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How Does Context Shape Comedy as a Successful Social Criticism as Demonstrated by Eddie Murphy's SNL Sketch "White Like Me?"

Abigail Jones

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HOW DOES CONTEXT SHAPE COMEDY AS A SUCCESSFUL SOCIAL
CRITICISM AS DEMONSTRATED BY EDDIE MURPHY'S SNL
SKETCH "WHITE LIKE ME?"

by Abigail Jones

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
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Abstract

This thesis explores the theory of comedy as social criticism through an interpretive investigation. For comedy to be a potent criticism it is important for the audience to understand the context surrounding the sketch. Without understanding the context the sketch still has the ability to be humorous, but the critique is harder to acknowledge. “White Like Me” as performed by Eddie Murphy on *Saturday Night Live* will be used as an example for understanding the social criticisms presented in the sketch. This will be descriptively analyzed by dissecting the three major jokes shown and then, to conclude the thesis, there will be a discussion of the dangers of not understanding context in comedy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

How does context shape comedy as a successful social criticism as demonstrated by Eddie Murphy's SNL sketch "White Like Me?"

This thesis argues that for comedy to be a social criticism it must rely on context to form a successful critique. Comedy is an ambiguous art form based on double meanings and irony, and to be able to recognize those underlying implications the context of the situation must be understood. In the theory of comedy, there is a gap in the research regarding the necessity of context. Much of the literature I read on the subject included an explanation of how comedy is created and how performance and timing is used in a sketch. What the theories lack is the attention to the use of context and to the importance of modern culture. I will focus on the importance of contemporary culture in comedy and support my argument through analysis of an example of comedy as social criticism.

The sketch I have chosen for my comedic analysis is Eddie Murphy's Saturday Night Live sketch "White Like Me." In the beginning of the sketch Murphy breaks the fourth wall and talks to the audience about the racial problems of 1980's America. To see if the rumors are true about the split Americas, Murphy goes undercover as a white man to see if he is treated differently. As he goes through the transformation from black to white, Murphy learns how to act as a white man by studying Dynasty and Hallmark cards. He concludes that to be a white man he must enunciate his syllables and walk as though he is clenching his butt cheeks. The next scene shows Murphy walking around the corner with white skin and clenched cheeks. His first stop is a convenience store

where he buys a newspaper. His encounter with the cashier concludes with Murphy leaving with a free newspaper because he is white.

Murphy then proceeds with his journey through white America on a public bus. The bus is filled with white people and one African American man. Once the African American man leaves the bus, the white citizens begin to party. Waitresses pull off their clothing to reveal work uniforms and start serving drinks. Couples start dancing and people start mingling. Murphy has never seen this before because he has always been on the opposite side of white privileged society. Murphy does not realize the divide was such a problem. Finally, he decides to test the differences between the races one last time; he applies for a loan. He goes in to the bank under the alias of Mr. White, and he has no collateral and no identification. The banker who started assessing the application was African American. He began to deny him the loan when his white boss walked in and sent the banker on a break. Afterward, the boss takes out a suitcase of money and tells Murphy that he does not need to pay the bank back. The sketch concludes with Murphy telling the audience to be careful when they meet a white person because he or she might be an African American in disguise, and the camera scans a make-up room filled with African Americans getting transformed.

What drew my attention to the sketch “White Like Me,” compared to the other comedic sketches in SNL, was its humorous but critical view on racism in America. The issue of race in America has historically been a sensitive topic. The sketch still holds significance because of the ongoing struggle between the different races. When I was younger I remember watching this sketch and thinking it was quite funny because Eddie Murphy dressed up and acted like a white man, which was the opposite of his usual

characters. I did not realize the message Murphy was trying to send about the racism in the United States. Yet, seeing the sketch now I realize how much social criticism is projected through this sketch. I have come to understand the historical significance and the potent issues this sketch is presenting. Yet, without this knowledge, I would still perceive the sketch as funny because of the contradictions it introduces. Without the knowledge of the context surrounding the sketch, the sketch loses its ability to criticize society. This sketch is a great example to use in my thesis because it shows the importance of context for comedy to enact social criticism.

I was particularly interested in the sketches of Saturday Night Live (SNL) because of their intimate closeness with the audience and the current culture. SNL is truly live, which makes the show unique compared to all other comedy shows in this era. SNL has the ability to receive live reactions from the audience and to incorporate highly current events within its comedy, such as Tina Fey imitating Sarah Palin during the 2008 elections. One of the reasons why those sketches are so popular is because the audience is able to watch the news and literally that night see a parody of that day's events on SNL. The audience reaction to the contemporary material is useful in determining what topics are considered comedic. SNL has survived 36 years of television, and throughout those years the comedy has reflected national crises and attitudes of the times. The start of SNL was attributed to Johnny Carson's want for more vacation time. Before the creation of SNL, the network NBC was showing reruns of Johnny Carson on Saturday nights to fill in the empty time-slot. Carson complained that he wanted those reruns to be played during the week so he did not have to work as much. So NBC put out a call for young directors to create a comedic show. Essentially SNL was created as a "throw-

away” show. Yet, with Lorne Michaels as the director, SNL became a legacy by successfully appealing to their target audience (Shales & Miller, 2002).

SNL is an excellent resource to use to research comedy as social criticism because of the risks that the show takes. In fact, because of those risks the show has experienced many dips in popularity and many skits have flopped. Different arguments can be made as to why sketches fail but, given the argument of this thesis, I believe that many of the sketches did not make proper use of context to connect with the audience. Many of the sketches were created from the surrounding environment of the news and media. Some of SNL’s most famous skits involved political figures, celebrities, or crises. These subjects provided a plethora of material to work with because the media exacerbates scandals and exploits people nationwide. SNL pushed the envelope of televised comedy because of its constant, and sometimes created very pointed criticism of pop culture. However, many of the sketches were not fully comprehended by the audience because the pop culture references were not current. For example, the parodies of older public figures do not work as well a criticism of current political figures. The context of the sketch is lost because they lacked currency. But, since SNL has survived over several decades, this allows us to see how successful the criticisms were and whether it has inspired a change in the current society.

As a form of communication, comedy is common to all societies yet, until recently, many scholars did not find it necessary to research the phenomenon. People often believe that comedy’s significance goes no deeper than the surface of its jokes. Aristotle barely mentioned comedy within his *Poetics* and many educated minds have underestimated its importance. Although Aristotle really only focused with tragedy in his

Poetics, there are some rumors of a lost third book that examined the comedic aspects of theater (Levin, 1987). Even if this was the case, a more thorough study of comedy is only a recent development. One reason why people may think that comedy is not a serious art form is because it invokes laughter, which is almost proof that the subject is not serious. People may laugh at something, but they do not necessarily need to know the whole meaning behind the situation to do so. Laughter comforts people and, therefore, tricks them into believing that there is nothing serious within the comedy. One aspect of comedy's social function is its relation to critique and, therefore, I believe researching the critical functions of comedy is important given the pervasiveness of comedy within the arts.

This thesis will investigate comedy as a form of social criticism and particularly the importance of context in producing social criticisms through comedy. Criticizing social norms is a useful tool for creating change, especially for challenging the disfavored norms and the beliefs they manifest. Although history is usually written by the powerful, the non-dominant culture often writes comedy. Comedy has been an important means of surviving, even contesting, oppression; in order to survive, the non-dominant voice had to subtly implant the criticism without being noticed. "This is why festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 92). To understand these subtleties the audience must understand the surrounding context of the culture. For comedy to be useful as a social criticism there has to be an acknowledgment of the culture itself, both by the comedian

and the audience. The audience has to be conscious of the social and historical references in comedy to appreciate the criticism along with the humor.

My investigation is interpretive and exploratory rather than historical or social scientific. I work with a single example, an Eddie Murphy sketch from SNL, to illustrate a general understanding of comedy. I use an exploratory and interpretive approach because this thesis is meant to argue a question, not to give a final answer. As such, the research is based on describing examples of human and cultural behavior rather than using quantitative approaches to predict their behavior. This thesis is meant to explore the different possible views people may have on comedy according to their knowledge and experience of society. Comedy is supposed to be ambiguous and therefore an interpretive approach, unlike a social scientific one, would not limit the analytical possibilities by presupposing a set of stable categories to determine meaning instead of analyzing the range of potential meanings (Martin & Nakayama, 2009).

Method

I will present my claim about comedy as a social criticism through descriptive analysis and interpretation of a specific comedic sketch. First, I will set forth a conceptual explanation of comedy as social criticism and the importance of context both for humor and for critique. Comedy can be a powerful form of critique if it focuses on the ideological assumptions and the failures of society. Behind the concept of social criticism is the thought of justice (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). Social criticism challenges societal stereotypes and addresses failures in the hope of helping to fix social injustices. To understand comedy in terms of social criticism, the audience must understand the

references to events, people, and values made by the comedian and the causes of the failures it satirizes. If the audience understands the motivation behind the jokes they will be able to understand the criticism made of society and, hopefully, more effectively seek justice. Then, the comic has successfully recruited social critics. “The comic can appear as a lawless element for subverting staid contentions or serve as a leveling force against hierarchy bonds, but it also can generate new ones” (Willett, 2008, pg. 5).

Second, I will conduct a close reading of “White Like Me” in which I perform a descriptive analysis of the key elements of the sketch. I will address the type of language that is used, the juxtaposition of the jokes, and the relationships between the characters. After the descriptive analysis I will interpret the sketch in light of the historical context relevant to the key elements of the sketch. These will include brief, illustrative histories and interpretations of “black face,” segregation, and redlining. I will explain the way that context makes the sketch funny and gives it critical bite. For example, it might be ridiculous to see an African American painted up with a white face, but when one stops and thinks of the historical relevance behind the act of covering up one’s skin to experience equality, it is a sobering acknowledgement to how racially divided America is. Finally I will specifically look at racial humor in the United States and talk about the progress that it has made as a social criticism.

Comedy as a Social Criticism

Defining Social Criticism

Social criticism has been defined and developed in many different ways, but in this thesis it will be understood as a way to seek justice within an oppressive society.

Kenneth Baynes (1992) quotes John Rawls' definition of society as "the way in which major social institutions fit together into one system, and how they assign fundamental rights and duties and shape the division of advantages that arises through social cooperation" (p. 162). Social criticism arises when the fundamental rights and duties are not equitable within a society. Comedy is a vehicle for subtly (or not so subtly) addressing these injustices by mocking the social norms in the hope of slowly changing the masses' beliefs about the inequalities.

"To our knowledge, no culture exists that is unfamiliar with humor" (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006, p. 348). From the jesters in ancient Greece to the political humor in South Park, comedy is an ancient activity that fulfills many social functions. However, I believe the most important function is its ability to criticize. If comedy is observed from a shallow point of view, it is easy to believe that comedy is a useless form of art. Yet a closer look at comedy reveals a rich store of underlying significance. Without a critical function, comedy loses its voice and then it does seem like nothing more than a bunch of "crotch shots" and "fart jokes." Understanding that social criticism fuels comedy casts comedy as a rather dangerous form of protest that needs more attention.

Defining Context

For comedy to have a critical edge it must trade on double meanings, hence the key to understanding the social criticism behind comedy must be context. Context will be equated with experience, in the sense of knowledge gathered and awareness of surroundings. Raymond Williams (2005) defined experience in *Keywords* as "(i) knowledge gathered from past events whether by conscious observation or by

consideration and reflection; and (ii) a particular kind of consciousness, which can in some contexts be distinguished from reason or knowledge” (p. 126). I will deal mainly with the first definition in this thesis, but in accordance to Williams’ definition, I will also add “unconscious observation” when talking about context. This is important because living in a society means constant immersion in culture, so we must have unconscious experiences that form our way of looking at the world. Comedy works basically as a reading of culture.

Hence, the more we look about us, the greater becomes our belief that the “planned incongruity” in the concept of the ‘socialization of losses’ gets us pretty close to the heart of things. The formula seems basic for purposes of “putting things together,” by establishing modes of convertibility between economic, religious, and esthetic vocabularies. (Burke, 1964, p. 98-99)

Therefore, context is important for comedy because without it, the meaning behind comedy would not have any grounding. This thesis will use historical analysis to help explain the jokes in Murphy’s sketch, but the purpose is not to tell the history behind the jokes. By stating the context surrounding the sketch, the richness of his criticism made will be clearer.

This thesis has three main chapters. The first chapter will address why a topic that could be taken as offensive can be seen as comedic. This chapter will include a history and explanation about the theory of comedy. Also, in this chapter I will explain why context is so important to humor. There are many factors that contribute to a “theory of comedy” to consider, and context is not the only aspect necessary for producing laughter. Most people have heard the phrase “comedic timing,” which many

experts say is the most important rule for comedy. Yet partnered with timing is the argument that performance means everything. But still, there cannot be a successful performance without successful writing, which includes sub-categories such as character, plot, and technical devices (Levin, 1987). All these parts contribute to a successful comedic sketch, but nothing guarantees a response of laughter. This thesis will argue that context is the glue that holds all these parts together. I do not claim that context is the “rosetta stone” of comedy because misunderstanding is always possible. Yet context is the key to understanding the joke *and* the social criticisms that are presented by a performance. Context needs good timing in the performer and understanding in the audience and, therefore, logically context connects to all the other factors required of comedy.

The second chapter is a descriptive analysis of “White Like Me.” In this chapter, I will explain the three criticisms that Eddie Murphy presents as jokes in the sketch. The overall joke that Murphy asserts in the sketch is the subject of “white face.” Eddie Murphy was, and still is, known for his race humor and in this sketch he is made up to look like a white male who walks around New York City experiencing life through a white man’s eyes. On his journey, he discovers that if you are white, other white people secretly give you everything for free; for example, when he walked in a newspaper shop the white store clerk whispered to him, “There’s no one around. Go ahead take it, take it.” As the sketch unfolds the audience is exposed to other stereotypical African American references that acknowledge the divide between the black and white America. The references evoke many notoriously racist acts that have marked U.S. history, such as

references to African Americans being denied access to buses and the inability for an African American to receive a loan.

Context is not understood to have the same meaning to every person; in fact, context is quite personal and individualized. This is an important factor that explains why comedy is difficult to produce. The context in which “White Like Me” was set does not deal only with the events of 1985 or even the decade of the 1980’s. In fact, the context in which this sketch is situated is centuries long. For example, the topic of black face/white face was very popular during the late 19th century, carrying over into the early 20th century. Black face got its start because the white society did not allow African Americans right to perform, yet white Americans still looked at them as a source of humor. The comedy of most traveling minstrel shows’ involved mocking and exploiting the black slave. Since real African Americans were not allowed to be performers, the actors of the minstrel group would paint their face black and pantomime exaggerated versions of imagined slave behavior. White audiences enjoyed the comedy but soon they desired a more authentic representation of a black slave, although they still wanted to laugh at their ignorance (Banjo, 2011).

Some African Americans aspired to become actors and when they were given a chance to act as an “authentic black person” they had a tough decision to make. Should the ambitious African American performers take the offer and risk being scrutinized by their own race or should they rebel against what the dominant race wanted and risk not being able to pursue their dream? Most African American performers battled with these two opposing sides, yet secretly they were able to make their own social critique within

their performance for the oppressing audience (Krasner, 1997). These accomplishments will be discussed in later chapters.

Despite African American struggles, the image of the “coon” has still survived as a stereotype. This image, created by and for dominant white culture, has led to many other stereotypes of African Americans in modern America. Murphy touches upon these issues in his sketch. For instance, he touches upon segregation, alluding to historical events regarding the segregation on public buses. Finally, his last criticism references the discrimination African Americans receive in contemporary America. The criticism that Murphy makes is that, even though slavery is over and formal segregation a thing of the past, there is still an informal, even unconscious segregation of whites from blacks, and whites are still oppressing blacks in many ways.

Finally, after discussing the components of comedy, the third chapter will address the justification for studying comedy and context. Context references the state of the culture and its views on different issues. It will show how the jokes could be meaningful today. The justification for this thesis is that comedy is truly a social criticism. The study of comedy, and the context surrounding it, reflects on broader attitudes toward societal conflicts. Comedy is usually the voice of nondominant class speaking out against the superior class, and if people listen to that voice, then change is possible, for better or for worse.

Chapter 2: Over Explaining Comedy (Until There is None Left)

Before you move on with this thesis you are warned that after you read this section, comedy will be over-explained until it is not funny anymore. The basics of comedy must be understood in order to recognize the deeper criticisms it can make. According to Polimenti and Reiss (2006) there are three basic rules to comedy.

Three essential themes, however, are repeatedly observed in the majority of humor theories: 1) humor reflects a set of incongruous conceptualizations, 2) humor involves repressed sexual or aggressive feelings, and 3) humor elevates social status by demonstrating superiority or saving face. (p. 348)

Much comedy is based on incongruities, such as Eddie Murphy changing the color of his skin. Yet the theme that is essential for comedy to become a social criticism is the statement that says humor “involves repressed sexual or aggressive feelings.” This theory shows that comedy is more serious than often believed, and that the comic is expressing repressed feelings in order to change something about the current society, or at least to register his or her desire.

Tragedy vs. Comedy

Instead of classifying tragedy and comedy as two separate identities it is easier to think that they are two separate leaves, or as Aristotle says, roots of the same tree.

Contrary to popular belief, comedy deals with very serious topics in life. “We cannot help but laugh at this grotesque report of a thwarted suicide, and yet in its own grim way it does reiterate the commonplace that comedy and laughter are serious business”

(Corrigan, 1980, p. 2). Without touching upon the serious aspects of life, comedy would be less than effective in criticizing society. Comedy and laughter are the release of tension, but the difference from tragedy is that comedy instills hope in the audience.

Comedy and tragedy are very similar in many respects, which means it is quite easy to make a comedy a tragedy, or vice versa, by changing the ending.

The difference between tragedy and comedy is the difference between experience and intuition. In the experience we strive against every condition of our animal life: against death, against the frustration of ambition, against the instability of human love. In the intuition we trust the arduous eccentricities we’re born to, and see the oddness of the creature who has never got acclimatized to being created.

(Fry, as quoted in Corrigan, 1980, p. 4)

One significant difference between comedy and tragedy is that comedy usually has happy endings. As Corrigan (1980) says, “The constant in the comic view of life or the comic spirit: the sense that no matter how many times man is knocked down he somehow manages to pull himself up and keep on going. Thus while tragedy is a celebration of a man’s capacity to aspire and suffer, comedy celebrates his capacity to endure” (p. 3).

The comic tries to endure daily life, but without hope the audience will retract their connectedness with the characters and so the story becomes a tragedy.

Styan (1968) explains how thin the line is between comedy and tragedy. If the audience sees an elderly lady, many people will have pre-formed reactions to be sympathetic toward her. Yet if the elderly lady is over-dressed and is heavily made-up, the incongruity causes the audience to laugh. However, if that behavior was intended to keep the interest of her husband the audience's sympathy reappears and the comedy is lost. It is quite easy to switch between comedy and tragedy with a mere change of the ending, and this is why comedy is as critical of how we live and what we believe as tragedy is.

The Comedic Triangle

Comedy has one crucial element that is not necessarily present within tragedy and that is the audience's relationship to the comedic subject. Comedy is based on the audience's reaction, after all. "Moreover, Purdie implies that both the source of the stimulus and the recipient are involved in an active process of construction" (Pye, 2006, p. 59). As Olsen (1965) said, comedy requires three components; "the Laugher," "the laughed at," and the relationship between the two. Although the term "Laugher/Laughed at" is used when describing comedy, the audience must realize that there is a very distinct difference between the act of laughing and comedy.

In other words laughter and comedy are not synonymous. Comedy is more difficult to analyze than simply judging it by the vocal response that is produced by the audience. "Laughter is only a symptom, and not a very reliable one ...it is only an

unreliable external sign of a particular internal—I mean psychic phenomenon” (Olson, 1968, p 11). What Olson is saying is that people laugh for many different reasons including reasons that do not include humor. Many people will laugh if they are nervous or uncomfortable, and some may even laugh when they are mad. People will laugh when a tragic event happens and some may not make a sound when they are thoroughly enjoying themselves. “The Laugher” will be described as the audience member who is outside looking in on the comedic situation.

Next is the “laughed at,” which, as Bergson (1921) argues, has to be characteristically human and have human tendencies because people have to be able to create a relationship with the “object.” That is not to say that humans cannot, or do not, find animals or inanimate objects funny, but what the audience actually finds humorous are the human characteristics that are displayed within the animal or object. The “laughed at” would be considered the “butt” of the joke.

Through experience and context the audience is able to create a relationship with the “butt” of the joke. This relationship is the ham in the middle of two slices of bread; without the ham you do not have a complete sandwich, and without context, experience and a relationship to the “butt” of the joke, you do not have a social criticism. For the audience to be able to identify the social criticism within comedy the audience must form a relationship with the “laughed at.” This usually is a dominant versus an non-dominant relationship.

Hobbes’ (1968) superiority theory argues that enjoyment of humor messages is derived from a falsely constructed sense of superiority to the disparaged. In other words, the perceiver not only fails to identify with the disparaged, but also

receives gratification from seeing an inferior group belittled because it makes them feel more positive about themselves.” (Banjo, 2011, Pg. 142)

Maintaining this relationship involves a third party, the comic, to keep the audience connected to the action. Pye (2006) mentions that in comedy there has to be a “two-against-one” scenario. The “butt” of the joke has to be perceived as incompetent in some way. In order for the tables not to be turned on the audience, both the comic and the audience must feel as if they are both superior over the “butt” of the joke. This is accomplished if there are two people declaring that the one is a fool.

If the creation of the comic involves the construction of oneself as ‘discursively strong’ then the identification of a butt in humor, a figure who is laughed at, usually involves constructing him as somehow discursively incompetent, as someone who does not have “full control” of the signifying system (Pye, 2006, p. 58).

It is the job of the comic to keep the control. When the audience loses the control they are vulnerable to feeling ridiculed. This invokes vulnerable emotions such as sympathy, guilt, or compassion, and then comedy is lost because the audience has an emotional fear for the comedic character. This distracts the audience from the content and allows them to focus on more personal problems and ultimately the audience feels like they are experiencing these vulnerable feelings along with the character. That is why a third party needs to be involved to help maintain the audience’s connectedness towards the “butt” of the joke.

Individual people find meaning in everything, yet for comedy to be successful it must allow individuals to form some sort of relationship that does not rely on emotions. As Bergson (1921) states, “Laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (p. 63). If an audience experiences a sympathetic emotional reaction to the sketch, the comedy immediately dies because emotion becomes too real and too painful to the audience emotion is tragic. Therefore, the number one rule of comedy is no vulnerable emotions. Yet there should be a certain connection or all meaning is lost on the audience. The hard job for the comic is to create not only a sense of closeness but also a false sense of distance. This is so the audience can use the “butt” as a scapegoat. The emotions and tensions of the audience member is transferred over to the “butt,” and the “laugher” is able to proceed without fear that their reaction incriminates here or him emotionally.

These parts of comedy create a triangle, which is similar to Ogden’s “semiotic triangle” that is used in the study of communication. Ogden’s triangle, as described in the *ABC of Communication Studies* (1998), is a great resource for describing language, but it is also helpful for understanding comedy. The triangle notes three components in Communication: the concept, the form, and the referent. The form is the symbol used to invoke an image, the concept is the image that is associated with the form, and the referent is the object that is referred to by the image. The lines that form the triangle and that connect the three elements together are the “denotations” and the “connotations.” Denotations are the meanings that can be found in the dictionary, and connotations are the meanings that are defined by experience and culture. These lines that connect the triangle are the “ham” of the sandwich that was mentioned above. Without the lines to

connect the three separate components the equilateral triangle cannot be formed (Gill & Adams, 1998).

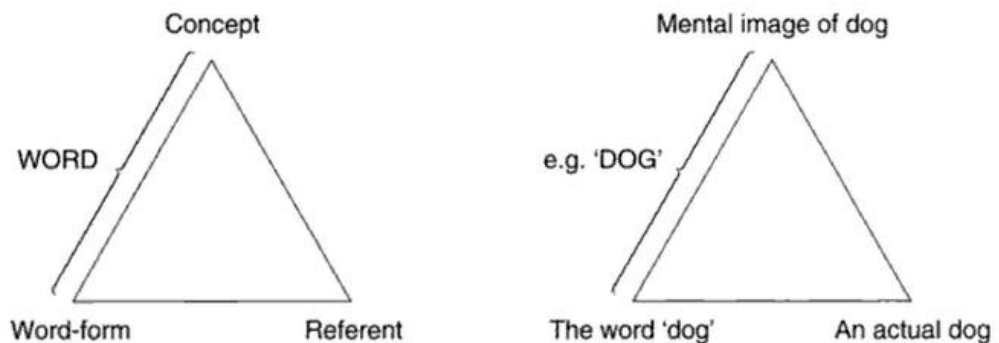


Figure 40 *The semiotic triangle*

“Figure 1: Semiotic Triangle, from Gills & Adams, 1998”

Comedy involves a similar triangle in the sense that there are three participating parties that need to exist as a basis for comedy. First there needs to be a “concept,” or what closely identifies with the concept. Where comedy is concerned it would be referred to as the “butt.” The “butt” is a mental image that is being created inside the audience’s head. The “form” is what *forms* the image by using humanly-created symbolic tools, such as language, costume, etc. Using forms to create the humorous image is the job of the comic. The comic is responsible for helping the audience recognize and relate to the concept, the “butt,” in a particular way. Then we have the referent. The members of the audience bring their already defined experiences and social memories and supply the concept for the referent.

Now that the points of the triangle are defined the triangle is almost finished. It is important to realize that without the lines that represent the “denotations” and the “connotations” we are left with three insignificant spots floating on a plane that are not connected by anything. The “denotations” and the “connotations” form the relationships

between the elements of the triangle; they are the context and the experience that are the background of these relationships. By adding “denotations” and “connotations,” lines connecting the three parts can be drawn and the triangle is formed.

The last point to be stressed is that the triangle is an equilateral triangle. No one part is more important and no one relationship or context is stronger than the other. The relationship between the audience and the comic is just as important as the relationship between the “butt” of the joke and the audience, and the “butt” of the joke and the comic. Comedy is a balancing act.

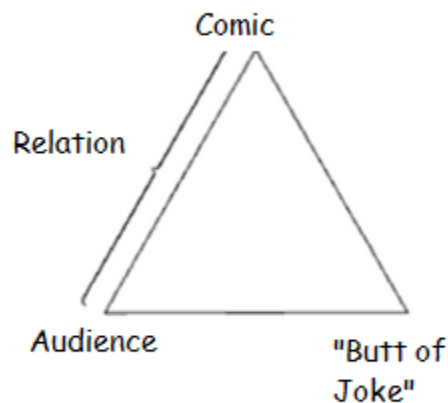


Figure 2: ‘The Definition of Comedy is Ambiguous’ or ‘The Definition of Comedy IS ambiguity’

Both statements for Figure 2 are true because for comedy to be successful it has to be ambiguous. It is up to the audience to decide, based on their experience, how the relationships between the elements are formed.

Ambiguity allows the audience, no matter their background or beliefs, to create their own meaning based on the interaction of elements of the joke. “White Like Me” seems fairly straightforward, but it has ambiguity that allows for a wide variety of audiences to interpret its social criticisms differently. The sketch fits into the triangle model, but what makes the sketch funny to several different people is the fact that the components to the triangle are ambiguous and allow the individual audience members to insert what they believe should be the elements of the triangle. In the sketch, the only thing that is not ambiguous is the fact that Murphy is the comic. He forms the audience’s image of the “butt” of the joke and guides the audience on a journey through the social criticism and helps create the relationship between the two. The audience and the “butt” are both ambiguous, however.

Together, context, experience, and connotation are what define the other parts of the triangle. There are many different perspectives presented in this sketch, and therefore there are many different audience members and “butts.” When Eddie Murphy performed this sketch on SNL in 1985, crime was rising within inner cities. The 80’s were an era of national angst. Crime was rising within inner cities where many citizens were of African descent. Reeves and Campbell (1994) researched the major news networks for their coverage of drugs, especially cocaine. What they found was that stories related to the “war on drugs” began to rise in 1982, spiked in 1986, and then again rose in 1988. Many white Americans equated these crimes with working class Americans, and since it was prevalent in the inner cities, white Americans believed that the drug problems stemmed from African Americans. “[C]ocaine would be defined according to a ‘trickle-down’ paradigm in which what was once a decadent ‘glamor’ drug became increasingly

available and abused by the middle-class Americans” (Reeves & Campbell, 1994, p. 18). After the mainstream discovery of crack, anti-welfare and anti-affirmative action rhetoric skyrocketed. Reagan used the “war on drugs” to attract the votes from middle and upper class whites and he made the decade of the 80’s the decade of a war against the people who needed help (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). From a white American’s perspective, the “butt” of the joke might be the African Americans. Murphy alludes to many stereotypes, for example of an African American not being able to receive a loan. Murphy also looks unnatural playing a white man so it is plausible, based on the criminal portrayals in the news that some viewers may have taken, to see the sketch as a critique of the inner cities.

On the opposite end of the spectrum the audience may be the “black Americans” perspective and Caucasian Americans are the “butt” of the joke. The 80’s were also the time of Regan and his effort to extinguish accomplishments of the civil rights movement. The tensions can be shown through the many jokes that Murphy does to reference the “white culture.” He over-enunciates every consonant or walks with clenched butt cheeks to over emphasize the white’s rigid attitude.

Finally, there is a third point in the triangle which includes the audience who is the “other.” The “other” could be defined as people of different races, cultures, or citizens who do not have a direct relationship with the historical events of the black racial inequality and who believe that both whites and blacks are the “butts.” With this audience, context is still important because in order to maintain an understanding of the jokes this audience does need to have some knowledge of the history of the United States.

Ambiguity is also important within the structure of the joke. One main job of the comic is to lead the audience, whoever it may be, to the punch line of the joke. The

ambiguity, in this case not knowing how the sketch will play out, is part of the entertainment of the joke. If the comic leads the audience down the path to what they are expecting, then the entertainment is lost because there is no room for surprise. Comedy has a lot to do with surprising the audience, but this is part of the delicate balancing act of comedy: surprising and confusing the audience in a way that entertains them. Therefore, comedy deals with plausibility versus implausibility. “Examining the relationship between the many possible variations in the balancing act between plausibility and implausibility affords a fascinating insight into the complex way in which the comic manipulates affective implication” (Pye, 2006, p. 67).

Eddie Murphy presents implausibilities, or incongruities, within his sketch. “For Hazlitt the essence of the laughable was ‘the incongruous,’ a distinction between ‘what things are and what they ought to be’” (Styan, 1962, p. 230). The first incongruity is that Murphy starts acting as a white man. Because of racialized expectations, audience members may assume Murphy is going to act like a stereotypical “black man.” But the implausible happens when Murphy enacts the racialized opposite of what is expected. The next implausibility is when Murphy presents the notion that white people get everything for free. Through different perspectives, the implausibility of the situation may not be so far from the truth; redlining is just one form of evidence of the white culture hiding opportunities from the African culture, for example.

Comedy involves taking something normatively “true” within society and applying an opposing meaning. The plausible situation is needed to provide the audience with a connection to reality so that they can form a relationship with the joke. Plausible situations are basically everyday situations whose outcomes are relatively normal. After

the comic is able to establish a routine with the audience, he breaks it, causing the audience to be surprised; what they were expecting is suddenly gone. Finally, great endings involve the comic incorporating the prior expectation back into the joke. Because the plausible outcome was stripped away in the beginning, the audience is not expecting a normal ending. When the comic ends the sketch with the plausible outcome of the beginning, the audience is surprised again. Yet, because the comic returns to the expected outcome, the comic made the audience feel like they are smart, thus reinforcing the fact that the audience is not the “butt” of the joke.

The theory of plausibility and implausibility helps explain why many people find physical and dark humor funny. The audience suspends disbelief, knowing that the performer is not going to get hurt and this allows the comedy to ensue. Yet, once the audience fears for the performer or the content invokes sympathetic emotions, the comedy is done. This is why the cartoon of the Coyote and the Roadrunner has maintained its comedy. For example, in Wily E Coyote cartoons the plausible ending would be him falling off the cliff to his death, but the implausible ending happens when he peels himself off the ground and continues chasing after the roadrunner (Pye, 2006). If the coyote ever gets seriously injured or killed, the comedy has also died and the sketch becomes a tragedy.

Comedy cannot be completely ambiguous, however, because the audience has to be able to piece together some understanding of the situation. Incongruity is just a technique. “If, as we have said, the ultimate effect of a play is dependent upon values assigned to it by the audience, then one of the chief functions of the artist is to provide

those signs which will lead the audience to draw the proper conclusions about the play's meaning" (Corrigan, 1980, p. 8). Context allows the audience to read the ambiguity.

Context

Recently found, says *The Huffington Post* (2012), on tablets dating back 3,500 years ago was a statement saying "...of your mother is by the one who has intercourse with her. What/who is it?" This has the claim of the oldest "Yo Mama" joke in history. A "Yo Mama" joke is a joke that is created to insult another's mother by calling her fat, stupid, or ugly. The purpose of the game is for the two participants to keep "one-upping" the other until one of them cannot think of any more insults. An example of a "Yo Mama" joke would be, "Yo mama is so fat when her beeper goes off people thought she was backing up." This may seem like a simple insult, but in order to truly understand the joke, the audience needs to know the context.

The first step in understanding the joke is to understand what a beeper is. The problem that comedy faces is that the times, traditions, and technologies are changing so fast that people of the next generation do not fully understand the joke because they were not exposed to the context surrounding it. Beepers are a thing of the past; hardly anyone uses a beeper except for doctors. Beepers also get their name from the sound that they make, and within this joke the comic equates the sound of the beeping with the backing up of a large truck. Not all cars or trucks make this sound when backing up. It is common among Americans to understand that large trucks beep when backing up, but that is only because of the Department of Transportation. The D.O.T has made it a law that all large vehicles must beep when backing up to ensure safety (Department of

Transportation). Not every country has a Department of Transportation and not all countries require trucks to beep when they back up. Therefore, someone without knowledge of beepers or truck safety measures they would not fully understand this particular “Yo Mama” joke. Furthermore, an audience member who does not know that cultural besting one another with ritualized insults would not appreciate the skill, let alone the frequent use of insult to assert power over another.

Many older comedians are finding that what was once commonly known is now lost on younger audiences. “It is, moreover, a nuisance that what is comic to one age is not to another; Shylock was a butt for the Elizabethans, but not for the Victorians; Richard III was played for comedy by Irving, but for pathos by Oliver” (Styan, 1962, p 230). For example, rolling up a car window used to be mimed as a crank that required much strength and struggle to get it closed. Now, younger generations are used to the automatic windows and cars with the manual windows are slowly fizzling out of existence. Soon a small amount of people will understand the function of the window crank. Another example lost is that once a friend mentioned that her child asked why a ringtone was called a *ringtone*. This baffled me because it is true that phones do not “ring” any more. Most people have mobile phones and do not use landlines. Even when you first buy a mobile phone, the default ringer is usually some watered down version of Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, and then from there, most everyone changes it to some popular song on the radio. Besides my mother, almost no one has a ringer as a ringtone, so it is no wonder that the child was confused with the word.

All this ties in with the mention of the oldest “Yo Mama” joke above, and the thesis. In 1976, J.J. van Dijk discovered a tablet that dated back 3,500 years ago that

contained what seemed to be jokes and riddles. van Dijk surmised that due to its rudimentary style that tablet was in fact written by a student (Streck & Wasserman, 2012). Experts can see the carvings are trying to convey comedy but it is very hard for the modern world to understand the joke. A joke deciphered on the text says:

“The deflowered (girl) did not become pregnant(!?),
the undeflowered (girl) became pregnant(!?).

(— What is it?)

(Answer:) Auxiliary forces(?)”

During the time that this tablet was written, the jokes may have been hilarious to the people telling them. Although it is not hard to see the humor in some of them, the jokes are out of context and it’s difficult to understand the full potential meaning of the jokes. This explains why many different cultures have their own styles of comedy and why outsiders often do not fully grasp the humor; it is because they do not fully grasp the context.

When I was studying in Bulgaria, I had a few Bulgarian friends and sometimes they would talk in Bulgarian to each other, and they would laugh at each other. I would ask what was so funny, and they said that I would not get it because it was too hard to explain in English. I said, “Try me.” Well, they were right. When they told me the joke, and tried to explain the context surrounding it, I still could not understand it. I just ended up faking a laugh and moving on to a different topic. What I discovered was that many Bulgarian jokes revolve around animals and their personification, just like American jokes can revolve around insulting other people’s mothers.

Even in a person's own culture it is sometimes hard to understand a joke if one does not understand the context, or is indifferent to it. The saying "He who laughs last, doesn't get it" is very true, because laughter is contagious. If everyone else is laughing then one feels the need to laugh, regardless if one understands the joke. People do not want to be the "butt" of the joke for not understanding it.

For example, I recently went to an Improv show in Boston, and there was one joke that didn't receive much acknowledgement because it was not understood. The setting of the sketch was a spelling bee and three of the actors were the contestants and two were the judges. The judges would call out to the audience for a word for the contestant to spell. One person yelled out "Santorum." After several political jokes later the contestant began to spell out, "A, N, A, el-." I let out a loud laugh. Unfortunately, no one around me found the joke funny and the only thing that is worse than not getting a joke is being the only one laughing very loudly.

My friend next to me asked me what the joke meant and I tried to explain it to her, but it was to no avail because the show was still going on. One must know the meaning of Santorum. Santorum is not just a candidate who is running for the Republican nomination for president in the 2012 election anymore. Dan Savage, a gay rights activist, coined a new meaning to Santorum's name because Santorum is an outspoken opponent of gay rights. If one were to look it up (which I advise caution in doing so), one will find that the word "santorum" has to do with anal intercourse. Now, if one does not know the context in which this is funny, again the meaning would be lost on them. As some may hear from the critics in the news, people are calling Santorum a theocrat who is trying to introduce much of his religious beliefs into public policy. All

this information is needed to understand this one joke; it is wonder humans are able to be comedic at all.

One argument against this thesis may be that if context is so important, then why have Shakespeare's comedies and many other older works still retained their value? The answer to this question involves context as much as modern sketches do. I would argue a main reason why Shakespeare's plays have withstood the test of time is because Shakespeare was a brilliant writer who was able to write about topics that are still meaningful to humanity. Meaning is everything in comedy and once something has lost its meaning the comedy is not the same.

Thus, when a black moustache is used to signify an evil man, it is quite clear that this significance is valid only so long as the audience assigns the value on the basis of such a sign. When, for whatever reason, the sign is no longer accepted, and when no natural signs are present in the work, the inference from sign to value is impossible, and the sign ceases to have meaning (Corrigan, 1980, p. 9).

So, although Shakespeare's comedies are able to get a comedic response out of a modern audience, there are still many references in his plays that are lost on the audience because of the context. For example, although it is not a comedy, in the opening of *Romeo and Juliet* Sampson bites his thumb at Gregory. The meaning is lost on a modern audience if they do not know the meaning behind the act of "biting your thumb." Today we express feeling of dislike towards another person through other nonverbal actions. Shakespeare writes about many themes, like love and vengeance, that are still prevalent

in today's society, but there are many other examples in Shakespeare that have lost their meaning over the years.

Social Criticism

The comedic sketch with the word "santorum" is saying much more than just a rude, funny definition for a word; it is a criticism of Santorum's political beliefs. What is funny is the incongruity with the meaning of "santorum" and the beliefs of the candidate Rick Santorum. The irony of the situation is that Rick Santorum does not believe in gay marriage, yet the made-up definition of his last name brings up rather raw associations with homosexuality. Savage does not agree with Santorum's opinion and wanted to fight back. Therefore, by defining Santorum's surname as something disgusting, many people cannot take him seriously and this takes away from his influence and also, the critic's voice is heard.

Comedy is like a social ninja. It distracts you with the safety and the good feeling of laughter and then out of nowhere it hits you with a roundhouse kick of criticism. Comedy does much more than entertain an audience. Comedy calls attention to crises within society and brings our problems "center stage" (pun intended). "[I]t is possible to gain valuable insight into the ways in which comedy masks and unmasks sites of anxiety" (Pye, 2006, p. 58). Although on the surface comedy may seem all fun and games, underneath all the jokes there is a seriousness of someone saying something about society. Thus, comedy is socially critical in that it can open the eyes of the audience and makes them see the faults in themselves or their community.

It helps if the comedy uses subtle and non-accusational techniques. As Johnston (2012) says, “Drama is for the feeling, comedy is for the thinking.” Comedy has the ability for the audience to laugh at themselves even when they don’t want to. “Laughter can capture us from outside and reveal aspects of ourselves even against our own will. And strangely this experience is emancipatory” (Willett, 2008, p. 3).

Context is what gives comedy its critical edge. “Comedy is an escape, not from truth but from despair” (Fry, 1960, p. 15). Comedy does not shy away from truths, and context is the key to unlocking the truth of the time. The *New York Times* writer, Michael Marder (2011), writes that comedy’s essence may be rooted in crisis. He uses the example of Mitt Romney’s Republican primary campaign in Florida during which Romney mentioned a joke about unemployment. He said that he was unemployed too because he didn’t have the job of President of the United States. The joke did not get a great response. In fact, it received the exact opposite response that he was expecting because there is a great difference between an unemployed multimillionaire and an unemployed middle-to lower-class citizen. The fault of his joke is that as the comic, he did not create the illusion of two against one. Instead he increased the anxieties of the Floridians and the joke was more on them instead on someone else. Marder explained how comedy is a result of crisis and social criticism.

For comedy to be successful as criticism, the audience needs to feel a certain distance from the topic of the joke. Romney’s joke was not successful in Florida because unemployment is a real and present issue for people (and most everywhere these days). The audience is very close to the crisis whereas Romney is not. “The after-taste of laughter may be bitter, Bergson grants, but comedy is itself only ‘a slight revolt on the

surface of social.’ Its gaiety happens like froth along a beach, for comedy looks at man from the outside: ‘It will go no farther’” (Sypher, 1956, p. 18). Comedy has to be from the outside because if it’s on the inside it becomes a tragedy.

“To make fun of the future is to put it under our control, if only for a brief instant of a shared explosive laughter, by mastering the fear it provokes” (Marder, 2011, para. 14). Comedy is a look at the present and a prediction of the future. The future holds fear and anxiety, but by being able to take a hard look at the present, it is possible for comedy to give people the feeling of control over current crises. Comedy has a sense of hope.

Chapter 3: “White Like Me”

Before Eddie Murphy, SNL was a predominately white cast. Garret Morris was an original cast member but he found it hard to rise above being type-cast in sketches that needed an African American. Because of his inability to generate his own material Morris was not able to gain stardom. In 1980, SNL came back for a sixth season. But with new cast members the sketches annoyed the audience and created dislike. Most of the sketches from that season have been described as tasteless and cultureless. Kay Gardella described the premiere as being “so disgusting and tasteless that throwing up would have been a compliment” (Whaley, 2010, p. 63).

Then, in 1981, Murphy joined the cast. At first he was put in sketches only as a walk-on “black character.” Finally Murphy received an opportunity as a respondent on the *Weekly Update* where he had the opportunity to try out racial humor. The audience responded kindly to his outlook on race and the viewership began to rise again. Murphy was promoted to full-time cast member (Whaley, 2010). This trend, although it is only an indication, shows that audiences crave something more than just shallow comedy.

In 1985, Murphy performed a sketch on SNL called “White Like Me.” The sketch started off with Murphy breaking the fourth wall and talking to the audience about the existence of two Americas, one white and one black. He stated that “talk is cheap” and that he wanted to find out whether white America exists, firsthand. Murphy built the sketch around three historically defining racist practices that targeted African Americans. The historical events alluded to by Murphy range across several decades of discrimination in the United States. He took up stereotypes defined through blackface;

segregation, particularly on public transportation; and economic discrimination, specifically in getting loans.

The start of his transformation in becoming white was to get a makeover. To be able to be fully immersed in white society, Murphy had to look white so he put on “white face.” Murphy also had to study the way that white people act, which he did by watching episodes of *Dynasty*. *Dynasty* was a nighttime television drama that premiered in the 1980’s and portrayed rich, greedy white Americans. The results of Murphy’s research are a pale skinned, “tight assed,” over-enunciating white male.

The concept of “white face” refers to “black face” and it references the representation of African Americans in entertainment, particularly the minstrelsy tradition. Minstrels used to observe black men as a sort of zoo animal and mimic them on stage (Williams-Witherspoon, 2006). By putting on “white face,” Eddie Murphy imitated the minstrels’ imitation of African Americans and so mocked white society. This is the first and all-encompassing joke presented in the sketch. Black face had a long and painful history within the United States, so painful that it is now effectively outlawed. The context for understanding black face begins centuries ago, but the era that is relevant for Murphy’s sketch began in the late 19th century and continued on through the early 20th century. White minstrel groups in the early 20th century would wear black face as a caricature of a black person. African Americans were not able to perform. Whites believed that blacks were animalistic and, therefore, not capable of art (Williams-Witherspoon, 2006). Since the actors were not able to employ “real” black people, they would make themselves up and act as they perceived slaves. The white American saw

slaves as unintelligent, tribal beings that danced very strangely, and so the African slaves were the “butt” of the joke in minstrelsy.

With black makeup on their faces and exaggerated white lips, minstrels would strut around the stage doing various silly things that “negroes” did, such as the cakewalk which had become popular in the theater. Although the cakewalk did have some roots in tribal dances, many slaves danced that way to mock their owners. “Ironically, the cakewalk was also a dance blacks used during slavery to imitate the strutting of whites” (Krasner, 1997, p. 78). African Americans thought white people danced ridiculously because of their stiff and rigid movements. When their owners had balls, slaves would watch them dance and then, in turn, imitate their owners dancing. Their white owners generally did not realize that their slaves were imitating them and thought they were doing primitive tribal dances. In essence, by mocking the African Americans the white minstrels were unknowingly mocking their own race (Krasner, 1997).

Many minstrels also sang the songs slaves would sing on the plantation. This again is ironic in that many plantation owners suppressed slave culture by not allowing slaves to sing or tell stories, by mocking plantation life, white minstrels were in fact salvaging African culture. This incorporated black culture into American history (Williams-Witherspoon, 2006). Although the intention of the minstrels was to criticize primitive ways of former slaves, their comedy did the opposite and empowered them.

Eventually, white audiences wanted more authenticity. They wanted real black characters. “According to Lisa Anderson, because audiences perceived blacks onstage ‘not as actors but as real live exhibits, or freaks shows’” (Krasner, 1997, p. 23). This gave many African American actors the opportunity to perform and the opportunity to subtly

change the way white people perceived the black community. Unfortunately, African American performers were restricted to performing the stereotypical “silly” slave. Although they had the opportunity to perform, minstrels and the audience limited the range of material to demeaning caricatures of black people (Krasner, 1997).

Post-slavery, African American performers were able to sneak criticism into their performances in ways intended to be noticed by many other African Americans and pro-equality Americans. “Counter-codes, innuendoes, and subtle shifts in emphasis suggest that the significance underlying performance was open to broader interpretations, and that performers, producers, and audiences could play against the grain of restrictive racial codes” (Krasner, 1997, p. 4). If the African American performers were too bold in their criticisms they would be fired, so actors resisted dominant culture by putting camouflaged criticism in their performances. Sometimes, however, African American audience members did not understand the criticism embedded in the performance and, therefore, also believed that the black performers were mocking African American culture. This caused African American performers to live in a sort of limbo, or a double consciousness (Krasner, 1997).

Murphy’s use of white face had a rich set of possible meanings as a result of this history. Murphy was not the first African American to perform in white face. Before him there was the character Willie Wayside, played by the famous African American performer Bob Cole. Willie Wayside was the town drunk and although the character was not the protagonist of several plays he made appearances in, he was an important comedic character during that time. He was an antagonist engaging in social critique.

Through exaggerated signs and multiple codes configured in the lyrics, the music, the unsaid, the implied, the historical context, the gestures, and the racial (whiteface) mask, Cole confronts Jim Crow by *attacking, albeit indirectly, its symbolic representation*, while simultaneously appearing as the “town drunk” in the midst of a carnivalesque ambiance (Krasner, 1997, p. 37).

The white audience would laugh at the predicaments that Willy Wayside would find himself in. Yet, what the audience was laughing at was a caricature of itself. By presenting a caricature of white culture to a white audience, it allowed a black performer to critique members of the ruling society to their willingly attuned ears.

Thus, African American comic performers found a way to critique an unjust society during the late 19th century. Similarly, Murphy’s performance is a critique of contemporary society.

The 1980’s in America were characterized by large-scale immigration “and the changing complexion of the large cities coupled with de-industrialization, growing unemployment, the flight of capital to states with permissive work laws a large reserve army of labor and the upward redistribution of wealth” (Patterson, as quoted in Williams—Witherspoon, 2006, p. 86.)

Although the minstrel theater and black face has ended decades ago, white Americans still maintained the image of the “black-skinned, blubber-lipped, [and] ‘flat-nosed’ character” (p. 50). This image has carried through the decades and is still resonant in the 80’s. Murphy was using the same critical method as Willie Wayside; he was highlighting the injustices of a racially divided country while making the white audience laugh at itself.

The second joke that Murphy made in “White Like Me” is about the racial divide itself. As Eddie Murphy walks through New York City, he discovers that there really is a white America hidden from Blacks. Eddie Murphy finds himself on a public bus, in New York City, with only one other black man. The bus is filled with deadpan faces of white folks sitting and waiting for their stop. Although the African American is not sitting in the back of the bus, he is surrounded by contemptuous white people; they are just waiting for him to get off. Finally, when the African American bus rider gets off, the white people, not knowing that Murphy is actually black, start to throw a party. So, although contemporary American society had destroyed formal segregation, the sketch argued there is still segregation between whites and blacks, although it did so through absurdity.

The bus as the scene for the joke has a great rhetorical significance when it comes to the oppression of African Americans. Prior to desegregation, African American were not allowed to sit at the front of the bus and had to stand if there were not enough seats for white Americans. Although the sketch did not represent segregation in terms of who can sit where, the setting of the bus symbolized a century of post-emancipation segregation that African Americans had to endure.

During the 1950’s, when bus segregation became an iconic scene of the civil rights struggle, Morris (1984) argues there was a “tripartite system of domination” wherein whites controlled blacks economically, politically, and personally. In 1953, in Baton Rouge, black leaders successfully petitioned the city council to pass an ordinance to allow seats on the bus be a “first-come-first-serve.” Although this law was passed, many bus drivers ignored the ordinance and still made African Americans sit at the back of the bus. African Americans started protesting the bus system by refusing to use the

buses (Morris, 1984). President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning any type of discrimination based on race, religion, color, or country of origin (Bruner & Haney, 2012). Although African Americans gained civil rights in the 60's, presumably opening all aspects of society to all people, Murphy depicts the persistence of a secret world of white America, a conspiracy to keep the races apart. The iconic setting of the bus provides the context that Murphy needed to make an absurd situation into a critical comment on racial divisions.

The last joke in this sketch is in regard to economic discrimination of African Americans. Murphy's character goes into a bank as a white man because the joke is that African Americans cannot get a loan. Murphy goes into a bank called "Equity" looking for a loan. He uses the alias "Mr. White" to reinforce his race. He sits down with an African American banker who looks through his history to see if he qualifies for a \$50,000 loan. The African American banker says, "you have no collateral, you have no credit, you don't even have any I.D." Just before the banker is about to turn Murphy down for the loan, the banker's white boss relieves him by sending him on break. After the African American banker leaves, the boss laughs and says, "that was a close one." The boss says that they do not have to bother with formalities, gives Mr. White a box of money, and tells him that he does not have to pay the bank back. Like the bus scenes, the sketch uses an absurdist plot twist to make a real issue visible.

This practice referenced in the bank scene is called redlining. Redlining is "the refusal of lenders to make mortgage loans in certain areas regardless of the creditworthiness of the individual loan applicant" (Holmes and Horvitz, 1994, p.81). Redlining began in 1934 but did not gain much attention until the post-civil rights era.

As racial minorities started moving to the inner city, following newly granted equality and opportunity, white Americans started to move out. Bankers were aware of this “white flight” and would discriminate against the African Americans to make sure they did not move into any white neighborhoods. The banks would outline African American neighborhoods with a red line. That red line meant that the people living in that area would not receive a loan, regardless of their credit (Wilson, 1997).

This decreased the value of the houses in that area which decreased the desire to move in to those areas. Without loans, African Americans and other minorities also could not move out of increasingly undesirable neighborhoods. On top of housing discrimination, employers were not willing to move into the inner cities because of the criminal stereotypes associated with those areas. This made it hard for the people living in the inner cities to find work. Transportation was also scarce so it was nearly impossible for the citizens to travel outside the city to find jobs. This combination of factors did cause an increase in crime because without jobs there is no routine and without routine there is boredom, and usually following boredom (along with economic disadvantage) is crime. So, in essence the stereotypes were confirmed (Wilson, 1997).

All this history provides the context for Murphy’s surprising trip to a bank in the sketch. The sketch was produced and performed in 1985, a time in which crime was up and the inner cities were represented as lawless. “Despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female-headed families, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970’s” (Wilson, 1997, p. 261). This immigration into the cities caused poverty to

shift from being mostly rural to mostly urban. Inner city poverty rose from 14.2 percent in 1970 to 19.9 percent in 1982 (Committee on National Urban Policy, National Research Council).

Also in the 1981, President Reagan was elected president; he staunchly opposed affirmative action. He also proposed the biggest tax cuts in history to that point, which were passed by both the Senate and the House, and which offset the governmental programs put in place by Franklin Roosevelt during the New Deal. This resulted in less government help for inner cities, which exacerbated the poverty. In 1982 the unemployment rate was the highest since the depression, rising to 10.4 percent (America's Best History). The inner city "epidemic" was becoming a major problem in the United States and Murphy chose to address this through his sketch, pointing to racism as a cause of inequity.

By making references to these historical events in his sketch, Murphy made racial discrimination a thing of the present, not just the past. The sketch, performed by one of the most popular comedians in American history, showed that African Americans had made great strides, but by juxtaposing the different eras next to each other it also showed that despite all the social transformation surrounding race relations, discrimination persisted. In doing so, it functioned as comedy and as critique, but only if the audience understood something of the events that structure the action in the sketch.

Chapter 4: The Results of Comedic Social Criticism

Because it relies on ambiguity and double-meanings, comedy has different effects on people with different backgrounds. Comedy is much like the story of the six blind men and the elephant (Polimeni & Reiss, 2006). The story goes that there were six blind, Indian men who were asked by the king to determine what an elephant was. When the six men found an elephant they all grabbed a different part of the elephant. According to the section of the elephant the man felt, he speculated on what an elephant was. The first man felt the broad side of the elephant and thought an elephant was a wall. The second man felt its tusk and thought an elephant was a spear. The third one thought it was a snake because he had felt its trunk and the fourth one felt its knee and believed the elephant to be a tree. The fifth man touched the ear and determined the elephant was a fan, while the last man grabbed the elephant's swinging tail and defined the elephant as a rope. When the men gave their accounts to the king, with each reporting different stories of what an elephant was the men all started fighting with each other and none of them ever gave up his definition. The moral of the story is that the blind men each "saw" the elephant with a different point of view and although they were all wrong, no man accepted any other man's opinion (Saxe, 1873).

This proverb was used to teach to preachers and scholars that there are many different points of view, and none of them are right or wrong. This proverb can also help explain how comedy means different things to different people. The context of comedy is the elephant, and the different parts of the elephant are the points of view that different people take, with their distinct cultural toolkits when hearing comedy. This story explains why comedy in one culture is not comedic in another culture. People only see

and experience limited parts of the full context and therefore cannot understand the other point of view.

Sometimes people are so blinded by their own points of view that they think others are wrong, and this can especially be true when it comes to comedy. People from different cultures can sometimes think that other cultures are not funny or do not have a sense of humor. For example, some Americans do not think British comedy is funny because they find it haughty and stuck up. By the same token, some people from Great Britain think that American humor is crude and ignorant.

It is also notorious that a “sense of humor” is an unreliable quality, and what will seem laughable to an English audience will not necessarily seem so to a Scottish. As a psychologist Thouless (1937) has written, “If members of a social group observe that their own objects of laughter do not produce laughter in another social group they are inclined to express this fact by saying that second group has no sense of humor.” (Styan, 1962, p.230)

This is why in the “semiotic triangle of comedy” there is the ability to have two audiences and two “butts of the joke.”

African American Comedy

Depending on the perspective, people laugh at different jokes for different reasons; this is where comedy becomes dangerous. Although the African American performers in the early twentieth century were trying to speak out against stereotypes by putting subtle criticisms within their performance, many of those statements were lost on the white audience. Many of the white American audiences just saw the African American performer as an authentic, ignorant Negro. ““Nobody can deny that a Negro can be one of the most amusing persons possible as long as he remains a Negro... It is when he tries to speak, do and look like a white man that he is at his worst”” (Krasner, quoting a racist critic, 1997, p.101). To some extent this state of mind has been carried through the centuries to today.

Because of comedy’s ability to be ambiguous the meaning found within the comedy is ambiguous too. For a white audience Murphy’s performance can be seen as just so many incongruities such as his pale skin, or the fact that he walks stiffly (unlike a stereotypical “black person walk”) or the fact that he over enunciates all his words like a white person. For an African American, the sketch might be seen differently. “For black performers, the tension between accommodating the needs of the public and a desire to transform the image of blacks was never quite resolved” (Krasner, 1997, p 159).

During the minstrel times, the African American performers formed a type of double consciousness. The first consciousness was the passion to perform in a hostile environment, and the second consciousness was the strong roots they felt towards their African culture.

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Dubois, 1903, p. 4)

Although the performers were given the opportunity to perform, they had to perform under the restrictions of whites. This caused tension between the performers and other African Americans because the latter thought that the performers were giving in and strengthening the stereotypes as seen by white Americans. Yet the performers were at a stalemate because they were not able to perform if they did not bow to the expectations of the whites. This is what formed the double consciousness. The African American performers lived their public life, under the eye of the white culture, and also lived a private life, the life of their ancestors. Their performance was their way of subtly resisting the double consciousness (Krasner, 1997).

Through his sketch, Murphy was making a criticism of the American culture, and how double consciousness effects African American's today. "Brenda Dixon Gottschild asserts that the black performer, by and large, 'has an intimate understanding of the necessity of living in two worlds and utilizing the mask as a survival mechanism'" (Krasner, 1997, p. 4). The conundrum faced by early black performers, and negotiated by Murphy, is alive today. The comedian Dave Chapelle used to have a show on comedy central called the *Chappelle Show*. During the height of his career he ended his show and

disappeared from the limelight for awhile. He later went on Oprah's talk show to explain why he had left.

Comedian Dave Chappelle confessed his discomfort on Oprah that while filming one of his stereotypical Black characters, he noticed that the white cameraman's enjoyment of the disparaging depiction was unusually distinct (see Chappelle's Story, 2005). Chappelle shared that "I know the difference of someone laughing with me and someone laughing at me." He described the experience as "a complete moral dilemma." This implies that the underlying mechanism of enjoyment of racial humor differs for White audiences specifically. (Banjo Pg. 142)

Many black comedians have experienced the scrutiny of white culture, but also have tried to maintain their identity. Murphy did not have leading parts on SNL until the audience started to enjoy his performances and Chappelle thought that he was losing his identity by reaffirming African American stereotypes. "[O]ne mistake these colored comedians did was the attempt to invade the white man's territory" (Krasner, 1997, p. 100). African Americans performers even today are stuck in a constant "catch-22" of acting as the minstrels portrayed them or not pursuing their passion because they were too "white and serious."

One way that African Americans are taking a step in maintaining their identity is through the use of language. One word that comes to mind is the word "nigger." This word has created much tension between the races. While white people ask "why are *they* allowed to use the word, but *I* can't," African Americans are trying to hold firm in their stance of the word. "The matter of language becomes rooted in a struggle of usage,

definition, and connection. David W. Blight observes that ‘the ownership of language—the liberation of words from debasement and control by the masters of plantation or states—can rescue the human spirit from totalitarian control’” (Krasner, 1997, p. 106).

Conclusion

Just like the elephant in the proverb, comedy can be seen as different parts of a whole context. Assuming that one does not know anything about “white face” the sketch can still be funny on the surface. All the painful emotion from the history of black face is absent but the incongruities are still there. Essentially, to the naïve eye, the sketch is about a black man who dresses up like a white man and looks funny. Someone with a broader view of the context surrounding black face may know that white minstrels used to paint their face black, but might not necessarily understand the brutal segregation reinforced by the act. This view can be dangerous because it can encourage the humor of the criticism without fully grasping the meaning and, therefore, run into the danger of making wildly insensitive jokes. For example, if Murphy became carried away with making white people look foolish, that group of the audience could turn on him just as the Floridians turned on Romney, and part of his intended audience would miss the criticism within the comedic sketch. Knowing the history that formed the context surrounding the joke makes it possible to establish the critique and to do some resistant work with it.

The same can be seen during the bus party scene. In fact, I almost missed the reference to the bus, but the location of the party seemed so unusual. If an audience member is not knowledgeable about the segregation on buses then that person would not

understand Murphy's point that segregation is still alive in contemporary America, even though it is trying to be hidden.

None of the jokes are being harmful outright toward African Americans, but what Murphy seems to be showing the audience is that treating someone a little more kindly because of the color of his or her skin can turn into a disaster. By ending on the most recent discriminatory events in history, redlining, Murphy is showing the United States the issue of racial division is still a problem even though it may not be physically hurting anyone. Without knowing the effects of redlining the audience would not know what problems inner city citizens face, and why certain stereotypes apply to certain races. What is worse is when the audience does understand the concept of redlining but does not understand the ramifications. Not knowing the consequences of actions can enable certain races to continue to be labeled by specific stereotypes, which is more harmful than being ignorant to the discrimination.

This sketch can be seen as funny without understanding the background behind the jokes, but it does not have the effect that the writer hoped it would if not. Knowing that black face was started to oppress and humiliate African Americans an audience member can recognize the discrimination that is being referenced to when they see Murphy's "white face." Remembering that segregation was enforced on the public bus system can help the audience be critical of any segregation going on around them. Finally, recognizing the consequences of economically discriminating against a race is useful because it can instill hope in trying to redress injustices. Murphy does give the audience a hopeful ending by telling them that if you get to know someone and like them,

their skin color does not matter in the end. By understanding all these elements the audience is able to “form the whole elephant.”

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Upon graduation Abby is staying at the University of Maine to get her Masters in Communications. After Graduate school she would like to move to Chicago and try out for Second City.