader’s attention. The first is that it is dull, dull, dull in a pretentious, florid and archly fatuous fashion. The second is that it is repulsive.” Riley Hughes in *Catholic World* wrote that “[the] very subject makes it a book to which grave objection must be raised. . . .As a study of unnatural infatuation, of a man and mind obsessed, it might be said to have a certain clinical authority. But the aura of evil, the implications of a decadence universally accepted and shared--this is a romp which does not amuse” (qtd. in Olsen 60). But it does amuse, as I will show, and was ahead of its time in postmodern performance comedy set to the page instead of the stage.

With a comparative dearth of humor analysis as opposed to other approaches to literary criticism, it stands to reason that certain works would get overlooked and/or misinterpreted regarding their humor. I attempt here (in the smallest of ways) to rectify that with the help of some really interesting pieces by critics of comedy, literature, and both—despite the aforementioned dearth there still exists quality literary humor criticism and criticism of American comedy that is not necessarily confined to paper.

Besides its issues of the marginalized, a bloody red component exists in the red, white, (and black) and blue of laughs. Notes Keough, “American humor is violent--and

often sexist, racist, brutal, and disgusting as well. There, I've said it, and as Huck says, 'All right, then, I'll go to Hell'" (xi). Violence is certainly a strong aspect of the three novels explored here, be it domestic, racial, sexual, wartime, or any of the other shades in a country birthed by violence and seeped in it in every corner of its history. Richard Hofstadter notes, "What is most exceptional about Americans is not the voluminous record of their violence, but their extraordinary ability, in the face of that record, to persuade themselves that they are among the best-behaved and best-regulated of peoples" (quoted in Keough 9). Hurston, Nabokov, and Vonnegut know Americans are thoroughly misbehaved and terribly regulated, and our assumption otherwise is a big joke ripe for the page.

In response to violence and other trauma, laughter helps heal the wounds, so it should not be a surprise that great comedic literary periods are born of the most negative of times. Cohen explains in the introduction to *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*,

Historians of American humor have shown that the greatest burgeoning of American comedy occurred during the Jacksonian democracy, from the Civil War years to 1900, and then in the 1930's. That two of these periods were times of great duress for the country strongly suggests that travail gives rise to humor, which expresses people's rage at the senseless turn of events and dissipates their gloom. (1)

The first novel examined here happen to be from the 1930s. Regarding the mid-twentieth century, Cohen explains, "And for a time many American writers did not choose to deal with this insane reality in their work. Instead, the 'sick comedians' stepped forward to

serve as the lunatic commentators of our collective lunacy, a role they assumed with a vengeance. . . . Their creed, if they had one, was Lenny Bruce's: 'Everything is rotten--mother is rotten, God is rotten, the flag is rotten'" (3). There may not yet be two more accused "sick" American comedic novelists as Nabokov and Vonnegut, who etched their lunacy on the literary world in the 1950s and 60s respectively.

We laugh today at being even slightly better-off than the objects of ridicule, or we do so perhaps in spite of our lesser fortunes should we and the marginalized groups with which we claim association be the butts of jokes, but we were doing that all last century. The three novels examined here I see as "opening acts" to the present state of performance comedy. Think of them in the way we see an unknown comic open for the bigger act or a green performer getting a shot with a very minor bit part on a variety program and when they kill you think, "Someday this person is going to be big." And then we look back on them and think, "Remember when?" That is not to say these three novels were "unknowns" in their day--all are classics. But two of them are not much described in terms of their humor yet use it quite importantly and deserve recognition for their use of it in championing marginalized peoples, and the other two are very humorous works that were ahead of their respective times in pushing the envelope in terms of what is and is not off limits for mockery. And they all deal with humor of respective "others": a woman who is Black, a man with an intellectual disability, a pedophile, and veterans with PTSD.

"'Comes and See': Janie Crawford's and Zora Neale Hurston's Comic Achievement in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" examines Zora Neale Hurston's story of a Black woman's conscious quest for love and unconscious quest for self in the

context of real world marginalization of Blacks and women and how that translates to permission granted to hold comedic court. The protagonist, Janie, is constantly silenced by authorities in her life, most notably her second husband, Joe, who bars her from engaging in the jovial fun that takes place on the porch in front of the store he owns. This porch functions as a performance stage where various townspeople mock and attempt to best one another through humor, using “The Dozens” and such in a space designated for Blacks and devoid of Whites, not unlike performance comedy at the time of the novel’s publication and decades afterward.

Comedy is anthropology, and Hurston herself was an accomplished anthropologist both in her academic and professional preservation of folklore and informally in fiction like *TEWWG*. This novel is an exercise in Black humor as cultural badge and stands as a marker to the foundations of African American humor that was once misunderstood, ignored, and limited in its allowed space and is so widely applauded today and accepted into the social norm. *TEWWG* has the oppressed Black and female figures silenced by White and male society, and the novel’s humor speaks to the world of American humor that, while publicly dominated by White men well into the second half of the twentieth century, still had women and people of color creating and utilizing jokes and laughs out of the spotlight. Hurston’s are Black communities that situate themselves away from white communities, allowing for a certain freedom among themselves while enforcing the patriarchy that the world of comedy still finds itself plagued by today. Janie isn’t allowed to do the equivalent of standup because standups are critics of situations, speaking truth about power, and like hell the men in power are going to be okay with her publicly criticizing her situation. The porch is a standup comedy stage which excludes

Black women, but Janie forces her spot on the stage in an early example of a work of American feminist humor.

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* is an accepted work of comedy by those who can get past the forcefield of reading the perspective of a fictional child rapist--*hilarious*, right? The novel is one huge drawn out rape joke, but a responsible one. Feminist author Lindy West argues in her essay "How To Make a Rape Joke" (a piece that is integral in my chapter) that "the best comics use their art to call bullshit on those terrible parts of life and make them better, not worse. The key . . . is to be a responsible person when you construct your jokes." I examine how Nabokov is dutiful in that respect, and besides the novel's wit I appreciate in my chapter "Rape Jokes: The Postmodern Standup Comedy of *Lolita*" the work as a forerunner to the Louis C.K.-esque style of comedy that is standard today.

While on the surface laughing at a story of pedophilia is unacceptable, Nabokov and his narrator, Humbert Humbert, make the same negotiations with the audience that a standup comedian in the twenty-first century would make in telling jokes on otherwise taboo subject matter. I examine this understanding the novel creates with its audience that is not unlike going to see a racy comic perform in a club and how *Lolita*, despite its book jacket abhorrent subject matter, manages to achieve one long metaphoric rape joke that is acceptable because the object of humor is never the victim of sexual assault and makes its narrator-protagonist--while still a disgusting person--a begrudgingly respectable comic.

"Unstuck in Time: *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s Fractured Structure as Spastic Comedy Program" deals with Kurt Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim and his (their?) still-in-the-twenty-first-century mistreated post-traumatic stress disorder. Like pedophilia, this topic is not

likely top-of-mind for most readers as comedic fodder. But also like pedophilia, the humor isn't at the expense of victims here either. A scathing work of satire in the late 1960s, *SH5* fired at the sacred cow of the supposed glory and universal bravery of WWII and did so as metaphor for the Vietnam War that slogged on at the time Vonnegut published it. Picking up the torch of humorous social commentary, Vonnegut took it a step further by not trying to be likable to the groups he was skewering as Twain had, and he as attacker of false idols such as American involvement in WWII made him a sort of literary bridge between craft-shattering comedians Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks.

SH5 preceded the mainstreaming of sketch comedy, but the fractured nature of time in the novel and the Tralfamadorian philosophies are not unlike the irreverence of the *Laugh-In* of its time or the *Saturday Night Live* we have grown so accustomed to for more than forty years. Cut up in tiny fragmental chunks within each chapter that are separated yet connected, each vignette is its own "sketch" that connects to the previous and next vignettes like an episode of the cult favorite *Mr. Show with Bob and David* that would take a thematic joke and draw it out over the course of an entire episode with sketches separate-yet-connected throughout.

So: three canonical pieces, looked at today with reverence for their typical American canonical qualities, but not appropriately appreciated for their comedic contributions to the rich American comedic tapestry. That changes now. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Lolita*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not just works of literature with obvious and/or subtle humor in them--they are germinations of performance comedy that we are accustomed to half a century or more since they were written. They show why many of us laugh today at what we do because we've kind of been doing it for

generations—or we at least had certain comedic barriers demolished decades ago by such novels.

As you continue to read, the house would like to remind you that there is a two-drink minimum and that any flash photography or recording during the show is strictly prohibited. We ask that you remember everyone is here to experience the performers, and nobody is here to hear you, so no heckling, please (especially at any bad jokes from this writer). The following program does contain strong language, so viewer discretion is advised (and I apologize in advance for any secondary sources leaning on the use of masculine pronouns to describe the ubercomic).

So, ladies and gentlemen, without further delay, would you please welcome to the stage...

**“Come and See”: Janie Crawford’s and Zora Neale Hurston’s
Comic Achievement in *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

Humor is laughing at what you haven’t got when you ought to have it. Of course, you laugh by proxy. You’re really laughing at the other guy’s lacks, not your own. That’s what is funny--the fact that you don’t know you are laughing at yourself. Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first--before it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own unconscious therapy.

—Langston Hughes (*The Book of Negro Humor* vii)

Zora Neale Hurston was—is—an anthropologist¹. She graduated (at the age of 34) with an anthropology degree from Barnard College (the first Black woman graduate from there), and would become one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance period. Hurston scholar Irma McClaurin in “Zora Neale Hurston and Anthropology” explains that it was Hurston’s upbringing in Eatonville, Florida—the first town in the nation incorporated entirely by African Americans—that set her apart from the other literary Harlemites, her writing “deeply rooted in rural southern Black culture” and a “preoccupation with the life ways and folklore of rural Black people” since she “had grown up listening to culture in the making—people swapping lies on Joe’s porch, symbolic and metaphoric improvisation and the creation of new meaning with language through storytelling and music.” Hurston then documented in her writing that culture she

¹ Her literary works, notably her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ensure that her studies of specific aspects of distinctly American culture live in perpetuum. The afore-used “is” is also in obedience to Alice Walker’s use of present tense regarding literally where Hurston’s remains now rest but probably also regarding Hurston’s perpetual spirit. Hurston’s tombstone is engraved with the Walker-penned epitaph “A Genius of the South, 1901 – 1960. Novelist, Folklorist, Anthropologist.” Walker recalls, “It was impossible for me to cry when I saw the field full of weeds where Zora is” (313).

observed and consumed, taking particular notice of the uniqueness and importance of humor's role in the Black culture of her rural childhood. Humor to Hurston became more than laughter; specifically as it existed among African Americans, it was a Swiss Army knife of sociopolitical application as needed, used to bond, to separate, to rebel, to lift up, and to strike down. Perhaps most importantly, Hurston saw a Black humor culture as something that dismantled stereotypes rather than contributed to them, and she precedes the African American comic of the latter portion of the century who uses laughter to convey sociopolitical truth. In doing so she also in the novel models the modern standup comic, one that uses less of the setup-punchline-setup-punchline style of old and more of the substantial storytelling and riffing flecked with jokes that is the standard style of today's socially-conscious comic.

Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is on a constant search for self while leading a life of quiet desperation for much of the story. Hurston's novel speaks to gender issues and how roles based on sex are stereotyped. No more blatant are the sexes structured hierarchically in the novel (and beyond it, as Hurston attempts to convey) than through humor.

From Nanny to Logan to Joe, and then even to a degree with Tea Cake and in the various town environments with peer pressure, Janie finds herself in controlling relationships all her life. Hers is a constant struggle for a certain independent womanhood that she arguably doesn't wholly find until she's been entirely defeated and comes full circle back to Eatonville. In the meantime, Janie battles to break the constraints imposed on her skin and sex by the status quo of the day and place. Hurston centers much of this within the all-Black communities of the novel that still treat women as second class

citizens. No greater is this symbolized than on “the porch,” the literal place of social gathering in Eatonville and the figurative standup comedy stage for the community—a stage relegated to the performance of men.

Alongside Janie’s struggle is a parallel search for what Janie defines as love. She believes it to be an organic thing that cannot be forced, and her relationship with Tea Cake proves that mostly correct. Tea Cake allowed her inner space to emerge freely more than anyone else ever in her life—most notably allowing her on the literal and figurative porch to express her humor. In a way, Janie’s loving Tea Cake was also about her learning to love herself and finding a home she never had—not just a geographic home but a place where she felt accepted, even if it was just finally accepted by herself. Yet Tea Cake’s tragic death shatters that dream of a home and sends her back to Eatonville alone and broken but not defeated, and now with a story, a voice. Most importantly, the weathered Janie now has an audience and—in full acceptance of herself—control of her own stage.

A LOST BUT FOUND WRITER, BUT STILL A LOST ANTHROPOLOGIST

Before digging into *TEWWG* it is important to recognize the absurdity of the treatment of Hurston’s literary life, both while living and dead. The woman’s work was all but forgotten for years after she died in poverty in 1960, and it was not until the great Alice Walker made it her mission to put Hurston back on the literary map that one of the pillars of the Harlem Renaissance was re-appreciated as Hurston is today. The cover of my personal Harper Perennial copy of *TEWWG* even includes a quote from Walker: “There is no book more important to me than this one.” It would seem really odd that a writer with the résumé of Hurston’s could virtually disappear from academia, but when

the field for most of the twentieth century is dominated by men (particularly White men), and when one reads how while alive and prospering Hurston often could not get a fair shake from her Black male peers, it's a bit easier to understand her slipping through the cultural cracks, outrageous as it is.

Alice Walker begins her chronicle of her search for Hurston's unmarked grave with an epigraph from writer Robert Hemenway:

On January 16, 1959, Zora Neale Hurston, suffering from the effects of a stroke and writing painfully in longhand, composed a letter to the "editorial department" of Harper & Brothers inquiring if they would be interested in seeing "the book I am laboring upon at present—a life of Herod the Great." One year and twelve days later, Zora Neale Hurston died without funds to provide for her burial, a resident of the St. Lucie County, Florida, Welfare Home. She lies today in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, Florida, a resting place generally symbolic of the black writer's fate in America. Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most significant unread authors in America, the author of two minor classics and four other major books. (297)

Walker could not cry when finding Hurston's final resting place in part "because I have come to know Zora through her books and she was not a teary sort of person herself; but partly, too, it is because there is a point at which even grief feels absurd. And at this point, laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity" (313). Walker's laughter is fitting because Hurston herself studied laughter—Black laughter specifically—and found it necessary in the day to day experience of African American life and also a unique cultural tool.

Stephanie Koziski in “The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic” references anthropologist Edward Hall who “maintained that an understanding of a people’s sense of humor is one key to the structure of that society. By control, he means that a person who can engender good feelings by verbal facility and charisma holds social authority over his or her fellows” (86). Though Hurston like other women did not in her time have a place on the standup stage (nor maybe even a desire to have one formally), she was certainly a performer. She has been described by her peers as a master storyteller in social circles, and that is very evident in a work like *TEWWG*, itself a frame narrative where the protagonist Janie tells her story to her friend Pheoby but inside an omniscient third person narrative that obviously stands for Hurston herself. Through a novel like this Hurston “holds social authority” over the reader, “engendering good feeling by verbal facility and charisma,” as Hall asserts.

Yet Hurston had her own problems overcoming certain social authorities in having her work taken seriously by her established peers. While today she is revered as a master social critic, she was often misunderstood by her contemporaries—predominantly men—who refused to bother to look beyond the superficialities of her written diction. Plenty of scholarship exists on Hurston’s novel, but particularly interesting is that of her contemporary, Richard Wright. In *The New Masses* in 1937 Wright reviewed the novel, and in the very first paragraph of his piece he writes “Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction” (qtd. in Railton). This is a far cry from Alice Walker’s assessment indeed. Wright’s commentary continues in a very harsh and demeaning way, noting that Hurston in *TEWWG* is carrying on “facile sensuality,” a negative tradition since Phillis Wheatley (yet Wright compares her to no

male authors). “Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears” (qtd. in Railton). Stephen Railton, a professor at the University of Virginia, notes that Hurston’s novel was mostly praised by White reviewers. Yet the likes of Wright and Alain Locke were exceptionally nasty to her in print, believing her work to be counterproductive, oversimplified, and derived from minstrel shows. Wrote Locke in *Opportunity* in 1938:

Janie's story should not be re-told; it must be read. . . . Her gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor keep her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters and from diving down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization or to sharp analysis of the social background. . . . [W]hen will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly -- which is Miss Hurston's cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction? Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over and envy. Having gotten rid of condescension, let us now get over oversimplification! (qtd. in Railton)

Not only is that some awful respectability politics coming from Locke with his categorization of Hurston’s work as a “pseudo-primitive,” and not only is it laughably wrong in retrospect in deeming *TEWWG* as lacking in psychology and human analysis,

but what is particularly striking about his criticism is the attempt to silence its orality. Determining that the novel needs to be read instead of “re-told” (as in Janie should not be telling her story but, rather, it should presumably be controlled by an omniscient narrator) in effect banishes the female voice from the lectern, microphone, and/or stage. To Locke none of the actual language of a people that Hurston transfers to the page and combines with her own poetic language and humor is worthy—even if he is so paternalistically gracious to note that Hurston has a gift for doing so. Her words and her comedy are sociopolitically inferior to him? Now *that* is funny.

While not Hurston’s contemporary, at least Henry Louis Gates sees Hurston’s colloquial language use as important. He writes of the novel in its afterword, “...she used black vernacular speech and rituals, in ways subtle and various, to chart the coming to consciousness of black women, so glaringly absent in other black fiction” and says *TEWWG* “is more closely related to Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* and Jean Toomer’s *Cane* than to Langston Hughes’s and Richard Wright’s proletarian literature, so popular in the depression” (196-97).

Maybe men like Wright and Locke were not fans of Hurston’s work partly because it had been positively reviewed by White critics (which may have happened because *TEWWG* hardly has any White characters with which to present a portrayal of Jim Crow Whiteness bothersome to the status quo, with Hurston’s intentional omission of that being quite ironic if so). It’s more likely Black male peers took issue with her consciously or unconsciously because of her humor. After all, humor is traditionally male-dictated and male-controlled because the ability to create laughter is power, and even in Black communities where granted power was at a premium, at least Black men

had it over Black women, and damned if those men, like anyone else with a shred of power, were going to cede any of it downward the social ladder. So rarely is power allowed to the marginalized, and even if it is, it's then hardly ever given justification of "laughing with" over "laughing at." Such groups are viewed as inviting the status quo to point at and mock them rather than actually getting the joke that is actually at the status quo's expense. (Take the modern example of so many viewers misinterpreting or missing entirely the actual sociopolitical commentary within the sketches of *Chappelle's Show* and reducing it to mimicked catchphrases.) Nancy A. Walker explains that in her research of American women's humor and the absence thereof she found that

women aren't supposed to have a sense of humor. Time and again, in sources from the mid-nineteenth century to very recently, I encountered writers (male) commenting--and sometimes lamenting--that women were incapable of humor, and other writers (female) explaining that they knew women weren't supposed to have a sense of humor and then proceeding to be very funny indeed. (*A Very Serious Thing* ix)

Those men Walker researched may have said that women were incapable of humor, but a safe bet is that they feared women having any control over humor, since to admit a woman is funny is to admit she has a certain power over you to make you laugh—how frightening (and emasculating). "Whether viewed from the perspective of psychology, anthropology, sociology, or linguistics," says Walker, "humor is tied to power, autonomy, and aggression in ways that directly affect gender relationships" (13). Isn't that what male critics like Wright and Locke were doing? Attempting to hang on to the power they had over a woman like Hurston, and doing so by attempting to invalidate her

humor via an ignorant dissection of its psychology, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics? Too bad for them that Hurston was the kind of woman Nancy A. Walker came across in her studies, one who wasn't supposed to be intentionally funny but ended being very much so indeed.

THE PORCH AS COMEDIC STAGE

The settings of Hurston's novel—Eatonville, Jacksonville, and “de muck”—are all exclusively Black. Hurston is from Eatonville, and though born in Alabama, she once wrote, “I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal town” (qtd. in Lillios). Her father was a former slave who was the minister in one of the two churches in Eatonville and its mayor for three terms. Twenty-seven Black men incorporated that town in 1887, and it was entirely Black-run and Black-inhabited for decades. The fictional life in the novel's Eatonville reflects this, as do Janie's relationships in Jacksonville and “de muck”; hardly any White characters enter the reading, and those that do don't play dominant roles.

Hurston's novel society is then intentionally consumed by Blackness, and the physical absence of Whites can be interpreted as a deafening loudness by the author. While Jim Crow was almost entirely about forced segregation, Hurston shows African Americans forced into their own little pockets of the world against their wills but not wanting of any amenities of Whiteness. There is hardly even a mention of racial separation. This world inhabited entirely by Blacks with rare interracial interaction is *the* world as far as Hurston and her characters are concerned. Notes Nancy A. Walker, “Hurston's work is typically located in all-black communities, and her humor differs

sharply from that of Alice Childress and Mari Evans in that instead of using irony and wit to confront racism, Hurston celebrates black culture with its jokes, its linguistic exaggerations, and its flamboyant storytellers” (*A Very Serious Thing* 111). If the standards of White mainstream society were going to have Black people set off from “civilized” society, Hurston was not about to pay those authorities any mind then. She was too busy laughing in spite of them.

Her anthropological bent gave her keen insight and experience with African American humor, with humor being something she knew was definitive of and unique to a culture. She already was aware of that which Elsie A. Williams describes Black humor critics discussing not long after *TEWWG*:

W.E.B. DuBois, in his 1940 *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, reiterated, describing laughter’s greatness as a dancing, singing gift, loving men and women behaving deliciously human and challenging: “if you will hear men laugh go to Guinea, ‘Black Bottom,’ ‘Niggertown,’ Harlem; if you want to feel humor too exquisite and subtle for translation sit invisibly by a gang of Negro workers.” Langston Hughes, in *The Book of Negro Folklore*, extensively records historical memories in which slaves discovered a functional use of humor and started “grinnin’ and skinnin’,” pulling tricks to keep their masters laughing and appeased, to cut down on their work.” [sic] In fact, Afro-Americans used this gift so surreptitiously that they “put on ole Massa,” and ole Massa’s response (as folklore has it) was a laughing barrel, a receptacle regulated by status quo laws which required Blacks when provoked to laughter to place their heads into a barrel so as to control, silence, and segregate

their “exquisite” gift. (161)

She not only was a gifted storyteller, but she also chronicled the special thing DuBois mentioned—the humor of an all-Black community and subsequently the humanity of a people. But, again, Hurston as a woman doesn’t get the spotlight DuBois and Hughes get for noticing such things *after* her.

As Hughes notes in this chapter’s epigraph, “Humor is laughing at what you haven’t got when you ought to have it.” Nancy A. Walker writes of this:

Hughes’s definition is applicable more widely than to the humor of American blacks . . . several of Hughes’s comments here suggest that he has reference in particular to the humor of the underdog, the have-nots of society who learn to cope with deprivation and discrimination in part by using humor. To laugh at “what you haven’t got when you ought to have it” implies a consciousness of both one’s right and the denial of those rights; to laugh when “you wish in your secret heart [that the situation] were not funny” suggests an awareness of the disparity and incongruity that members of minority groups constantly endure: the distance between the official promise of equality and the actual experience of subordination to the dominant culture. (*A Very Serious Thing* 101-02)

In *TEWWG* Hurston does not weep for anything Black communities are especially lacking but instead smiles wryly about it. It’s not about a glass-half-empty; rather, it’s laughing at the glass being chipped beyond recognition (if you even had a glass at all). “Even as a child, Hurston was aware of the differences between her life in Eatonville and the more heroic and exciting lives she read about . . . But her tone is one of joy, and the juxtapositions create humor, not bitter irony” (113). There is no better example of such a

lack than the absence of a “proper” stage on which to perform. While Eatonville and the other places show no signs of a theater or performance hall, humor still finds a way to the figurative stage. If there was no formal place with tickets and reserved seating at which to take in a show, something would be made out of the nothing Hurston’s community was granted.

So the porch becomes the stage, the place of mixing revelry and performance and social commentary. June Sochen says that “humor thrives in an oral setting, in a performance mode, not as written and read material. People laugh out loud in an audience of laughers far more readily than in the solitary setting of their living room” (12). The porch then is there where the characters perform standup while relaxing in chairs. The reader initially encounters Hurston’s porchgoers on the very first page as Janie returns to Eatonville from “burying the dead.” Hurston writes, “It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths” (1). Immediately these so far nameless characters of the town are depicted as gaining power on the porch, a place where the sun (under which labor is performed) and the bossman (under whom labor is performed) are absent, and where these porchgoers cease to be tools of convenience and become their own selves. The porch is presented as a respite for Blacks in a White-dominated world and becomes a place where Whiteness no longer exists; therefore, Blackness and its inherent specific humor can thrive there.

It is his porch where Janie's second husband, the wealthy alpha Joe, calls a meeting of the town to announce he has purchased in cash two-hundred acres of land for the town that he will develop (Hurst 38), and it is the place where the Eatonvilleans gossip, such as after Joe expels from town a man who stole goods from Joe's store, and the other townsfolk find the penalty too harsh. "Some of them thought Starks ought not to have done that. . . . But they didn't say that while Joe Starks was on the porch. When the mail came from Maitland and he went inside to sort it out everybody had their say" (48).

The porch is where folks are at peace and enjoying each other's company. "When the people sat around on the porch and passed around the pictures of their thoughts for the others to look at and see, it was nice" (51). But it is most importantly the place where the most laughter is created. Take the scene where some men taunt Matt Bonner about his skinny mule, at first tricking him about how the mule is "bad off." Matt takes the bait, demanding to know what's wrong, and Sam deadpans,

"De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some others had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh wash board."

The great clap of laughter that they have been holding in, bursts out. (52)

What follows is the ritual dozens, playful yet often competitive insults tossed at one another to the delight of an audience. The dozens appear multiple times in the novel. "But sometimes Sam Watson and Lige Moss forced a belly laugh out of Joe himself with their eternal arguments. It never ended because there was no end to reach. It was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason" (63). Such a contest is linguistically

definitive of the Black culture to which Hurston was so in tune. Joseph Boskin in “African-American Humor: Resistance and Retaliation” quotes Daryl C. Dance:

The vocabulary [of African American humor] is made interesting by the use of Negro slang expressions, jive talk, Biblical expressions, stock phrases, a great many obscenities, and an unmatched love of the double entendre. Much of the humor, particularly in the toasts and the dozens, is characterized by a musical, rhythmical quality, a love of verbal play and a delight in rhyme and pure sound. Many of the jokes and tales are highly colored by the influences of the fervent religious services with the changes and shouts of the minister and the impassioned responses of the congregation, as well as by the rhythm and stock phrases of the blues. (148)

Hurston’s portrayal is much what Dance describes. There is a ritual to the joking that takes place on the porch. H. Samy Alim and Geneva Smitherman explain in *Articulate While Black*:

The tradition of snappin, a.k.a. signifyin and playin the Dozens in Old School lingo, is a style of verbal communication that incorporates double meaning and humor to comment on an individual, event, or situation. Snappin can be in the form of playful commentary or serious social critique couched as verbal play. It involves rhetorical hyperbole, irony, indirection, metaphor, and deployment of the semantically or logically unexpected. Most importantly, the signifyin must be funny.” (107-08)

Funny it is in the novel for sure, and that religious quality mixed with humor plays out in a mock funeral for that mule in which the otherwise stuffy Joe and the townspeople perform a spoof of a solemn service for one of its most important citizens. While the funeral doesn't take place on the porch, it is presided over by Joe, the main porch's owner who carries the porch's oratory power wherever he goes.

In her portrait of Black humor, though, while staying true to the Southern rural dialects and rituals that so bothered her negative critics Hurston actually avoids stereotypes. At the same time this does not prop up what maybe inappropriately entertained her positive reviewers as misinterpreted minstrelsy that Wright and Locke condemned. Writes Lawrence E Mintz,

In American popular culture, the black as comic figure crept into our group fantasy as the smiling descendant of Pan . . . Two blatant stereotypes surfaced, Jim Crow and Jim Dandy . . . These types, contends Robert Bone, triggered laughter as audiences perceived the gap between affectation and reality. The travesty sought 'to keep the pretender in his place' . . . To survive, the black artist had to participate in self-caricature. To succeed, he had to perpetuate vile stereotypes" (215-16).

But with almost no whites for juxtaposition in *TEWWG*, there is no opportunity for stereotypes. Hurston's characters do not become caricatures because the problematic "standard" White folks are intentionally omitted for the most part, creating an obvious silence from a status quo that would otherwise work to denormalize her characters. Her "clowns" are heralds of a rich Black culture of humor, and they are not hindering the

evolution of perception of African Americans; in fact, the jokers are that very kind she intends for us to laugh *with* and not *at*. Hurston is ahead of her time in debunking the misconception of African Americans wrought by the blackface shows and cartoon caricatures of her day.

Unfortunately the porch is not entirely ideal. As though predicting her male critics' misunderstandings of her use of authentic humor, Janie quickly learns that the men in her life have certain rules for women using their voices, and getting a piece of that stage power is against those rules.

THE FORCED SILENCE OF THE BLACK FEMALE COMIC VOICE

While that first page description of the porchgoers begins with establishing the porch as cultural sanctuary, it ends with "They sat in judgment" (1). That judgment is immediately focused on Janie as she returns from what the end of the story tells the reader is the death of her third husband, Tea Cake, and her subsequent murder trial. There is animosity toward Janie, much of it jealousy with the men ogling her attractive body they cannot possess as she walks past and their wives clearly bothered by her being in control of that body and her own silence. She is gossiped about most ironically because she refuses to lend her voice to them and fill them in on the juicy gap between the time she left Eatonville and returned. Regarding the townspeople attempting to reduce Janie to a joke as they do as she passes them, Lowe writes, "Like Hester Prynne in the opening pages of *The Scarlet Letter*, Janie will be the victim of cruel, unthinking humor until she silences it, and unlike Hester, she must cap the discussion by having the last laugh herself. . . . By treating her humorously, they attempt to reduce her mystery to a mere

riddle that may be solved” (159). This is not unlike spiteful hecklers at a standup show who must transfer the power from performer to themselves, and it is the comedian who has her act under control most who best handles them, cedes no power, and gets the last laugh. From the start of the reader’s relationship with the protagonist her voice is a piece of controversy to be fought over by others. Oddly enough the novel begins with Janie as the show and the porchgoers as the audience, a role reversal that mocks them. It’s as though she no longer needs their stage with its permissions. As the reading continues and Janie gives her voice to her only friend in town, Pheoby, we see what it took for Janie to reach this status as Black woman with power—the power of owning her voice and self, what John Lowe describes thusly: “Janie, child-free, financially secure, leaves one husband, buries two others, and finds the ‘pulpit’ Lucy [of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*] always deserved” (156).

Eatonville with its powerful porches is one of Janie’s multiple temporary residences that are never quite homes, and without them being homelike they then lack the comfort and permission for voice, and control over one’s voice is a type of power. Janie learns harshly early in her life that she lacks not so much power but permission for power—she has a voice but just is not granted space to express herself. What is perhaps most cruel is that this realization comes in part at the hands of an older female relative channeling her internalized oppression as a postcolonial woman. Janie’s grandmother in *TEWWG* is a product of a dream deferred. A former slave and mother to her slavemaster’s child of rape, she tells Janie, “Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me” (16). Survival is then all Nanny knows, and she refuses to accept anything less than sure stability for her

granddaughter. What's problematic is that Nanny's notion of stability is Janie marrying at a young age a man she doesn't love. Janie's say in the matter is dismissed by Nanny, and Janie's voice and control of her life and self are then clipped and pocketed by her grandmother. Doubly disastrous is that Nanny's decision comes just as Janie is discovering her blooming bee-on-blossom womanness, a crucial point in Janie's psychological development that Nanny severely disrupts by shaming Janie for kissing a boy in their yard and rushing her into marrying Logan. Still a girl being jetted into an unnatural womanhood, Janie "attempts to survive her grandmother's restricted vision of a black woman's life and realize her own self-conceived liberation," according to Edwidge Danticat (xv). Nanny's terrible hand-washing last words to Janie are "Lawd, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you" (24). This is cruelly comical, because while Nanny accomplished the duty of providing a literal world of food, clothing, and shelter for her granddaughter, Nanny's "best" was also screwing Janie's whole emotional and psychological world up and setting Janie up for a life of physically and emotionally scarring relationships in which Janie is on a constant search for self and voice, meaning she is never allowed a fixed sense of home. These scars are the kind that armor a future comedian like the one Janie will later become. Standup comedy—at least the modern style that ditched the one-liner brand for more psychological confessional—is very much an expulsion of built up troubles from the troubles of childhood and intimate relationships.

Nanny's comic cruelty continues after Janie marries Logan. When the miserable Janie seeks marriage advice from her, at first Nanny goes sophomoric. "The old woman looked amazed then gave a big clatter of laughter. 'Don't tell me you done got knocked

up already, less see—dis Saturday it's two months and two weeks'" (22). The rest of the conversation involves Nanny putting down Janie's idea of finding true love. Again Janie's voice is suppressed, this time by her grandmother practically laughing her out of the room. According to Lowe,

When Janie's expectation of falling in love with Logan is not met, she seeks advice from Nanny, who erupts in revealing, dialect-driven, comic invective. She employs "black on black" signification and a telling malapropism: "Ah know dat grass-gut, liver-lipted nigger ain't done took and beat mah baby already! Ah'll take a stick and salivate 'im!" (40). This does not indicate surprise at Janie's being beaten, but that she has been beaten so soon. The "liver-lipted" reference is part of black-on-black humorous tradition, and the reference to his "grass-gut" transforms him into a cow and thus feminizes him. . . . Nanny offsets her comic skepticism, however, with her respect for material things: "If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road and . . . Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all s black women gits hung on. Dis love!" (41-42). Nanny's discourse has two embedded sexual jokes in it. Janie has an "organ" in her parlor now, but neither she nor Logan can make "music" with it. And clearly the "prong" women get "hung on" is more than just "dis love." (164-65)

Yet Nanny was hardly humorous before Janie was hitched to Logan. Nanny's humor only comes out in conjunction with her inability to empathize with her granddaughter's misery. She is laughing *at* Janie not *with* her. Lowe explains that Nanny

can only joke after Janie has been safely married off. In some ways, we may posit Nanny's mode of narration as generated by her harsh experiences and thus representative of both slave narratives and what would become known as 'protest literature' after Richard Wright exploded on the literary scene. Hurston ingeniously presents us with this representative history and then has the text ask, through Janie, will a tragic history (as expressed through Nanny and Leafy) take the pleasure out of present black life (Janie's)? For a time, the answer seems to be yes. (164)

Such unpleasantness continues for a long while in Janie's life and after Nanny is dead.

She is subject to physical abuse by husbands two and three, Joe and Tea Cake respectively, but it is the former who uses violence as a means to acquiring her silence, her voice being a threat to his power held in his masculine public reputation. Joe beats and berates Janie privately and publicly when he feels she has been insubordinate in her trophy wife duties, the most important of which to him is her not being heard by the Eatonville, Florida townspeople: "...mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home'" (43). That idea of a woman's place being "in de home" is crucial to understanding the historical treatment of American women humorists. Sochen writes in the introduction to her *Women's Comic Visions*:

The long absence of domestic humorists from our anthologies and college courses points to another long-held cultural value in America: the denigration of domestic activities, practitioners, and products. Women as the primary agents in the domestic realm, a realm decidedly inferior to the public arena--the business world, the government, and the public museums and concert halls--have been undervalued; so have their efforts. Therefore, it is entirely logical and consistent to underrate the writings of domestic humorists. Men avoid the kitchen and the nursery, the cleaning and the cooking in the home, as much as they can. Their work is surely superior. Humor associated with politics, business, and other male pursuits ranks higher in the hierarchy of humor than women's events; [Frances] Witcher jokes about gossipy women and the annoyances of homemaking. Guess whose humor is preserved? (11)

Janie is forced by her husband into domesticity, and yet there is not even honor to that work to him, and she certainly would not be permitted to discuss or joke about her housewifery. She is also denied participation in the fun and games and politicking that go on in public, in which much is engaged on the porch in front of the store Joe owns, her conversation relegated only to exchanges with customers inside the store. Nancy A.

Walker explains that

women's legal and economic ties to--and dependence on--men have worked against female group identity and therefore the development of certain group codes, of which humor is one. Another reason is the pervasive ideology of the "lady," which became firmly rooted in the rise of genteel culture in the early nineteenth century and which mandates a passive behavior that is the very

opposite of the irreverent stance of the humorist. The lady laughs at men's jokes; she does not invent her own. Finally, if there *were* a tradition of women's humor similar to that of blacks, Jews, and other minority groups, it would probably be a submerged, almost invisible tradition, unavailable as a source of strength to women as has been so much of women's history. ("Toward Solidarity" 59)

There are inklings of Janie's comic voice despite her being relegated to "de home." One example is when Joe goes to purchase land from Cap'n Eaton. Hicks hangs back and approaches the porch to flirt with Janie, his male ego causing him to think too highly of himself and to assume he has the porch's power in this situation (37-38). Janie humorously shuts Hicks down, performing her comic voice on the stage while Joe is not there to silence her. Earlier, sensing Logan's less-than-alpha status, Janie refuses to take orders from him and do work "lak uh man" like his first wife did in chopping wood.

"Ah'm just as stiff as you is stout. If you can stand not to chop and tote wood Ah reckon you can stand not to git no dinner. 'Scuse mah freezolity, Mist' Killicks, but Ah don't mean to chop de first chip" (26). Regarding Logan versus Joe, Lowe writes "The drama of Jody's explosion onto the scene profits from his contrast with Logan, a figure notably lacking in many traits, but especially humor. . . . Logan's response to her supposition that she might leave him represents his only comic moment, and he used humor aggressively, to hurt" (165), and he mocks Janie's physical traits (which is grasping at straws because she's very attractive). Lowe continues, "When he demands that Janie come out and help him shovel manure the next day, that is the final straw. Logan doesn't know that Janie thinks he looks at this moment 'like a black bear doing some clumsy dance on his hind legs' (52); the reader goes further, and sees that Logan is figuratively as well as literally

‘shoveling shit’” (165). It takes a bit longer for such humor to come out of her in her relationship with Joe, though.

Janie initially acquiesces to Joe’s censorship and plays the role of dutiful trophy wife. This confined silence eventually backfires on Joe, though, as Janie--like any suffocating voice--slowly tries to find airspace in a space not providing air. In a scene in which Joe and other men criticize a poor woman for seeking charity and wax on her husband not disciplining her enough, Janie finally speaks up after her Eatonville lifetime of relative silence:

Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation.

“Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was ‘bout y’all turning out so smart after Him makin’ yuh different; and how surprised y’all is goin’ tuh be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ‘bout us as you think you do. It’s so easy to make yo’-self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens.”

“You gettin’ too moufy, Janie,” Starks told her. “Go fetch me de checker-board and de checkers. Sam Watson, you’s mah fish.” (75).

Joe is obviously bothered by Janie’s sudden sense of power in speech here coupled with that speech questioning male dominance. He quickly shuts her up with an order to “fetch” a symbol of her silence and otherness--the checkers she’s not allowed to play and which are played on the porch--in order to stave off further emasculation in her words. But that can’t hold forever. Janie reaches a breaking point a few pages later in a pivotal scene in

the store. Janie mutilates a plug of tobacco a customer asks her to cut. ““Uh woman and a knife--no kind of uh knife, don't b'long tuhgether” the customer jokes (78). The knife and the bar of tobacco all provide for a symbolic castration setting that then follows. Joe angrily re-cuts the plug correctly and yells at Janie in front of others, criticizing her supposedly-fading looks. Janie no longer acquiesces and gives the business right back to her husband, capping it with “When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life” (79). The crowd has a great laugh over the subjugated Joe and his representative manhood (or lack thereof).

Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul's daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing [...] For what can excuse a man in the eyes of other men for lack of strength? [...] There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless. And the cruel deceit of Janie! (79-80)

Joe greatly values his public reputation as town alpha male, so as he is unable to stop the onrush of emasculation and unable to find words to get his male dominance back, he responds in one of the only ways a manchild can--he hits her and chases her out of the store, violently ejects her from the only homeplace she's allowed, an attempt to punish Janie for having a voice that can only exist at his expense.

Janie's eruption using emasculating humor against her oppressor is not atypical. Nancy A. Walker points out that

Writing about growing up in the 1950s [two decades after Hurston's novel's

publication], Anne Beatts recalls, “real girls weren’t funny. Real girls were pretty and fluffy and could do the splits in cheerleader try-outs.” The only girls she remembers who were known for being funny in high school did meet the test of a “real girl”: “One of them was fat. One was handicapped. The others were ‘tough.’” If aggression, for women, is most safely expressed in humor, this could explain why the only funny girls Anne Beatts remembers from high school were fat, handicapped, or “tough”: the hostility they felt at being different from the “real girl” ideal was channeled into humor (“Toward Solidarity” 61-62).

Janie is not the doll Joe wants her to be, and she eschews his standards of “real girl” who is seen and not heard. She’s naturally an outwardly beautiful woman but also “tough,” as she similarly showed in her humorous responses to her first husband who tried to enforce his will on her. In a scene where Logan suggests (but is too unsure of himself to demand) Janie will be doing field work rather than just domestic, her deadpan works to further Logan’s quick devolution into childlike state he’s in when she finally leaves him.

“Looka heah, LilBit, help me out some. Cut up dese seed taters fuh me. Ah got tuh go step off a piece.”

“Where you goin’?”

“Over tuh Lake City tuh see uh man about uh mule.”

“Whut you need two mules fuh? Lessen you aims to swap off dis one.”

“Naw, Ah needs two mules dis yeah. Taters is goin’ tuh be taters in de fall.

Bringin’ bigprices. Ah aims tuh run two plows, and dis man Ah’m talkin’ ’bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle ’im.”

Logan held his wad of tobacco real still in his jaw like a thermometer of his

feelings while he studied Janie's face and waited for her to say something.

"So Ah thought Ah mout as well go see." He tagged on and swallowed to kill time but Janie said nothing except, "Ah'll cut de p'taters fuh yuh." (26-27)

Go bring back as many mules as you want, Logan. Janie's having none of it, especially when he is so obviously afraid of her. Later he will be arguing in what is "half a sob and half a cry" (32) just before she walks out on him forever without even a goodbye.

Janie's sudden evolution into Black woman stage comic is very much an issue of gendered humor history. She takes what men have refused to give her, as all female comics have done in American history. Suzanne L. Bunkers explains:

Sociologist Paul McGhee, in noting the association of power with the successful use of humor, explains that the initiation of humor has in our culture become associated with males rather than with females because males hold the power. McGhee continues, "For a female to develop into a clown or joker, then, she must violate the behavioral pattern normally reserved for women" (McGhee 183-84). Those who hold the power in a culture develop a preference for humor that victimizes the powerless . . . (162)

This is Janie versus her husbands. She wrestles power in humor away from them while violating the cultural norms of woman as silent obedient servant.

Her only male comic ally is Tea Cake, who becomes her third husband. Tea Cake immediately engages her in humorous banter, never making her the object of any joke and allowing her to poke fun at him without repercussion and instead the reward of a place on the comic stage. He teaches her to play checkers, the game Joe forbade her to play (and that was often a vehicle to the revelry on the porch), and eventually Hurston

writes that “Tea Cake fell in beside her and mounted the porch this time. So she offered him a seat and they made a lot of laughter out of nothing” (101-02). This continues when the two move to Jacksonville and then to “de muck,” Janie never silenced by Tea Cake but instead encouraged to be vocal and funny and joyous. Important to note, too, is that Tea Cake is Janie’s poorest husband and ten years her younger, and her relationship with him is frowned upon by the judgmental Eatonville folks (that never gave her “porch power” anyway) and breaks from Nanny’s ideals of a husband with financial stability. When they move to “de muck” Lowe describes how

Janie’s growing ability to joke and laugh soon makes her a favorite with the people too, especially after she starts working alongside Tea Cake in the fields. . . . Soon Janie joins Tea Cake in storytelling for the appreciative audience that gathers each night at the shack. . . . In this school and laboratory, Janie ‘marks’ (imitates) the other storytellers and becomes an accomplished comedian/‘liar’ herself. (184)

But even as a male comic ally, Tea Cake eventually fails the woman comic. He is physically violent toward her at times, and his psychosis brought on by rabies almost kills the very thing he helped create—Janie as free and funny woman—but she shoots him to death first.

It’s ironic, too, that just as Janie gains her humorous voice via the demise of Joe and into her relationship with Tea Cake, the townsfolk lose theirs. Had Joe lived, she may never have had the opportunity to stretch her comedic vocal chords, something Tea Cake allows her more freedom in doing. After meeting Tea Cake and spending more quality, positive time with him, the town thinks he is just after her money and that she’s too

smitten with a younger man to realize it. Lowe notes, “They fail to realize that they’re still looking at Janie as an extension of Joe, as his spoils, waiting to see if an appropriate claimant will come along . . . The humorless nature of their communal discourse here testifies to a blind adherence to a joyless Puritan ethic” (181). Sam, one of the most easygoing and funny people in town, even thinks Janie is going to get swindled by Tea Cake. Worst of all, Pheoby—the almost perfect best friend to be discussed later in this chapter—wishes Janie would pick the safer undertaker instead of the devil-may-care younger tramp. This woman comic only exists to the ignorant masses in terms of men she is with or could be with.

Joe never recovers from the castration by Janie and soon takes ill and quickly dies, pouting like a child until his last breath. It’s a pattern in all three of Janie’s husbands who all become infantilized before Janie parts ways with them--Logan, the unromantic who treats her as employee, when he realizes he holds no power over her and she can leave him (she emasculates him and earns her freedom, too) and Tea Cake as he’s dying of rabies wanting to put his head in Janie’s lap “and let her mama him in her sweet way” (179) and his irrational thoughts that she is making him a cuckold for which he, too, responds to emasculation with attempted violence. All three of these men work to directly to stifle Janie’s voice and sense of self, the reflex of their warped illusions of gender roles and disruption to their clinging machismo—a byproduct of otherness of subjugated Black American manhood. Notes Nancy A. Walker on women’s castrating humor, “Castration jokes are obviously aggressive, and may even be hostile, but . . . they are a direct response to the epithet castrating bitch that has been hurled at feminists. Using humor to stand this accusation on its head is a sign of unity” (“Towards Solidarity” 64). This is

Hurston's humorous clarion call to all the women readers who have similar built up frustrations as Janie. It is only when their glaring fragile manhoods are exposed intentionally (Logan and Joe) or unintentionally (Tea Cake) that they wither away and let Janie own her voice and self, moving from one to the next until all three are gone and she is totally in control of her story. Even if it means a lack of permanence, a lack of a home.

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN BECAUSE YOU NEVER REALLY HAD ONE

TEWWG tacitly presents its Black female protagonist with the conundrum of searching for her idea of a home while never having had one in the first place. Janie's homelessness is also rooted in not being able to call anything home from a young age. Her first living space was on the property of the White family Nanny worked for, and Janie doesn't learn that she is African American until the age of six.

“Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names. Ah looked at de picture a long time and seen it was mah dress and mah hair so Ah said:

“‘Aw, aw! Ah’m colored!’

“Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest.

“Us lived dere havin’ fun till de chillun at school got to teasin’ me ‘bout livin’ in de white folks’ back-yard.” (9)

As a young girl Janie internalizes that Black is different, is other. This is a parallel to Hurston's real life, as Barbara Johnson point out in analyzing Hurston's essay “How It Feels To Be Colored Me”: “In this sea change [of Hurston describing how moving from Eatonville to Jacksonville turned her from ‘Zora of Orange County’ to ‘a little colored

girl’], the acquisition of color is a loss of identity: the ‘I’ is no longer Zora, and ‘Zora’ becomes a ‘she’” (604). Young Janie becomes “she” as well. Already having been called “Alphabet” because others haven’t even allowed her to her own her own name, her race others her with Whites and living on White property outcasts her with Black schoolmates. Certainly this is more of the scarring that fosters a comic soul in Janie later. On African American humor historically, Charles H. Nichols explains

But in their creative modes of expression--spirituals, worksongs, blues, and jazz-- African-Americans have not . . . taken flight into psychopathology. They have learned to deal with soul-destroying reality. They have inverted the accepted forms with irony and satire which bare the absurdities of our relationships. Jazz flouted all musical conventions yet conquered the world. By “changing the joke,” as [Ralph] Ellison says, “they may slip the yoke.” (107)

Her otherness is its own yoke in this case, and Janie rids herself of its burden (but never the otherness itself) through jokes. Also contributing to her otherness is the absence of her parents whom Janie says she has never seen. “Den they’d tell me not to be takin’ on over mah looks ‘cause they mama told ‘em ‘bout de hound dawgs huntin’ mah papa all night long. ‘Bout Mr. Washburn and de sheriff puttin’ de bloodhounds on de trail tuh ketch mah papa for what he done tuh mah mama” (9-10). Janie is robbed of a familial home and then mocked for it with only Nanny as an ally. If there is one gift Nanny gives Janie, it is the oral tradition of telling her story despite a dream deferred. According to Zahra Mahdian Fard and Bahman Zarrinjooee:

Nanny’s calculated talking about her own past and the way whites treated her daughter and even herself manifest her inner involvement with black identity.

Nanny's main method and technique for raising awareness about black identity is to tell her own story to her granddaughter. This technique of orally recounting one's life story is among the main techniques in postcolonial novels. Below Nanny tells her story to Janie to influence and galvanize her fight against white people... (93)

Nanny, the ex-slave, never had a home of her own until the winter of her years and never had an audience until compelled out of fear for Janie to recount Nanny's life to her. Despite squashing Janie's blossoming womanhood and manipulating her future, she does bequeath the telling of one's story even as "a cracked plate" (20) that Nanny refers to herself as and what Janie will slowly become in adulthood. But Janie's problem is never being granted a voice for her story. Nanny is a culprit in that, as are Janie's husbands and her lifelong antagonistic relationship with a gallery of critics from the schoolyard teasers to the porch-sitting gossipers in Eatonville to the Black peers of Jacksonville who turn on her during the trial for Tea Cake's alleged murder. Janie is forced "inside" the pseudohomes throughout her life and is never accepted "outside." After kissing young Johnny Taylor in the yard and shaking Nanny to the core, Janie leaves the yard with the symbolic blossoming sexual pear tree and goes inside the house to "some old tree" that is Nanny. "That was the end of her childhood" (12), the forcing her into a womanhood Janie did not ask for. Joe disallows her presence in the conversations on the store's porch. She is to stay inside, tethered to the sales counter and voiceless. The Jackonvillians wish to see her inside a prison for shooting Tea Cake in self-defense. "They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks [...] They talked all of a sudden and all together like a choir and the top parts of their bodies moved on the

rhythm of it” (185-86), and they work together to try to have Janie convicted, trying to use their collective voice to crush the voiceless outsider Janie. And Janie as outsider, as other, is typical of a Hurston work, according to Barbara Johnson:

I soon came to see, however, not only that the insider becomes an outsider the minute she steps out of the inside but also that Hurston’s work itself was constantly dramatizing and undercutting just such inside/outside oppositions, transforming the plane geometry of physical space into the complex transactions of discursive exchange. In other words, Hurston could be read not just as an *example* of the ‘noncanonical’ writer but as a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference. (602-03)

Thus is Janie the constant nomad in *TEWWG*, traveling from place to place, husband to husband, life station to life station, all the while in search of herself that no character but Pheoby understands or tries to see. But as Johnson notes, “The outside is no guarantee of the nature of the inside” (607), and the reader knows that inside Janie there is a voice--albeit a homeless one--longing to scream out.

THE COMIC SCREAM RELEASED THROUGH HER STORY

While *TEWWG* is about women trying desperately to tell a story, it is not a first-person narrative. Janie’s, while a frame story, has its outermost frame in third person, so even Hurston does not grant Janie a relay of her telling directly to the reader. This only furthers the struggle for voice—only by the grace of a third person omniscient narrator have Janie’s words and Hurston’s messages been granted benefit of audience. Yet had the novel been a first-person narrative it would lose that important struggle to gain voice, as

the voice would already be there and in control from the start. Instead the story of Janie is more about her journey to find her voices and to reach a point where she can tell her story.

Janie has come full circle and is now in control of her voice and ready to share it. The novel's final line—"She called in her soul to come and see" (193)—shows that her voice has gained release from the inside. But it took so much to get to that point, most recently the death of Tea Cake, the only man with whom she shared true love, which forces her out of the unhomely Jacksonville and back to the cold, judgmental environment of Eatonville. While Janie may have yet to find some place to call home, she has the story of her life, a life now in her control.

Janie tells her story to Pheoby upon returning to Eatonville a broken but not defeated woman. Pheoby becomes a crucial character in terms of Janie's comedy living on. Lowe explains regarding Janie's return to town:

Pheoby presents Janie's case to the other women with a scornful humor: "'De way you talkin' you'd think de folks in dis town didn't do nothin' in de bed 'cep praise de Lawd'" (13). She greets Janie's arrival more positively: "'Gal, you sho looks good. You look like youse yo' own daughter.' They both laughed.'" (14). . . . Pheoby's joke fits with her entrance to Janie's yard through the "intimate" gate, for her humor, always useful in establishing intimacy, brings the two old friends together quickly. (162)

Pheoby, in mocking the gossipers, is not unlike an opening act here that gets followed by Janie's novel-long performance. She transitions from opening act to ideal audience as Janie chooses her as the recipient of her life story. Continues Lowe:

As Hurston states, “Pheoby’s hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story” (23). [John F.] Callahan usefully points to the way this structural device, taken from the modes of black discourse in general and the black church in particular, supports the achievement of what he calls a rhetoric of “intimacy and immensity” throughout the entire book (115-49). Although Callahan does not discuss the role of humor, his terms here are similar to those I have identified as key to Hurston’s comedic world: the systolic system she creates by recognizing the “co(s)mic,” humor’s paradoxically central role in the cosmos, but also its ability to cancel voids by the achievement of intimacy. (163)

And isn’t standup about intimacy? It’s a special relationship between audience and performer where the former is granted voyeurism into the latter’s emotional and psychological nakedness.

Janie also gives Pheoby—and hence compassionate women everywhere—permission to pass this story along. Janie is back in Eatonville not for herself but for the sake of the other “others.” “Janie’s is an intimate audience of one,” notes Danticat. “She entrusts her adventures to Pheoby to retell to others only if Pheoby chooses” (x). Hurston gives Janie power, and Janie then gives that power to the trusted Pheoby to pass on as she wishes, a chain entirely independent of male permission. The power--the voice--is from woman to woman. Woman comic to potential women comic. Sochen writes:

I don’t think it is accidental that many great women comic performers in this century are minority women. Black and Jewish women are overrepresented in statistical terms; they far exceed their numbers in the population. But perhaps they have a double advantage: as women and as members of a discriminated-against

minority, they understand the strengths and foibles of their oppressors. Part of the necessary equipment of a humorist is an astute understanding of human nature, the weaknesses of all of us. As outsiders looking in, women--black and Jewish women particularly--became sensitive commentators on American life. As survivors, they laughed rather than cried at their observations; as generous women, they shared their humor with others so that they, too, could laugh and not cry. (14)

Just as Janie has shared her humor with Pheoby. Also Janie has disrupted the exclusively male space of comedy, and does so in 1937 Jim Crow Florida, well ahead of most of the modern feminist movement in comedy and otherwise. Zita A. Dresner in examining late twentieth century comedian Whoopi Goldberg notes that

Goldberg does not see “herself in the traditional role of the male clown, simply knocking someone down, verbally and/or physically, with mockery and ridicule. Rather [she] depends on monologues, on narrative, to create characters who have their own individual identities and personalities and who, to a smaller or greater degree, are outside the social mainstream or the majority culture--people who, because of race, gender, age, economic status, political beliefs, physical or mental handicaps--are disenfranchised from or disillusioned with the social establishment. (181)

Is this not then Janie? More importantly, is this not then Hurston, too?

In the end, the prerequisite of male-approved space is no more and the story of Janie is homeless but free, free to travel from internal space to internal space only granted to so many women like them until those spaces are no longer confined to the various

porches and store counters but instead to a space where the screams of others like her are heard. She can joke and laugh without restriction, and she can choose her stage as she wishes because she has the power now to do so. It is not just her soul she requests “to come and see” but also anyone out there wishing to take in a performance by a cracked plate who can laugh at the damage.

Rape Jokes: The Postmodern Standup Comedy of *Lolita*

“Child molesters are very tenacious people. They love molesting childs. It’s crazy. It’s like their favorite thing. I mean, when you consider, it’s so crazy because when you consider the risk in being a child molester, speaking not of even the damage you’re doing, but the risk. There is no worse life available to a human than being a caught child molester. Any yet they still do it. Which from, you can only really surmise that it must be really good. I mean, from their point of view. Not ours, but from their point of view. It must be amazing for them to risk so much. (How do you think I feel? It’s my last show probably.) Like I can’t key into it. Because I love Mounds bars. I love Mounds bars. It’s my favorite thing, right? But there’s a limit. I mean, I can’t even eat a Mounds bar and do something else at the same time. That’s how much I love them. Like, if I’m eating a Mounds bar, I can’t read the paper like ‘Mmmm... Hmmm...’ I have to just sit there with it in my mouth and go ‘Why is this so good? I love this so much.’ Because they are delicious, and, yet, if somebody said to me ‘If you eat another Mounds bar, you’ll go to jail, and everybody will hate you,’ I would stop eating them. Because they do taste delicious, but they don’t taste as good as a young boy does—and shouldn’t—to a child molester. Not to me. Not to us, because we’re all awesome. Alright, we did it. We got through it.” (Saturday Night Live)

Louis C.K. used his monologue time while hosting *Saturday Night Live* in May of 2015 to do what he does best—standup. The in-person audience response to the bit (which followed his discussion of his “mild racism” and his daughters as metaphors for the Middle East) was one of constant collective uncomfortable laughter—a mix of genuine guffaw, tentative chuckling, and “ooo”s and “aww”s (as in, “Did you really go there?”). In other words, it was on par with the claim of British author and Nabokov champion Martin Amis (son of Kingsley Amis, whose comic novel *Lucky Jim* was published just a year before *Lolita*): “Human beings laugh, if you notice, to express relief, exasperation, stoicism, hysteria, embarrassment, disgust, and cruelty” (qtd. in Kunze 44). C.K. is fully aware of this audience uncomfortableness and the dropped jaws at his approach to a “sacred cow” like child molestation, both in his writing of the jokes (as giant in the standup world his reputation certainly precedes him) and his own inability to maintain a comedian’s composure (he both laughs at his own material and humorously mentions how he won’t be invited back to the show). The impersonal audience response was expectedly divided, with ink spilled over whether or not C.K. had gone too far, as media (particularly online) catering to shock is wont to do.

After reading *Lolita*, I couldn’t help but think of Nabokov as postmodern standup comedian a la C.K., pushing the envelope of accepted comedic appropriateness and tackling the untouchable—the (sometimes uncomfortably sympathetic) mindset of the pedophile—all the while being very “meta,” very self-aware of the creation of jokes large and small and stretching his audience’s boundaries for acceptable laughter. Humbert Humbert is undeniably funny at times, even though it is sometimes unintentional on his part and very intentional on Nabokov’s. Humbert’s creator understands the need to laugh

in the face of establishment and the “untouchable” topics of our worlds. Nabokov once said,

One of the main reasons why the very gallant Russian poet Gumilev was put to death by Lenin's ruffians . . . was that during the whole ordeal, in the prosecutor's dim office, in the torture house, in the winding corridors that led to the truck, in the truck that took him to the place of execution, and at that place itself, full of the shuffling feet of the clumsy and gloomy shooting squad, the poet kept smiling. (qtd. in “Nabokov’s Last Laughs” 142)

The artist—be s/he novelist, comedian, or otherwise—is not automatically above reproach. Taboo for taboo’s sake has a hard time finding a welcoming audience. “Punching downward” as a comic, mocking the marginalized or the defenseless, undermines the inherent nobility ascribed to the joke-teller as prophetic speaker of truths. The audience reflex of reading the narration of a child rapist or hearing a man on camera make light of sexual assault is immediate condemnation, if only for the nanosecond before or even while laughing as a means to fill a new awkwardness. That is unless an understanding is accomplished between artist and audience that the punching is lateral or upward.

Sexual assault is a subject deemed off-limits by many as a subject of humor, particularly as advocacy for victims of sex crimes and awareness of rape culture grow more rapidly. Even audiences who might not take offense still understand that there is something inherently offensive about any rape joke. Comedians as artists are constantly

challenged to find new ways of furthering the art form, and that often involves pushing the limits of what is considered good taste. In contrast to non-comedians who say that certain topics like rape cannot be joked about, many comedians argue that the taboo must be allowed to be approached in comedy, lest censorship prevail (noted comics such as Jerry Seinfeld and Patton Oswalt have spoken out against political correctness as ironic enemy of progressive comedy).

Columnist and critic Lindy West argues that it is possible to properly tell a rape joke in a twenty-first century climate that is increasingly more educated on facts regarding sexual assault and more sensitive to minimizing victims. West, a prominent feminist, responded for *Jezebel* in 2012 to the controversy over standup comedian Daniel Tosh making a rape joke at the Laugh Factory club in Hollywood (in fairness, the club owner argued it was a comment, not a joke). A woman in the audience called Tosh out, saying that jokes about rape are never funny, and Tosh responded with a remark about how hilarious it would be if that woman were raped right there and then in the club. West goes on to argue against the “thought police” notion that defenders of rape jokes erroneously cite and says that comedians are allowed to say whatever they want but not without audience retribution. “The world *is* full of terrible things, including rape, and it *is* okay to joke about them. But the best comics use their art to call bullshit on those terrible parts of life and make them better, not worse. The key . . . is to be a responsible person when you construct your jokes.” After establishing room for rape jokes in the comedy world and buffering against the automatic retort of attempted censorship of the artist, West explains and exemplifies how actual “good” rape jokes are made (one

example being by Louis C.K). The main principle is that the victim must never be the object of mockery:

You can be edgy and creepy and offensive and trivial and, yes, you can talk about rape. Doing comedy in front of a silent room is scary, and shocking people is a really easy way to get a reaction. But if you want people to *not hate you* (and wanting to not be hated is not the same thing as wanting to be liked), you should probably try and do it in a responsible, thoughtful way. Easy shortcut: **DO NOT MAKE RAPE VICTIMS THE BUTT OF THE JOKE.** (West)

West's all-caps demand is basic human decency, but is it easy to accomplish? Can one joke about rape without demeaning the victims? Enter the conundrum and controversy in reading Nabokov's *Lolita*. On its surface it is a story told by a fairly unapologetic pedophile who goes into "poetic" detail about his sexual fantasies targeting underage girls, his peeping tom habits, and his statutory and incestuous rapes. Yet Humbert is undoubtedly funny. His memoir is one long rape joke, but one that gets a reflexive initial response as lewd and repugnant just because of its pedophilic content. We can laugh with less guilt because young Dolores is never the butt of Nabokov's joke; instead, it's Humbert, as will be examined later in this chapter.

Despite dealing in subject matter they know will make their audiences wince, Nabokov does not punch downward via the unwitting comic persona Humbert, just like C.K. in his monologue persona as unfiltered philosopher does not make victims of child molestation the objects of his mockery. In this way Nabokov operates with his novel as

scalpel the way the great current standups do with a microphone on a stage, laying waste to conventionalities and comfort levels. This is mostly done by the first-person narration of Humbert, a character (all standups take on a character role) alone on stage and completely vulnerable to his audience, channeling his troubles and pains into entertainment for us, which is the very essence of current standup comedy. Also, though it's done unconsciously, Humbert is self-deprecating, an almost given trait of standup performances.

All standups assume a role in their acts—they become a character different from their off-stage selves. Nabokov in performing through his characterization of Humbert creates what West deems acceptable rape jokes akin to examples she provides of twenty-first century standup acts that tackle the taboo of laughing while sexual assault is being discussed but not at it. Before looking at *Lolita* as work befitting the modern comedy club, it is important to first establish the novel as comedic literature.

YOU LAUGHED... AND THAT'S OKAY

Nabokov wants the reader to laugh at Humbert's memoir. It is through our laughter that we readers are able to strip away our inhibitions and our trepidation toward listening to a grown man regale us with tales of pedophilia (though, of course, the novel is so much more than that). Few canonical novels cause us to laugh in that most Freudian of ways in which our reflexes know no other way to respond to such uncomfortableness than by giggling. It is Nabokov's big overarching jokes on us. Writes Sarah Blacher Cohen in her introduction to *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature*, "Vladimir Nabokov, known for his lexical drollery and cosmopolitan grotesques, is a

master of diabolical comedy. As wily author, he leads his readers to anticipate one outcome and then, through narrative ruses, totally reverses their expectations” (5). Once he has established the narrative from the point of view of an unapologetic child rapist, the last thing the reader expects is jokes. And the joke is then on the reader.

In “Humor and *Lolita* in the Classroom,” Paul Benedict Grant notes “As well as being one of the book’s greatest attractions, humor is one of its most troublesome aspects and a root source of its unease: it is, to say the least, unsettling to find oneself laughing along with a pedophile and a murderer” (163). But laugh we do—and there is nothing wrong with that. Just as Nabokov stressed in his literary criticism that it is important to always understand works of fictions as exactly that—fiction. We are not laughing at a real rapist; rather, we are being entertained by an intentional comedic creation. Not all critics see the novel this way, and laughing Humbert and his acts off as simply fiction as one might any violent movie can work to normalize the very real problems of sexual assault and violence against women. Plenty of scholarship on the novel considers it a sexist piece of literature. Humbert’s debasing of pretty much every adult female character in the novel and infinite shades of gray in which to examine his relationship with the child Dolores lends to such an argument. In “Men Explain Lolita To Me” Rebecca Solnit makes a valid point that many readers—males specifically—are so preoccupied with Humbert that they become ignorant of Dolores as person with a voice that we never quite hear.

You can read Nabokov’s relationship to his character in many ways. Vera Nabokov, the author’s wife, wrote, “I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her

heartrending courage all along...” And the women who read Nabokov’s novel in repressive Iran, says Azar Nafisi of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, identified too:

“Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. As such she becomes a double victim—not only her life but also her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victim to this second crime.”

(Solnit)

Morbid as it is, Dolores’s lack of voice is not unlike the people typically mentioned in a standup act—loved ones, politicians, etc.—who also never get their points of view brought to the stage for “fairness.” Comedy isn’t about democracy or diplomacy. Linda Kaufmann asserts of *Lolita* that “the most sexist critical statements come from critics who take the novel as a representation of real life” (qtd. in Kunze 55). Ditto those who fail to consider the creation of mythical, unattainable Lolita by Humbert vs. Nabokov’s Dolores. The author gives us a human being whose childhood is forcefully and diabolically stolen from her, and yet she survives and achieves some semblance of normalcy in marriage only to ironically die during childbirth, a chance to create a pure childhood she did not have. Humbert hardly absorbs any of this humanity and even until the end when he gives his Lolita-turned-married-Dolores \$4,000—perhaps some sort of restitution for what in his mind aren’t quite crimes he has done to this young woman—he still tries to get her to leave her husband for him. He thinks he can repair the vile past with some romantic future that the reader knows would be a farce—“a woman and her serial rapist live happily ever after”—fulfilling the twisted myth that he’s constructed in his head. She is always his object, a possession instead of a person. Lolita was never real;

she is a figment of the mind of a parody of a man. Dolores is real, though, and Humbert does not grasp that, and he is then always an awful fool that Nabokov reminds us to laugh at rather than feel sorry for. Standup, like the parody and/or satire of this novel, is not a representation of real life but, rather, a commentary on it through laughing at the uncomfortable bits of it.

MAKING PARODY POSTMODERN

Lolita performs both the two main types of parody: parody for its own sake and parody for the purpose of critique (satirical parody), “But as a whole,” writes Thomas R. Frosch, “the novel participates in a third type, parody that seeks its own originality, what Robert Alter would call metaparody: parody that moves through and beyond parody” (137). In this way Nabokov has created a work of postmodern comedy with lines blurred and conventions eschewed.

Nabokov’s battles with Freudian theory are well-known, and he creates Humbert as a man staunchly against that most famous of psychoanalysts Teckyoung Kwon writes in the article “Nabokov’s Memory War against Freud” that “...Nabokov simultaneously achieves a subtle parody of the real, and of infantile sexuality, without abandoning his propensity for humor and comic gestures. For instance, the pistol Humbert uses to slay Quilty is described as a ‘Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb’ (197)” (78). Here “infantile sexuality” represents the Freudian school of thought, which Nabokov mocks. The novel even manages to somehow parody a genre that would not even exist until a few decades later. When Humbert has finally confronted Quilty, we get the deadpan response.

“I just wanted a smoke. I’m dying for a smoke.”

“You’re dying anyway.” (296)

Reread that conversation with Humbert’s voice like that of Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger just before they dispatch with the bad guy. We have a laugh at the heroic-but-cheesy action film line before *Rambo* or *Predator* were remotely conceived. Machismo is mocked anyway. Humbert is so mannishly narcissistic that it becomes laughable. It is his self-love that Nabokov uses to dull the sharpness of the sexual subject matter, almost as though it becomes impossible to hate the rapist and pedophile because we find him so gigglingly pathetic. When Humbert speaks of himself in terms of “...my striking if somewhat brutal good looks...” (24), we lose a level of respect that hate would otherwise accompany; hate validates on some level. Humbert does not get such validation. When he brags like this, we stop our reading, look up from the text and say to ourselves, “This guy is a joke.” That is also how we respond when Humbert brags, “I was, and still am, despite *mes malheurs*, an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive cast of demeanor. Exceptional virility often reflects in the subject displayable features a sullen and congested something that pertains to what he has to conceal. And this was my case” (25). Yes, he’s a total joke, and Nabokov tells a pretty good joke the whole way through. Humbert as self-declared “...great big handsome hunk of movieland manhood...” (39) becomes an object of satire. As Kunze puts it, “Nabokov’s satire of America, consequently, extends beyond its motels and highways and consumerism to encompass a critique of perhaps America’s greatest fabrication: the all-American man” (64).

It's hard to respect a guy who also goes out of his way to believe his own bull. Humbert is in a constant battle to not slip on a novel-length polygraph test. Ronald Wallace notes in *The Last Laugh*:

Sometimes the narrator himself is fooled by his own duplicity. For example, Humbert Humbert, a lecher, murderer, blackmailer, pervert, thief, liar, and madman by his own assessment, often sincerely believes his own lies. He believes, for example, his claim that he wants only happiness for Lolita, but it is evident from his actions that he wants only satisfaction for himself. Although Humbert cannot admit it, his invention of the concept of nymphet is primarily a justification for his own lust. In this respect, Humbert rather closely resembles Swift's mad narrator in *A Modest Proposal* and James's mad narrator in *The Sacred Fount*. Like his predecessors, Humbert takes a single case and posits from it a general law. (8)

Humbert's tale is one long anecdotal fallacy, and he can't help but make it obvious. And, again, we laugh at him.

Another bit of Americana he parodies is domestic life while he also plays on the traditional romance story and merges the two. In examining the contention that the novel is a love story, Frosch says:

It doesn't criticize the romantic mode, although it criticizes Humbert; it renders romance acceptable by anticipating our mockery and beating us to the draw. It is what Empson calls 'pseudo-parody to disarm criticism.' I am suggesting, then that *Lolita* can only be a love story through being a

parody of love stories... Further, it is the book's triumph that it avoids simply re-creating the romantic novel in its old form; for Nabokov to do so would be to lose his own personal, twentieth century identity. (138)

Nabokov then has advanced the romantic comedy, even though this novel is hardly what many in the twenty-first century would tag with the neologism of "romcom," especially with snappy, humorous instances such as a young Dolores saying, "The word is incest," cutting Humbert off as he tries to find a word for what their relationship will be (119). It's sitcom scenario of the headstrong wife figure trumping the oafish husband. Dolores isn't the only creator of comedic situations at Humbert's expense. When Charlotte, Dolores's icy mother and Humbert's wife, is reading a letter from Dolores, she scolds the absent daughter and caps the scene (chapter) with a humorous reprimand of Humbert. "The dumb child,' said Mrs. Humbert, "has left out a word before 'time.' That sweater was all-wool, and I wish you would not send her candy without consulting me" (81). Cue Humbert breaking the fourth wall, turning sheepishly to the camera as the canned laughter collides with some very early 1990s electric guitar snippet of the show's theme song leading to commercial. Wallace writes that "...the best generic description of the novel is, perhaps, a parody of comic form" and that Nabokov parodies Shakespearean and Meredithian comedies (67). Such examples of cohabiting-but-abrasive couples are a traditional "safe" basis for approachable comedy. Humbert is not always the target of a quip in the sitcom-ish situations the novel presents, though.

"I have a surprise for you,' she said looking at me with fond eyes over a spoonful of soup. 'In the fall we two are going to England.'

I swallowed *my* spoonful, wiped my lips with pink paper (Oh, the cool rich linens of Mirana Hotel!) and said:

‘I also have a surprise for you, my dear. We two are not going to England.’” (90)

This passage is Peg and Al Bundy-esque in its sharpened display of the American family. Notes Wallace, “But *Lolita* is more than a parody of romantic comedy . . . It is Humbert who writes this parody of romantic comedy, consciously exposing himself. The fact that Humbert is the self-conscious author of his own exposure complicates the form.” (70) And with the complication of form comes establishment of a relationship between the comic and audience that is beyond the orthodox. It is a standup comedian laughing uncomfortably with his audience and, like Louis C.K., acknowledging that he may not have an invitation extended to him again. Humbert goes meta within meta and, thus, goes very much postmodernist comic befitting a twenty-first century stage.

The novel’s climax—the Humbert vs. Quilty scene—quickly becomes an absolute farce. The confrontation the reader has been anticipating for a while, the metamorphosis from Humbert the Monster to Humbert the Hero, ends up deviating into slapstick. Grant writes in “Nabokov’s Last Laughs,”

“...As Douglas Fowler has written, Nabokov’s is a ‘laughter that isn’t forgetful of pain’. Quilty’s ‘comically prolonged death throes’ vividly illustrate the literary trick of transforming this pain into pleasure . . . Quilty, writer of ‘tragedies, comedies, fantasies’ (*AnL* 298), shows where his true allegiances lie by transforming what should be quintessentially

tragic moment into farce. His verbal and physical clowning signifies as clearly as does Gumilev's dignified smile Nabokov's favoured response in such circumstances, as well as his faith in the disabling power of humour..." (144)

Humbert is drunk and keeps referring to his gun as "Chum." The emergence at long last of the much-mentioned but concealed Chum is buffoonish: "I now went away from him, and in a bar-adorned kitchen gingerly unwrapped dirty Chum, taking care not to leave any oil stains on the chrome—I think I got the wrong product, it was black and awfully messy" (295). Humbert, a pedophile, expresses joy in having cornered "this semi-animated, subhuman trickster who had sodomized my darling" (295). Quilty is under the influence of one or more substances and cannot take the situation seriously, and it bothers Humbert, who is now playing the straight man in this newly made comedic duo.

"Quilty," I said. "I want you to concentrate. You are going to die in a moment. The hereafter for all we know may be an eternal state of excruciating insanity. You smoked your last cigarette yesterday. Concentrate. Try to understand what is happening to you."

He kept taking the Drome cigarette apart and munching bits of it.

"I am willing to try," he said. "You are either Australian, or a German refugee. Must you talk to me? This is a Gentile's house, you know. Maybe, you better run along. And do stop demonstrating that gun. I've an old Stern-Luger in the music room." (297)

Humbert initially cannot get the weapon to fire, and when the gun finally does go off a first time the bullet misses its target, and he gets mocked by Quilty. Quilty defends Humbert's allegations of kidnapping by saying he saved Dolores "from a beastly pervert" and "had no fun with your Dolly" due to Quilty's impotence (298). The scene becomes a figuratively impotent man arguing with a literally impotent one that turns to slapstick physical wrestling between two jokes of men, "one of whom was utterly disorganized by a drug while the other was handicapped by a heart condition and too much gin" (299). With zero consideration for its "poetical justice" Quilty reads his death warrant written by Humbert as though it were a pitch for publication, breaking from the reading multiple times to make comments that devolve from praise to critical misreading, the last annotation being "Getting smutty, eh?" after the line "play with erector sets" (300).

Nabokov finally gives us some desired violence, but Humbert shoots Quilty several times without being able to end him, and the scene is now undeniably farcical before Quilty crawls bleeding "majestically" into bed as though exhausted for a nap and receives a final wound. "Quilty was a very sick man," Humbert asserts a few sentences later after assuring us that his own "lost contact with reality for a second or two" does not negate his full responsibility while murdering (304). Humbert then briefly interacts with Quilty's drunk snobbish friends who never pick up on what has happened, even when Humbert explicitly tells them he's just killed their friend and even when Quilty has crawled out of the bedroom into their view to get their attention before breathing his last. The friends take it as a big joke—and the readers laugh at a different one. And after Humbert walks away unscathed from this epic farcical scene, he ends the chapter with the comparatively mundane yet punctuationally funny problem "Two other cars were parked

on both sides of [Humbert's car], and I had some trouble squeezing out" (305). After all that, Humbert decides

since I had disregarded all laws of humanity, I might as well disregard the rules of traffic. So I crossed to the left side of the highway and checked the feeling, and the feeling was good... Traffic was light. Cars that now and then passed me on the side I had abandoned to them, honked at me brutally. Cars coming toward me wobbled, swerved, and cried out in fear... Passing through a red light was like a sip of forbidden Burgundy when I was a child. (306)

The police then attempt to stop his driving, so Humbert, "With a graceful movement," goes off-road before coming to a "gentle rocking stop" on a hill among a bunch of cows (306-307). If the novel's most important scene lacks almost any hint of seriousness, how then can one not agree that *Lolita* is a comedic work?

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE WELCOME TO THE STAGE VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND HUBERT HUBERT

Asserting that *Lolita* is a comedy is one thing. Arguing that it is akin to current standup comedy is another. Yet Nabokov's work shares traits employed by current giants of standup stage to win over their audiences time and again. On stage with a microphone is the ultimate in first-person comedy. It is not far off to think of Humbert's memoir as told on a stage while he paces back and forth or Humbert as the joke writer's figurative ventriloquist's dummy in front of a room full of potential laughers.

Louis C.K. approaches his audience as some mutated concept of the traditional comedic Everyman that came so often before him. He's been a father and a husband, but his act is not about the typical foibles that come with those roles. C.K. takes those molds and destroys them and rebuilds them in brutally honest fashion, and to be brutally honest in twenty-first century comedy one has to speak of the vulgarity of life that audiences a) don't expect and b) don't initially want to confront. Humbert—Nabokov's act—is hardly different. Chapter 30 of Part I of *Lolita* is Humbert's argument of "I just so happen to be as passionate a pedophile as a great artist would be about art." The unexpected, uncomfortable, but not altogether dismissible comparison calls to mind C.K.'s comparison of loving Mounds candy bars and loving child molestation. Early in Part II Humbert further parallels C.K.'s monologue:

Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. (166)

Humbert is a perverted version of the overbearing comedic dad. He hilariously reads the teencentric advice section of Dolores's school's newspaper and makes a list of forbidden activities with boys for her. But as the audience is comfortable with that safe trope, Nabokov is sure to remind it that it is reading the narration of a less-than-savory character. The hilarity of the conservative list-making scene is placed immediately before the pathos of the reader realizing via *Lolita*'s reaction to Humbert's odd strictness that he

is now taking away her social childhood after already taking her innocence. The author's game continues. That game often consists of punchlines, though. Humbert tends to end many otherwise dramatic scenes with unintentional jokes. He establishes this habit early in the novel. "I was on my knees, and on the point of possessing my darling, when two bearded bathers, the old man of the sea and his brother, came out of the sea with exclamations of ribald encouragement, and four months later she died of typhus at Corfu" (13). The sudden shift from tender to embarrassing to death is a joke build up with a punchline, and as it also ends a chapter, it puts a finer point on the scene as a whole and prevents us from taking this memoir seriously. Humbert does so again at the end of the fourth chapter: "But that mimosa grove—the haze of stars, the tingle, the flame, the honey-dew, and the ache remained with me, and that little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since—until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another" (15). As soon as we briefly lose ourselves in serious moments, the spit-take suddenness of Nabokov's Stoogian slap upside the head hits us. And like C.K., Humbert shows us times where he is conscious of the joke he and his audience are together in on. As Frosch notes:

His chief defense against a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Lolita* is to admit it readily and dismiss it as trite and unhelpful. When he describes his gun, he says, "We must remember that a pistol is the Freudian symbol of the Ur-father's central forelimb"; Humbert beats the analysts to the draw and says, in effect, "So what?" At another point, he anticipates a Freudian prediction that he will try to complete his fantasy by having intercourse with Lolita on a beach. Of course he tried, Humbert says; in

fact, he went out of his way to look for a suitable beach, not in the grip of unconscious forces but in “rational pursuit of a purely theoretical thrill”; and when he found his beach, it was so damp, stony, and uncomfortable that “for the first time in my life I had as little desire for her as for a manatee.” (131)

This is not unlike C.K. acknowledging to the audience in the *SNL* monologue, even if as just a joke, that he will not be invited back because of this.

After a conversation with headmistress Pratt, Humbert bribes Lolita with a small amount of money and a promise to let her do the school play for a return of her manually pleasuring him in her classroom. It is a severely disturbing revelation, but in Nabokovian comedic fashion, it is punctuated with a punchline to end the chapter. “Oh, stupid and reckless of me, no doubt, but after the torture I had been subjected to, I simply had to take advantage of a combination that I knew would never occur again” (198). The reader must laugh, if for nothing else, in exasperation at this, and it calls to mind another standup bit of C.K.’s in which he describes a time his wife manually pleased him out of pity. “So we go upstairs to my daughter’s room because it’s the only empty room in the house,” he says, followed instantaneously by the audience response of laughter mixed with shame. C.K. chides the audience for the response, saying he pays the rent and should be able to receive such an act “in my house. It’s all I get” (thebatchtube). Please, dear audience, sympathize with these poor men and appreciate them getting to take advantage of a rare opportunity. These are gross men, but they are uncomfortably empathetic as they hold up a mirror showing readers things they would rather not admit to understanding. They are bearing the faults for our entertainment. As Kwon notes, in Humbert there “lurks a deep

sorrow, one fueled by the tenacious, apparently unquenchable, longing for the past that informs Humbert's undying love for Lolita" (78). There is, too, a sorrow in every standup comic, and the old maxim about their trade is that the comedy is born of their pain.

Comedians endear themselves to audiences often via self-deprecation. Just as C.K. makes it clear that he is in no way superior in life experience to his audience, Humbert makes fun of himself throughout the reading. Multiple times he refers to himself as a "brute" or with some other epithet. He begs his audience to feel sorry for him. As Frosch points out, this disarms the audience that is otherwise ready to convict him: "Humbert's self-mockery, for example, has to be understood as a proleptic device, and, indeed, to follow the style of *Lolita* is to track the adventures of a voice as it attempts to clear itself of certain potential charges. As we will see, in many ways the defense is Nabokov's, even more than Humbert's" (131). Along with self-deprecation, Humbert uses other comedian's tactics to win over his audience. These include, as Grant lists, iconoclasm, malice, honesty, and familiarity:

Critics often accord the humor special praise, without comprehending the manner in which it taps into our own experiences and forces us to confront our own value systems. In this sense, we do not really read *Lolita*; *Lolita* reads us. One of the novel's earliest critics, F.W. Dupee, recognized this: "Lolita is very funny . . . but the supreme laugh may be on the reviewers for failing to see how much of everyone's reality lurks in its fantastic shadow play . . . The images of life that *Lolita* gives back are ghastly but recognizable. If Mr. Nabokov's methods are the usual methods of comedy,

they are here carried to new extremes.” (“Humor and *Lolita* in the Classroom” 166)

And in those new extremes to which Nabokov takes comedy he becomes a standup comedian—with Humbert as his sort of ventriloquist’s dummy—that could take the literal stage sixty years after the novel’s writing.

LOLITA: A GOOD RAPE JOKE

So it’s a piece of comedy, and its author and narrator are established standups. Still, that does not merely afford license to mix laughter and sexual assault. Does *Lolita* pull off what qualifies as a “good” rape joke?

West in her *Jezebel* piece cites four examples of a “good” rape joke—those which are unlike the controversial Tosh joke and the many made unfortunately every day by ignorant and unfunny people. She first presents the Sasha Baron Cohen character of Borat, with the character deadpanning of his homeland, “In Kazakhstan the favorite hobbies are disco dancing, archery, rape, and table tennis.” On the surface the audience is snapped into surprise (and then laughter) due to rape’s unlikely inclusion on such an otherwise benign list. “I’d say that the butt of that joke is Kazakhstan,” writes West, “or, at least, the caricature of Kazakhstan that Sasha Baron Cohen has constructed—a borderline-medieval old world racist mud-hole. He’s satirizing the casual misogyny of a certain set of crusty old anti-Semitic post-Soviet eastern European men in stinky suits.” And despite acknowledging that the character is likely offensive to Kazakhs, more importantly, “The point of Borat is that he gives people the opportunity to expose their own prejudices—the fact that anyone [within the Borat sketches] is willing to take this

character seriously is *extremely* telling.” Nabokov on more than one occasion uses the Humbert character to expose the reader’s prejudices, and the narrator is so often over-the-top silly that should he be taken seriously by the reader, it would say a lot more about him/herself and that person’s baggage.

West’s second example is none other than C.K. himself. “I’m not condoning rape, obviously—you should never rape anyone,” he quips. “Unless you have a reason, like if you want to fuck somebody and they won’t let you.” The blatancy and simplicity is the obvious key here. “Louis CK has spent 20 years making it very publicly clear that he is on the side of making things better,” West says. “The oppressors never win at the end of his jokes. That’s why it’s easy to give him the benefit of the doubt that this joke is making fun of rapists—specifically the absurd and horrific sense of entitlement that accompanies taking over someone else’s body like you’re hungry and it’s a delicious hoagie. The point is, only a *fucking psychopath* would think like that, and the simplicity of the joke lays that bare.” Does not Humbert have that sense of entitlement? He is also admittedly a patient in mental health facilities multiple times and writes his story from such confines. His psychosis is arguable throughout the novel.

The next example is from John Mulaney who jokes, “Late at night, on the street, women will see me as a threat. That is funny—yeah! That *is* funny. It’s kind of flattering in its own way, but at the same time it’s weird because, like, I’m still afraid of being kidnapped.” The in-person visual of Mulaney is especially helpful with this joke because he is not exactly an intimidating presence, and his act often uses a smarmy charm coming from a man who looks like a feeble teenager. “The butt of the joke is John Mulaney. The woman running away from John Mulaney is not being mocked. This is a joke about how

scary it is to be a woman and how easy it is for men to be oblivious. This joke is helpful.” Too often Humbert is oblivious to not only the psychological and emotional damage he causes to a child he rapes but to his numerous personal shortcomings and humorous situations. Brian Boyd writes in “Nabokov’s Humor” of Humbert finally having sex with the girl in the hotel: “It’s a scene of great tension and disastrous consequence, but because Nabokov’s humor and Humbert’s we are tense on Humbert’s behalf more than Lolita’s” (150). Just as we mock Mulaney and not a potential victim of his hypothetical assault.

Ever Mainard is the final given example. She builds up to her punchline with a story of being alone in public one night and feeling threatened as a man approached her. “The problem is that every woman in her entire life has that one moment when you think, ‘Oh! Here’s my rape!’” West explains, “Pretty simple: This isn’t a joke about women getting raped—it’s a joke about the way that rape culture, which includes rape jokes, *makes women feel*.” Despite Humbert’s unreliability and his lens being the only one through which we really see the story, his attempts to convey Dolores’s feelings to the audience create the sort of effect Solnit ironically describes of men who take issue with her criticism of the novel:

But “to read *Lolita* and ‘identify’ with one of the characters is to entirely misunderstand Nabokov” said one of my less friendly readers. I thought that was funny, so I posted it on Facebook, and a nice liberal man came along and explained to me this book was actually an allegory as though I hadn’t thought of that yet. It is, and it’s also a novel about a big old guy violating a spindly child over and over and over. Then she weeps. And then another nice liberal man came

along and said, “You don’t seem to understand the basic truth of art. I wouldn’t care if a novel was about a bunch of women running around castrating men. If it was great writing, I’d want to read it. Probably more than once.” Of course there is no such body of literature, and if the nice liberal man who made that statement had been assigned book after book full of castration scenes, maybe even celebrations of castration, it might have made an impact on him.

For Solnit, this is a novel that continues the American literary tradition of “othering” women. She’s not wrong, but comedians have to “other” the subjects of their stories, even when intentionally or unintentionally making a joke of themselves, as Humbert does. Still, too, we see Dolores survive his oppression. Nabokov is sure to make his long rape joke show us that the residual effects on the girl involved do not involve Humbert breaking her beyond repair. While she is denying his request to leave her husband, Dolores is again put in the comic position of superiority in the relationship.

“No,” she said, “it is quite out of the question. I would sooner go back to Cue. I mean—”

She groped for the words. I supplied them mentally. (“*He* broke my heart. *You* merely broke my life”). (279)

That isn’t so much Humbert acknowledging the damage he has inflicted as it is him using words Dolores doesn’t even say to feel sorry for himself. As she lets this fool down gently, we see that it is he who is the emotionally fragile child: “I think it’s oh utterly grand of you to give us all that dough. It settles everything, we can start next week. Stop crying, please” (279). It’s her dialogue—not his narration—that lets us know he’s crying

after being rejected by his rape victim that he wants to love him. He is so asinine that he's funny.

Lolita is not a comfortable read, that's for sure. But it needs to be uncomfortable. Nabokov and Humbert both understand that their respective audiences need to have their safe conventions shaken up but to be able to swallow some tough medicine with a bit of sugar—the sweetness of laughter. If the audience is laughing, it most definitely is listening, and in a novel written from the perspective of an unabashed pedophile, it is no small task to keep an audience listening. Neither is it to stand in front of a room full of people and tell jokes about taboo, delicate aspects of a cruel world and actually achieve the success of eliciting laughter, the type that is a relief in consideration of the awfulness in the real world. Yet comedian Nabokov and his stage character Humbert are successful. They keep smiling amid their potential executioners, and without expecting it, we laugh at a good rape joke. Then we let out a deep cathartic breath as Louis C.K. reassures us “Alright, we did it. We got through it.”

**Unstuck in Time and Live from Tralfamadore:
Slaughterhouse-Five as Standup Act and Spastic Sketch Comedy Program**

*The surgeon spoke English, and he said to Billy,
"I take it you find war a very comical thing"*

- Slaughterhouse-Five 193

Like Hurston, Kurt Vonnegut was an anthropologist. While the University of Chicago deemed his thesis insufficient (and note to readers of this one: don't risk jilting another possible Vonnegut here), he always kept that keen analytical eye for human behavior. So amid odd jobs he became a lowly writer, taking that eye from observational to surgical, taking a scalpel to various Americana and exposing the toxic innards of so much under the country's skin (and he'd later receive that Master's degree from the University of Chicago for his novel, *Cat's Cradle*). Almost always Vonnegut examines our collective behavior through an exaggerated scientific lens, seemingly because it takes the fantastic to understand how absurd reality is.

Vonnegut's genius lies in his ability to so originally blend Sci-Fi and satire, while never much liking being classified as a writer of one or the other. But he knew if we were laughing we were listening, with the latter being more important. So while he exists to us predominantly in book form, he is a performance comic who, while preceding so much of the stage comedy that dominated the latter half of the twentieth century until today, was doing a lot of the postmodern stage act before the live comics themselves.

The live performance comedian shares Vonnegut's surgical eye. The sketch show actor boils the major and mundane real world scenarios down to an audio/visual vignette of fiction that might be less strange than truth. Meanwhile, the standup comedian babybirds the audience by chewing up the difficult-to-swallow truth and spitting it in a

more easily digestible form down our gullets before we go back to chirping and “poo-tee-weet”-ing.

The seeds of the performance comedy that is today the norm were certainly planted before Vonnegut published *SH5* in 1969, but sketch comedy and standup bloomed into popular art from the 1970s on. I will examine how his novel was the next step in postmodern comedy after that of Lenny Bruce, who changed the dynamics of standup as Vonnegut then changed the war story. Vonnegut’s work fits nicely between Bruce and Bruce’s heir, Bill Hicks, who would reboot scathing, shocking political standup we’ve been so used to since the turn of the century. Also, I look at the parallels between *SH5* and the TV sketch comedy between now (when it helps shape the political world) and then (when it was irreverent novelty). Programs like *Saturday Night Live*, *The Muppet Show*, and *Mr. Show with Bob and David* were groundbreakers in their own right, but we can see a lot of Vonnegut on the page in what they brought to the small screen. While the subsequent decades after *SH5*’s publication were figuring out new ways to test the boundaries of how to make us laugh at the tragic and weird of the American experiment, Vonnegut had already done it on the paper stage. In *SH5* he had written the sketches and monologued difficult truths into our naïve waiting, chirping mouths.

PERFORMANCE COMEDY AS NECESSARY AFFRONT TO SACRED COWS

The novel’s title is ironic since the POWs in the slaughterhouse were saved while more than one-hundred thousand German civilians died. That and its double meaning as metaphor for war in general as a death factory. “The boxcar that transports the American POWs is itself a kind of obscene vending machine: ‘In went water and loaves of

blackbread and sausage and cheese, and out came shit and piss and language” (Keough 111). Multiple American deaths are ironic--the hobo who keeps insisting “I been in worse places than this. This ain’t so bad,” Weary—who so loves war—2 whose life is metaphorically and literally eaten away by gangrene, and the good soul, Edgar Derby. As a joke Vonnegut strips Derby’s death of its pathos by mentioning multiple times in the novel that Derby will die. Vonnegut gigglingly robs the reader of the emotional payoff so dear in witnessing fictionalized death of a “good guy,” and one the reader has grown to know mostly while imprisoned next to Russian POWs who would all die without fanfare (the camp the Americans are held in and then moved from is literally an “extermination camp for Russian prisoners of war” (173)). The grief-from-a-distance fetish is never given a chance, just as it is so morbidly absent in recognizing real deaths of noncelebrity strangers—in war and otherwise—every single day.

Vonnegut does not allow for the reader to mourn the loss of someone like Weary because he is otherwise detestable, a “bad guy”; therefore, his death holds no currency for the reader and is perhaps even welcomed—a subtle indictment of the reader’s scruples and hypocrisy. Of the military deaths that occur daily in the American war machine even today, Vonnegut would like us to know that they are not all heroic deaths and that they do not always involve heroes, despite America being so quick to label on all who serve in the military as such.

He parlays this into civilian deaths, too. Billy Pilgrim’s wife, Valencia, dies quite comically in a panic to get to the hospital to see her husband who has been in a plane crash that killed all but him. Billy’s fellow optometrists (who cannot “see” the world in the Tralfamadorian way Billy has been exposed to) in the plane crash draw no sadness

from the audience. The detestable Professor Rumfoord tries to justify the bombing of Dresden to Billy who was there while Rumfoord was not (how American in its - splaining, as the neologistic suffix goes). This shortly after the professor mentions to his girlfriend about what he thinks is an unconscious Billy in the hospital bed next to him: “Why don’t they let him die? . . . That’s not a human being anymore. Doctors are for human beings. They should turn him over to a veterinarian or a tree surgeon. *They’d* know what to do. Look at him! That’s life, according to the medical profession. Isn’t life wonderful?” (243-44). Vonnegut smilingly puts up to our faces our common, unfortunate desire to segregate the undesirables, even if it means six feet under.

Vonnegut’s indictment of our hypocritical and selective attitudes toward death are no more evident than in his descriptions of “deaths” of nonhuman things. Soon before his daughter’s wedding Billy sits alone in his house, and in Vonnegut’s description of the emptiness of the place, he mentions that “There wasn’t a dog, either. There used to be a dog named Spot, but he died. So it goes” (79). And after the wedding, as a sleepless Billy comes across a bottle of champagne on the kitchen table, he “uncorked it with his thumbs. It didn’t make a pop. The champagne was dead. So it goes” (93). As the American POWs showered after arriving in the prison camp, “The Americans’ clothes were meanwhile passing through poison gas. Body lice and bacteria and fleas were dying by the billions. So it goes” (107). Even the Christ on a crucifix in Billy’s bedroom in Ilium, New York. “A military surgeon would have admired the clinical fidelity of the artist’s rendition of all Christ’s wounds—the spear wound, the thorn wounds, the holes that were made by the iron spikes. Billy’s Christ died horribly. He was pitiful. So it goes” (48). That we use death terminology figuratively in everyday speech only exacerbates our

detachment from very real deaths that don't selfishly involve ourselves in some way. If our loved one shuffles off this mortal coil, it's the most important event in the world at that moment, but if a cosmopolitan German city with no strategic war value is incinerated out of spite or Edgar Derby is summarily executed for taking a teapot from the rubble, those are just words in books and hardly different from a glass of water deoxygenated. "There was a still life on Billy's bedside table—two pills, an ashtray with three lipstick-stained cigarettes in it, one cigarette still burning, and a glass of water. The water was dead. So it goes. Air was trying to get out of that dead water. Bubbles were clinging to the walls of the glass, too weak to climb out" (129). The gravitas here is absurd, but that's the point. It's like the Mel Brooks quote: "Tragedy is if *I* cut my finger. Comedy is if *you* walk into an open sewer and die" (quoted in Keough 172).

Vonnegut's mantra of "So it goes" following the mention of any death is a mocking of a very American cultural phenomena. David Brion Davis explains, "Founded and preserved by acts of aggression and characterized by a continuing tradition of self-righteous violence against suspected subversion and by a vigorous sense of personal freedom, usually involving the widespread possession of firearms, the United States has evidenced a unique tolerance of homicide" (qtd. in Keough 8-9). The death of a soldier—when run through an American cultural filter of that tolerance—becomes no different than that of a louse or a bottle of champagne; that is, if we are really being honest with ourselves about the uncomfortable truth Vonnegut points out of how we apply a certain specialty in real life to the deaths of some but not others. How the demise of a loved one is oddly more important than the incineration of an entire city like Dresden (and Hiroshima and Nagasaki and...). How humankind's capacity to turn other humans into

candles used by POWs fighting for the side that would drop an atomic bomb is ironic. He makes us uncomfortable about our selective comfort with death.

It is important to remember that Vonnegut's witty criticisms of the American military machine and its cogs aren't mere observations from a safe distance by some academic liberal. He was there. He's a primary source. While *SH5* is a fantastical work, it is also semiautobiographical. And as Vonnegut was himself a soldier on the front lines of combat, he knows all too well what a soldier's life is actually like—not the Hollywood or the TV commercial versions—and that reality is pathetically hilarious to him. There are no John Waynes or Frank Sinatras, staying true to the promise Vonnegut makes early on in the novel to Mary O'Hare, the conscientious objector in all of us. War, the actual fighting part at least, is full of often unstable, weak young people. With guns.

Notes Rosemary Gallagher, "In one interview, in reference to Freud's remarks on gallows humor, Vonnegut claimed: 'It's humor about weak, intelligent people in hopeless situations. And I have customarily written about powerless people who felt there wasn't much they could do about their situations' (qtd. in Cronin Rose 23). Billy Pilgrim . . . [is] such powerless people" (76-77). Billy is the embodiment of every fragile, confused pseudo-adult inside drab and gunfire who either dies frightened far away from home or returns home damaged for an unclear cause. Gallagher claims that "Billy Pilgrim is not only presented as an ineffective soldier, he is the antithesis of the American war hero. He is, quite literally, a joke. . . . In shirking the traditional image of the war-hero Pilgrim exposes the absurdity of war" (77). Pilgrim also exposes the mythmaking of every American soldier as glory personified.

While Billy is the novel's protagonist, he is by no means war's only extended joke. Every character in the European theater and in the theatrics of Billy's home of Ilium, New York, is just the very worst of the painfully un-extraordinary American falsely glorified or whitewashed. What we've accepted as normalcy is awful to Vonnegut, and he blurs the line between what is normal and what is absurd between suburbia and combat respectively. As the American and British POWs in *SH5* interact, Gallagher notes an interesting dynamic:

The meeting of the sorry group of American soldiers and the 'glamorous, war loving, dirty old men' caricature depicted by the British officers in the POW camp is one of the most humorous scenes in the novel. . . . The British officers, who spend their tour of duty creating the illusion of a civilized society within the POW camp, are described in terms of parodying the British stereotype as proponents of order amidst the chaos of war. . . . The arrival of the American soldiers brings the reality of the war to their little oasis, shattering the illusion they worked so hard to create. The Americans defile the image of the latrine, the symbol of normality.

(78)

And what bigger mockery of normality can there be than to depict it as a shit house? The war-weary, comparatively infantile Americans ironically shatter a fantasy of proper gentlemanliness and soldierliness when they get diarrhea from the exquisite banquet prepared by the Brits.

Wild Bob is a satire of the American war hero who "makes an impassioned speech parodying such inspirational pre-battle speeches as Shakespeare's famous 'St.

Crispin's Day' speech from *Henry V*' (79). This is not unlike the speech of then-*SNL* cast member John Belushi as Bluto in 1978's *Animal House* giving the pep talk that includes "Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?" and the subsequent fraternity's solving their plight with intentional chaos, a Vonnegutian response if there ever was one. Ditto Belushi's role a year later in the WWII farce *1941* as Capt. Kelso, the overzealous, dangerously bungling pilot hellbent on stopping a presumed Japanese attack on California practically by himself after Pearl Harbor. It should be noted, too, that Wild Bob was the leader of the regiment "Four-fifty-first," and if it is not an intentional reference by Vonnegut to Ray Bradbury's masterpiece commentary on anti-book sentiments and willful American ignorance, *Fahrenheit 451*, it is a humorous coincidence.

In a scene where a Marine officer speaks at a Lions Club meeting in favor of aggressively "bombing North Vietnam back into the Stone Age, if it refused to see reason," Billy is "not moved to protest. . . . He was simply having lunch with the Lions Club, of which he was past president now" (76). Gallagher observes:

In highlighting Billy's lack of emotional response, his childlike ignorance of the brutality of war, despite having lived through it, this scene serves to expose Pilgrim's lack of personal development, while subtly and humorously emphasizing the escapist time-travel motif in the novel. The implication is that though Pilgrim has lived a full life, including holding the honor of Lions Club President, he remains the same "child" who embarked on his war crusade simultaneously many years ago, and at the same time. Broer argues that it is in

fact the author who is the true hero of the novel: “Billy . . . may choose to close his eyes to unpleasantness, but Billy’s regress is Vonnegut’s progress (74).” (79) That progress is not only Vonnegut perhaps working through his own unique sort of posttraumatic stress, but in doing he is—in wonderful Vonnegutian postmodern fashion—refusing pity or falling into the trap of making himself sympathetic; instead, he is demanding laughter be attached to his own psychotherapy. This is not unlike the *modus operandi* of the standup comedian.

DENYING THEIR ROLE AS COMEDIANS—VONNEGUT THE STANDUP COMEDY

PLACEHOLDER

“I’m not a comedian,” Lenny Bruce insisted, “I’m Lenny Bruce” (qtd. in Keough 173).

The counterculture comedian of the mid-twentieth century did not pave the way for the subversive comics that would follow him so much as he bulldozed the conventions of taboo. Bruce’s denial of his comedian status, preferring instead to be recognized as an individual containing multitudes, is not unlike Vonnegut’s denial of his position in the artistic stratosphere. “Though he objects to this classification [of Black Humor] (just as earlier he objected to being labeled a ‘sci-fi’ writer), he does admit to juggling the absurd and the pitiful, the trivial and the tragic” (Keough 120). Vonnegut eschewed formal labels because they boxed one in and meant the artist was doing a job rather than a calling. Like Bruce, he knew there is a difference between artist and artisan.

The two men also likely hated their respective labels because they did work under those labels that was breaking the labels’ boundaries. Bruce was doing standup social commentary that audiences had never experienced, and it was often so jarring that the

humor of it all would become blurred if not uncomfortable. He was arrested multiple times for obscenity in his act, mostly for language that included explicit sexual and masturbatory references, with the most famous case holding trial in New York in June 1964 following an April arrest and getting Bruce a four-month sentence in a work house (he would die during the appeal process). The comedian had never before been serious criminal, with the real obscenity being arguably truths and language too real for an audience not yet evolved enough to digest them. This evokes my epigraph of Vonnegut lamenting the banning of his novel in schools along with more pornographic works because “How could anybody masturbate to *Slaughterhouse Five*?”

Vonnegut in similar fashion broke the mold on the satirical novel, tossing out rules of linearity and not shying away from foul words and graphic descriptions of violence and sexuality. While he never had his First Amendment rights so blatantly disregarded with legal penalties as Bruce was subject to, Vonnegut experienced his share of censorship. Wrote Wesley Scroggins, associate professor at Missouri State University, in attempting to get *SH5* banned from the Republic, MO school district (even though he homeschools his kids) in 2010: “This is a book that contains so much profane language, it would make a sailor blush with shame. The ‘f word’ is plastered on almost every other page. The content ranges from naked men and women in cages together so that others can watch them having sex to God telling people that they better not mess with his loser, bum of a son, named Jesus Christ” (qtd. in Morais). The novel ranks twenty-ninth on the American Library Association’s list of banned or challenged classics (ALA). Per Betsy Morais of *The Atlantic*:

Since it was published, *Slaughterhouse-Five* has been banned or challenged on at

least 18 occasions. And the rhetoric around each case appears to be, like Billy Pilgrim, “unstuck in time.” When the book was stricken from the public schools of Oakland County, Michigan in 1972, the circuit judge called it “depraved, immoral, psychotic, vulgar, and anti-Christian.” In 1973 the Drake Public School Board in North Dakota set 32 copies aflame in the high school’s coal burner. A few years later, the Island Trees school district of Levittown, New York—in an area once known as Jerusalem—removed *Slaughterhouse-Five* and 8 other books from its high school and junior high libraries. Board members called the books “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy.” In the 1982 *Board of Education v. Pico* trial, the U.S. Supreme court ruled 5-4 against the board's restriction, citing a violation of the First Amendment. But even as that case was being decided, more districts continued to face challenges to the novel’s place in schools.

If a comedian is bothering that many people, s/he must be doing something right and telling some very inconvenient truths. Yet while Bruce died three years before *SH5* was published, and Vonnegut was not a sort of opening act to Bruce, Vonnegut did work to bridge a comedic gap that the standup world would see following Bruce’s death. For years there would be almost nobody comparable to Bruce and his skill at sacrificing the delicate balance between laughing at truth and the truth being too much for laughter. George Carlin, who was arrested with Bruce for failing to provide identification when questioned by police, was close and a very important counterculturist, but his standup act post-Bruce did not leave audiences confused as to whether the comedy was abandoned in his act in favor of social experiment or shock for the sake of shock. Richard Pryor

brought to audiences difficult truths, notably about race relations, but his race already “othered” him and thus blunted the shock that would come with a white performer speaking such things to a white audience, as discussed in the chapter here on Hurston. Unfair as the sociological dynamics were, a Black comedian punching up would not be as unexpected or hit as close to home for a status quo audience as a white comedian punching across about similar American flaws as Bruce did.

Vonnegut then kept the microphone warm with his anti-war satirical masterpiece that killed two birds with one pen—the supposed glory of American involvement in WWII and the unquestioning faith expected of Americans in their military’s operations. Will Kaufman sees Vonnegut as a standup in novelist’s clothes.

In one sense, he has devoted his entire writing career to the exploration of what it means to be a comedian in a world where frankness--however unbearable--is the only agent of awakening. “Jokesters,” he says, “are all through when they find themselves talking about challenges so real and immediate and appalling to their listeners that no amount of laughter can make the listeners feel safe and perfectly well again.” Yet the highlighting of such challenges is precisely the object of social criticism, and as Vonnegut demonstrates in virtually all his novels, the momentarily saving grace of laughter--and the play that gives rise to it--may well lead directly to the “real,” the “immediate,” and the “appalling” verities that the comedian is obliged to ameliorate or conceal. Vonnegut has given the world a series of novels in which comedians and would-be comedians are doomed to confront the consequences of their play, and in doing so has illuminated the problems of irony fatigue more prolifically than any other American writer. . . .

for if *The Confidence-Man* asked in the nineteenth century whether a comedian, though “essentially a fool,” might be “effectively a knave,” such novels as [Vonnegut’s] ask the same in the twentieth. (17-18)

Vonnegut was unfortunately aware that we are all damned if we do and damned if we don’t, but his humanism prevented him from embracing the nihilistic latter or just selling out. He still had a duty—“A Duty Dance with Death,” as part of the novel’s subtitle reads—to make the audience uncomfortable in laughter rather than blissful in ignorance. Lenny Bruce had no illusions about putting a dent in the collective outlook on the world either, but he was not about to sit on his hands while the microphone was so readily available or merely request “Take my wife. . . please” as his contemporaries comfortably did. Knowing one can’t change the world or stop its self-destruction does not quench that restlessness both artists grappled with.

Bruce would die restless at age 40 of a drug overdose. As Vonnegut kept his spot on the grander stage warm, it was later filled by another fireball of a standup who was also dead too young and well before most Americans could wrap their heads around what truth bombs he’d just dropped on their heads. Describes Kaufman:

In November 1993, John Lair published a profile in the “Annals of Comedy” section of the *New Yorker*. It began: “On October 1st, the comedian Bill Hicks, after doing his twelfth gig on the David Letterman show, became the first comedy act to be censored at CBS’s Ed Sullivan Theatre, where Letterman is now in residence, and where Elvis Presley was famously censored in 1956.” There was a significant difference between the two: “Presley was not allowed to be shown from the waist down. Hicks was not allowed to be shown at all.” Four months

after this profile appeared, Bill Hicks was dead from pancreatic cancer, leaving Lahr to recall his importance: “He was really an ass-kicking comedian--the best kind. The only kind that matters--when jokes are meant to kill.” (113)

There’s that Vonnegutian death lingo again. Hicks was the new Bruce as the century waned, though both men would likely despise that statement. And as a lot of Vonnegut was Bruce, a lot of Vonnegut was Hicks, too. Kaufman cannot help himself from making the link in *Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue*. Besides noting how Hicks, always enemy of the censor, liked to quote Vonnegut’s “observation about profanity offering a convenient excuse for one’s ideas to be ignored” (122), Kaufman writes of Hicks, “In the climate of conservative backlash in which he performed, he may still have been considered a threat by those who would--to use Vonnegut’s image--dress up in a suit of armor to attack a hot-fudge sundae. . . . Hicks suggested that, like ‘Shiva the Destroyer,’ his job as a comic was to topple idols, ‘no matter what they are’” (118). Soldiers, veterans, the military as a whole, capitalism, patriotism, sexual conservatism—all American idols that Vonnegut swipes at in *SH5* and that Hicks would keep trying to dismantle into the 1990s. Hicks was heavily critical of the Persian Gulf War and what he saw as the TV media being in cahoots with the American warmongering government, and Kaufman notes that he was one of the very few comedians to be so open about that since doing so would be to, as performer Eric Bogosian put it, “watch those little bags of money just fly away. It was, like, kiss your career goodbye” (132). Hicks would scathe, “Well, a war is when two armies are fighting. So you see, right there, I think we can all agree, it wasn’t exactly a war” (132). He noted how the war terminology in the media would change as the lopsided “Persian

Gulf Distraction” went on. This is not much different than Vonnegut writing *SH5* at Vietnam protest and noting within it the way history of American military conquests get manufactured to a willing public. For example, Vonnegut relays stories of a famous movie-maker telling him he should just as well write an “anti-glacier book” as an anti-war one (*SH5* 4), of telling a University of Chicago professor about witnessing the bombing of Dresden and how the professor, a member of The Committee on Social Thought and a nonveteran, rather than listening instead tells Vonnegut what happened in the war (12-13), and of how Vonnegut wrote to the Air Force for info to go toward the book and how he was told by a PR person that Dresden info was still top secret—“Secret? My God—from *whom?*” (14). So Hollywood and the academics have all the war answers because they have the movies based on the books based on what the American government allowed them to know. Which was nothing, or at least not the truth. Vonnegut is then compelled to put forth the truth, just as later on Hicks would be, too. Both just figured out that being funny in the process made the pills of truth easier to swallow. Kaufman believes that “Few American comic writers, if any, have been so deliberately public as Vonnegut in his wrestling with the paradox of the critic at warning and the comedian at play” (149-50). In this regard, he was following in the footsteps of his idol, Mark Twain, though he would never want to be called “the next Twain.” Still, a comparison is unavoidable if one is a great social critic in literature and daring every few decades to really take aim at sacred cows in a humorous novel a la the “going to hell” religious and racial commentaries of *Huck Finn*. Even Vonnegut knew the inevitability of it. Per Kaufman, “Vonnegut admitted that he, like all American comedians, had been left with the legacy of Mark Twain’s curse: ‘Every present day comedian who says after

mocking something supposedly sacred, “But I’m only kidding, folks,” is following in the footsteps of Samuel Clemens . . . who became a world citizen while necessarily disguised as Mark Twain” (148). Vonnegut was certainly mocking multiple sacred aspects of Americana—war, soldiers, subjective death fetishes, etc.—though a reader doesn’t get the sense so much that he’s kidding as he is wrapping nuggets of truth in wry humor.

Hicks heard the Bruce comparisons for sure as he gained notoriety and was censored on Letterman and elsewhere. (Bruce was allowed on network TV just a handful of times and had his acts censored or cut entirely by the likes of Steve Allen.) But just as Bruce declared he wasn’t a comedian, he was Lenny Bruce, Hicks had a sort of loathing for the trade he was plying or at least being defined by it. Commenting on his own perceived bitterness by using his juxtaposition to the comedian Gallagher, Hicks said,

Now *this* is comedy. Ho ho ho. That Bill Hicks is just bitter. . . . Why can’t he hit fruit with a hammer? He’s just jealous he didn’t think of it”. . . . Folks, I *did* think of that. I was two at the time. . . . I could have been the young Gallagher in diapers, walking around being a millionaire, franchising myself--but, *no*. I had to have this weird thing about trying to illuminate the collective unconscious and help humanity. Fucking *moron*. (quoted in Kaufman 146)

This certainly smacks of Bruce fighting his own good fight despite recognizing its futility. Vonnegut, too, could have sold out in his writing. He could have made a safe war novel or chose to satirize something less stitched in the fabric of American exceptionalism. Speaking truth wittily into his typewriter microphone compelled him instead, just as Hicks tried to “help humanity” in his short time on Earth. As Kaufman hypothesizes of Hicks, “Had he lived, he would have joined the ranks of such

contributors as Chomsky, Gore Vidal, Molly Ivins, Kurt Vonnegut, Calvin Trillin, and Alice Walker” (114). While maybe not reaching the breadth of content or acclaim of those authors, Hicks certainly carried Vonnegut’s sociopolitical comedic torch toward the twentieth century’s end.

Ironic, too, that Vonnegut, the actual prisoner of war who survived history’s most awful firebombing and was a lifelong cigarette smoker who so mocked our death fetishes and death apathies, was born before and outlived these two great idealistic comedic peers by more than double. So it goes.

PTSD TO *SNL*: *SH5* AS SKETCH COMEDY

The fractured structure of *SH5*’s vignettes—a few paragraphs or less at a time chunked together and separated from other chunks by three little dots . . . an ellipsis, if you will, linking one chunk to the next with something silent in between . . . a pregnant pause to make the audience consider the awkwardness going on in front them—works as extended metaphor for Billy’s fractured mind that is obviously suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. The author’s mind is perhaps in tow, too, if the reader is to believe this novel is Vonnegut’s PTSD self-medication. There are running jokes throughout—Vonnegut tells us at the end of Ch. 1 how the rest of the novel literally begins and ends, we are repeatedly told that Edgar Derby will die, and there’s the winking mantra “So it goes.” Gallagher points out that the novel is heavily foreshadowed and that the protagonist is aware of his future with a degree of omnipotence. “The foreshadowing is used . . . to comedic effect--the narrator knows how the story will end and wishes to let his audience in on the joke” (81).

Vonnegut breaks the fourth wall for the entire first chapter. It's a confessional as much as it's an explainer. Most of all it may be the autobiographical catharsis in which he works out some of residual effects of his war experience that will never completely leave him. As though on stage before us, Vonnegut spends the opening chapter monologuing for his audience before getting into the skits a la the standard of sketch comedy programs in the last quarter of the twentieth century through today. The novel's fiction does not begin until Chapter 2, and even that begins with a directive to the audience, "Listen:" (29). The fourth wall is a key component in performance comedy. Writes Sheldon Patinkin in his book on the history of the sketch and improve comedy Mecca The Second City:

In fourth-wall acting, you're pretending that the front of the stage is the fourth wall of the room you're pretending to be in. In other words, the actor tries to leave out any sense of performing for an audience. . . . Comedy, however, doesn't bounce well off walls. You have to play the audience and their laughter--or silence--and therefore can't pretend to yourself that they not there. It's one of the many reasons for the famous quote, attributed to Groucho Marx: "Dying is easy; comedy is hard." (3)

As all mentions of death, literal and figurative, human or otherwise, are followed by the initially flippant "So it goes" that turns into farce after the first few dozen times it is used, dying certainly is "easy" for Vonnegut in his novel. Writing effective satire? Not so much.

As Billy and the rest of the POWs enter the prison camp, one soldier mumbles something that leads a Nazi guard to knock out two of his teeth.

“Why me?” he asked the guard.

“Vy you? Vy anybody?” (*SH5* 116)

The Nazi’s quote is a criticism of the American soldier’s sense of entitlement. It will later be repeated by a Tralfamadorian with the same meaning. It is absurd of humans, particularly Americans, to think they are special and that their respective “now” and their lives are more important than the “now” and lives of past and future persons.

Sketch comedy’s soul is absurdity. Every televised sketch program has often involved taking very broad slice-of-life normalcies presented in condensed versions that expose how silly reality actually is. Take the silliest of sketch shows, *The Muppet Show*, which ran for 120 episodes starting in 1974 and did not even use human characters. In “Taking Silliness Seriously: Jim Henson’s *The Muppet Show*, The Anglo-American Tradition Of Nonsense, And Cultural Critique,” Michelle Ann Abate notes what was

...a key facet of the series: nonsense. Throughout nearly every sketch of every episode of every season of *The Muppet Show*, this theme recurred. From the often bizarre musical numbers planned for celebrity guest stars and the silly backstage antics of Kermit and company to Gonzo’s odd animal tricks and the mostly unintelligible ramblings of the Swedish Chef, the Muppets routinely embraced absurdity, irrationality, and foolishness; indeed, they became famous for their celebration of it. . . . Another equally powerful and as-yet overlooked factor in the

critical acclaim and mainstream success of *The Muppet Show* is the long-standing Anglo-American tradition of nonsense. Emerging as a reaction to the logic, order, and rationality that would typify The Age of Reason, nonsense permeates the social, material, and literary culture of the United States and Great Britain. (590)

Vonnegut's novel is then sort of equally Newtonian comedic law—*SH5* is the opposite reaction to the gravitas and serious homage given to discussions of the Second World War and Vietnam. While it carries serious messages, it is at times delightfully silly in the aforementioned American tradition.

[Roland Weary] had a dirty picture of a woman attempting sexual intercourse with a Shetland pony. He had made Billy Pilgrim admire that picture several times. . . . The word photography was first used in 1839, and it was in that year, too, that Louis J.M. Daguerre revealed to the French Academy that an image formed on a silvered metal plate covered with a thin film of silver iodide could be developed in the presence of mercury vapor. In 1841, only two years later, an assistant Daguerre, André Le Fèvre, was arrested in the Tuileries Gardens for attempting to sell a gentleman a picture of the woman and the pony. . . .He was sentenced to six months in prison. He died there of pneumonia. So it goes. (*SH5* 51-52)

Such nonsense greases the wheels for Vonnegut's less fluffy goals—war criticism, destruction to the narrative of what was later dubbed “The Greatest Generation,” and scolding the building of figurative cultural monuments to violence and its residual

effects. While the Muppets didn't deal so darkly, they like others in the growth of sketch comedy nonetheless paralleled Vonnegut. Abate explains:

This seemingly innocuous entertainment style routinely embeds powerful social, cultural, and political commentary. Given the way in which nonsense resists and even openly rejects elements of logic and linearity, it opens up the possibility for unconventional artistic forms, innovative aesthetic styles, and irreverent—often subversive—cultural interpretations. Indeed, nonsense often evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's notion, discussed in *Rabelais and His World*, of the carnivalesque for the way that it defies the dominant social order and upends hegemonic authority, control, and power (45). (590-91)

The vignettes then come to be their own little skits connected to create an entire "show." George Schlatter, producer of *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, writes in his retrospective on the sketch comedy program that

America desperately needed a comedy panacea or release valve for the tensions building up through an unwinnable war in Vietnam, an unpopular president in Lyndon B. Johnson, student unrest that would lead to the Kent State shootings, racial conflict that prompted the protests of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X and their assassinations, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and his senator/brother and presidential candidate, Bobby. (4)

Vonnegut's novel coincided with that same panacean desire. *Laugh-In* debuted in 1968 and Vonnegut finished *Slaughterhouse-Five* in 1969, but he'd been writing it in his head since May 29, 1945 when he typed his family a letter upon liberation as a prisoner of war

in Dresden. He describes early on in the novel how he was having difficulty coming to proper terms with his war experience, and while he does not mention it as a reason, it can hardly be assumed a coincidence that what Vonnegut saw with Vietnam helped bring whatever he had repressed from his service time to a head. And the only way he could explain the mania of it all in his head was to make it a manic approach to the narrative on the page. The chronological does not exist, which can be explained in the dime-store literature classroom as an expression of the Tralfamadorian concept of time and lifecycles not being some A to B line with finite points or how being captured by Nazis is no less traumatic than flashing back to a father forcing an unwilling child into a pool via throwing. Besides that it is also very reflective of Vonnegut as shell-shocked veteran and a war story's inability—if keeping true to the actual experience—to meet the demands of comfortable structure. Schlatter, who witnessed the show in person, notes of *Laugh-In's* changing the game: “The hyperactive happening ‘redefined what could be done on television,’ stated a 2008 *New York Times* obituary for Martin, and ‘made conventional television variety programs seem instantly passé and the sitcom brand of humor seem too meek for the times’” (5). *SH5* is hyperactive, too, with its seemingly random time tripping without warning and war portrayals abutted by scenes on planet Tralfamadore and the only slightly less absurd Ilium, New York. This game was changed, too. All prior war novels immediately became passé and meek as Vonnegut took the genre (and that of sci-fi and satire) to... well... the slaughterhouse. (I'm sorry for that bad joke.)

“Every television cliché became fodder for us” writes Schlatter (7), and Vonnegut put war novel cliché through his own satiric meat grinder. His soldiers are decidedly not Sinatras, keeping his promise in the novel's first chapter to Mary O'Hare; instead, they

are grown children: immature, crass, and scared. The presumed nobility of the military and the starched propaganda poster of the infantryman are lambasted in *SH5* because Vonnegut knows the truth is more sadly hilarious than fiction.

Laugh-In's most popular catch phrase, "Sock it to me," acts a bit like "So it goes" in *SH5*. Both are attached to a demise—with Vonnegut it's following the mention of death and with *Laugh-In* it's preceding someone (often actress Judy Carne) being doused with water or clunked on the head with some object. Also both encapsulate some absurdity that can't quite be articulated—"Sock it to me" is a command without a definitive meaning, yet the audience understood it perfectly, while "So it goes" mocks what was supposed to be the unmockable, death. Even Richard Nixon, the very sort of political figure that spurs a *SH5* into existence, appeared on *Laugh-In* and Nixoned out "Sock it to me" very Nixononly.

But while *Laugh-In* was surely antiestablishment (even with Nixon), there was a certain bite lacking in its funniness—it was something more goofy than witty, more cute than commentary. *Saturday Night Live* debuted six years after *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and it wasn't just a rhyme the two shared. (That joke is terrible, and I apologize.) The former quickly etched itself into American pop culture with its kamikaze approach to humor and forever changed the boundaries of the American sketch show not unlike how Vonnegut took the war novel and turned it inside out and sideways like a pathetic corpse on the battlefield. And *SNL* was not without its violent roots and relationship to violent metaphor. "Our comedy reflects a violent desperate time," said Michael O'Donoghue, the show's first head writer, of the turbulent late 1960s and continuing Cold War that bore *SNL*'s style from the get-go in 1975. "Humor is a release of tension, and you react to

what is happening around you. The world is ready nuke itself out--Dick Van Dyke and Donna Reed just don't cut it anymore" (quoted in Keough 228). Thus emerged *SNL*—out of the battle fatigue of the recently-abandoned quagmire in Vietnam, as well as violence and rioting at home—with the punchy sort of penchant for silliness that shows itself when you're just too tired to take the world seriously anymore. It was a comedy that contained a nothing-to-lose attitude that comes with the epiphany of getting to laugh in the face of the political and military machines that would just as soon crush you anyway. Keough explains that "The performers, in fact, considered themselves comedy commandoes on a mission of truth behind enemy lines. The signals were obvious. As Hendra puts it, 'Once the switch was thrown, the audience recognized everything they saw--the "fuck-you" tilt of the head, that certain edge and edginess'" (228). That the program was live, too, disrupted the audience's comfort with taped comedy and canned laughter. All's fair in sketch and war. Disrupting the novel reader's comfort has a similar tilt of the head from Vonnegut.

He also took the classic American war novel and made it an indictment of itself, a satire that despite the science fiction was more truth than fiction because the author had lived it—"All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (*SH5* 1)—and, thus, made the messages about American weaponized glory even more damning, thereby politicizing what textbooks had led schoolkids to believe was righteousness in the European and Pacific theaters and doing so during the biggest military exercise controversy in American history at that time. So did *SNL* in regards to its respective sociopolitical commentary, whether it be turning every sitting president and

candidate since the show's inception into a caricature or delving deeper into the less obvious traits of Americana.

In his examination of the classic *SNL* Hans and Franz bodybuilding characters, Mason Allred writes that they are in keeping with "Henri Bergson's theory of comedy as 'social gesture'. . . . Hans and Franz are a neglected, yet revealing moment of comedic work that intervened in the dominant ideal of masculinity at the time by exposing the ridiculous foundation of such 'big man masculinity'" (242). This is not unlike the machismo of the soldier engrained in American pop culture since even before Vonnegut—the Frank Sinatra that Mary O'Hare loathes early in the novel.

Hans and Franz are poking at the sacred cow of pursuit of superficial physical specimen and its translation to ideal masculinity. The characters existed in a time when various anti-intellectual societal norms were being skewered on the show.

This was the same *Saturday Night Live* period when Dana Carvey was also mocking staunch and prude conservatism with his character of "Church Lady," and often performing impressions of George H. W. Bush. Kevin Nealon was playing (among other occasional characters) "Mr. Subliminal," who was a salesman capable of slipping words in between his sentences to subliminally lead or manipulate his interlocutors. (252)

But Vonnegut got there first. Not only are the pro-war and military idolatry stances anti-intellectual, they're hypermasculinity begging to be made fun of. War isn't a movie, Vonnegut is saying. But it might be gallows humor. In fact, "War, in *Slaughterhouse Five*, is the ultimate obscenity" (Keough 111). A reader who doesn't get Vonnegut's big

joke in that regard will focus instead on the lesser obscenities—curse words, scatological humor, sexuality, etc. while missing that the overly aggressive soldiers like Paul Lazzaro and Roland Weary are less fictitious characters and more firsthand documentations of sick kids overcompensating in the theater of war. Explains Keough:

Roland Weary and Paul Lazzaro . . . are two willing and able cogs in the wheels of war— and both psychopaths with the killer instinct. Weary is an expert on the Iron Maiden, blood gutters, and other “instruments,” and he lets Billy in on his own ultimate torture: “You take a guy out on an anthill in the desert, see? He’s facing upward, and you put honey all over his balls and pecker, and you cut off his eyelids so he has to stare at the sun until he dies.” The ferocity of the aptly named Weary numbs. Weary’s sidekick, the weaselly Paul Lazzaro, is a snarling by-product of big-city life. He recalls, with relish, feeding parts of a clock spring to a dog in order to watch him rip out his own entrails. . . . Weary and Lazzaro are the kinds of crazies war demands--and utilizes. (111)

Lazzaro, a la Weary, tells of gaining vengeance on a dog that bit him by feeding it a steak with bit of clock spring embedded in it and then watching the dog chew its own guts out (*SH5* 176-77). He is also from Cicero, IL, meaning he’s a proximal Chicagoan, but not fully one. He is not quite *of* the sprawling and brawling City of Big Shoulders. Even in that regard he is lacking. Edgar Derby, a representative of the wholesome ideal would-be postwar *pater familias*, dies quite unheroically, and the reader is warned of this several times, almost always with the qualifier “poor old Edgar Derby.” There are no John Waynes or Frank Sinatras here.

While *SH5* does not ooze with issues of manhood as it is “The Children’s Crusade,” what hypermasculinity exists in the novel is laughed at in a series of interconnected “sketches” laughing at the aura of manly Hollywood soldier. The American soldiers who are exceptions to the predominantly children are comic fodder and cannon fodder. Sculpted from years of prison workouts, the chiseled Brits are a parody of the gentleman soldier. The American Nazi, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., who was married to a famous German actress and lectures the POWs in his “white ten-gallon hat and black cowboy boots decorated with swastikas and stars . . . sheathed in a blue body stocking which had yellow stripes running from his armpits to his ankles” looks too ridiculous for the reader to even take him seriously enough to be hated (207). Idealized men other than what Vonnegut knows are the real soldiers—naïve, tired, often scared youngsters—are butts of jokes. Hans and Franz would become that same mockery of pursuit of fictional male that Arnold Schwarzenegger had become posterchild for, be it inflated personality on the battlefield on screen or inflated biceps in real life. “It seems obvious then, that the primary butt of [Hans and Franz’s] joking was Arnold and the masculinity he came to represent, a masculinity that had reached mainstream admiration” (Allred 254).

Schwarzenegger himself would later self-deprecate and appear alongside his *SNL* “cousins.” Allred notes that

it is extremely significant that Arnold Schwarzenegger himself would step on stage with his “cousin” imitators in 1988. This presented the audience with a complicated comic conundrum. The imitated (Arnold) was now present and actually recited lines, like, “listen to me now, believe me later” and berated his

imitators exactly like they treated their audiences. Arnold appeared to imitate himself or indulge in a caricature of Arnold that had been pumped up by Nealon and Carvey. The Freudian model of a tripartite joke with the tellers (Hans and Franz), observer (audience), and butt (Arnold/hypermascularity) was now seemingly rearranged. (254-55)

Which harkens back to Vonnegut breaking the fourth wall in *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

Angela D. Abel and Michael Barthel note:

One outlet that seems to have generated some two-way influence in the news flow of political information is Saturday Night Live (SNL): a show that routinely capitalizes on political events and actors (Voth, 2008). Discussing politics using humor and satire can extend the boundaries of critique and analysis that typically constrain journalists (Jones, 2007) and, coupled with the ability to mimic real events and people, have led many to question a possible “SNL effect,” where the show is theorized to influence public opinion on political candidates or issues (Kurtz, 2008, March 14). (2)

SH5 probably has not influenced political candidates all that much since its publication, but Vonnegut’s use of humor to make more palatable the descriptions of an arguable war crime and the general combat experience certainly frees him from boundaries a journalist or historian would face approaching WWII and the bombing of Dresden secondhand. Vonnegut’s work raised the bar for war fiction (perhaps nonfiction as well), holding any future storytellers accountable for not only not romanticizing the fresh Vietnam War of the late 1960s and those future combats he knew were inevitable on other non-American

soils but also not framing them as some maudlin opuses on humankind's tragic ability to destroy its own. War is gallows humor because it is merely an example of how humanity is doomed no matter what, and Vonnegut thinks you have to laugh at it to keep from crying. James Thurber wrote, "The true balance of life and art, the saving of the human mind as well as the theatre, lies in what has long been known as tragicomedy, for humor and pathos, tears and laughter are, in the highest expression of human character and achievement, inseparable" (qtd. in Boskin 19). *SH5* is very much this sort of tragicomedy, where the reader understands s/he is bearing witness to a recollection of human-on-human slaughter and the terrible residuals of war on the psyche, yet s/he cannot help but smile at the wryness of it all presented in the novel. We want to weep for our collective sins—past, present, and future—but Vonnegut won't allow it, which is a joke in and of itself.

Vonnegut's own fictional representation, author and degenerate Kilgore Trout, has written dozens of books that almost nobody but Billy has read, and all could be stand-in titles and plots for sketch show skits. *Maniacs in the Fourth Dimension* is "about people whose mental diseases couldn't be treated because the causes of the diseases were all in the fourth dimension, and three-dimensional Earthling doctors couldn't see those causes at all, or even imagine them" (132). This plot not only acts as a metaphor within a metaphor that is Billy Pilgrim and his PTSD but also humanity's acceptance of dismissing weirdos and "others" because it is they who are odd and lost causes, not us "normals." *The Gospel from Outer Space* is about "a visitor from outer space . . . made a serious study of Christianity, to learn, if he could, why Christians found it so easy to be cruel. . . . But the Gospels actually taught this: *Before you kill somebody, make absolutely*

sure he isn't well connected. So it goes" (138). This leads to the conclusion that "*There are right people to lynch.*" Who? People not well connected. So it goes" (139). Humans have deeply twisted unwritten rules about whose life is expendable if not undesirable, but we don't often like to talk about that. Vonnegut is making us do so in Trout's "skits," all of which are satires of our very real societal flaws.

Maybe no sketch comedy program embodies a Vonnegutian influence more than HBO's *Mr. Show with Bob and David*, which ran from 1995 to 1998 with a Netflix revival of original content in 2015. "In the vein of Monty Python's Flying Circus [the absurdist British sketch show that aired from 1969 to 1974]," writes Ross Miller in his interview with Bob Odenkirk and David Cross, the show's creators and main performers, "by their own admission a major influence, sketches wouldn't end so much as they would bleed in and out from one another" (Miller). Odenkirk and Cross benefitted from the premium cable network airing their show because without commercial breaks that *SNL* is beholden to, there were no figurative breaths to take, and an episode of *Mr. Show* is one continuous comedic journey where all the sketches were linked, and none of them so much end as they do birth another. A 2008 *Vanity Fair* piece on the comic duo notes that "Mr. Show was a seemingly random hodgepodge of skits and half-baked ideas, all loosely tied together by a common theme. The show's comedy was irreverent and sometimes viciously subversive. To truly enjoy Bob and David, you had to see the humor in Satanism, teenage suicide, cock rings, hermaphrodites, after-school specials about mentally-challenged parents, and the Ku Klux Klan" (Spitznagel). Such an approach to ultra-taboo subject matter to joke about like the KKK would later become a television comedic given in twenty-first century smash hit shows like Dave Chappelle's *Chappelle's*

Show. Again, though, Vonnegut had already done the baby elephant walk over those hot coals, giggling over the supposedly unlaughable—the last World War, the theatrics of combat, the humanity of Nazis juxtaposed with the savagery of the Allies, sympathy for Soviets, pornography, PTSD, and every imaginable literal and figurative death.

While doing so, Vonnegut fractures his novel into tiny vignettes, stories that can often stand on their own should they be cut out along the dotted lines he provides between each. It is almost as though they are their own comedic sketches, often pointed at their respective ends by a joke. Vonnegut's own explanation proves this darkly humorous sketch show theory: "Laughing or crying is what a human being does when there's nothing else he can do. My books are essentially mosaics made up as a whole bunch of tiny little chips and each chip is a joke. . . . The only way to get a belly laugh, I've found, is to undermine a surface joke with more unhappiness than most mortals can bear" (qtd. in Keough 120). What is an episode of a show like *SNL* if not some mosaic tribute to that which needs satirizing that week? And what is a great sketch if not one rooted in some terrible sin of society like racism, idolatry, or sanctioned murder?

But each *SH5* vignette is part of a larger chapter, which is part of the larger novel, and each vignette bleeds into the next in much the same way a *Mr. Show* episode works. There is no start or end to each, breaking with the tradition of finiteness in previous sketch shows and war stories. This approach is all very Tralfamadorian—no beginning, no end, just "is" and always will be going on. Lois Maffeo writes of *Mr. Show*'s comics that

They begin each show with a monologue that launches the episode's loose theme.

As each sketch tumbles forth, a thread of thematic consistency emerges from each subsequent bit. In one episode, “Motion Lotion,” a made up song Cross has been caught by hidden camera singing in the toilet, becomes a pop hit in the next sketch and is hummed by the dial-a-porn caller in the third. (65)

While Vonnegut dismisses time and linearity in his story, Odenkirk and Cross dismiss the presumption of comedy—the sketch in particular—as its own capsule. For them, the capsules have been spilled on the floor, stepped on and broken, and the contents smeared into one another. The audience does not know if it is laughing at something related to what it saw five minutes ago or not. And in *SH5*, five minutes ago might have been four decades ago or light years away in another dimension.

Mr. Show was critically acclaimed but short lived and achieved just cult status. *SH5* was critically acclaimed but still not appreciated by the average American jingoist and was banned in some schools when released. Notes Keough:

Vonnegut himself is not interested in killing--with words or guns. As he says in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, “Let the guns rust.” But his attacks on such sacred cows as capitalism and Christianity have ruffled sensibilities and goaded librarians and school committees in such outposts as Drake, North Dakota, and Levittown, New York, to ban his books. . . .”The books of jokesters are short,” he has observed, “which is a social disadvantage in an era when literary importance is measured by the pound. The problem is that jokes deal so efficiently with ideas that there is little more to be said after the punch line has been spoken. It is time to come up with a new idea--and another good joke”. . . . In a world replete with absurdist

violence, Vonnegut has continued to insist on reason and refused to abandon hope. (102)

Ironically, he uses an absurdist nonlinear approach to this, and it is through the chaos of the novel's fractured form that he reaches that reason.

“Did you expect us to laugh?” the surgeon asked him (193).

Conclusion

These three novels are undoubtedly funny. It's not just about the jokes, though. While they were always considered humorous, viewing them in consideration of the relatively brief history of American stage and television performance comedy genres sheds new light on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Lolita*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and their respective contributions to the American comedic fabric. These are not just some jokes in books; rather, they are affronts to establishments and experiments in determining what is funny and who gets to point it out. Whatever today is off limits according to the cultural finger-waggers is hardly different from frowning on a woman engaging in bawdy standup or gasping at a sex criminal so pathetic that he's begging to be mocked or railing against discussing war as farce. Three works in particular have been examined here critically not as foundations for modern humor but evidence that the comedic norm today—particularly in popular standup and sketch comedies—existed yesterday in challenging taboos about which we still may hold reservations. Despite being considered otherwise by various standard bearers of the status quo, these are three novels that challenged what and who could be funny while their authors used pens innovatively much like how a stage microphone functions in performance comedy today.

When these works of Hurston, Nabokov, and Vonnegut are viewed in a twenty-first century light, we gain a greater appreciation for the age-old “You can't do that” punches these writers were willing to absorb at the time for the sake of their literary punchlines and for the sake of replying “Yes, I can. Because this is funny, and this is necessary.” In turn, maybe we also look at modern standup and sketch comedy as being

not necessarily the children of novels like these but maybe a not-so-distant younger cousin.

So thank you and goodnight, ladies and gentlemen. You've been a tremendous audience. Drive safe, and be sure to try the veal.

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