

# Stand-Up Comedy, Social Critique and a Few Notes on Retelling the Origins of American Studies

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*Abstract:* This essay considers a range of ways scholars reflect on the origins and institutionalization of the field of American studies in the post-World War II era. Drawing on examples from the comedy of Mort Sahl, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, and Richard Pryor, this essay argues that post-war stand-up comedy supplies an aesthetics and an ethics that can open up new and productive ways of engaging critically with the origins of the field

*Well before I was born, my great grandmother threw herself in front of a bus. The police tried to say she was committing suicide. But the family knew she was just trying to stop civil rights.*

- Anthony Jeselnik, *Caligula* (2013)

**O**n his 2013 album *Caligula*, Anthony Jeselnik confesses that a dreadful death in the family was no pedestrian suicide but an act of white supremacist terror. The comedian summons a relative only to throw her in the path of a moving vehicle--and into a bit of rhetorical slapstick. In fact, he invents an enemy of civil rights whose desperate need to seize control of the front of a bus leads to a death so bizarre the police can't fathom it as political protest. What sort of joke is this? An instance of affectionate familial misogyny and one that offers us, also, the delight of imagining justice-dealt-by-public transit for an ancestor's idiotic, self-sabotaging crusade against integration.

To Americanists, who are regularly compelled to contemplate the politics and purpose of our disciplinary predecessors, I offer Jeselnik's "bit" as an inroads into new ways of thinking, talking, and writing about our relations to the origins of the field. The post-World War II era that marked the arrival of American Studies as an academic field was contemporaneous with the emergence of varieties of comic speech that coalesced into the recognizable genre of American expressive culture we know as stand-up comedy. In this essay, I argue that stand-up, more than an object of scholarly investigation in its own right, is a rhetorical form that can open up new interpretive

engagements with the origins of American studies and our investment in revisiting its postwar origins. I am not interested in the dubious proposition that stand-up comedy from the 1950s onward offers an alternate lineage for American Studies. Instead, this essay is motivated by a curiosity about postwar stand-up as a rhetorical form and a *discrete* mode of inquiry into an “American” personality, culture, politics, and identity. Mort Sahl, Moms Mabley, and Richard Pryor (individuals whose careers spanned and surpassed the 1950s) developed rhetoric and shaped an aesthetic that generated unfamiliar, dynamic forms of analysis. Sahl’s rhetorical signature: beats, cadences, digressions and colloquial registers provided the rhythm of an open-ended, dialogic political critique. Moms Mabley’s ingenious dissembling, accompanied by light-hearted faulty-thinking and faulty-talk, could seize and shake the conscience of an unsuspecting audience, even as she made herself the butt of a joke. Pryor’s brilliant talent of giving voice to the adversary and running commentary to the audience could interleave comic slapstick with deadly serious discourse. Sahl’s, Mabley’s and Pryor’s distinct varieties of stand-up supply alternate expressive modes and a politics of form designed to nudge commonplace talk on social and civic life out of its discursive ruts.

Americanists’ standing practice of accounting for their disciplinary forbearers is mired in its own ruts. To pack it in would be catastrophic, however; this inquiry never ceases to be compulsory, principled, urgent. In his much-cited, well-worn and indispensable essay “‘Paradigm Genres’ in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement,” Gene Wise identifies an early illustration of the project so-called Americanists would pursue in the life Vernon Louis Parrington. Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927), Wise explains, was the work of “single mind grappling with materials of American experience, and driven by concentrated

*fury to create order from them.*" Perry Miller's well-known Marlow-ian "jungle epiphany" in the Congo was another "representative act" or "paradigm drama" that set off what Wise calls the "academic movement" (Wise 1979, 297-299). Parrington's and Miller's efforts were characterized by "the obsession to give order, explanation to America's experience, and the will to break through scholarly conventions blocking that quest," and this enterprise was further nurtured by Yale University faculty that ventured outside their disciplinary silos in search of productive intersections between art history, literary studies, and history (Wise 1979, 303). Nevertheless, their post-war project was bolstered by the University provost's desire for a curriculum that championed free enterprise and individual liberties as the keystones of Americans' "cultural heritage," a program of study that could hold economic totalitarianism at bay (Holzman 1999, 84). Fundraising for the emerging field relied on the premise that etching the contours of a distinctly American personality and crafting discourses of American Exceptionalism were weapons against Cold War communism (Holzman 1999, 90). In the decades that followed, however, the work of these early self-identified Americanists became a starting point for revisionary scholarship that questioned the fundamental assumptions of its white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal stance. That the current field of American studies shares a lineage and affiliation with a Cold War endeavor necessitates bouts of genealogical soul-searching. Below, I present an abbreviated but not entirely overstated inventory of the places where this soul-searching has stalled. After that, I propose that stand-up rhetorics could complicate or "jump-start" its discursive logics.

**Mommy, Grandma is Starting to Breathe Again.  
Shut up, and Get that Pillow Back in Place!**

Some scholars have moved to crack down on an unequivocal and impassioned censuring of postwar American Studies by steering its critics to alternative ancestries or by stressing its methodological impact in lieu of its early politics. Elaine Tyler May's "The Radical Roots of American Studies" playfully chisels a Mount Rushmore of the three Marx's (Karl, Groucho, and Leo) and so finds levity in the early field. She generously toasts the discipline's "founding fathers" - and a few "mothers" - for the "critical edge that characterized much of the scholarship of the postwar years" (May 1996, 180). The muscle of this case, however, relies on a pliable lineage that locates forerunners in such scholars as W. E. B DuBois, who might have (to paraphrase the most - or only - entertaining Marx brother she alludes to) refused to join *this particular club even if it would* have him as a member. May is only one of many patient apologists that suggests that what we call American Studies preceded its institutionalization. Along these lines, the "field" bended briefly toward justice before stumbling somewhere else.

While May's essay concedes the "myopia" of the myth and symbol school that "defined American culture as grounded in White male Protestant Anglo-Saxon traditions that were reactionary, nostalgic, stifling, and antidemocratic," not to mention oblivious of "the creativity and activism emanating from groups excluded from that tradition," she contends that a quick, irrevocable indictment of American studies neglects its meaningful achievements (May 1996, 188-189). Philip Deloria, too, has rolled his eyes at the "collective congealing of an American studies creation story," particularly the tired censuring of the "heteronormative white male

club" and "its failures to do this or that." (The "this" and "that" it is indicted for are the "uncritical celebration of an American exceptionalism that underpinned imperial and neocolonial projects across the globe" associated with Cold War containment culture.) (Deloria 2009, 10, 12). In other words, if the Cold War blunted "the critical edge" the field now aspires to, methodological innovations in post-war American studies were a vital antidote to formalist criticism. Furthermore, May maintains the field continuously supplied a "'free space' of sorts for rogue scholars of various stripes" (May 1996, 187). These reasonable pretexts could very well assuage practical objections to intellectual chauvinism, and they ought to mitigate the impulse to trot out an old chestnut about the field's Faustian bargain with American Exceptionalism. But they are also cosmetic antidotes, and there is something of the despot in therapy that withholds license to scratch a remorseless and irresistible itch.

### **Mommy, Why Can't I Kiss Grandma?**

#### **Shut up, and Close the Casket.**

One remedy for fixating on the ancestral project in service of American Exceptionalism is the formidable practice of forgetting our disciplinary forbearers. Forgetting is one way we come to know ourselves. Then today's American Studies is a field not only sheared of its umbilical cord, but one that liberally "adopts" outsiders: ethnic and cultural studies that find no footing elsewhere in the academy, for instance. This posture prefers mergers over modest but risky self-effacing activism that would endanger our more steady footing—which is not to pretend that American studies is immune to budgetary cuts. Still, ours is a "large tent" mentality or, in less gratifying terms, we make American Studies a boarding house and the field a landlord in some (and even the dirty) senses of the word.

In 1997, Mary Helen Washington's presidential address at the annual conference of the American Studies Association asked, "What Happens to American Studies if you put African American Studies at the Center?" Washington pointed out that the "extraordinary experimental work" and interdisciplinary bent of African American Studies in the 1970s "should have made, but did not make, African American studies and American studies natural collaborators, fraternal, if not identical, twins" (Washington 1998, 3). Still, if we have at last succeeded in meeting Washington's compelling challenge to "*institutionalize* inter-ethnic, inter-racial, multi-cultural paradigms" to remake the ASA in as "liberated and liberating institutional space," are we entirely freed of Gene Wise's concern that American Studies is a domesticating, "parasite" field that recruits or rescues disciplines "which have their real base vitality in the culture at large" (Washington 1998, 22; Wise 1979, 315)? Can we exult a now-fulfilled prophecy that the old center of American Studies is a crumbled, innocuous artifact and revel in a clean bill of health? Or is there a language for unfinished business, one that admits we are host to a dormant virus that, at any moment, could flare up and infect our scholarly habits?

**Mommy, Can we Play with Grandpa?**

**No, You've Dug Him up Enough Already.**

There is still a camp that persists in the once-reflexive-now-retrograde condemnation of the early projects of American Studies and the Cold War imperative that nourished it. The honesty of this simple politics of pure loathing for the past - one that would disinter one's forerunners from the coffin only to pound new stakes into their hearts - lies in its apparently uncompromising, caustic vision. Of

course, there is something congratulatory in a cynical, self-righteous disavowal and ritual excoriation of the emergence of American Studies. To be sure, the etymology of sarcasm is to rip the flesh off of dogs, and one cannot help but bloody one's hands when flaying a dead beast and making a meal of it. But a perfect estrangement from postwar American Studies scholars is far-fetched, especially when we share the same brand. What idiom can best show contempt for the past while conceding our relation to it? Jeselnik, I think, manages something like this in a tasteless public eulogy for what we can only hope is another imaginary grandmother. He remarks that his fondest memories of her were when she cuddled up to him on the sofa and read Mark Twain, solemnly explaining that it combined her two favorite pastimes: "Spending time with her grandson and using the n-word" (Jeselnik 2015). Comedian Chris Rock's bleak suggestion that for Blacks, America is like "the uncle who paid for you to go to college, but who molested you," supplies a stronger analogy (Rock 2004). In these instances, Jeselnik and Rock agitate familial attachments without denying their own affective investments in the past, or their ancestors' persistent claims upon the present.

How can Americanists proceed with a candid account of the postwar origins of the field—an account that does not blithely dismiss the vexations of its emergence or profess absolution of its past offences, or become agonizingly mired in livid antipathy and Oedipal ire? I turn to postwar stand-up comedy to locate the rhetorical forms that may accomplish this task.

From the 1950s on, stand-up comedians launched animated attacks on figures of authority, unsettling the language of American Exceptionalism. Many of them punctured Cold War logic and



the postwar culture of containment as they explored the stratified, variegated texture of an American “personality” in crisis. My point is emphatically not that stand-up comedy inevitably short-circuited social conventions or supplied a counter-hegemonic stance. Stand-up comedy has never had a pact with liberatory history. It has frequently reinforced prevailing norms, and often been designed to entertain uncritically. Yet the 1950s marked the arrival of new comedic registers that differentiated its cultural status from existing entertainments. In this period, it became a “distinctive cultural form, separate from other modes of performance and enticing the public to support shows exclusively comprised of stand-up comics” (Krefting 2014, 37). I won’t discuss the prevalence of the cycle of jokes whose homicidal impulse protests the very notion of familial relations during this era (see above), though their macabre quality underscores the proliferation of comedy-as-grassroots-assault against Cold War containment culture (Boskin 1997, 57-59). I do point to some of the post-war developments in professional stand-up when, as Rebecca Krefting argues, “audiences were increasingly hospitable to critiques of institutionalized inequality, particularly around indices of race and ethnicity” (Krefting 2014, 37). What follows is a constellation of moments – paradigm dramas, if you will – that help us consider the rhetorical elements and performative styles that stand-up comedy has to offer to contemporary Americanists interested in rethinking and rewriting our relationship to the postwar origins of the field and its early scholarship. I focus on three examples of comedic commentary from stand-ups Mort Sahl, Moms Mabley and Richard Pryor, respectively, highlighting how their formal acrobatics and physical performance ingested the incongruities in American politics and society to arrive at a sophisticated ethics and aesthetics of critique.

**“Maybe if Things go Well this Year We Won’t Have to Hold These Meetings in Secret Anymore.”**

In the 1950s, Mort Sahl was one of the first of the comedians who found audiences willing to “reassert their power as individual sovereign citizens through laughter, even (or especially) if it came at the expense of those who wielded power from the distance of a high office” (Robinson 2010, 109). The many provocations of Lenny Bruce’s confrontational and irreverent humor on race relations—exemplified by his biting satire of an anti-Semitic quasi-liberal bigot in “How to Relax your Colored Friends at Parties”—would use humor to unapologetically transgress social norms (Kaufman 2012, 130). And when “race was placed squarely on the discursive table in a highly visible way,” Bambi Haggins has noted, “Dick Gregory was there” (Haggins 2007, 3). Though Gregory modeled respectability in a clean-cut dark suit, his stand-up was no less invested in dismantling Cold War ideologies and social hypocrisies. Nevertheless, Sahl pioneered a mode of delivery as he caricatured heads of state, jeered at political duplicity, and lobbed an image of the Cold War as farce. Though his take on current events was flip-pant, off-the-cuff, and highly digressive (even if he appeared to be reading the news straight off the press), his technique incorporated a constant appraisal of the utility of humor as a mode of critique.

The album *Mort Sahl At The Hungry i* (1960) is chock-full of laughs and severe groans. He notes, for instance, that during Nixon’s trip to the American Exhibition at Gorky Park, “President Eisenhower was in a new role, having been completely in charge when Nixon was out of the country,” and he pointed out that religious groups strongly favor the death penalty, “even if a man is occasionally executed unjustly. And they believe in that, even

though they made a very large mistake once" (Sahl 1960). The Jewish American comedian begins with a bit on the recent U-2 Incident, when a U.S. spy plane was discovered in Soviet airspace, promising to "reconstruct it tortuously." He ends by encouraging the audience to "break up into buzz groups and discuss the real meaning of the material," as if the general shape of his performance mimics a university lecture followed by recitation sections. In fact, through the 1950s and 1960s Sahl sported a "casual campus wardrobe (the signature cardigan sweater, slacks, loafers, rumpled hair, open collar, rolled-up shirtsleeves)" - in 1954 Terrence O'Flaherty from the *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "just the right campus touch" (Nachman, 2003, 50). But what Sahl explains will be a "10-minute review" of American history "starting last August" is breathtakingly undisciplined. His account of the American political scene is nearly eclipsed by parenthetical observations, forays into unrelated territory, and associative flights of fancy. His is a shaggy dog comedy, stippled with half-apologetic remarks, as if the comedian suddenly realizes he has gone astray: "excuse me for digressing"; "but anyway"; "now back to our theme"; "oh listen, before I forget," and so on. Sahl intermittently interrupts each routine with sudden shouts of laughter, snorts, unfinished sentences, and omissions.

But the news inevitably resurfaces in Sahl's comedy, and when it does, his bark has quite a lot of bite. When he first encountered the comedian in 1953, "avid fan" Nate Hokum heard a car salesman-by-day's "unswerving attack" that wreaked havoc "upon our entire system of order"; Sahl's bundle of caustic comments constituted a "dissertation on our sacred cows and revered institutions." This was "the antithesis of the slick comic" that slid glibly into the post-war era untouched by social change, miles away from what Gerald Nachman has labeled the "postwar pre-renaissance"

comedians: “comic craftsmen” plying their trade; “joke-tellers, spielers, showbiz brawlers” doing their thing; “one-liner salesmen, guffaw dealers, joke brokers.” These old school performers were, Nachman respectfully explains, “jovial go-along get-along guys whose mandate was to amuse; survival was their foremost worry, not social commentary” (Nachman 2003, 50, 22). Herbert Caen of the *San Francisco Chronicle* differentiated Sahl from this “chatter-and-patter” or “professional” funnyman, pointing to the strange amalgam of materials in his comedy: “Its ingredients are so twisted around and re-integrated in each performance that he successfully creates the impression of complete ad libitum.” Enrico Banducci, who owned *The Hungry i* and gave Sahl his big break, described the comedian’s riffs as a “brave exercise in the art of free speech,” filled with a spontaneity of social critique so off-the cuff that, “Sometimes, when he develops a particular rapport with this audience, he takes off and flies, and his sudden, brilliant ad-libs and inspirations would never be heard outside an on-performance recording.”

These are not merely “smart-aleck footnotes” that materialized on the daily paper that was Sahl’s casual prop, but an eviscerating graffiti on newsprint, one of those “uninvited forms of inscription”: a “subcultural ‘plague’” that marks and pollute spaces” or “excretory marking rituals” that attend, as Michel Serres points out, “the possibilities of (de)(re)territorialization” (Walton, 2017, 121). *Mort Sahl At the Hungry i* is a record of the comedian’s phonological delinquency: extemporaneous rattling of ordinary ideas, good-humored and venomous sneers, not only scribbled in the margins of the news but scrawled in capital letters on existing print. Nachman also singles out the “athletic dexterity” of Sahl’s performances: “the menacing smile, the subversive guffaw, the supple voice that can reproduce anything from party hack to

airhead starlet” and monologue shot through with his signature “barking laugh” (Nachman 2003, 67). Caen marveled at the “blinding bursts of speed” in a meandering soliloquy “about cable cars and cops and raids and politicians” and compared Sahl to “a jazz musician playing a chorus: toying with phrases, following the melody and suddenly losing it, trying for high notes that he sometimes splattered.” Sahl punctuates his insubordinate talk with unwieldy snorts and sputtering, meta-communicative signals that point to a kind of mutiny *beyond* insubordination, a secondary language that meditates on the complexion of social commentary he has to offer, that questions and finds itself always unfinished. “Is there anyone I haven’t offended?” he asks by way of closing—in the very middle of the performance. His comic mode envisions and pursues a comedy of a different order: one that really gets in the expressive muck to offer a formidable critique equal to the gravity of political life.

Michel Serres observes that, “the behavior of squatters can be understood as a radical form of interrogating ideas and practices of ownership and property rights.” From the 1950s to mid-1960s, Sahl’s was a vagrant politics turned verbal coup and an intellectual curiosity that eviscerated the headlines, ripped the skin off the body politic, and publicly feasted. Not only did he vandalize everything in his path, he marked his territory with a style of speech that was a second order of critique. On the one hand, cultural historian Peter Robinson squarely positions Sahl as a political comedian that found a public hungry for a humor that could assault the “political status quo and society’s intractable contradictions, including that between what author Susan Sontag called the two competing destinies of the age: the unrelenting banality of seemingly limitless prosperity and consumption, and the inconceivable terror of nuclear destruction” (Robinson 2010, 118). On the other

hand, Sahl's strange, uncontrolled squawks, uneven inflection, and wild detours examine the nature and effects of social critique even as that critique takes place. What Americanists might take from the ethics of this vocal syncopation, which intersperses the uttered critique with inquiry into the practice of critique, is the opportunity to move beyond "competing destinies" - that is to say, rival histories - and to call into question the role of disclaimers and dismissals when it comes to recapitulating the emergence of the field.

**"Have You Been Down South at all? What do They Call You? Do They Call You Jackie or Moms? I've Never Known."**

The variety show host Merv Griffin asked this question in 1969. Perched next to Griffin in red knit cap and a hideous yellow housecoat patterned with pink, white and blue flowers over an equally ugly dress, Jackie "Moms" Mabley is very much at ease. For some time, Mabley had adopted the non-threatening stage persona of an old and occasionally toothless woman in an "oversized clodhoppers, tattered gingham dresses, and oddball hats," but her performances were far from innocent (Watkins 1999, 391). Mel Watkins explains that the African American comedian's regalia was simply "the buffer or intermediary necessary to quell resistance to a woman doing a single comic routine" (Watkins 1999, 391). In this interview, she cuts Griffin off with a casual wave of her hand. "They like me down there, to tell you the truth," she explains. "In fact," she continues, tapping her finger on the table that separates the host from his guest, "they like me so well...they named me, what's that name that man got that horse in the moving pictures...that western man?"

"Who? Uh Roy Rogers?"

"Roy Rogers, they named me Roy Rogers' horse."

"Trigger?"

"Trigger, yeah."

"That's what they call you in the South?"

"Everywhere I go, hello Trigger! What you saying, Trigger?....At least I think that's what they said...."

The apparently harmless and absent-minded "Moms" first dramatizes her enthusiastic reception down South by throwing her hands wildly in the air and clasping them together. Then she clasps those same hands tightly in her lap, mouth turned down and brow wrinkled in puzzlement. She dares, no, compels her white audience to laugh at guileless "Moms"'s expense. Griffin raises his eyebrows and sits upright, suddenly the straw man and slightly alarmed at the guilty pleasure of this likely unscripted gag, not to mention the temporary gutting of his authority by his otherwise disarming guest. He is abruptly riveted by the surface of his desk. The audience, meanwhile, bursts into laughter. They have just seen "Moms" suddenly seeing herself seen.

This event belongs to a genealogy of what theorist and literary critic Lauren Berlant has called acts of Diva Citizenship, when "a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege" (Berlant 1997, 223). Mom's joke relies upon "wounding words," language that, as legal scholar Charles Lawrence

has controversially argued, is no less viscerally experienced than an actual slap (Haiman 1993, 28). She painstakingly dramatizes the effect of an epithet in a succession of expressions, as uncertainty and then sorrow rise to the surface of her face. Of course, her consummate toying with incendiary remarks makes a gag of forfeiting dignity. The work of the tendentious joke, Freud has suggested, “shows itself in a choice of verbal material and conceptual situations”; pleasure stems from that temporary reappearance of what has “been repudiated by the censorship in us” and are supposed to be lost (Freud 1960, 159). And yet, he points out, “to the human psyche all renunciation is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost” (Freud 1960, 120-121). Effortlessly eliciting a racist idiom from a theoretically dormant vernacular, Moms makes plain that stinging language, supposedly muted by the recent passage of Civil Rights legislation, can have volcanic effects. Berlant remarks that diva-auratic events “emerge in moments of such extraordinary political paralysis that acts of language can feel like explosives that shake the ground of collective existence” and call upon their audiences to act (Berlant 1997, 223). Mabley’s seismic, televised provocation, her “trigger” – here and elsewhere “encased” in the familiar, reassuring “vaudevillian-styled joke series” – destabilizes the comfortable exchange between host and guest with an uneasy laughter, obtained at the expense of her own humiliation (Haggins 2007, 150).

Here I must note that self-deprecation was among the vital comic instruments women had at their disposal during the 1950s and 1960s. While Mabley adopted a comic persona as a non-threatening, “desexualized, alternately cantankerous and kindly sort of revisionist mammy,” her entry into televised entertainments was electrified



by her signature libidinous hankering after young men blended with brilliant comic sociopolitical commentary (Haggins 2007, 150). Linda Mizejewski contends that women's access to mainstream stand-up comedy in the 1950s was tightly restricted, and argues that it was tolerable for Jewish and African American women to participate in the "male world of smut" only because their "color, ethnicity, or immigrant status marked them as not feminine" (Mizejewski 2014, 18). Jewish American stand-ups such as Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers depended on self-effacing humor; their social critique was contraband, just below "humor's beguiling surface" (Gilbert 2004, 2). Nevertheless, women comedians sometimes offered an abrasive take on female sexuality that was otherwise "silenced, euphemized, or neglected" in an "era of Doris Day virginity and twin beds for Mr. and Mrs. Cleaver" (Mizejewski 2014, 19). Jewish American comedian Belle Barth's raunchy comedy, captured on albums like *My Next Story Is a Little Risque* (1961) and *If I Embarrass You, Tell Your Friends* (1960), included the memorable lyric: "I'm gonna line a hundred men up against the wall. / I bet a hundred bucks I can bang them all" (Mizejewski 2014, 19). And Rusty Warren's unforgettable Cold War, pre-bicentennial ditty reminded her audience that if "it's great to live in a democracy today, where freedom is everywhere," a woman's most earnest display of patriotism was to "Bounce your Boobies" on *Rusty Warren Bounces Back* (Warren 1961). Thus the genius of Mabley's televised performances was the vividly conceived, highly polished, and well-executed "Moms," whose frumpy dress and farcical penchant for handsome young men provided the perfect guise for inciting a different, discomfiting register of laughter in unwitting audiences.

Of course, it is presumptuous to assume that in every case laughter felt the keen edge of her words. For instance, Haggins suggests Dick Gregory's jokes about a black president were

met with a broad range of laughter: laughter that *could* embody “communal solidarity,” *might have* brushed off “the preposterous absurdity of a black president” or *attempted* “to obscure the serious discomfort many harbored concerning such a prospect” (Haggins 2007, 162). By contrast, Mabley’s overtly political jokes appeared eminently palatable. In her live performances, she regaled audiences with impossible tales of intimate chats with Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Lyndon B. Johnson—whom were all, apparently, in desperate need of her guidance. She recounted her sharp scolding to the presidential candidates on matters of national security and civil rights, and described her service to the country as a diplomat—a trade very much at odds with her lowly attire. From her nonchalant posturing and self-important airs, however, it was only a few steps to a plain-spoken activism in comic garb.

But her 1969 appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show* was one where the comedian embraced the danger of incurring her own and others’ distress and, in doing so, called upon her audience to confront the repressed currents of racism that gave shape to their social worlds. For American Studies scholars earnestly engaged with writing the origins of the field, this type of talk could capsize liberal convictions in unsullied progress, requiring both scholars and their audiences to wade, at least temporarily, into sites of serious discomfort.

### **I’m not Bullshitting Here, Those Motherfuckers Hurt.**

Finding himself slightly short of breath during *Live in Concert*, a filmed 1979 performance, the black comedian Richard Pryor moves to tell his audience about his recent heart attack (Pryor 1979). “I was just walking along and someone said ‘Don’t breathe.’” His left arm extends away from the body at a strange angle, and the hand on

the end of it a tight fist pressed against the center of his chest twists as if turning a deadbolt. Pryor's first response is one of confusion. "I said, 'Huh?'" "'You heard me motherfucker, I said 'Don't *breathe!*'" Another turn of the fist. Pryor assures his assailant in a meek, high-pitched whimper, "Okay, I won't breathe, I won't breath, I won't breathe," only to be rebuked by that unsociable voice: "Then shut the fuck up!" But the comedian's sniveling entreaties continue, "Okay, don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me, don't kill me" until the low-pitched and pitiless voice hollers, "Get on one knee and prove it!" Pryor falls to one knee and faces the audience, still dramatizing the interchange between his heart and himself: "You're thinking about dying now, aren't you?" "Yes." Each new admonition is marked by another wrenching turn of the fist against his chest and a reflexive jolt of pain, "You weren't thinking about it when you were eating all that pork!" This last rebuke draws bursts of laughter from the audience but shoves Pryor onto the stage, writhing on his back, gritting his teeth in pain. "You know black people have high blood pressure," his heart scolds him. "I know, I know, I know."

At this point, a brief interregnum: Pryor raises his back from the stage, breaking the forth wall and the dramatic frame to address his audience: "You be thinking about shit like that when you think you're going to die." He revisits his desperate appeals by way of example. Pryor's supplications are, by now, frenziedly crushed into a single declaration, a frantic neologism: "Don'tkillmedon'tkillmedon'tkillme." On such occasions, the comedian clarifies, "You put in an emergency call into god." He seamlessly transitions back into character, piteously inquiring, "Can I speak to god right away please?" and then addresses the audience again, transferring the mic to his right hand. There's "always some angel like" — now imitating the nasal voice of an indifferent telephone op-

erator that elicits new peals of laughter: "I'm going to have to put you on hold." "And then," he explains, "your heart get mad if it find out you've been going behind its back to God. It say," adopting an incredulous but mildly entertained tone, "was you trying to talk to god behind my back?" but when the comedian denies it, his infuriated heart launches another attack that returns Pryor to his agonized contortions on the stage. "You's a lying motherfucker!"

Pryor's interpreters have typically focused on the punchline to the joke, which involves Pryor regaining consciousness in an ambulance to find a group of white people hovering over him. This leads him to the exasperating conclusion that, "I died and wound up in the wrong motherfucking heaven!" But the genius of the exchange that precedes this comic relief is no less revelatory about race relations. The comedian has just wrenched his heart from his body, encountered his own heart as unfamiliar "someone" and witnessed it attack him, choke him, reproach him, threaten him, assault him, and leave him senseless. What is more, that fuming, menacing cartoon villain of a heart has an already familiar disposition. It belongs to the police. Pryor incessantly references the brutality and indiscriminate violence of law enforcement against black Americans in *Live in Concert*. In fact, earlier in the performance, when recounting the bizarre circumstances under which he shot his car to keep his wife from leaving, he remarked, "Then the police came. I went into the house. Cause they got magnums too. And they don't kill cars. They kill Niggers." However, when he plucks out the vital organ that sustains him, he finds that his heart has adopted and internalized that same cruel vocabulary and propensity for violence. It was lying in wait to assault him. Pryor's account suggests that even one's vital organs may have been corrupted; the integrity of one's own body is not to be taken for granted. For Americanists who would happily throw

their postwar predecessors under the bus, Pryor's insight prompts us ask how we are both injured and animated by their scholarship. We might also ask, from time to time, who is playing ventriloquist?

### **You Cannot go Swimming if You Have Diarrhea.**

In a 2014 performance on *CONAN*, stand-up comedian Tig Notaro speculated on the provenance of placards in public pools that cautioned visitors not to swim with diarrhea. What kind of comfort with one's body would it take, Notaro asked, pressing her hand to her stomach, for an individual to think, "I'm not feeling so well... doctor said I should probably stay at home. But you know, I think I'm going to head down to the public pool and do some laps" (Notaro 2014). Notaro's impression of this defecating Philistine, performing the backstroke in the pool with "full on diarrhea" and vindicated by the absence of any municipal prohibition against such behavior, finds its parallel in stand-up comics' frequent, ingenious violations of propriety. This bit also, inevitably, evoked what scholar John Limon has described as the "tour de force" of meta-comedy that put "aggression and excretion into form": Lenny Bruce's "I'm going to piss on you" (Limon 2000, 15). And it is worth pointing out that the comedic-diarrhetic's culturally-specific form of—to borrow a phrase from anthropologist Mary Douglas—"ritual pollution" precisely characterizes Notaro's historic performance *Live* (2012). This performance brims with the impromptu, uninhibited divulgence of Notaro's battle with superbug C.Diff and the tragic accident that led to her mother's death, not to mention her then recent diagnosis with breast cancer. But could we regard *Live* as an instance of parrhesia, not in a pejorative sense (a hemorrhagic gush of chatter), but as an agonizingly candid rhetorical form that dares its interlocutor to stifle it? And if so, does this mode of contemporary stand-up have

a place in what activist and documentarian Michael Moore called the “army of comedy” required for political dissent (Pearson 2017)?

I end with this description of the celebrated work of contemporary stand-up comedian Tig Notaro to gesture at the far reaches of stand-up comedy today, whose frequent habit is to tell everything — to pollute the pool, one might say, with every effluvia or noxious suppuration that belongs (or belonged) to the body, in an unsanitary and potentially toxic catharsis. I sometimes wonder if this expressive mode suggests the route to an agonizingly candid scholarship in American Studies modeled on the figure of the parrhesiaste, which Socrates linked to ethics and an “aesthetics of the self” (Foucault 2001, 166).

I have argued, however, that the comedic architecture Sahl, Mabley, and Pryor introduced to stand-up comedy is of a sharper, more penetrating sort and with an ethical agenda that is relevant to scholarly reflection on the history of the field of American Studies. Sahl does not hesitate to employ the contempt of the graffiti artist or the obscenities of the squatter in service of (de)(re)territorialization of hegemonic space. But this brash talk is a broken talk, intruded by formal signals that undercut the arrogance of critique *and* call into question the sufficiency of the counter-attack. Mabley, acting as diva-citizen, intermittently “triggers” moments of serious discomfort, such that the discreditable, sometimes even appalling residue of the past comes into view, and what lies below the conscious surface returns. Pryor recognizes that vital organs are shaped by violence; they are neither differentiated from nor can be undifferentiated from our bodies. They will attack, and when they do, we must pluck them out and listen to the ideological bearings of their speech. Sahl’s, Mabley’s and Pryor’s expressive modes provide different tactics for speaking of and to postwar American

Studies, and their aesthetic provocations can challenge us to transform our relationship to the past and the stories we tell ourselves.

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## NOTES

1. There can be no better evidence of the interconnected influence of these three comedians on American culture than Joseph Dorison's decision to examine Gregory alongside Sahl and Bruce in a book devoted to the history of Jewish comedy. See Joseph Dorison, "Comedy's Changing Landscape: Two Jews and a Black Crossover Artist" in *Kvetching and Shpritzing: Jewish Humor in American Popular Culture* (Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland and Company, 2015), 109-116.
2. Nate Hokum, [liner notes] in *Mort Sahl*, Mort Sahl 1960 or *Look Forward in Anger*, Verve, MG V-15004 (1959), LP.
3. Herbert Caen, "About Mort Sahl" [liner notes] in Mort Sahl, *The Future Lies Ahead*, Verve, MG V-15002 (1959), LP.
4. Enrico Banducci, [liner notes] in Mort Sahl, *At the Hungry i*, Verve, MG VS-615012 (1960), LP.
5. Herbert Caen, "About Mort Sahl."
6. Serres quoted in David Walton, "From Piss-Communication to GraffARTi: Hegemony, Popular Culture, and the Bastard Art," 121.
7. *The Merv Griffin Show*, 1969, in *Moms Mabley: I Got Something to Tell You*, directed by Whoopi Goldberg (2013, USA: HBO 2013), DVD.