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**American political stand-up comedy as a subversive and
conservative cultural form in the Obama era**

James Alexander Nixon

M.A (Hons), MLitt

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of
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School of Humanities

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
List of Figures	5
Abstract	6
Introduction	7
i. Introduction	7
ii. Definition of Key Terms	11
iii. Primary Literature Review & Methodology	15
iv. Outline of Chapters	32
Chapter 1: “You Think I’m Joking”: The Weaponised Comedy of President Obama’s Stand-up Addresses	36
1.1 Introduction	36
1.2 Barack Obama, the Insult Comic President	41
1.2.1 Obama’s Stand-up Comedy Address at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner.....	45
1.2.2 The Bakhtinian Qualities of the Gridiron Club Dinner	45
1.2.3 Obama’s Comic Addressing of his Press Relationship	48
1.2.4 Obama’s Stand-up Addresses at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner	56
1.2.5 Comic Delegitimation in Obama’s Response to the Birther Theory	59
1.2.6 Tough Crowd: Interpreting Obama’s Drone Programme Joke.....	64
1.3 Conclusion	70
Chapter 2: African American Political Stand-up Comedy under an African American Presidency	74
2.1 Introduction	74
2.2 Reparations, Plantation Huts and the Turkey Presidency in Patrice O’Neal’s <i>Mr P</i> ..	79
2.2.1 Feather Bed Resistance and Comic Division.....	81
2.2.2 O’Neal’s Contribution to the Obama-era Reparations Debate	83
2.2.3 Racial Unification in O’Neal’s Plantation Hut	86
2.2.4 O’Neal’s Bakhtinian Uncrowning of Obama	89
2.3 The Pimp Presidency and Anti-Imperialism in the Stand-Up of Eddie Griffin	93
2.3.1 Exploring Tensions in Griffin’s Pimp President Material	94
2.3.2 Racial and Class Consolidation in Comic Impersonations of Obama	97
2.3.3 Reluctant Caretakers: Analysing Griffin’s Social Conservatism.....	103
2.3.4 Exploring Griffin’s Imperialist Finale of the Obama Presidency	106
2.4 Conclusion	110
Chapter 3: Left-Wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama era	113
3.1 Introduction	114

3.2 Left-Wing Romanticism, the License to Joke, and Criticisms of the Obama Doctrine in Jamie Kilstein’s Political Comic Monologue	119
3.2.1 The New Boyfriend: Joking Frames and Left-Wing Haziness	119
3.2.2 “You Have To Criticise Obama”: Kilstein’s Critique of the Obama Doctrine	121
3.2.3 Kilstein’s Bakhtinian Uncrowning of Obama.....	124
3.3 Examining the Obama-era Healthcare Debate through the Political Stand-up Comedy of Lewis Black	127
3.3.1 Black’s Critique of the Profit Motive	128
3.3.2 Keeping Your Eye on the Ball: Examining Black’s Response to “Obamacare”	133
3.4 “President Blackenstein” and the Health of Political Partisanship in Bill Maher’s <i>Live from D.C</i>	138
3.4.1 Exploring Bergsonian Correction in Maher’s Stand-up	140
3.4.2 Political Comic Limitations through a Partisan Lens	142
3.5 Conclusion	147
Chapter 4- Right-Wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama era	149
4.1 Introduction	149
4.2 Barack “Messiah” Obama and Torture Memos in Nick DiPaolo’s <i>Raw Nerve</i>	155
4.2.1 DiPaolo’s political critique of Obama’s racial symbolism	156
4.2.2 “It’s not torture”: Analysing DiPaolo’s critique of anti-torture rhetoric.....	159
4.2.3 Unions, Immigration and Bergsonian Qualities in <i>Raw Nerve</i>	162
4.3 The Right-Wing Political Comic Criticism of Dennis Miller’s <i>America 180</i>	169
4.3.1 Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque in Miller’s Theatrical Map	170
4.3.2 Helping the Helpless, Not the Clueless: Miller on Obama-era Welfare	174
4.3.3 Getting Beyond Race under Obama: Miller’s embracing of the Post-Racial	177
4.4 Conclusion	184
Chapter 5: Comedy’s Trump Problem and the Health of Political Comic Criticism at the end of the Obama era	187
5.1 Introduction	187
5.2 Introducing the Comic Spectre of Donald Trump	191
5.2.1 “Trump is Funny” vs. “Trump is No Longer Funny”	194
5.2.2 Outraged and Unemployed: Political Comic Crisis in the wake of Trump	198
5.2.3 Examining the Stand-up Comic Qualities of Donald Trump.....	201
5.2.4 The “Evil Clown” Undertones of Trump’s Comic Manner	205
5.2.5 Questions of “Post-Trump Political Credibility” in Political Comedy	210
5.2.6 Revisiting the Culture Industry in the Wake of Trump’s Victory	213
5.3 Conclusion	217
Conclusion	221
Bibliography	233

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List of Figures

- Figure 1:** President Obama at the Correspondents' Dinner. Image Credit: *Reuters*.
<http://archive.is/eEREg>
- Figure 2:** "Luther" and Obama. Image Credit: *Nerdist*. <http://nerdist.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ObamaLuthorFeature04262015-970x545.png>
- Figure 3:** A screenshot of *CNN*'s coverage of Bill Maher's cheque to Obama's re-election campaign. Image Credit: *CNN*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/12/opinion/christoph-terrel-bill-maher/index.html>
- Figure 4:** Dennis Miller during his stand-up special *The Big Speech* (2010). Image Credit: *The Big Speech*. DVD.
- Figure 5:** Miller's model map in its initial variation in *America 180*. Image Credit: *America 180*. DVD.
- Figure 6:** The other side of Miller's model map in *America 180*. Image Credit: *America 180*. DVD.
- Figure 7:** Jon Stewart's response to Donald Trump announcing his presidential bid. Image credit: *Vox*. <http://archive.is/s7CGh>.
- Figure 8:** A screencap of Trump's impersonation of a reporter. Image credit: RightSide Broadcasting. <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau6.2.009/2436>

Abstract

President Obama's tenure in the White House had a significant effect on political comic deliberation and performance within stand-up comedy, particularly in reference to discussions of race and racial politics. This thesis examines the subversive and conservative qualities of political stand-up comedy under his presidency, exploring how the cultural form reacted and responded to the ideological, performative, cultural and political tones and pressures of this era. These chapters range from an analysis of Obama's own presidential stand-up addresses, to African American, left-wing and right-wing political comic reaction within stand-up comedy, and finishes with an examination of Donald Trump's effect on political stand-up (and the broader areas of political comic production) in the final year of the Obama era. The thesis' nine case studies explore narratives and issues of Obama-era power and various political, social and cultural items of the period. The primary methodology consists of textual and discourse analyses of the nine case studies. These are reinforced using a broad data collection of relevant journalistic, political, theoretical, comic, and cultural analysis. The main findings of this thesis are that political stand-up comedy was largely a timid cultural agent in the Obama era due to a range of ideological, racial, cultural and socio-political qualities. Subversive elements can, however, still be found throughout the nine case studies, particularly in the area of right-wing political stand-up comedy, a subversion which is magnified by the field's deficit in cultural and social insurance in comparison to African American and left-wing political comic ruminations.

Introduction

i. Introduction

This thesis analyses the conservative and subversive nature of American political stand-up comedy in the Obama era. It is guided by the following primary research question: “To what extent has political stand-up comedy acted as a subversive and conservative cultural form in the Obama era?” This issue is discussed through five chapters involving nine distinct case studies, providing a chronological scope from the initial years of the Obama presidency, with an analysis of his own use of stand-up, through to an examination of his successor Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. It is an interdisciplinary project, using a large body of comic, cultural, theoretical, political and journalistic reinforcement.

Obama’s tenure presented many challenges to political stand-up comedy. The racial symbolism of his presidency, as well as his ideological associations as a Democratic president, introduced a unique array of ideological, racial, cultural and social considerations that created a substantial difficulty for political stand-up comedy in how it engaged his presidency. In comparison to the task that faced political comedy in tackling President George W. Bush - a presidency that stand-up Rick Blue comments was akin to “a big fat punch line that no one could resist” for American stand-up comedians - Obama's presidency stalled comedic criticism for a variety of reasons.¹ Even comedy scholars such as Alison Dagnes, who challenge the existence of an ideological left-wing bias in political comedy, recognise that the task of critiquing Obama contrasts with a relatively straightforward satirising of Bush.² Veteran stand-up comedian Colin Quinn put this down to a fear of being construed as racist. He opens with a bold statement on the poor health of contemporary political comedy:

¹ For the majority of electronic sources, I have provided permanent webpage copies from archive.is in place of the source’s original URL link. The original URL link and date of last access are listed within the webpage copy. Any electronic sources that are incompatible with this webpage copy option (such as those that include relevant audio/visual materials) are provided with the original URL link and date of last access.; Blue, Rick, “We make fun of everyone except our President”. Montreal: *The Montreal Gazette*, July 29th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/jkuE1>.

² Dagnes, Alison, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor*. New York City, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp.49-50. Print.

In this country, for the last five years, nobody has made a joke about the President of the United States. Nobody...People don't make jokes about Obama because they're like, 'if you make a joke about President Obama, it's...subconsciously racist.'³

Quinn further notes that the only person making jokes about the President is Obama himself at the White House Correspondents' Dinner: "That's how bad it has gotten. The President has to get up there and go, 'Guys, it's ok, I make jokes about myself. It's ok, I'm making jokes about how the press kisses up to me'".⁴ Although Blue and Quinn's comments exaggerate the absence of criticism, this thesis investigates the degree to which his presidency significantly stalled political comic criticism. An exploration of the subversive and conservative nature of Obama-era political stand-up, and its varying methods and processes, demonstrates how comedians dealt with the challenges of presenting political commentary under his presidency. My first chapter examines Obama's unique, on-the-offensive redefinition of the traditional presidential stand-up address at the Gridiron Club Dinner and White House Correspondents' Dinner. Chapter two analyses Obama-era African American political stand-up and its varying theoretical, performative, cultural, social and political considerations through comedians Patrice O'Neal and Eddie Griffin. The third chapter examines how ideological and racial deliberations affected left-wing political stand-up in the Obama era through the case studies of Jamie Kilstein, Lewis Black and Bill Maher. The fourth chapter focuses on right-wing political stand-ups Nick DiPaolo and Dennis Miller, examining how they compare with the performative and theoretical considerations discussed in the previous two chapters while enjoying little of the same cultural and political insurance. In the fifth chapter and final case study, I explore Donald Trump's effect on the subversive and conservative qualities of the broad field of political comedy in the 2016 presidential election, and his personal use of stand-up comic stylistics and qualities.

Historically speaking, from Benjamin Franklin to Doug Stanhope, political humour - and its present day variant, political comedy - has long been revered in the United States as an important cultural institution. Constance Rourke argues for example that "there is scarcely

³ "Colin Quinn: Comedians Afraid To Joke About Obama Because Of Accusations Of Racism", *Real Clear Politics*, May 23rd 2013. Web. <https://archive.is/Pagcl>.

⁴ "Colin Quinn", 1:19.

an aspect of the American character to which humor is not related.”⁵ In his work *Hawthorne* (1879), Henry James suggests that the early adoption of a distinct national humour may be due to a lack of cultural confidence. In a nation devoid of the cultural inheritance that Europe enjoyed, James argues that the development of a national humour may have compensated for this, what he likens to its treasured, “national gift.”⁶ If Stephen J. Whitfield is correct in arguing that American humour “expresses a supremely democratic temperament”, it would follow that political humour - and by extension, political comic performances - likewise reflects this temperament.⁷ A terseness in form and language, scepticism of power, and a constant wrangling with civic obligations and American ideology, are but a few of the qualities that political comedy and popular ideas of the national character regard as inherent traits. Louis D. Rubin Jr. argues that all American humour can be broadly defined through a political opposition. He theorises that the central principle to all American humour is the gap between the ideal promise of democracy - freedom, equality, self-governance - and the ordinary quality of everyday life, what he defines as “The Great American Joke.”⁸ Political comedy sits naturally in the middle of this interplay between “the democratic ideal and the mulishness of fallen human nature”.⁹ With respect to the interactions and obligations between the state and its citizen, Stephen Whitfield notes, “humor, though not necessarily wit, is more accessible and more participatory than the civic obligations to wrestle with dilemmas of policy”.¹⁰ From this, the position of political comedy and humour has become an important aspect of American political examination, as exemplified in Benjamin Franklin's satires on the British Empire, George Carlin's acerbic critiques of American militancy, to Jon Stewart's nightly critiques of the Bush and Obama administrations on *The Daily Show*. Lawrence E. Mintz notes its crucial importance as a cultural chronicler of social and political attitudes, being amongst the most universal and significant forms of humorous expression:

Humor is a vitally important social and cultural phenomenon, that the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes,

⁵ Rourke, Constance, *American Humor: A Study of National Humor*. New York City, NY: New York Review Books, 2004, p11. Print.

⁶ James, Henry, *Hawthorne*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1879, p.44. Web. Available online via *Project Gutenberg*. Web. <https://archive.is/xBBO8>.

⁷ Whitfield, Stephen J., “Political Humor”. Mintz, Lawrence E. (ed), *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. Westport, CO: Greenwood Press Inc., 1988, p.195. Print.

⁸ Rubin Jr., Louis D., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986, p.52. Print.

⁹ Rubin Jr., *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, p.52.

¹⁰ Whitfield, “Political Humor”, p.195.

dispositions and concerns, and that the relatively undervalued genre of stand-up comedy (compared with film comedy or humorous literature, for example) is the most interesting of all the manifestations of humour in the popular culture.¹¹

Following on from Mintz's examinations, the assumption of comedy - political or not - as inherently subversive or critical still carries considerable weight. Todd McGowan, in "The Barriers to a Critical Comedy" (2016), notes that comedy often feels self-evidently subversive in its disruption of everyday social norms as it tackles authority through political satire.¹² Joseph Boskin, in "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboo" (1990), argues that popular beliefs in political humour as egalitarian and democratic "have rarely been carefully scrutinized" because of their "self-serving quality" in popular culture, and that the relationship between political humour and American power structures "reveals specific limitations and unspoken taboos."¹³ As he argues, "Pinpointing [these limitations], however, has not been of primary interest to scholars or others involved in humor studies."¹⁴ Paul Lewis points to the potentially harmful qualities in American humor in *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (2006), arguing that these qualities are generally given less consideration than the positive effects, like the "extremely hostile humor" of 1980s stand-up comedians Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison and the troubling misogynistic and homophobic strains in their stand-up routines.¹⁵ More recently, Don Waisanen's "An Alternative Sense of Humor: The Problems with Crossing Comedy and Politics in Public Discourse" (2013) emphasises the need to recognise its limitations:

I would argue that to become more broadly appreciative of and discerning about the many constructive forms comedy has taken in contemporary public discourse, humor's potentially negative features or effects in some situations must also be understood.¹⁶

¹¹ Mintz, Lawrence E., "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation". *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Spring Special Issue: *American Humor*, Spring 1985, p.71. Web. An online version can be accessed at *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712763>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹² McGowan, Todd, "The Barriers to a Critical Comedy". *Crisis and Critique*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, July 2014, p.201, p.202. Web. <http://crisiscritique.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/todd.pdf>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹³ Boskin, Joseph, "American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboo". *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4. London: Sage Publications, 1990, p.473. Web. www.jstor.org/stable/1601523. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁴ Boskin, "American Political Humor", p.474.

¹⁵ Lewis, Paul, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p.37. Print.

¹⁶ Waisanen, Don, "An Alternative Sense of Humor: The Problems with Crossing Comedy and Politics in Public Discourse." Rountree, Clarke (ed.), *Venomous Speech: Problems with American Political Discourse on the Right and Left*, Vol. 2. Westport, CO: Praeger, 2013, p.300. Print.

His analysis counters “a climate in which comedy is mostly only celebrated”, despite its ability to severely diminish incisive debate by reducing it “to who can tell the best one-liner that will make an evening news broadcast or Internet viral video.”¹⁷ This thesis builds on the field of comedy scholarship by exploring the subversive and conservative qualities of Obama-era political stand-up comedy. My own interest in this subject area is two-fold: firstly, I have, for a long time, appreciated the interaction of both broad cultural forms of comedy and politics, and the way in which these interrelate, and secondly, I have had a long interest in comedy’s ability to act as a form of critique, which was sharpened with the election of Barack Obama.

ii. Definition of Key Terms

At this point, it is important to define my key terms, beginning with “stand-up comedy”. A strict definition of stand-up comedy is an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and / or performing humorous material directly to an audience.¹⁸ For the sake of clarification, a performed stand-up comedy address can be enacted by individuals not typically defined as stand-up comedians; this is particularly pivotal in chapter one’s examination of Obama, as well as my interpretation of Trump’s comic qualities that are used to define him within a unique stand-up comic categorisation as a presidential candidate in chapter five. Defining “political comedy” is more difficult due to the genre’s own relationship with satire, with the latter defined by Dustin Griffin in his chronicling of the broad form as “a work...designed to attack vice or folly.”¹⁹ In many cases both terms are used synonymously in comic productions, along with other forms of comic convention such as metaphor, sarcasm, and straight political humour. Applying this definition of general satire to the study and criticism of political issues would simply be termed political comedy, and in works such as Alison Dagnes’ *A Conservative Walks Into the Bar*, both satire and political comedy are used interchangeably.²⁰ In Becker and Waisanen’s “From Funny Features to Entertaining Effects”, they employ a broad definition of political comedy that

¹⁷ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.301, p.302.

¹⁸ Mintz, “Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation”, p.71.

¹⁹ Griffin, Dustin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994, p.1. Print.

²⁰ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.25.

facilitates the often interchangeably used terms of comedy, satire and political humour. They define “political comedy” as “a range of traditional and evolving practices humor can take, for example, explicit satirical rants against a public figure or more implicit, ironic jokes that mean the opposite of what is said.”²¹ In this thesis, I use this broader definition to discuss live comic material focused directly on politics. This can be narrowed down to stand-up comic material which pertains to Obama-era politics, and often Obama himself. Thus, “political stand-up comedy” can be defined as political commentary presented exclusively within a live stand-up comedy performance.

As for a definition of “subversive”, a more standard, purely-political characterisation of the term deems it as actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority.²² An important contribution to a working definition of political comic subversion is David L. Paletz’s quadripartite classification of supportive, benign, undermining, and subversive political humour as outlined in his journal article “Political Humor and Authority: From Support to Subversion”.²³ In his analysis of the iconoclastic stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce, describing him as “the quintessential authority-subverting” comedian, he emphasises Bruce’s characterisation of authority as unjust, his disturbing foci and the exacerbated tension within his material and lack of a satisfactory resolution.²⁴ Classifying Bruce as subversive, Paletz goes on to define Harry Shearer’s dark comic critiques of Ronald Reagan and his administration on his radio show, “Hellcats of the White House” as fitting under the category of undermining political humour.²⁵ In McGowan’s examination of “the politics of comedy”, he argues that “A comedy of genuine critique must reveal that the social authority

²¹ Becker, Amy B. & Waisanen, Don, “From Funny Features to Entertaining Effects: Connecting Approaches to Communication Research on Political Comedy”. *Review of Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2013), p.162. Web. Available online via *Taylor & Francis Online*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2013.826816>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²² Spjut, R. J., “Defining Subversion”. *British Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter, 1979). *British Journal of Law and Society*: Cardiff University, pp.254-261. Available online via JSTOR. Web. www.jstor.org/stable/1409771. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²³ Paletz, David L., “Political Humor and Authority: From Support to Subversion”. *International Political Science Review* Vol 11, Issue 4, 1990, p.487. Web. Available online via Sage Journals. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/019251219001100406>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁴ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.491.

²⁵ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.489.

itself is not simply a discursive entity but necessarily lacking. It must show the social order and the subject itself as incomplete”.²⁶

The term “conservative”, in its more traditional meaning of a political ideology, can be best understood by its emphasis on defending establishmentarian norms and being incentivised to preserve typically historic institutions and practises.²⁷ Applying this to a cultural setting, then the same scholarship that helps to build a working definition of subversion likewise helps in establishing a working definition of conservatism. Two of Paletz’s characterisations of political humour, “supportive” and “benign”, can be likened to the working definition of conservative political comic tones.²⁸ He defines the first of these two terms, supportive, with the example of the American comedian Bob Hope, “The quintessential comedian of authority-supporting jokes”.²⁹ He characterises Hope’s supportive political humour as promoting a “spirit of good, inoffensive fun”, with its reliance on broad political stereotypes of governmental institutions and its predictable political comic targets.³⁰ Its conservative counterpart, benign, which he illustrates with the example of the Washington D.C humour association the Gridiron Club Dinner, is characterised by Paletz as “not entirely supportive of political authority”, but are rendered acceptable through its ritualization and presentation.³¹ McGowan argues that if critical, subversive and radical comic elements function through their exposure of a deficit within social authority, then conservative elements contrastingly display its fullness. He notes that “When comedy subtends a sense of wholeness in either the subject or the social order, it functions conservatively and helps to entrench a belief in the intractability of social authority.”³² These varying definitions of cultural conservatism provide a useful foundation for this thesis. It is crucial to establish that this thesis does not treat subversive and conservative qualities within political stand-up as an absolute binary. McGowan’s analysis speaks to the difficulty of gauging political comedy through a critical and conservative frame of analysis and categorisation, emphasising the subtleties between the cultural form and forms of power and authority as more nuanced at a methodological or performative level. He argues that “The difficulty with

²⁶ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.212.

²⁷ Andreasson, Stefan, “Conservatism”. Geoghegan, Vincent & Rick Wilford (eds.), *Political Ideologies*. Abingon, Oxon & New York City, NY: Routledge, 2014, p.48. Print.

²⁸ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.483.

²⁹ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.487.

³⁰ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.488, 487.

³¹ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.488.

³² McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.205.

analyzing comedy is that even comic moments that seem to disrupt social authority often play the role of stealthily supporting rather than undermining its power. It is not enough to look for authority being mocked.”³³ Paletz additionally notes in his own analysis that “Humor, it seems to me, may range along a spectrum in its relationships with authority. At one extreme it could be supportive; at the other, subversive. In between, it can be benign or undermining.”³⁴ My own definition of the terms subversive and conservative does not fit exactly within a single one of these definitions, but taken together they provide a solid, yet flexible, position for gauging these subversive qualities, and measuring them through relevant ideological, performative, racial, cultural, and socio-political considerations. In this thesis’ analyses, many examples of live political comic critique fall within subtle frames of critique and support for social and political authority, and very much dependent on the respective case study under scrutiny. The categorisation of subversive and conservative qualities is based on a consideration of the respective racial, cultural, political and social lenses relevant to each case study.

For the purposes of examining relations between political stand-up and Obama-era power central to this thesis, routing this through a working definition of “political power” will prove pertinent. The term political power is typically used within broader definitions of “power”; G. William Domhoff argues that within the general definition of power as “the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others”, political power can be viewed as one form of power transferable alongside, for example, economic power, intellectual power, and military power.³⁵ Almon Leroy Way Jr. defines political power as “the capacity to influence, condition, mold, and control human behavior for the accomplishment of political objectives.”³⁶ In this thesis, political power relates principally to the classic power sphere of the White House, more specifically to President Obama and more broadly to the Obama administration. W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence and Steven Livingston’s analyses of relations between the American news media and the George

³³ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.205.

³⁴ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.486.

³⁵ Wrong, Dennis Hume, *Power: Its Forms, Bases, and Uses*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009, p.2. Print.; Domhoff, George William, “The Class-Domination Theory of Power”, *Who Rules America?*, p.1. Web. http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/class_domination.html. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³⁶ Jr., Almon Leroy Way, “Part One: Politics & Government: The Essentials.” “Political Science 201H: The American System of Government: Politics & Government in the U.S.A”, *The Progressive Conservative*, “Political power”, 2a. Web. <http://www.proconservative.net/CUNAPolSci201PartOneC.shtml>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

W. Bush administration supports this interpretation to restrict the definition of political power to a principal, administrative focus.³⁷ Adopting the conclusions of Nikolas Rose and Peter Millar, my own analysis of political power emphasises a fluidity of complicity and power relations between the individual artists and the administration. They argue that “Personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations.”³⁸ The subversive and conservative political comic responses to this era of political power include - but are not limited to - policies, broadly understood cultural and social tones, and political narratives propagated by the Obama administration, or distinctly recognised as a product of the administration’s time in office, for example, constructs of post-racialism.

iii. Primary Literature Review & Methodology

The thesis’ stated contribution begins with a primary literature review, with its overarching categorisation as one that examines the politics of humour and comedy, and in particular the subversive and conservative nature of political stand-up comedy and its relation to structures of American power. The various texts referred to provide a foundation from which to explore political stand-up’s boundaries, strengths and limitations. Each chapter also contains a secondary literature review in their introductions which reviews relevant texts that shape the current scholarship.

The primary theoretical supports I use are the works of Russian philosopher and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and French philosopher Henri Bergson. With Bakhtin I focus mainly on his concept of carnival outlined in his texts *Rabelais and his World* (1968) and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), and his essay *Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel* (1941), and with Bergson, his theory of laughter as a form of corrective as outlined in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900). I draw on Bakhtin’s

³⁷ Bennett, W. Lance, Lawrence, Regina G. & Livingston, Steven, *When the Press Fails: Political power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007. Print.

³⁸ Rose, Nikolas & Miller, Peter, “Political power beyond the State: problematics of government”. *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 61, Issue s1 (January 2010), p.272. Available online via *Wiley Online Library*. Web. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2009.01247.x/abstract>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

concept of carnival for several reasons. Firstly, his characterisation of carnival focuses on laughter and the power of festive transgression to subvert and redefine existing relationships between individuals and socio-political structures, what Bakhtin argued is its ability for “working out...a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*” in opposition to actual existing political and social structures through the ambivalent, restoring quality of “carnival *laughter.*” (Original italicisations)³⁹ Bakhtin proposed that, through the “half-real and half-play acted form” of European medieval carnival, relationships between individuals and structures of power could be negotiated through the uniqueness of unbridled culture of folk carnival humour, freeing individuals from what he described as “the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life.”⁴⁰ The theatrical element of carnivalesque, comic suspension is of particular relevance to this thesis. One example can be found in how this concept illustrates an expansion of certain privileges and accountabilities which are otherwise hindered within non-carnival conventions (particularly deployed in the case studies of President Obama and President Donald Trump), providing a platform to ridicule and debase contesting ideas and values. The primary characteristic of carnival, the “*mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king* (Original italicisation)”, plays an important part in measuring the subversive qualities of many of the thesis’ case studies, with its focus on resistance to authority and the transitory decrowning of powerful officials and the crowning of comical representations, such as a jester, as the “proclaimed king.”⁴¹ It is applied to Jamie Kilstein’s interpreted uncrowning of Obama and the Obama Doctrine. Bakhtin’s dualistic concept of crowning and decrowning is linked to his concept of inversion, where within the “typical carnival” atmosphere, everything is upturned in contrast to the official, noncarnival world, and where “all who are highest are debased, all who are lowest crowned.”⁴² Bakhtinian inversion, and its usurping of conventional political, cultural and social norms for forms of “inverted wisdom” and “inverted truth” through carnivalesque suspension, provides prescient reinforcement for a cultural agent that is recognised for its ability to subvert and challenge socio-political orthodoxies and norms.⁴³ I demonstrate that this concept can apply

³⁹ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 8. Emerson, Caryl (trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p.123. Print.; Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *Rabelais and His World*. Iswolsky, Helene (trans.). Indiana University Press: Bloomington, IN, 1984, p.11. Print.

⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.3.; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.123.

⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.281.; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.124.

⁴² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.197, p.383.

⁴³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.260.

as readily to a conservative functioning as it can be to a left-wing or radical one. For instance, the Gridiron Club Dinner is interpreted to demonstrate Obama's emancipation from his typical accountabilities through comic performance. Other works by Bakhtin emphasise his appraisal of laughter and the comic mode. In "Epic and Novel", he expands upon the uniqueness of the comic form, seeing laughter as a uniquely incisive cultural agent - "a comical operation of dismemberment" - through examination.⁴⁴ He comments:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.⁴⁵

This stated, intensely incisive nature of laughter provides a crucial theoretical framework for the subversive and critical elements of this thesis, enabling analyses and critiques of Obama-era political, cultural and social narratives, values and norms to be interpreted within Bakhtin's cited ability of laughter to provide "absolutely free investigation".⁴⁶ This treatment of "the artistic logic" of comic analysis by Bakhtin features prominently in the case study of Patrice O'Neal.⁴⁷

With respect to Bergson, I apply his concept of laughter as a form of corrective, as outlined in his work *Laughter*. Within a theoretical framework focused on gauging subversive and conservative qualities, Bergson's theory of laughter's disciplinary nature complements the more subversive qualities of Bakhtin's theory in its emphasis on the often unpleasant and unjust qualities of political comic communication. Bergson's three core observations of the comic - the comic as a strictly human phenomenon, the absence of feeling within the production of laughter, and its social signification - provide a managerial explanation of laughter and emphasise its surmised disciplining of unorthodox behaviour in society, what

⁴⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Holquist, Michael (ed.). Emerson, Caryl & Holquist, Michael (trans.). University of Texas Press: Austin, TX, 2004, p.23, p.24. Print.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.23.

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.23.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.24.

he likens to its role as a form of “social ragging”.⁴⁸ I principally focus on his latter two observations, detachment and correction. Within disciplinary laughter lies a coded representation of threat, or alienation, from society, what Bergson argues is its usefulness as a form of “social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.”⁴⁹ He comments:

Each member must be ever attentive to his social surroundings...Therefore, society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter.⁵⁰

Bergson also underlines the relatively injudicious nature of corrective laughter. In humour’s disciplinary function that corrects “the outer manifestations of certain failings” within individuals, he argues that it should not be equated with sentiments of fairness or kindness.⁵¹ Bergson’s corrective function is applied within several case studies, such as those of Bill Maher, Obama and Trump, with their respective uses of correction against opponents. An additional element of Bergson’s theory, the concept of emotional distance and detachment within laughter, is also important. As a categorised, highly cerebral response that works within its defined “social meaning” of correction, Bergson argues that laughter is motivated by an emotional distancing from the object in question.⁵² As he comments, “Comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbour’s personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called a *growing callousness to social life*. (Original italicisation)”⁵³ This hypothesis of detachment is applied in the case studies of DiPaolo and Miller with their dismissal of groups such as immigrant workers and welfare recipients. My specific use of Bakhtin and Bergson in each chapter is outlined in the secondary literature reviews.

Paletz’s “Political Humor and Authority”, provides a key method of qualitative measurement which influences its methodological approach. He analyses political comic examples through a self-defined taxonomic criterion, ranging from supportive to subversive positions

⁴⁸ Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York City, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1914, p.3, p.4, p.8, p.135. Print. Available online via *Archive.org*. <https://archive.org/details/laughteranessay00berggoog>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁴⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, pp.87-88.

⁵⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.135.

⁵¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.197.

⁵² Bergson, *Laughter*, p.133.

⁵³ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.134.

towards political authority, as a means of deliberating on “whether...humor directed at authority-figures matters.”⁵⁴ He uses “suggestive rather than definitive” examples such as comedians Bob Hope, Harry Shearer, Lenny Bruce, and the Gridiron Club Dinner. His criteria serve as a primary consideration in gauging the case studies’ direct or indirect target of focus - typically interpreted to be Obama - and are extended to an analysis within this era. Paletz’ journal article is given further consideration within the methodology section. Another important text is Peter M. Robinson's *The Dance of the Comedians: the people, the president, and the performance of political standup comedy in America* (2010), in which he examines the historic relationship between humourists, comedians and American presidents.⁵⁵ He chronicles how presidents such as Theodore Roosevelt and Kennedy used humour and comedy performances to respond to popular criticisms, mapping the increasing importance of presidential humour in public relations and the history of the presidential comedy tradition.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Robinson assesses post-war press, presidential, comic and public appetites for political humour and comedy amongst “the ebb and flow of events and national traumas” in the United States.⁵⁷ In his concluding remarks, Robinson notes how the radical and conservative qualities of political comic performance is being continually negotiated between comedians, presidents and the American public, making it akin to a “part mischievous insurgency, part political sideshow, part show business spectacle”.⁵⁸ This thesis extends Robinson’s work through an analysis of Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses in chapter one.

In *Laughing Mad* (2007), Bambi Haggins analyses the televisual and cinematic personae of a range of African American stand-up comedians from the post-civil rights era to the post-soul comedy of the 2000s, investigating how concepts of blackness are translated across a range of medium-specific performances, including stand-up comedy. She examines comics like Bill Cosby, Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle to investigate commercial negotiations within stand-up, television and cinema, reinforced in part using a casual progressive and

⁵⁴ Paletz, “Political Humor and Authority”, p.487, p.483, p.484.

⁵⁵ Robinson, Peter M., *The Dance of the Comedians: the people, the president, and the performance of political standup comedy in America*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010, pp.57-99, pp.99-139. Print.

⁵⁶ Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians*, pp.49-56, pp.126-30.

⁵⁷ Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians*, p.217.

⁵⁸ Robinson, *Dance of the Comedians*, p.227.

regressive analysis.⁵⁹ Haggins argues that “the truth of the matter is that most humor - particularly most African American humor - is inflected by progressive and regressive impulses”.⁶⁰ My specific extension to her work is in the study of Patrice O’Neal and Eddie Griffin in chapter two, in which I build on her analysis of progressive and regressive considerations in this cultural field in the Obama era by gauging the power of stand-up as a subversive and conservative agent.

Waisanen, in “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, notes how humour can perform both radical and conservative functions, but that these are being continually negotiated depending on the context. He focuses on the limitations of political/comic exchanges using five self-defined themes, regulation, simplism, instability, negativity and distortion, four of which are particularly relevant.⁶¹ He defines regulation as the process in which humour can pressure individuals to conform to certain viewpoints and outcomes through comic amusement, which can act to regulate opinion and debate rather than expand it. This regulatory function is applied to the case study of Maher in his rebuttal of Obama-era Republican criticism. Waisanen’s concept of simplism is introduced by arguing that “the very compactness and pace of jokes” often demands succinctness over incisive political commentary: “Thus, the setup-punch line joke structure can make it difficult for a communicator to impart complex information, which might kill a joke.”⁶² The implications of simplifying political issues and political information through the mechanisms of comic communication are expanded upon in the case study of Lewis Black. Instability is defined as humour’s “potential for unstable meaning” through its potential for divergent interpretations.⁶³ This brings a resulting difficulty to control or navigate a desired interpretation from varying audiences and their respective social conventions: “In these instances, comedy can serve to reinforce, rather than challenge, people's beliefs, values, and attitudes, even against a comedian’s very intent.”⁶⁴ In this thesis, Waisanen’s concept of instability is extended to include interpretations of concerns over racial misunderstanding regarding Obama in the case studies of DiPaolo and Miller. His final concept of distortion refers to the abusive implications in humour’s

⁵⁹ Haggins, Bambi, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007, p.83. Print.

⁶⁰ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.89.

⁶¹ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, pp.303-304, pp.306-308, pp.308-310.

⁶² Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.304, pp.303-4.

⁶³ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.304.

⁶⁴ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.305.

relationship between realism and exaggeration, where, through comic response, “another person's image or argument is fundamentally distorted in order to easily knock it down”.⁶⁵ It is applied to the case study of Maher to illustrate how distortion can result in the difficulty of comic effectiveness taking precedence “over an ethical responsibility” in his depiction of politicians and public figures.⁶⁶ In conclusion, he argues that by “maintaining an alternative *sense* of humor” (Original italicisation), both humour’s constructive and less constructive effects in live political comic communication can be appreciated. Waisanen’s four concepts of political / comic interchange are built upon within this thesis.

Another relevant text is Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt’s *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (2017). This collection of essays discusses in part how stand-up can promote social change and both subvert and affirm established power, demonstrating “how stand-up may itself promote hegemony and stagnation or, conversely, stimulate change.”⁶⁷ The more relevant chapters are Aaron Duncan and Jonathan Carter’s interpretation of Bill Hicks within the Gramscian categorisations of the organic intellectual and Modern Prince, deployed within their reading of Hicks’ critiques of American political spectacle and his status “as an agent of change and challenger of hegemony”.⁶⁸ Their work is developed through numerous case studies by citing examples of their social and political critiques. Another relevant chapter is Ron Von Burg and Kai Heidemann’s examination of conservative stand-up comedian and self-proclaimed ““God’s Comic”” Brad Stine, and their interpretation of Kenneth Burke’s concept of the burlesque frame of rejection within Stine’s ridiculing of the American left.⁶⁹ This work is expanded on in chapter four’s case studies, DiPaolo and Miller. Jonathan P. Rossing’s chapter, “Live From D.C, It’s ‘Nerd Prom’: Political Humor at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner”, and his analysis of the democratic and beneficial nature of the comedy and humour within the event, is developed in chapter one’s

⁶⁵ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.308.

⁶⁶ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.309.

⁶⁷ Meier, Matthew R. & Schmitt, Casey R (eds)., *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change*. New York City, NY, New York: Routledge, 2017, xxix. Print.

⁶⁸ Duncan, Aaron & Carter, Jonathan, “The Comedic Prince: The Organic Intellectualism of Bill Hicks”. Meier & Schmitt, *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, p.149.

⁶⁹ Von Burg, Ron & Heidemann, Kai, “What’s the Deal with Liberals?: The Discursive Construction of Partisan Political Identities in Conservative Stand-Up Comedy”. Meier & Schmitt, *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, p.153, pp.154-6.

examination of Obama's stand-up at the Gridiron Club Dinner and Correspondents' Dinner.⁷⁰

Rebecca Krefting's text *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (2014) examines the relationship between political, cultural and socially-critical stand-up comedy and its commercial viability through her introduction of the comic genre, charged humor.⁷¹ This genre is defined as a social justice oriented form of stand-up that both aims to address social inequities and create a sense of cultural citizenship, contrasting with the more problematic elements of apolitical comic performance that secure comic amusement by "reinforcing the worse of audience beliefs and expectations."⁷² *All Joking Aside* provides a number of routes for extension, such as her gauging of critical and conservative qualities within stand-up. She cautions against seeing political humour as necessarily charged in nature, citing Bill Maher as an example of how this form of humour can easily ally with forms of "'safe' comedy".⁷³ She also points to the complexities of delivering charged humour within stand-up comedy, from the possibility of misinterpretation to deliberations over balancing aggressive, loaded language in order to effectively deliver socio-political commentary.⁷⁴ Krefting's ideas on the fragility of socio-political comic exposition within charged humour are extended within this thesis' subversive and conservative framework, particularly in chapter three.

Similarly, Sophie Quirk's *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (2015), examines stand-up comedy's social and political efficacy and influence in both negative and positive forms.⁷⁵ She outlines a tripartite of manipulative aspects in stand-up performance, the first being getting an audience to laugh, what she characterises as "the management of expectation"; the second element involves using manipulation to challenge taboos, and the third involves using stand-up as a form of social challenge, what she characterises as "the possibility that the comedian's influence over individuals could last beyond the immediate contact at the gig, and even take part in a wider social negotiation".⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Rossing, Jonathan P., "Live from D.C, It's "Nerd Prom": Political Humor at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner". Meier & Schmitt, *Standing Up, Speaking Out*, p.182.

⁷¹ Krefting, Rebecca, *All Joking Side: American Humor and Its Discontents*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014, p.15. Print.

⁷² Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p.13, p.7.

⁷³ Krefting, *All Joking Side*, p.3.

⁷⁴ Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p.180, p.219, p.228.

⁷⁵ Quirk, Sophie, *Why Stand-up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2015, p.9. Print.

⁷⁶ Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters*, p.35.

This thesis builds on Quirk's analysis to demonstrate how comic manipulation can be used to expand, revise, and denigrate forms of political and social authority. In her discussion of "the more consciously political strand" of contemporary British stand-up, she outlines the implications of stand-up acting to regulate and affirm conventional social and political opinion and expectations, to trivialise important issues, and questions whether stand-up can be interpreted as a form of harmless protest towards, or possibly even a weapon of, established power.⁷⁷ However, Quirk is mindful of its contrasting potential for social change, seeing it as a particular popular form "which is licensed to test attitudes and has particular strengths in persuading its audience to shift their reference points."⁷⁸ Being appreciative of both, Quirk concludes, is vital to developing a critical approach to stand-up and comic discourse more broadly, an approach that is developed in this thesis.⁷⁹

Alison Dagnes' *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (2012), examines how stand-up comedy is driven by financial imperatives and the partisan divide between left-wing and right-wing comedy, and questions the ideological bias in modern American comedy. Her primary focus is to analyse the reasons for the absence of right-wing political comedy. Investigating varying commercial, cultural, and partisan elements that influence this, Dagnes chronicles examples of televised conservative political comedy to illustrate the performative and theoretical elements involved in these limited attempts to bridge the dearth. One issue she highlights is the assumption of right-wing cultural forms being associated with establishmentarian norms and a "status quo quality", which she argues goes against the essential nature of political comic critique: "If comedy is a humorous protest and a vote for change, then conservatives will not be ripe for this pursuit."⁸⁰ In doing so, Dagnes undercuts conservative "allegations of ideological bias" within satire and political comedy.⁸¹ This thesis builds on her text through left-wing political comic analyses in chapter three, with her work providing consideration of the contrasting difficulties of delivering left-wing political comic commentary under Obama's presidency for a variety of racial, partisan, performative and theoretical reasons. It is also developed in the case studies

⁷⁷ Quirk, *Why Stand-up Matters*, p.160, pp.152-4, pp.169-72.

⁷⁸ Quirk, *Why Stand-up Matters*, p.200.

⁷⁹ Quirk, *Why Stand-up Matters*, p.208.

⁸⁰ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.172.

⁸¹ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.216.

of DiPaolo and Miller in chapter four, highlighting similar performative, ideological, partisan and cultural tensions in a conservative comic context.

In his journal article, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy” (2014), McGowan outlines certain classic, theoretical considerations that promote and also hinder the critical and conservative qualities of the comic form. He contests the idea that conceptions of comedy and laughter are inherently subversive, arguing that there is “no inherent political valance to the comic act”, and that it can assist political authority just as readily as it can undermine it.⁸² McGowan distinguishes between critical and conservative comedy through its conception of social order and social structures. He argues:

If comedy creates an image of the social order as a whole, it has a conservative function. But if comedy reveals the incompleteness of the social structure, it functions as a critical comedy that plays an emancipatory role in political struggle.⁸³

He concludes that the “fundamental barrier” to a critical, subversive comic presentation or production can be found in its inherently social quality, and the functions of exclusion and inclusion essential to comic critique.⁸⁴ He argues that comedy’s common function to exclude and marginalise individuals who step outside of these societal expectations and conventionalities for comic amusement often makes it a Bergsonian instrument of social order by presenting “the illusion of wholeness that derives from comedy’s specific amalgam of inclusion and exclusion”, the form’s clouding of actual cultural, social and political deficits and substantiation of existing conventions.⁸⁵ In order to function critically, the comedy of critique “cannot allow any entity to escape unscathed”, and must dismiss the illusion of wholeness.⁸⁶ “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy” aims to rebalance assumptions about the fundamental criticality of comedy, which this thesis extends through its own Obama-era political comic analysis.⁸⁷

Joseph Boskin’s journal article “American Political Humor: Touchables and Taboos” (1990) highlights similar qualities. He proposes that political humour has reflected various power

⁸² McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.204.

⁸³ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.201.

⁸⁴ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.218.

⁸⁵ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.220, p.319.

⁸⁶ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.220.

⁸⁷ McGowan, “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, p.202.

relationships in the United States throughout its history, but has retained “substantial black holes” in its focus, arguing that corporate and financial culture in the United States has been largely absent from any political comic criticism.⁸⁸ Citing examples of political humour from the Revolutionary War to the Reagan era, he notes how this form has tended to focus on the most obvious symbols of American power, such as the presidency, while neglecting more incisive analyses, thus “subjecting the system to humorous scrutiny while at the same time exempting it from any radical examination” that leads to a separation within political humour between the leaders and decision-makers of American power and their structures and basic process.⁸⁹ He concludes by stating that political humour’s shunning “of the real centers of economic and political power” allows for a superficial examination of the mechanisms of American power.⁹⁰ Boskin’s work casts a light on the superficialities that often characterise political comic production in dealing with political issues, with political humour’s “specific locus” revolving around the president.⁹¹ In this thesis, his ideas are used to qualify and develop the institutional taboos that he argues fortify the borders of political comic expression, and to develop to what extent political comic material focused on President Obama (or other figures of Obama-era political and social authority) can be interpreted to be affirming or countering Boskin’s critique.

John Morreall’s contribution to Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering’s collection of essays in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour* (2005) interprets the boundaries of serious and comic discourse and humour and offensiveness, and ethical limits to humour. In his chapter contribution, “Humour and the Conduct of Politics”, he examines the ethical implications of humour used by and against politicians. Citing the example of Ronald Reagan’s famous joke that confronted “the age issue” during the 1984 presidential election, Morreall argues that humour is often used “to block legitimate concerns about politicians and their policies”, which, in this case, “got Americans to dismiss some important and potentially disturbing facts” regarding Reagan’s continued ability to govern.⁹² He concludes by noting the malleability of political humour as a weapon that, in its use by both powerful political officials and everyday individuals, can equally cloud serious issues as well as

⁸⁸ Boskin, “American Political Humor”, p.473, p.474, pp.478-82.

⁸⁹ Boskin, “American Political Humor”, pp.474-5, p.476, p.478, p.475.

⁹⁰ Boskin, “American Political Humor”, pp.481-2.

⁹¹ Boskin, “American Political Humor”, p.478.

⁹² Morreall, John, “Humour and the Conduct of Politics.” Lockyer, Sharon & Pickering, Michael (eds.), *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*. New York City, NY, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p.76. Print.

illuminate them, but which can also be undercut through comic rebuttal. As he argues, “If politicians sometimes use humour in propaganda, comedians also undermine that propaganda.”⁹³ This thesis builds on Morreall’s work by examining constructive and less constructive uses of humour by powerful political officials and comedians. On a similar theme, Paul Lewis provides a more contemporary and expansive analysis of the less savoury, injudicious qualities within modern American humour in *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (2006). Interested in dissecting “the fault lines in our humor culture” through his evaluation of intentional humour, Lewis critiques stand-up comedy as amongst “the predictable and safe joke” comic genres that absorb and shape perceptions of humour within popular culture, with *Cracking Up* proceeding from the view that Americans “tend not to see or think much about the most harmful uses of humor.”⁹⁴ In his final chapter, he charts the development of satire within the modern United States as one that can as likely promote specific policy directions and decisions as they can undermine them. Lewis’ analysis critiques the field of political comic criticism during the George W. Bush’s presidency, arguing that elements of softer, “less clearly negative portrayals, so far from hurting the president, may have contributed to his success.”⁹⁵ This thesis builds on his observations by noting how political stand-up comedians under Obama’s presidency can both promote and hinder political and social narratives.

Michael Billig’s text *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (2005) illustrates the corrective power of ridicule within humour as an instrument of social control. He offers a counter-argument to what he perceives as the popularity of dominating, good-natured theories of humour by arguing for one “that places ridicule at the centre of social life and that locates humour in the operations of social power”.⁹⁶ He guides his analysis through a dichotomy between disciplinary humour and rebellious humour, where “Disciplinary humour contains an intrinsic conservatism, while rebellious humour seems to be on the side of radicalism.”⁹⁷ His concept of rebellious humour provides a key theoretical frame that recognises its value to both conservative and radical agents, arguing that “a feeling of rebellion and an enjoyment of humour that transgresses social demands do not necessarily

⁹³ Morreall, “Humour and the Conduct of Politics”, p.78.

⁹⁴ Lewis, *Cracking Up*, p.7.

⁹⁵ Lewis, *Cracking Up*, p.162.

⁹⁶ Billig, Michael, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2005, p.3. Print.

⁹⁷ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.202.

equate with a politics of rebellion.”⁹⁸ This development of rebellious humour is a key strength of Billig’s work, reinforcing more nuanced interpretations between humour and power key to the central research question of this thesis. Billig’s work is particularly relevant to DiPaolo and Trump, who are interpreted as demonstrating what he characterises as the “joking rebel” through their anti-political correct comic personas.⁹⁹

A complementary text to *Cracking Up* and *Laughter and Ridicule* is Chris Powell and George E. C. Paton’s sociological collection in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control* (1988), and its analysis of international examples of humour as a means of social control or as resistance to this control. Paton’s “The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality” illustrates the role of the comedian as a social and moral guide, what he argues are the possibilities “for the professional comedian to expose and play on double-standards in official morality or legitimated moral codes and actual moral behaviour”, which he characterises as the comic’s “unique status as teachers we like”.¹⁰⁰ A key acknowledgement by Paton is not just how this interpretation of the comic as a moral negotiator is linked to questions of social control, but how these roles fall between identifications of “the conservative/radical comedian role-types” that either reinforce existing societal arrangements, or protest against them.¹⁰¹ These ideas are built upon in each of the case studies (specifically that of Kilstein), highlighting a similar dalliance between conservative and subversive tones and the role of the political comic as a cultural remedy to socio-political issues.¹⁰²

The subtleties of comic accountabilities in relationship with political authority are explored in Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson’s collection on post-network television political comedy in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* (2009). Jones assesses presidential impersonations in presentations like *Saturday Night Live*, arguing that during the 2008 election, its productions were largely toothless in their

⁹⁸ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

⁹⁹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

¹⁰⁰ Paton, George E. C., “The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality”. Powell, Chris & Paton, George E.C. (eds.), *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988, p.207, p.230. Print.

¹⁰¹ Paton, “The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality”, p.209.

¹⁰² Paton, “The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality”, p.230.

political criticism, opting for “safe ‘critique’” rather than incisive analysis.¹⁰³ He concludes that “*SNL*’s brand of satire has moved beyond its previous low as an *accomplice* of power into a willing and active *agent* of it. (Original italicisation)”¹⁰⁴ Through the lens of the live political comic mode, his critique of *Saturday Night Live*’s aggrandised status as a “satirical watchdog of power” is expanded in chapter two by highlighting the show’s problematic impersonation of Obama, and again in chapter five in its response to Trump’s presidential campaign.¹⁰⁵

Charles E. Schutz’ *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Erwin* (1977) provides a theoretical overview of the humour of democratic politics. He addresses the use of invective by American politicians, and notes how the largely negative nature of political humour used against American politicians acts as an antidote against political excess.¹⁰⁶ This thesis extends his considerations to an analysis of relations between political officials such as President Obama and various stand-up comedians. In a successive journal article, *Cryptic humor: the subversive message of political jokes* (1995), he expands on these themes, arguing that the subversive potential of political humour relies on its ambiguous nature, containing cues and signs that point to a deeper meaning.¹⁰⁷ However, he warns of the injudicious element within this “comic guise” of ambiguity that shields political comic aggression through guiding its aim “from directness to intentional distortion”, and in so doing, diminishes the clarity of the humour through its indirectness, thus opening it up to divergent interpretations. Avoiding this without steering towards styles of more “broadsax variety” political humour appreciated by “the sympathetically partisan” - where the humour’s target and critique is certain - is a balancing act acknowledged by Schutz within the delivery of subversive political humour.¹⁰⁸ This thesis builds on Schutz’ analysis of

¹⁰³ Jones, Jeffrey P., “With All Due Respect: Satirizing Presidents from Saturday Night Live to Lil’ Bush.” Gray, Jonathan, Jones, Jeffrey P. & Thompson, Ethan (eds.), *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009, p.47. Print.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, Jeffrey P., “With All Due Respect”, p.60.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, Jeffrey P., “With All Due Respect”, p.45.

¹⁰⁶ Schutz, Charles E., *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Erwin*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977, pp.246-296, pp.297-334. Print.

¹⁰⁷ Schutz, Charles E., “Cryptic humor: the subversive message of political jokes”. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research.*, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (January 1995), p.51. Web. <https://www.degruyter.com/view/j/humr.1995.8.issue-1/humr.1995.8.1.51/humr.1995.8.1.51.xml>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Schutz, “Cryptic Humor”, p.62.

strengths and weaknesses in cryptic political comic criticism through an Obama-era framework.

Stephanie Koziski's journal article "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic" (1984) provides a classical overview of the stand-up comedian as a social and cultural critic that embodies similarities to anthropological analysis. She underlines the comedian's ability to bring an audience to a new level of "conscious awareness" and "cultural focus" through their perceptions of incongruity in everyday culture and society.¹⁰⁹ She notes:

Some standup comedians specifically look at the array of seemingly unrelated customs, behaviors and artifacts in their society, as does the anthropologist, and see novel interconnections. They break down social life into its basic elements- searching for categories, isolating domains and identifying rules.¹¹⁰

Citing Dick Gregory's material on civil-rights era racial tensions, Mark Twain's excoriations on American religion and hypocrisy, and George Carlin on the destructive nature of human societies, she postulates that this particular anthropological treatment of existing society- "as participants or alienated beings"- provides opportunities to critique and revise existing forms of order through their examinations of "the mental molecules that make up social structures".¹¹¹ This thesis builds on Koziski's work in examining these same anthropological tendencies within the role of political and social critic. Lawrence E. Mintz's aforementioned journal article, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation" (1985) examines the stand-up as a "comic *spokesperson*" and negotiator of social and cultural values, arguing that the key to understanding this role and its "process of cultural affirmation and subversion is to recognise the comedian's "traditional *license* for deviate behaviour and expression." (Original italicisations)"¹¹² Citing Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller and their challenging of gender roles, and Redd Foxx's confrontation of sexual taboos, Mintz emphasises the performative elements within a comic's negotiation of cultural and social spaces with their respective audience, from crowd-work, the importance of creating a sense

¹⁰⁹ Koziski, Stephanie, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic". The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 18, Issue 2 (Autumn 1984), p.57. Web. Available online via *Wiley Online Library*. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1984.1802_57.x/abstract. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁰ Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist", p.58.

¹¹¹ Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist", pp.60-68, p.65, p.73.

¹¹² Mintz, "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation", p.75, p.74.

of community between the audience and comedian, to the art of creative distortion and exaggeration.¹¹³ Building on Mintz's research, this thesis explores the numerous ways in which political stand-up comedians play a similar role in defying and affirming social, political and cultural assumptions within the Obama era. Finally, a popular, non-scholarly addition to questions of live political comic performance in the Obama era can be found in Paul Provenza's collection of interviews with stand-up comedians in *Satiristas: Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs & Vulgarians* (2010). His extensive array of interviews with popular American stand-ups - four of whom are in this thesis as case studies (Black, Kilstein, O'Neal and Maher) - provide insights into the tensions involved in performing Obama-era socio-political comic criticism. From his introductory remarks on the importance of comprehension within political comic performance (what Provenza characterises as recognising "the perceived truth" before attempting to subvert it), Stephen Colbert's reflections on his insubordinate address at the 2007 Correspondents' Dinner, to Greg Giraldo's thoughts on the difficulties of the intensely subjective nature of audience response to political comic material, *Satiristas* provides a litany of reflections from within the political comic community, and ones built on within this thesis' case studies.¹¹⁴

The methodology used in this thesis falls within a mixed-methods qualitative approach of textual analysis and discourse analysis, involving examinations of the relevant political stand-up comedy productions and/or presentations for the first eight case studies. The final case study of Trump as a presidential candidate, with his interpreted political comic qualities, draw on recordings made during the 2016 campaign. Produced stand-up comedy albums and recorded, televised specials are considered as texts. This categorisation allows a textual analysis based on self-created transcripts of each political stand-up comedy production, and/or existent transcripts of Obama and Trump's respective political comic presentations, for example, in Obama's case, a transcript of his stand-up comedy address at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner published by the White House. Within these transcriptions is a classification of types of audience laughter, which I define as the less vocal characterisation of "Mild Laughter" and the more successful response of "Laughter". Both terms are also expanded on certain occasions to signify audience applause, falling between categories of "Mild Applause" and "Applause." Differentiations between these sets of audience

¹¹³ Mintz, "Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation", p.75, p.76, pp.78-9.

¹¹⁴ Provenza, Paul & Dion, Dan (eds.), *Satiristas! Comedians, Contrarians, Raconteurs & Vulgarians*. New York City, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, xiv, pp.26-7, p.264. Print.

amusement and response vary between case studies and the spaces they are performing in. As Sophie Quirk notes in her own methods of categorising audience laughter, the size and quality of laughter “cannot be measured from the same base-rate because the situations are never comparable”, but they nevertheless provide a form of transcription that accurately portrays the comics’ exchange with the audience and the respective size, character and expectations of the audience-performer relationship.¹¹⁵ I do the same in my own transcription methods. These are complemented by examining relevant performative and theatrical behaviours, audience reactions, and the success (or otherwise) of political exposition in the material and what this entails both in an isolated context and within a broader theoretical, cultural, historic and political analysis. Through this data collection, I engage in archival research involving relevant journalistic, political, theoretical, comic, as well as broader cultural reinforcement, and each case study begins by signalling a segmenting of the main themes, akin to thematic analysis.

In relation to the thesis’ consideration of subversive and conservative qualities, other texts have employed similar critical and complacent, or enlightening and regressive frameworks within socially and politically-focused stand-up comedy. In Haggins’ examination of the comic televisual and cinematic personae of a range of African American stand-up comedians in *Laughing Mad* (2007), she notes in her section on Chris Rock that comic material can embody both progressive and regressive forces, and is susceptible to ideological biases depending on both the artist in question and the social and political issue being discussed.¹¹⁶ Similarly, Krefting’s analysis of politically and socially-charged humour stands in contrast to what she characterises as the political and social innocuousness of “safe comedy” or “safe humor”.¹¹⁷ While critics such as Haggins and Krefting have discussed the critical and complacent nature of comic production and presentation, neither has pursued an examination of subversive and conservative qualities in political stand-up comedy as a main focus. Paletz’ principal elements of target, focus, social acceptability and presentation, together with Waisanen’s catalogue of political / comic limitations, influence this thesis’ methodology in gauging the broader performative, theoretical, cultural, and political tensions of each relevant case study. A further methodological consideration is Krefting’s engagement with “authorial context”, what she typifies as drawing from performers lives,

¹¹⁵ Quirk, *Why Stand-up Matters*, p.9.

¹¹⁶ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.83.

¹¹⁷ Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p.5.

background, personal accounts” that allows for interpretations of artistic and political intentions without being drawn too deeply into the problematic territory of dictating exact comic intent.¹¹⁸ This approach is primarily adopted in the case study of Eddie Griffin, in which newspaper interviews and other secondary materials are used to interpret his political comic material. Rather than imposing absolute qualifications of subversion and conservatism, this thesis attempts to provide a more nuanced measurement of each case study’s political commentary, and shows how, through varying cited tensions, they can be measured. The exact subversive and conservative aspects of each are determined within both the immediate context (i.e. the respective political stand-up comedian presenting his material) and a broader context encompassing relevant political, cultural, journalistic and theoretical considerations. My methodology’s in-depth textual analysis also includes secondary materials such as classical and contemporary political comedy texts, print and online media, and televisual examples. Much of this reinforcement is taken from journalistic sources. I use this mixed-methods qualitative approach of textual and discourse analysis and examine audience reactions relative to each one in order to engage the degree to which the primary research question has been answered. And while the methods are largely consistent across all nine case studies, they are context sensitive and emphasise the direct social, historical and temporal nature of the case studies and their productions.

iv. Outline of Chapters

This thesis examines five key areas of Obama-era political stand-up comedy. The primary research question of this thesis is: “To what extent has political stand-up comedy acted as a subversive and conservative cultural form in the Obama era?” The first chapter, *You Think I’m Joking”: The Weaponised Comedy of President Obama’s Stand-up Comedy Addresses*, focuses entirely on President Barack Obama. The subversive and conservative nature of Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses at the Gridiron Club Dinner and White House Correspondents’ Dinner are explored in relation to his comic subversion and conservatism. Beginning with his address delivered at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner, I interpret how Obama, through his adoption of a comic role, used the opportunity to address, deflect and trivialise criticisms of his deteriorating relationship with the White House press corps. In

¹¹⁸ Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p.10.

the second half of the case study, I analyse his addresses at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. The key foci of my analysis are his 2010 and 2011 comedy addresses from which I infer a live comic strategy of attempting to trivialise the controversial issues of the right-wing citizenship conspiracy theory (the "birther" theory) and also his administration's controversial drone programme. My examination of Obama's novel comic approach provides an extension to the presidential comedy scholarship of Peter M. Robinson, Don Waisanen, Judy Isaksen and Jonathan P. Rossing. In conclusion, while this initial case study offers the most obviously conservative example of political stand-up examined in the thesis, the President's relationship with the Gridiron Club still involves certain destabilising elements that challenge the status of some of the more austere institutions of Washington D.C political culture, as does his on-the-offensive redefinition of the presidential comedy tradition.

The second chapter, *African American Political Stand-up Comedy under an African American Presidency*, focuses on African American political stand-up comedians Patrice O'Neal and Eddie Griffin. This arena of stand-up is addressed by gauging the theoretical, political, racial and theoretical elements contained in African American political stand-up comedy's reaction to Obama's presidency, and the ramifications of this for the thesis' broader assessment of political stand-up comedy as a subversive or conservative cultural agent. I examine O'Neal's Obama-era political stand-up primarily through his posthumously released album *Mr P* (2012) and Griffin through his comedy special *You Can Tell 'Em I Said It* (2011) More specifically, while O'Neal - particularly after his death in 2011 - has received critical attention for his comic insights, an analysis of Eddie Griffin's political comic persona is rarer. This chapter builds on the African American comedy scholarship of Bambi Haggins, Mel Watkins, Jonathan P. Rossing and Kara Hunt. In my conclusion, I argue that *African American Political Stand-up Comedy* adds weight to the contention that this demographic's political stand-up comic nature became more conservative under Obama than in previous eras. But there are nonetheless bold, subversive elements in both case studies that challenge this.

In the third chapter, *Left-wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama era*, I provide an analysis of left-wing political stand-up comedy in the Obama period. This is done by looking at three case studies: left-wing political stand-up comedians Jamie Kilstein, Lewis Black and Bill Maher. The chapter's first case study focuses on Kilstein's critique of Obama-era

foreign policy courtesy of his stand-up comedy monologue on the late-night television talk show *Conan* from February 2011. This is followed with Lewis Black and his critique of the American healthcare debate under Obama. The final case study of Bill Maher examines the issue of partisanship in his political comic critiques, and looks at how this material contributes to a broader understanding of the subversive and conservative nature of left-wing political stand-up. One highlight of this chapter is its scrutiny of the importance of partisan and ideological elements involved in left-wing treatments of Obama. My reasons for choosing Kilstein, Black and Maher for chapter three are numerous, but primarily because they provide a broad overview of left-wing political comic material from a range of left-wing ideological positions, and also in how they offer an opportunity to gauge more dynamic fluctuations between conservative and subversive elements than the case studies from the first two chapters. It builds on the left-wing comedy scholarship of Dagnes, Krefting and D.M Jenkins. The overall research findings from this chapter are that the subversive and conservative qualities of Kilstein, Black and Maher are significantly dependent on their positioning and affiliation to President Obama, as well as a range of performative, partisan, theoretical and ideological considerations.

In my fourth chapter, *Right-wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama era*, I examine right-wing political stand-up comedy through the case studies of DiPaolo and Miller. The chapter's first case study, DiPaolo, begins with an exploration of the difficulties as a right-wing stand-up comedian in exploring concepts of race under Obama, in addition to analysing his declarations on torture, unions, national identity and immigration. The second case study on Dennis Miller illustrates conservative enervation under Obama, with his critiques of the administration's taxation and welfare policies, and ends with his statement of confidence in the health of post-racialism. I selected DiPaolo and Miller for their contrasting approaches within this area of stand-up. Furthermore, their critiques are delivered within an intensely complex framework which offers few defences for right-wing political stand-up comedians, particularly illustrated in the awkward elements of Miller's post-racial conclusions. This chapter expands the right-wing comedy scholarship of Dagnes and Ron Von Burg and Kai Heidemann through an Obama-era political comic contribution. I conclude the chapter by arguing that while the unpolished, rarefied feel of their political comic critiques often blunts the critical edge of their material, there are some impressive moments of subversion within an arena which has such little cultural insurance and few comic concessions.

In the final chapter of the thesis, titled *Comedy's Trump Problem and the Health of Political Comic Criticism at the end of the Obama Era*, I end with a case study of President Donald Trump, focusing on his 2016 presidential candidacy and the destabilising effect his campaign had on political comic reaction. While this thesis concentrates specifically throughout on political stand-up comedy, for the sake of analysing the broader effects and influences on the form, particularly in relation to Trump, it is crucial to look at the wider bowl of political comic contributions during the 2016 presidential election campaign. This chapter builds primarily on the comedy scholarship of Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein and Matthew Bruce, Mark Chou and Michael Ondaatje, and the non-scholarly contributions of John Hugar. It concludes by arguing that Trump's sheer unconventionality and disruption of typical political comic conventions led to a significant degree of self-interrogation during the presidential election as to the responsibilities, influences and effects of political comedy.

My overall research findings establish that political stand-up comedy in the Obama era, while displaying distinct moments of subversion, has been largely timid in its political criticism under Obama's presidency due to a confluence of ideological, racial and cultural sympathies with Obama, and the distinct, ever-present possibility of misinterpretation within political comic communication, particularly in regards to the unique racial aspect of his presidency. The very cautious nature of political stand-up comedy under his presidency stands in contrast to the President's own skilful use of comedy throughout his time in office, and leaves a rich comic legacy behind. In comparison, political stand-up comic reactions and responses to his presidency will likely be remembered for its chronicling, rather than critiquing, of Obama and his administration's policies and political and social narratives.

Chapter 1: “You Think I’m Joking”: The Weaponised Comedy of President Obama’s Stand-up Addresses



Figure 1: President Obama performing his annual stand-up comedy address at the 2014 White House Correspondents’ Dinner.

In Washington there is no more serious business than being funny.
- Political speechwriter Jeff Nussbaum¹

1.1. Introduction

On March 9th 2013, Obama made an appearance at the journalistic humour association the Gridiron Club Dinner. With growing anticipation over the President’s appearance, the Gridiron’s prohibition of reporters did little to dispel criticisms from the media. Even by the Obama administration’s particularly hostile standards to media reportage, the event was treated with extra confidentiality, with media coverage prohibited.² C-SPAN’s 2012 letter of petition requesting access to the event drew attention to the association’s lack of transparency towards media circles by reminding them that the Supreme Court has a friendlier approach towards providing live access to their own proceedings than the Gridiron

¹ Nussbaum’s quotation can be accessed at Green, Joshua, “Funny Business”, *The Atlantic*, Vol. 293, No. 4, May 2004, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/7AEXD>.

² Byers, Dylan, “D.C.’s Gridiron Club on the griddle, again”, *Politico*, 8th March 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/LRGIG>; Downie Jr., Leonard, “The Obama Administration and the Press: Leak investigations and surveillance in post-9/11 America”, *Committee to Protect Journalists*, October 10th 2013. Web. <https://archive.is/65az6>.

does.³ This request was almost immediately denied, thus relegating the throngs of press to the foyer of the Renaissance Hotel.⁴

This heavily-obfuscated coverage of a journalistic association and an excluded Washington press appears to be an unusual combination, even more so when we consider that the Gridiron Club Dinner is hosted and chiefly performed by an elite membership of press and broadcast journalists, leading *Politico*'s Dylan Byers to comment that non-Gridiron press corps members found it "particularly ironic that after all the press corps' recent complaints about access and transparency, fellow journalists are making the decision to keep the president's remarks *in camera* - which is to say, off camera". (Original italicisation)⁵ As Obama sat at the head table, a number of satirical musical skits conducted by the Gridiron's press membership were performed, with dozens of print, magazine and broadcast journalists taking to the stage in pantomime clothing to take part in musical sketches, a "musical skit in costume" tradition that club historian James Free notes as a "mainstay of the dinner entertainment."⁶ Some carried political humour banners, while others stood up front in tiger and bear costumes. They performed renditions of classic songs adapted to contemporaneous political topics. Mary Poppin's "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" was spun into "Mandatory Legislative Budget Sequestration"; Simon and Garfunkel's "I am a Rock (I am an Island)" became "I'm not Barack (I am Joe Biden)", and Bob Dylan's "Everybody Must Get Stoned" was transformed into "Everybody Must Get Droned."⁷ Within this unusual context of satirical political performances, pantomime clothing, and comedy addresses, Obama stepped up to the podium to deliver his address, adopting the role of stand-up comedian.

³ "C-SPAN asks to cover Gridiron Dinner", *jimromensko.com*, March 23rd 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/OiftS>.

⁴ "Gridiron Club Dinner Arrivals", *C-SPAN*, March 9th 2013. Web. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?311427-1/gridiron-club-dinner-arrivals>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁵ Byers, "D.C.'s Gridiron Club on the griddle, again", p.1.

⁶ Gridiron Club 2013 Reprise", *Harvard Club of Washington D.C.*, p.1. Web. <http://hcdc.clubs.harvard.edu/article.html?aid=553>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Free, James, *The First 100 Years! A Casual Chronicle of the Gridiron Club*. Washington D.C., D.C.: Gridiron Club, 1985, p.29. Print.; In the following video numerous animal costumes and banners can be seen during one of the musical sketches. "Gridiron song for Amy Klobuchar", uploaded to *kevindiaz57* (Youtube Channel) on March 10th 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-0vrtsP9Sc>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁷ Silva, Mark, "Gridiron's 'Hillary': 'Will You Select Me, Will You Elect Me, When I'm 69?'" , *Political Capital, Bloomberg*, March 11th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/R8oZc>.

The annual presidential stand-up comedy address has become an increasingly popular aspect of American culture, and one which Obama performed in each year of his presidency and considerably redefined. A trio of associations, the White House Correspondents' Association, the Gridiron Club and Foundation, and the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association, constitute the Washington D.C. tripartite of political comic culture, with the Correspondents' Dinner being easily the most popular and influential of the three. As Charles E. Schutz notes, American political humour as an instrument of criticism is generally perceived to be used by everyday citizens against the powerful, and not by the powerful themselves, acting as "a safe release for aggressiveness against superior force."⁸ In this chapter I examine the less-analysed side of stand-up comedy when utilised by powerful agencies through the case study of President Barack Obama. This chapter is guided by the following secondary research question: "To what extent do President Obama's stand-up comedy addresses reflect on an analysis of political stand-up comedy as a subversive and conservative cultural form under his presidency?" It examines Obama's reorientation of the annual presidential stand-up comedy address, and how the significant potential of self-definition at the heart of his addresses has been employed to shape the President's reputation by attempting to deflect prominent political criticisms. It interprets that Obama's addresses provide a unique space for him to attempt to normalise political criticisms and controversies, such as his antagonistic relationship with the White House press corps, right-wing citizenship conspiracy theories surrounding his birthplace, and his administration's controversial drone programme. It is guided by the aforementioned secondary research question that seeks to analyse to what extent Obama's stand-up comedy addresses reflect the cultural form's subversive and conservative nature.

Through underlining the major scholarship of presidential comedy that the chapter's arguments build on, an overview of its contribution to literature on Obama-era presidential comedy, and any additional texts referenced and/or applied as general reinforcement in this chapter, is considered. A major text extended within this chapter is Peter M. Robinson's previously evaluated *The Dance of the Comedians* (2010), in which he examines presidential uses of stand-up comedy and comic response throughout American history up to the George W. Bush administration. Don Waisanen's analysis of crisis-directed presidential joking at the Correspondents' Dinner in "Comedian-in-Chief: Presidential Jokes as Enthymematic

⁸ Schutz, *Political Humor*, p.8.

Crisis Rhetoric” (2015) is also developed. His examination of Obama’s use of humour to deflect negative accusations of foreignness in the birther theory provides a reading of presidential joking “as invitations for audiences to inhabit particular constructions of reality”, elements of interpreted strategy that are built upon in this chapter.⁹ This chapter also extends Isaksen’s journal article, “The Power of Obama’s Racio-rhetorical Humor: Rethinking Black Masculinities” (2017), in which she interprets Obama’s stand-up material as a model for negotiating black masculinity.¹⁰ She complements this chapter’s reading of Obama’s response to the citizenship conspiracy theory through her treatment of “the emancipatory performance practices of humor” and disciplinary laughter, which this chapter builds on through its explication of Obama’s on-the-offensive redefinition of presidential joking and addressing of prominent political criticisms.¹¹ Jonathan Paul Rossing’s paper, “Live from D.C, It’s “Nerd Prom”: Political Humor at the White House Correspondents’ Association Dinner” (2017), is also expanded. Through his characterised style of political humour which he titles “demockery”, Rossing argues that “in the spirit of the roast, the comedians insult and ridicule democratic agents and processes not to harm democracy but to honor the system with all its flaws”.¹² However this chapter counters Rossing’s research by citing specific elements within President Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses that can be deemed harmful to public debate and democratic politics.

The chapter’s analysis of his 2013 address at the Gridiron Club Dinner uses a wide range of contemporary journalistic commentaries, along with a historical treatment of the American presidency’s relationship to the association. Bakhtin is applied in an interpretation of the Gridiron Club Dinner as an adaption of his concept of carnival. This is achieved by compounding the association’s carnival qualities through Bakhtin’s four key defining features of carnival. Umberto Eco’s “The Frames of Comic Freedom” (1984) is used as a critique of Bakhtin’s concept by arguing that it typically exists within a realm of permitted disobedience, and that comedy and carnival’s dalliance represent “paramount examples of law reinforcement” by reminding individuals of the existence of social order.¹³ Eco’s treatment of carnival is built upon through an analysis of the Gridiron Club Dinner, which

⁹ Waisanen, Don, “Comedian-in-Chief: Presidential Jokes as Enthymematic Crisis Rhetoric”. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, Issue 2 (June 2015), p.337. Available online via *Wiley Online Library*. Web. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/psq.12190/abstract>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰ Isaksen, “The Power of Obama’s Racio-rhetorical Humor”, p.10.

¹¹ Isaksen, “The Power of Obama’s Racio-rhetorical Humor”, p.11.

¹² Rossing, “Live from D.C”, p.169.

¹³ Eco, Umberto, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”. Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed), Erickson, Marcia E., (asst.), *Carnival!* Berlin, New York City, NY & Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984, p.6. Print.

is argued to exemplify a reversal of typical Bakhtinian theory by affirming power through carnival rather than subverting it. This is succeeded by analysing how Obama responded to criticisms of his contentious relationship with the White House press corps through his stand-up comedy address, and the implications this has for assessing the cultural form as an instrument of power. It is reinforced through the application of Bergson's theory of laughter as a social corrective interpreted in Obama's comic responses to the press as a means of disciplining their political criticisms of his administration's press record. Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of comic half-ness is also applied to an analysis of the Gridiron Club Dinner. In his essay, "The Comic", Emerson proposes that the essence of comedy is defined by halfness, where in our everyday recognition of concepts of perfection such as truth and goodness, a successive, contrasting halfness or imperfection is what creates laughter. This is employed in an examination of serio-comical rhetoric in Obama's comedy address at the Gridiron Club Dinner.

In the second half of the case study, I analyse Obama's comedy addresses at the Correspondents' Dinner. After providing an extensive background to the association through local and national journalistic reinforcement, and one that construes the enviable role of comedy as a means of shielding the association's candid affirmation of Washington D.C elites, the section investigates Obama's response to the right-wing citizenship conspiracy theory - known as the "birther theory" - by arguing that the effectiveness of his comic ripostes is due to a strategy of comic delegitimation. Waisanen's analysis of crisis-directed presidential joking is developed by building on scholarly work on construed presidential strategies within comic communication. This segment extends Isaksen's journal article, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor: Rethinking Black Masculinities" (2017), in its gauging of Obama's on-the-offensive, disciplinary mode of stand-up comedy.¹⁴ Another relevant work is Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan's and Richard Walsh's journal article, "Ten Theses about Fictionality" (2015), in which they highlight fictional and non-fictional elements in Obama's comedy addresses and how Obama's use of "fictive and nonfictive discourse" allows a suspension of actualities and exploration of alternatives.¹⁵ From their proposed rhetorical possibilities, Nielson, Phelan and Walsh's work is employed to interpret Obama's comic delegitimation of the birther theory. This section interprets

¹⁴ Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor", p.10.

¹⁵ Nielsen, Henrik Skov, Phelan, James & Walsh, Richard, "Ten Theses about Fictionality". *Narrative*, Vol. 23, No.1 (January 2015), p.62. Available online via *Project Muse*. Web. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/563646>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

strategies behind Obama's drone programme joke at the Correspondents' Dinner. It is strengthened with contextual journalistic responses - both to the comic material, and to the growing controversy over the Obama administration's undisclosed drone programme - followed with an interpretation of possible strategies at play in referencing the programme within the formula of a stand-up joke. Finally, James K. Mish'alani journal article, "Threats, laughter, and society" (1984), is applied to a reading of Obama's drone joke at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner. In Mish'alani's examination of Bergson's concepts of comic ridicule and threat within laughter, he underlines the intimidating nature of corrective laughter as a "representational character" of assault or physical violence that works as a "semblance of assault" to adversative behaviour.¹⁶ Mish'alani's treatment of Bergsonian threat is applied to the chapter's analysis of Obama's drone joke. The chapter concludes by highlighting the heavily conservative leanings of Obama's stand-up comedy addresses, but I temper this by illustrating his subversion of the Gridiron Club Dinner by his noticeably spotty attendance record. These considerations are discussed within the wider context of his skilful use of stand-up, the repercussions this has for how we view this cultural agent under his presidency and its relation to modes of power, and how this chapter contributes to this field of scholarship.

1.2. Barack Obama, the Insult Comic President

As *Politico*'s Ben Smith and Gabriel Beltrone commented ahead of Obama's 2010 Correspondents' Dinner, the crucial power of presidential stand-up comedy lies in its unique opportunity for presidents to re-define themselves on a popular public platform. "When Obama delivers his second address to the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, he'll do so at an event that's evolved from a clubby roast into a crucial moment of presidential self-definition."¹⁷ ABC News Radio White House Correspondent Ann Compton echoed this assessment, remarking that the president's comedy addresses are "far more defining" than any official addresses given during their tenure in the White House.¹⁸

¹⁶ Mish'alani, James K., "Threats, Laughter, and Society". *Man and World*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1984), p.150. Web. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF01248673>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷ Smith, Ben & Beltrone, Gabriel, "Prep and circumstance", *Politico*, 30th April 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/9rRef> (p.1) <https://archive.is/NwcvA> (p.2).

¹⁸ Smith, & Beltrone, "Prep and circumstance", p.2.

However, *The New York Times* Washington correspondent Mark Leibovich argues that Obama has always treated his stand-up comedy duties as “something of a chore”.¹⁹ This sentiment is repeated in *Politico*’s Mike Allen’s interview with the President’s Director of Speechwriting - and a chief writer of Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses - Jon Favreau (2009-2013) ahead of the 2014 Correspondents’ Dinner. When Favreau comments that the President “loves” attending the Correspondents’ Dinner, Allen is incredulous, stating that Obama clearly “does not”.²⁰ However, while Leibovich maintains that although Obama viewed these performances as something of a chore, they also acted as “a humorous outlet to say how he really felt” about certain issues, particularly the Washington press.²¹ Furthermore, he could do so without the same accountability he would face within typical political channels, an element that Favreau reinforces by noting the potential of being able to “put in jokes that are really funny but not 'appropriate' for a politician to tell.”²² Dean Obeidallah adds weight to this argument, concluding that the President has “weaponized comedy”, marginalising the typical self-deprecatory humour of previous presidents’ comedy addresses for a strategy far more politically advantageous. He notes that the uniqueness of stand-up comedy allows the President an atypical level of personal exposition to redefine issues and challenge criticisms: “Sure it’s comedy, but the barbs have messages embedded in them.”²³ The sheer lack of self-deprecatory humour in his addresses however has elicited criticism from commentators such as Paul Farhi of *The Washington Post*. Calling Obama “the Insult Comic President” following the 2010 Correspondents’ Dinner, Farhi argued that Obama had broken with the “presidential punch line tradition” of inoffensive, self-deprecatory humour to go on the attack against opponents.²⁴ *Politico*’s Todd S. Purdum noted a similar criticism prior to the 2014 Correspondents’ Dinner:

President Barack Obama is very smart (as he could tell you). He is also very funny (and the first to laugh at his own jokes). He is a master of comic timing,

¹⁹ Leibovich, Mark, *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral- Plus Plenty of Valet Parking! - in America’s Gilded Capital*. New York City, NY: Penguin Group, 2013, p.140. Print.

²⁰ “Open Mike: Jon Favreau, former Obama speechwriter.” Uploaded onto *Politico* (Youtube Channel), May 2nd 2014, 0:00. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xez0q91AosI>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²¹ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.140.

²² Burton, Charlie, “All the president’s gab”, *GQ Magazine (UK)*, September 2nd 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/QKTTc>

²³ Obeidallah, Dean, “Obama Will Weaponize Comedy at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner”, *The Daily Beast*, May 2nd 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/Ch7w7>.

²⁴ Farhi, Paul, “For Obama, a changed tone in presidential humor”, *The Washington Post*, May 3rd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/1jZNL>.

has an appealing sense of the absurdities of his chosen profession and an unerring ear for the withering one-liner. As long as the subject is someone else.²⁵

Although Farhi and Purdum have criticised Obama's addresses for being too much on the offensive, this chapter demonstrates its role as a useful strategy. In Waisanen's analysis of presidential comedy at the Correspondents' Dinner, he argues that the Clinton administration to the Obama administration marks a period "in which the strategic use of enthymematic, crisis-directed humour has been amplified."²⁶ This chapter argues that Obama's contribution to this period of crisis-directed comedy addresses is markedly more on-the-offensive in comparison to Clinton and Bush, what Judy L. Isaksen typifies as Obama's clear preference for "a more edgy comedy style", and "one that has social purpose."²⁷ Certainly, Mark Katz, principal comedy writer for Clinton, remarked how in the "war room"-like drafting of his comedy addresses for the Correspondents' Dinner, Clinton wanted to use the opportunity to address his opponents, rather than simply self-deprecate.²⁸ As Katz comments, "President Clinton actually hated about half the jokes we wrote for him...He couldn't understand why the jokes weren't about other people...He wanted other people to rue the day they ever crossed him because they heard this joke."²⁹ Reinforcing this tension, one of Clinton's jokes planned but subsequently removed, envisaged him stating that "all the [White House] correspondents are below average" - a reference to the Lake Wobegon effect - before White House aides deemed it "Too harsh".³⁰ A list of censored Clinton jokes released in May 2014 found a similar pattern of comic expurgation, with jokes aimed at the Correspondents' Dinner, presidential candidates Bob Dole and Ross Perot, and right-wing exaggerations of the Clinton administration being removed in the final cut.³¹

President George W. Bush employed a similar self-deprecatory strategy. In his address to the 2007 Radio and Television Correspondents' Association dinner, he satirised his

²⁵ Purdum, Todd, "Barack Obama laughs at but not with", *Politico*, May 2nd 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/DUtdq>.

²⁶ Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief", p.335, p.337.

²⁷ Isaksen, Judy L., "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor: Rethinking Black Masculinities". *Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 28, Issue 1 (2017), p.10. Web. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10646175.2016.1235517>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁸ Gay, Jason, "How Mark Katz Made Bill Clinton a Big Joke ... Haiku MTV! ... Too Much Rage, Not Enough Soy Sauce", *New York Observer*, September 13th 2000, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/gcdyJ>.

²⁹ Purdum, "Barack Obama laughs at but not with", p.2.

³⁰ Purdum, "Barack Obama laughs at but not with", p.2.

³¹ "Censored jokes of the Clinton files", *Politico*, May 1st 2014. Web. <http://www.politico.com/gallery/2014/05/censored-jokes-of-the-clinton-files-187799?slide=0>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

propensity for verbal gaffes: “But between the Congress and the press, there is a lot of scrutiny in this job. Not a day goes by that I don't get scrutineered one way or the other. [Laughter.]”³² Changing this strategy rarely worked to his advantage. An infamous example was when he presented a series of jokes at the same venue in 2004 about his administration’s fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction, displaying photographs of himself searching for them in the Oval Office.³³ The reaction to this joke was largely negative, regarded by many commentators as being in extremely bad taste.³⁴ Perhaps due to the media fallout over these jokes, the Bush administration corrected its comic strategy six weeks later at the 2004 Correspondents’ Dinner, avoiding jokes about Iraq entirely, and devoting five out of eight minutes to honouring American servicemen in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁵ Although the Clinton and Bush administrations were able to use their addresses to deflect a certain degree of popular criticism, they were far more cautious than Obama’s. Each year a number of White House officials, such as Favreau, Jon Lovett and David Axelrod - as well as professional comedians and comedy writers such as Stephen Colbert and Judd Apatow - have helped prepare Obama’s comedy addresses.³⁶ As argued in this chapter, Favreau and other White House officials (and part-time joke-writers) potentially recognised the strategic opportunities in drafting his comedy addresses as a chance to mould the powerful narratives of the Obama administration and respond to popular political criticisms. This is initially interpreted through President Obama’s stand-up comedy address at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner, and is followed with an analysis of his addresses at the Correspondents’ Dinner.

³² “2007 Radio and Television Correspondents Dinner”, *C-SPAN*, March 28th 2008, 35:52. Web. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?197375-1/2007-radio-television-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³³ “2004 Radio and Television Correspondents’ Dinner”, *C-SPAN*, March 24th 2004, 30:00. Web. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?181100-1/2004-radio-television-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³⁴ “Bush’s Iraq WMDs joke backfires”, *BBC News*, 26th March 2004, p.1. Web. [https://archive.is/CWK4a](https://archive.is/CWK4a;); “Bush’s joke about WMD draws criticism”, *USA Today*, March 26th 2004. Web. <https://archive.is/hK2iQ>.

³⁵ “2004 White House Correspondents’ Dinner”, *C-SPAN*, May 1st 2004, 27:02-35:28. Web. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?181634-1/2004-white-house-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³⁶ Memoli, Michael A., “Making the president funny at White House correspondents dinner is serious work”, *Los Angeles Times*, April 25th 2015, p.1. <http://www.latimes.com/nation/politics/la-na-presidential-comedy-20150425-story.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

1.2.1. Obama's Stand-up Comedy Address at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner

The annual Gridiron Club Dinner remains one of the more unique nights of off-the-record political culture, a night of socialising between the political and press elites of Washington D.C. through the medium of comedy. Renowned for its white tie exclusivity since its founding in 1885, all-but-one president (Grover Cleveland) has presented some form of comedy address or routine at the association on a near-annual basis, and only sixty-five carefully-vetted journalists receive new or renewed invitations to the dinner's membership each year.³⁷ As Free partly chronicles, there are a number of examples of presidents directly using the Gridiron Club to address popular political criticisms.³⁸ In 1970, Richard Nixon used the opportunity to perform a piece of musical comedy to counter criticisms of the Southern Strategy.³⁹ Ronald Reagan was honoured in his final Gridiron appearance in 1988 by a chorus of Washington journalists singing an interpretation of "Thanks for the Memories", which ribbed the President's convenient short mindedness about his senior advisors' involvement in the Iran-Contra affair.⁴⁰ More recently, George W. Bush - adorned in a cowboy hat and leading a rendition of the "Green Green Grass of Home" - bid farewell to the club in 2008 with lyrics that poked fun at his controversial pardoning of Scooter Libby.⁴¹ The lineage of comic performances by U.S Presidents, and the practice of addressing undisclosed, politically-turbulent and controversial policies, is a tradition that this chapter interprets Obama enthusiastically embraced in his 2013 Gridiron address.

1.2.2. The Bakhtinian Qualities of the Gridiron Club Dinner

Comic qualities central to the political-journalistic comedy tradition of the Gridiron Dinner involve the suspension of conventional political and journalistic roles, where satirical

³⁷ Byers, "D.C.'s Gridiron Club on the griddle, again", p.1.

³⁸ Free, *The First 100 Years!*, p.32.

³⁹ O'Reilly, Kenneth, *Nixon's Piano: Presidents and Racial Politics from Washington to Clinton*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1995, p.6. Print.

⁴⁰ Thomas, Helen, "President and Mrs. Reagan led the powerful and elite...", *United Press International*, March 26th 1988, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/5jWHR>.

⁴¹ Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, "Bush's Surprise Serenade Hits Youtube", *The Lede, The New York Times*, March 13th 2008, p.1. Web. <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/13/bushs-surprise-serenade-hits-youtube/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

musical numbers can be performed by print journalists, and where presidents and other political officials can relax from their normal constraints, a principle, according to Free, characterised as “Ladies are always present; reporters are never present.”⁴² A relaxation of these official roles is also balanced by the Gridiron Club’s century-old, watchful motto that “the Gridiron will always sing, but never burn”, a motto that sets an important precedent for the association’s festivities.⁴³ The role of the President as comedian and journalists as entertainers exemplifies the deferral of conventionality for unconventionality that is so well reinforced in a comic mode, and the mock-participatory quality of the presidential comedy performance that exists within a synthetic political, journalistic and public space. This unusual interruption of actualities reinforces comments from the *Washington Post*’s Henry Allen, who argues that in Washington D.C., “authenticity and fantasy are close companions.”⁴⁴ In this eccentric union of press and presidents, the humorous theatricalities of the Gridiron’s press membership and Obama’s engagement with a stand-up comedy address, Bakhtin’s theory of carnival proves highly prescient. As he argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), a principal, guiding quality of carnival is its subversion of traditional relationships between the individual and modes of power:

Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. (Original italicisation)⁴⁵

Within the spoof and satire of the Gridiron Club, an adaptation of Bakhtin’s carnival can be explicated that embraces features of the concept in an atypical and unique way. He notes within his definition that “as a form it is very complex and varied, giving rise, on a general carnivalistic basis, to diverse variants and nuances depending upon the epoch, the people, the individual festivity.”⁴⁶ He proposed four defining features of carnival: “Familiar and free interaction between people”, “eccentric behaviour”, “carnivalistic mésalliances”, and “profanation”, all of which can be identified within the comic suspension of the Gridiron Club Dinner.⁴⁷ The enclosed ethos of the Gridiron reinforces this Bakhtinian reading, with the satirical skits, animal costumes and song parodies embodying the carnivalesque features

⁴² Free, *The First 100 Years!* p.32.

⁴³ Free, *The First 100 Years!* Preface, i.

⁴⁴ Allen’s quote can be accessed in Leibovich, *This Town*, p10.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.123.

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.122.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp.122-3.

of eccentric behaviour, permitting what Bakhtin describes as “the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves”, in this case through stand-up comedy, and profanation, “a whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringings down to earth”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the qualities of free and familiar contact and carnivalesque misalliances can be seen in the comic association between members of the Fourth Estate and the President, a merging of what Bakhtin characterised as “the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant”.⁴⁹ This sense of misalliance is reflected in Keith Koffler’s criticism of Obama’s appearance at the 2013 Gridiron Club Dinner due to its comical association of press and political officials, the appearance of “Washington’s most august journalists letting their hair down by dressing up and performing skits while rubbing elbows - and playing figurative footsie - with the politicians they cover.”⁵⁰ This interpreted incorporation of certain carnival qualities also allows for a treatment of scholarly works that highlight potential conservative elements within Bakhtin’s theory. In Umberto Eco’s analysis of Bakhtin’s theory of carnival in “The Frames of ‘Comic Freedom’”, he argues that its subversive potential is constrained by being separated from reality, keeping its moments of transgression, criticism and reflections of power exclusively within the safety of a comic sphere.⁵¹ His analysis of “*authorized transgression*” (Original italicisation) allows an exploration of the potential implications of powerful agencies altering Bakhtin’s theory by utilising these humorous, carnivalesque qualities typically used in readings of popular resistance to power.⁵² If, as Eco notes, “carnival is the natural theatre in which animals and animal-like beings take over the power and become the master”, the Gridiron Club Dinner literally exemplifies an adaptation of this by having powerful press officials masquerade onstage in animal costumes.⁵³ This Bakhtinian quality is highlighted in an interview with *USA Today*’s chief congressional correspondent Susan Davis, a 2015 Gridiron inductee, when she commented on the club’s secrecy around reporting and recording the annual dinner event, which - as a new member - involves her wearing a cow suit:

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.123.

⁴⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.123.

⁵⁰ Koffler, Keith, “Press Excluded From Obama Event By...The Press”, *White House Dossier*, March 10th 2013, p.1. Web. <http://www.whitehousedossier.com/2013/03/10/press-excluded-obama-event-press/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁵¹ Eco, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”, p.3.

⁵² Eco, “The frames of ‘comic freedom’”, p.6.

⁵³ Zak, Dan, “At Gridiron, Satire Has No Fury Like a Journalist Scorned by Obama”, *The Washington Post*, March 23rd 2009, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/nuoLD>.

I think they take [their off-the-record approach] very seriously, and everything else is ridiculous. It's just more about being in the moment.... The upside is there will be less pictures of me dancing in the cow suit on the Internet.⁵⁴

The Washington Post's Robert McCarthy reaches a different conclusion however, namely that the Gridiron Club's prohibition of media coverage, combined with its "excessive coziness" between journalists and the President continues is "because the journalist performers are willing to look foolish in front of the president but not the world."⁵⁵ Contrastingly, rendering Obama's comic behaviour through the Bakhtinian cover of what Eco describes as "assuming a mask" - in this case performing stand-up at the Gridiron Club Dinner - ensures that transgressions can be committed "while remaining innocent", a relaxation of the typical codes as President and lessening his accountability when performing within a comic mode.⁵⁶ It was within this cultivated comic space that Obama could behave with what Eco typified as "*authorised transgression*" (Original italicisation).⁵⁷ Rather than carnival being used to resist power, this chapter argues that it is used to affirm it.

1.2.3. Obama's Comic Addressing of his Press Relationship

It was within this comic realm that the President addressed, mocked, and deflected criticisms from the White House press corps. Obama's address at the 2013 Dinner was delivered within the context of intense criticism over the clandestineness of his administration and its contentious relationship with the White House press corps. As *The Atlantic's* Connor Simpson comments, Obama's address within this good-humoured setting acted as a perfect opportunity for the President to acknowledge his administration's transparency criticisms to its press membership.⁵⁸ This issue is something he identifies early in his address:

As you know, I last attended the Gridiron dinner two years ago. Back then, I addressed a number of topics- a dysfunctional Congress, a looming budget crisis,

⁵⁴ Andrews, Helena, "One of the youngest members of the old-school Gridiron Club spills some of the society's 'secrets'", *The Washington Post*, March 14th 2015, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/fmV7j>.

⁵⁵ McCarthy, Robert, "Wise up, Gridiron Club, or lose your cachet", *The Washington Post*, March 21st 2012, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/uM1Qu>.

⁵⁶ Eco, "The frames of 'comic freedom'", p.3.

⁵⁷ Eco, "The frames of 'comic freedom'", p.6

⁵⁸ Simpson, Connor, "Obama Suits Up for Decent Gridiron Comedy Routine", *The Atlantic*, March 10th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/03/obamas-suits-decent-gridiron-comedy-routine/317571/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

complaints that I don't spend enough time with the press. It's funny, it seems like it was just yesterday. [Laughter.]⁵⁹

This joke confronts the popular criticism of the Obama Administration's lack of accountability and access to the press, which he acknowledges has endured for a number of years. Numerous figures within local and national press circles state that the administration has continually refused to disclose even the most basic information about daily occurrences in the White House, and harbours what Washington correspondent Josh Meyer argues is an "across-the-board hostility to the media."⁶⁰ Correspondent David E. Sanger goes even further, commenting that the Obama administration "is the most closed, control-freak administration I've ever covered."⁶¹ The President's acknowledgement of this criticism by the Washington press marks his first attempt to minimalise this issue within his stand-up address. Placing it within the crises of a contentious Congress and the sequestration budget crisis of early 2013, Obama skews the stark nature of this poor relationship by listing his self-acknowledged contentious relationship towards the press corps alongside predicaments over which he has less control. However, as *ABC News Radio's* Ann Compton argues, "it's up to presidents to define what relationship they want to have" with the press corps, where the change "has to come from the top."⁶² In this joke, Compton's remarks are clearly not an account of Washington press relations that the President promotes.

In a subsequent joke, Obama addresses the press corps' growing criticisms of the administration's increasing tendency to redirect journalists to the *WhiteHouse.gov* website rather than answering their questions during White House press briefings. To contextualise this joke, the administration's promotion of *WhiteHouse.gov* further incensed relations between themselves and the press corps, particularly because it allowed the administration to almost completely bypass any form of dialogue through its use of sophisticated government websites, creating an entirely new set of problems for governmental accountability in an already hostile press environment. As Leonard Downie chronicles in his 2013 report on relations between press groups and the Obama White House, from

⁵⁹ "Remarks by the President at the Gridiron Dinner", *WhiteHouse.gov*, March 9th 2013, p.1. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/03/10/remarks-president-gridiron-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁰ Meyer's quotation can be accessed in Downie Jr., "The Obama Administration", p.1.

⁶¹ Sanger's quotation can be accessed in Downie Jr., "The Obama Administration", p.1.

⁶² McCalmont, Lucy, "WHCA Panel pushes for access", *Politico*, February 25th 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/wNseK>.

exclusive interviews and photographs with the President, videos of White House officials performing their duties, to blog posts by Obama aides continually updated on an hourly basis, every facet of the administration's day-to-day business is contained within a highly-refined social media strategy that requires non-existent interaction with the press to push favourable narratives while continuing to block independent press access.⁶³ This is borne out in data compiled by presidential historian Martha Kumar, who argues that Obama maintained a particularly distant relationship with the press corps within his second term, as reflected in the number of press briefings he conducted. As Kumar argues, compared to his predecessors at the same point in their re-election campaigns, Bush and Clinton had held seventeen and sixteen press briefings, respectively. Obama had held just eight within his same period, and concluded his first term with fewer press briefings than any president since Ronald Reagan.⁶⁴ In addition to this, *The New York Times*' Santiago Lyons argues that the administration's obsessive use of marking events as "private", blocking media access, then later providing a sanitised, White House-friendly media narrative through media outlets such as WhiteHouse.gov through their own photographers, has become standard practise.⁶⁵ So it is within this contentious context that Obama delivered the following joke:

Now, since I don't often speak to a room full of journalists- [Laughter.]- I thought I should address a few concerns tonight. Some of you have said that I'm ignoring the Washington press corps - that we're too controlling. You know what, you were right. I was wrong and I want to apologize in a video you can watch exclusively at WhiteHouse.gov. [Laughter.]⁶⁶

By acknowledging his quarrelsome reputation with the press corps through the medium of a stand-up comedy address, he admits the validity of these popular criticisms but deflects the possibility of further interrogation. It is through the distinctiveness of the comic mode that Obama is able to acknowledge a popular political criticism, accept it, but then pronounce that the policy will continue, reinforcing Waisanen's analysis of President Ronald Reagan's use of enthymematic presidential humour, where "jokes both endorse criticisms while

⁶³ Downie Jr., "The Obama Administration", p.1.

⁶⁴ Tau, Byron & Byers, Dylan, "Obama's soft-media strategy", *Politico*, 17th August 2012, p.2. Web <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0812/79840.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Slack, Donovan, "Obama ends term with fewer pressers than Bush or Clinton", *Politico*, January 15th 2013, p.1. Web <http://www.politico.com/blogs/politico44/2013/01/obama-ends-term-with-fewer-pressers-than-bush-or-clinton-154233>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁵ Lyons, Santiago, "Obama's Orwellian Image Control", *The New York Times*, December 11th 2013, p.1. Web <https://archive.is/xxoa5>.

⁶⁶ "Remarks", p.1.

undermining them.”⁶⁷ The freedom offered to Obama in a comic mode is further illustrated in the following joke, where he mocks the press’ rare opportunities to question him during press briefings by poking fun at his own lack of acquiescence. In this joke, Obama communicates with White House Correspondent for *Fox News*’ Ed Henry:

[President Obama speaking.] While we’re on this subject, I want to acknowledge Ed Henry [Senior White House Correspondent for *Fox News*], who is here - who is the fearless leader of the Washington press corps now. [Applause.] And at Ed’s request, tonight I will take one question from the press. Jay [Carney, White House Press Secretary], do we have a question? [Laughter.] Surprisingly, it’s a question from Ed Henry. [Laughter.] [Ed Henry speaks directly to Obama.]: “Mr. President, will you be taking any questions tonight?” [Laughter.] [Obama responds.] I’m happy to answer that. No, Ed, I will not. [Laughter.]⁶⁸

In a candid exposition of his dismissive attitudes towards the press, the President attempts to make light of his absence and when present, his deflection of critical questions at White House press briefings, a conduct heavily criticised by the press corps.⁶⁹ This is also an issue he mocked in his 2011 Gridiron Club appearance in similarly barbed language. Introducing his address with an acknowledgement that he is happy to have “a chance to spend time with so many members of the press” the President remarked that “I know people say that I have a testy relationship with the media - but how can that be? I hardly ever see you.”⁷⁰ This presents the possibility of using comedy’s malleability to reinforce the problematic official narratives of the Obama administration - in much the same way its own media bodies like WhiteHouse.gov do - to discourage adversarial opinion. In his appraisal of Obama’s weaponisation of comedy, Obeidallah acknowledged the effectiveness of confronting criticisms in a stand-up comedy address, commenting that “there’s nothing more effective - and satisfying - than causing a room full of people to laugh at your opponents or their views.”⁷¹ This argument resonates with Bergson’s conservative theory of laughter, in which he argues that humour acts inherently as a form of social corrective to adversarial behaviour.⁷² Bergson notes that the pleasure caused by laughter implied “a secret or unconscious intent” of correcting opponents and criticisms, and in order to achieve this

⁶⁷ Waisanen, “Comedian-in-Chief”, p.346.

⁶⁸ “Remarks”, p.1.

⁶⁹ Tau & Byers, “Obama’s soft-media strategy”, p.2.

⁷⁰ Sweet, Lynn, “Obama at the 2011 Gridiron Club dinner. Transcript”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 14th 2011, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/nOWxo>.

⁷¹ Obeidallah, “Obama Will Weaponize Comedy”, p.1.

⁷² Bergson, *Laughter*, p.87.

correction, it “must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed.”⁷³ As he comments, “In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct our neighbour, if not in his will, at least in his deed.”⁷⁴ Reflecting the social corrective, regulatory function of Bergson’s interpretation of laughter, Obama’s WhiteHouse.gov joke, and his broader press material, can be interpreted as an adaptation of his corrective theory against critical media opinions by ridiculing them in his comedy address, illustrating what the theorist argued was humour’s major function i.e. to “intimidate by humiliating.”⁷⁵ Both Obeidallah’s and Bergson’s commentaries on the power of humour to silence adversarial opinion lend weight to more strategic interpretations of Obama’s comedy addresses, with its potential to mock and trivialise political criticisms.

Furthermore, a reading of the disciplinary functions within Obama’s addresses entrenches Bergson’s interpretation of the “equivocal nature of the comic”, and the difficulty of drawing a line between “the trifling and the serious” tones of the form that has implications for appreciating Obama’s relationship with the White House press corps.⁷⁶ In an example from August 2012, when Obama made an unannounced appearance in the White House Briefing Room after a hiatus of two months, and after taking just twenty-one minutes of questions before walking offstage, ABC News’ correspondent Jake Tapper, a well-known critic of the President’s perceived hostility to the press corps, called after him, “Don’t be a stranger”, a remark that drew a laugh from the President as he left the room.⁷⁷ On another occasion, when former White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs tried to placate growing anger amongst members of the media over Obama’s continued evasiveness, he reiterated a standard platitude of the current administration, saying that “this is the most transparent administration in the history of our country.”⁷⁸ According to *Politico*’s Josh Gerstein, “peals of laughter broke out in the briefing room.”⁷⁹ In a relationship with an administration that refuses to have any sort of meaningful interaction with the White House press, and furthermore mocks it within journalistic humour events, this collision of artificial and actual

⁷³ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.136.

⁷⁴ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.136, p.197.

⁷⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.198.

⁷⁶ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.135, p.137.

⁷⁷ Christopher, Tommy, “Jake Tapper To President Obama After Press Briefing: ‘Don’t Be A Stranger!’”, *Mediaite*, 20th August 2012, p.1. Video of incident included. Web. <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/jake-tapper-to-president-obama-after-press-briefing-dont-be-a-stranger/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁷⁸ Gerstein, Josh & Gavin, Patrick, “Why reporters are down on President Obama”, *Politico*, 28th April 2010, p.2. Web. <https://archive.is/dUt9S>.

⁷⁹ Gerstein & Gavin, “Why reporters are down on President Obama”, p.2.

political and press accounts can be seen as a small victory for a press corps so readily dismissed by the President through his own initiation of laughter. For many media figures in the audience during Obama's address at the Gridiron dinner, his mockery of these popular criticisms of themselves and their associates will be the closest they come to any sort of response regarding their contentious relationship with the President. This sentiment was expressed previously in comedian Jay Leno's headliner address at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner, when he joked that for the White House press corps, this was "about as close to a White House press conference as they've have had in a year...so, enjoy it while it lasts."⁸⁰

The consequences this has in examining the comic mode are considerable: in a context where day-to-day interaction with the President is non-existent, where he rarely, if ever, acknowledges his poor relationship with the press in a formal setting, and where reporters are essentially made to seek answers to even the most basic questions from politically-sanitised literature on WhiteHouse.gov due to the scarcity of non-government filtered information from the White House, the President is able to joke about it within a comic role with minimum accountability. This trivialisation pays service to comedy's malleability, but also its complicity, in normalising controversial policies and attitudes, raising questions about elements of comic theory when applied by powerful political officials, and the ambiguity of intent. In his essay *The Comic*, Ralph Waldo Emerson touches upon this quality of ambiguity in analysing the essence of the comedy performance:

The essence of all jokes, of all comedy, seems to be an honest or well-intended halfness; a non-performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance.⁸¹

Leibovich underlines Emerson's theory of the comic half-performance by noting that what made Senator Obama such a compelling candidate during the 2008 presidential election was a portrayed indifference to whether he became president or not, his possession of a "post-ironic detachment from politics".⁸² *Politico's* Todd S. Purdum comments on this projected detachment, but this time specifically in relation to the President's comedy performances: "As is often the case with other rhetorical aspects of his presidency, Obama sometimes seems

⁸⁰ "2010 White House Correspondents' Dinner", *C-SPAN*, May 1st 2010, 35:54. Web. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?293275-1/2010-white-house-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁸¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume VIII: Letters and Social Aims*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010, p.83. Print.

⁸² Leibovich, *This Town*, p.41.

to deliver his jokes - however effective they may be - with the disembodied distance of someone observing his own performance.”⁸³ Leibovich and Purdum’s comments illustrate Emerson’s notion of ambiguity in the President’s performance, what he characterised as the “non-performance of what is pretended to be performed.”⁸⁴ Obama’s deliveries within a comedy mode allow a temporary degree of removal from his official accountabilities, but also raise a number of questions about the serio-comical nature of his address at the Gridiron Dinner that demonstrate the ambiguities of interpretation within comedy. One noticeable example can be found in the President’s final remarks at the Dinner:

Now, I do want to end on a serious note. I know that there are people who get frustrated with the way journalism is practiced these days. And sometimes those people are me. [Laughter.] But the truth is our country needs you and our democracy needs you.⁸⁵

Leibovich’s own analysis of the President’s campaign race in 2008 noted his non-performance amongst pledges of performance, the bolstering of an artificial façade that hid a different truth than what appeared at first glance. As *Politico*’s Josh Gerstein comments, the President in his everyday duties “rarely lets a chance go by to make a critical or sarcastic comment about the press.”⁸⁶ This documented antagonism towards the White House press corps emphasise the serio-comical nature of Obama’s stand-up address even further. From this, Emerson’s concept of “the radical joke of life”, which he defines as the contrast between ideals and practise that creates laughter, the “perception of disparity”, can be interpreted in the contrast between Obama’s diplomatic, presidential rhetoric towards the Washington press and what Emerson characterised as “the yawning delinquencies of practise” found in Obama’s contentious relationship with the White House press corps.⁸⁷ This can be construed as indicating the darker side of Obama’s stand-up, the barely concealed hostility that at times breaks from beneath the calculated comic stability of his comedy address and attempts to normalise a hostile relationship with the press corps under his administration. In his closing remarks, the President finished with an acknowledgement of the necessity of a free press and its essential practise of holding political officials accountable:

⁸³ Purdum, “Barack Obama laughs at but not with”, p.1.

⁸⁴ Emerson, *The Collected Works*, p.83.

⁸⁵ “Remarks”, p.1.

⁸⁶ Gerstein & Gavin, “Why reporters are down on President Obama”, p.1.

⁸⁷ Emerson, *The Collected Works*, p.84.

These are extraordinary times. The stakes are high and the tensions can sometimes be high as well. But while we'll always have disagreements, I believe that we share the belief that a free press- a press that questions us, that holds us accountable, that sometimes gets under our skin- is absolutely an essential part of our democracy.⁸⁸

Three days later, amid a stream of reports praising Obama for his comedy address at the Gridiron Club Dinner, a live-stream of the President's meeting with his export council was posted on the White House website in its ongoing commitment to greater accountability.⁸⁹ However, as Nancy Benac notes, only one reporter was allowed to attend the meeting.⁹⁰ This in itself serves as a striking complement to his Gridiron address in which he acknowledged the broad grievances of the White House press corps. As she comments, "Obama himself took note of complaints about limited access in his jokes last month at the Gridiron dinner, an annual event where political leaders, journalists and media executives poke fun at one another".⁹¹ This chapter argues that these forms of stand-up comedy address exhibit a strong complicit edge towards Obama-era political power. The President, who normally refuses to acknowledge his controversial relationship with the press corps, and whose administration feeds politically sterile responses from its own enclosed communications structure to a Washington press he does not wish to be held accountable by, delves candidly into addressing and mocking these controversies within the mode of a stand-up comedy performance. This raises serious questions about stand-up comedy's role as a complicit agent with regard to powerful political officials such as President Obama, and by extension, the White House.

To return to Bakhtin, the interpreted application of Bakhtinian qualities within the Gridiron Club Dinner allows for an emboldening of typical press and political privileges and accountabilities within the association, the creation of an elite form of carnival whose own respective transgressions and limitations purportedly work in the favour of powerful political

⁸⁸ "Remarks", p.1.

⁸⁹ "Gridiron Club Dinner 2013: Obama Pokes Fun at Self, Reporters", *Reuters*, published March 9th 2013. Original report reprinted by *The Huffington Post*. Web. <https://archive.is/aKJEH>.; Saenz, Arlette, "Obama Makes Light of Recent Controversies at Gridiron Dinner", *The Note, ABC News*, published on March 10th 2013. Web. <https://archive.is/3mOay>.; Slack, Megan, "President Obama Talks Trade with His Export Council", *The White House Blog, The White House*, published March 12th 2013. Web. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2013/03/12/president-obama-talks-trade-his-export-council>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁹⁰ Benac, Nancy, "Obama Image Machine Whirs as Press Access Narrows", *The Big Story, Associated Press*, published April 1st 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/kuBdD>.

⁹¹ Benac, "Obama Image Machine", p.1.

and press officials. In Bakhtin's aforementioned definition of the carnivalesque, he described it as a setting for negotiating, through a "half-real and half-play acted form", interrelationships between individuals, an ethos subsumed in the theatre of the Gridiron Club Dinner.⁹² The Emersonian, serio-comical reflections in Bakhtin's carnivalesque description emphasise the significance of the stand-up comic mode in routing these negotiations, where Obama's comedy address can be seen as performing these carnivalesque features through a relaxation of his typical accountabilities as President, an application of Bakhtin's feature of eccentric behaviour. As he notes, "The behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in noncarnival life", carnivalesque features which can be interpreted in the President's comic performance at the Gridiron and his ridiculing of the White House press corps.⁹³ When combined with the carnival qualities of the Gridiron Club Dinner, Obama's address creates a supreme opportunity for political power, where the laughter and chaos of the association, rather than liberating the powerless as Bakhtin envisaged, instead emancipates the powerful.

1.2.4. Obama's Stand-up Addresses at the White House Correspondents' Dinner

This chapter ends with an examination of Obama's stand-up comedy addresses at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. A number of contrasts with the Gridiron Club Dinner are immediately apparent. Unlike the Gridiron's continued prohibition on media coverage, the Correspondents' Dinner is broadcast yearly to an audience of millions on *C-SPAN*.⁹⁴ Whereas the Gridiron's use of pantomime costumes and political show tunes has been described as more catered to an older generation's tastes, what Linton Weeks characterises as its "Washington-as-Broadway" comic style, the Correspondents' Dinner speaks to contemporary cultural tastes, attracting Hollywood celebrities that congregate amongst the

⁹² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.123.

⁹³ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, p.123.

⁹⁴ Roberts, Roxanne, "White House Correspondents' Association Dinner: A theme party has little to do with D.C.", *The Washington Post*, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/64tSf>.

press and political elites of Washington D.C.⁹⁵ Comedy's prominent position within the association has popularised it on a national and international level through its annual presidential comedy addresses and satirical videos. Obama's annual stand-up routines have proven to be easily amongst the most popular videos from the event, receiving millions of views per year online, followed with productions like Stephen Spielberg's "Obama" comedy short prepared for the President's 2013 comedy address.⁹⁶ Obama's comedy address at the 2011 Correspondents' Dinner has proven to be the most popular full-length video of his comedy performances at the association, with an edit of it in which he aims jokes at businessman and presidential successor Donald Trump attracting over eighteen million views.⁹⁷

However, similar to the Gridiron's suspension of typical press and political relations, the Correspondents' Dinner sits within what Clinton's comedy-writer Mark Katz defines as an "alternate reality", where "the President says all these funny things that he could otherwise never say in a million years."⁹⁸ In considering Leibovich's description of Washington D.C. as "the Nation Exaggerated", the Correspondents' Dinner maximises that exaggeration to cartoonish proportions by illustrating the problematic relationship between White House and Washington Press factions within a single annual event.⁹⁹ Commentators such as *The Washington Post's* Roxanne Roberts reinforce this, noting how the event's popularity with press, and political and Hollywood elites has made it an obvious target for criticism. As she argues, "The assumption, based on the black-tie bonhomie in the Washington Hilton ballroom, is that the president and an elite press enjoy a cozy relationship - too cozy."¹⁰⁰ In an editorial written shortly before *The New York Times* withdrew from attending the Correspondents' Dinner in 2007, the paper's Frank Rich described the Correspondents' Dinner as the "crystallization" of the White House's ability to enlist the Washington Press.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Weeks, Linton, "The Gridiron's Batters, Skewered With a Butter Knife", *Washington Post*, March 12th 2006, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/kC41g>; Miller, Jake, "Hollywood Meets D.C.: Inside the White House Correspondents' Dinner", *CBS News*, May 3rd 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/ZaoEG>; "White House Correspondents' Dinner: When Media, Celebs and Politicos Meet (Photos)", *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 3rd 2014. Web. <https://archive.is/rVH57>.

⁹⁶ "Steven Spielberg's "Obama"", *The Obama White House* (YouTube Channel), April 27th 2013. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyU213nhrh0>.

⁹⁷ "President Obama Roasts Donald Trump At White House Correspondents' Dinner!", *SuchIsLifeVideos* (Youtube Channel), April 30th 2011. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8TwRmX6zs4>

⁹⁸ Gay, "How Mark Katz Made Bill Clinton a Big Joke", p.1.

⁹⁹ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.11.

¹⁰⁰ Roberts, "White House Correspondents' Association Dinner", p.1.

¹⁰¹ Rich, Frank, "All the President's Press", *The New York Times*, April 29th 2007, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/xIHPc>.

Leibovich likewise criticised the Correspondents' Dinner as a festive affirmation of Washington power:

Indeed, to the outside world, the dinner and its collateral goings-on present an image of Washington as one big game and costume party, everyone bathed in the same frothy mix of fame and fun and flattery and (most of all) *belonging*. It all looks terrible.¹⁰² (Original italicisation)

The gross affirmation of D.C culture that Roberts, Rich and Leibovich condemn is where the use of comedy proves a useful tool in attempting to pacify the intense criticism the dinner receives each year. This is manifest in the self-deprecatory manner with which many treat the Correspondents' Dinner. From reporter's treatments of the event as "Nerd Prom", to "The Snorespondents' Dinner" characterisation voiced in the *Veep* parody prepared for the 2014 Correspondents' Dinner, popular discussions of the event are riddled with self-deprecation.¹⁰³ In actuality however, there are few annual associations that hold such sway over political and media elites in Washington D.C., and the self-effacing, derogatory manner in which they discuss the event contrasts with its manifest importance as an annual barometer of elite status. Leibovich notes that the anticipation of the Correspondents' Dinner creates such a frenzy each year, that pre-parties and after-parties for the dinner number as many as two-dozen per year, and with tickets ranging up to \$2500 becoming one of the most sought after commodities in Washington D.C.¹⁰⁴ The intense anticipation that precedes each year's dinner has reached such peaks that a spoof of Netflix's political drama *House of Cards* - entitled "House of Nerds" - was produced for the 2012 Correspondents' Dinner, in which political and media officials from Senator John McCain, *Fox News* Washington Correspondent Ed Henry, and *Politico*'s Mike Allen negotiate with Democrat whip Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey) to secure tickets for the event.¹⁰⁵ However, the anticipation displayed by the political and media officials for the event is thereafter mocked; later in the sketch, *Buzzfeed*'s editor-in-chief Ben Smith, who is hosting his own keg party as a

¹⁰² Leibovich, *This Town*, p.138.

¹⁰³ Shapiro, Walter, "The Inescapable Squareness of Washington's 'Nerd Prom'", *New Republic*, April 28th 2012. Web. <https://archive.is/gy9i1>.; "Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Joe Biden: White House Correspondents' Dinner 2014", *HBO* (Youtube Channel), May 3rd 2014. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=da5tjfpKyac>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.8.; Roberts, "White House Correspondents' Association Dinner", p.1.

¹⁰⁵ "Kevin Spacey's Correspondents' Dinner Spoof - 'House of Nerds'", *The Daily Conversation*, April 27th 2013. Web. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCzI521sgqE>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

competing alternative, mockingly notes that “a colonoscopy would be cooler” than attending the dinner.¹⁰⁶

The faux-dismissive treatment of the Correspondents’ Dinner is perhaps borne out of the expectations of an association that is in part comedy, but it may be also due to what it represents, both inside and outside of Washington D.C.: namely, a nakedly candid affirmation of elite press and political power. Leibovich’s commentary reinforces this, arguing that the “Nerd Prom” self-deprecation endemic in discussions of the event is really a “self-congratulatory” facade to distance political and media officials from the dinner and its numerous critics, similar to the association’s status as a charity event through its annual awarding of college journalism programs, a glorifying quality that *The Post and Courier’s* Margaret Carlson’s argues allows it to “maintain a veneer of a sense of mission...when the amount given wouldn’t cover valet parking for the evening.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, ridiculing the dinner as a demanding but noble journalistic obligation serves to mask a less munificent rationale for why so many political figures, media officials and celebrities compete for tickets each year. It is within this foundation that serious strategies behind Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses are interpreted, and in which I analyse how Obama’s comedy addresses at the Correspondents’ Dinner provide a unique space for him to confront and deflect contentious issues such as right-wing citizenship conspiracy theories and his administration’s controversial drone programme.

1.2.5. Comic Delegitimation in Obama’s Response to the Birther Theory

Obama’s first term was in part defined by a spate of right-wing alternative theories such as the birther theory, which cast doubt over Obama’s birthplace in the United States.¹⁰⁸ Within this context were also theories that questioned Obama’s Christian faith, ruminated over his hidden socialist agenda, and postulated sinister notions originating from the healthcare

¹⁰⁶ “House of Nerds”, 3:25.

¹⁰⁷ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.137; “2014 Scholarship Recipients”, *White House Correspondents’ Association*, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/WhBKL>.; Carlson, Margaret, “Washington wallows in annual self-abasement spectacle”, May 5th 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/CBwld>.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, Ben & Tau, Byron, “Birtherism: Where it all began”, *Politico*, April 22nd 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/aQ6rn>.

reform movement such as the infamous death panel myth.¹⁰⁹ *The Guardian*'s Paul Harris commented in August 2009:

Republicans, seizing on the fierce debate over Obama's plans to reform healthcare, have called him a socialist who plans "death panels" for the elderly. Rumours have circulated that Obama was not born in America and that he plans to ban firearms. Despite having no basis in fact, they have become widely believed.¹¹⁰

White House officials such as Press Secretary Robert Gibbs expressed their bemusement at the birther theory, dismissing it as "totally crazy".¹¹¹ In response to a related question on July 27th 2009, he commented that even having to indulge "the made-up, fictional nonsense of whether or not the President was born in this country" within the "august" setting of the White House briefing room gave the theories more legitimacy than they deserved.¹¹² In the same setting, after the release of his long-form birth certificate on April 27th 2011, Obama concurred with Gibbs' argument in April 2011, commenting to the Washington press corps that, "We do not have time for this kind of silliness. We've got better stuff to do. I've got better stuff to do."¹¹³ Both Gibbs' and Obama's responses to the birther theory emphasise the necessity of splitting absurdist notions away from the weightiness of White House affairs. Their official responses to this theory however, and the dynamic in which they can be engaged, changes considerably when addressed within the comic mode of the Correspondents' Dinner. President Obama employed this strategy in addressing the birther issue during his stand-up addresses at the 2010 and 2011 Correspondents' Dinners. Commenting on his fluctuating approval ratings at the former event, he stated, "It doesn't bother me. Beside I happen to know that my approval ratings are still very high in the country of my birth. [Laughter & Applause.]"¹¹⁴ In his first comic address of the issue, he not only confronts the issue, but jokingly admits that he *was* in fact born abroad. Obama delivers the joke without breaking his presidential demeanour, staying straight-faced

¹⁰⁹ Rutenberg, Jim & Calmes, Jackie, "False 'Death Panel' Rumor Has Some Familiar Roots", *The New York Times*, August 13th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/YMna2>.

¹¹⁰ Harris, Paul, "Fears for Barack Obama's safety as healthcare debate fuels extremism", *The Guardian*, August 16th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/N7YRb>.

¹¹¹ Taylor, Caitlin, "Gibbs on Birthers' Theories: 'You Couldn't Sell This Script in Hollywood'", *ABC News*, August 6th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/DDPN3>.

¹¹² "Press Briefing 7/27/09", *The Obama White House* (Youtube Channel), July 27th 2009, 29:10-23. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i953nlhyvSs>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹³ "Obama Releases His Birth Certificate", *ABC News*, April 27th 2011, 4:26-32. Web. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/video/obama-releases-birth-certificate-13468322>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁴ "2010 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 19:32.

throughout the premise and delivery. The audience affirms their disapproval of these theories by joining with him in satirising them. The joke not only marks Obama's confrontation of the birther theory, but cleverly uses ambiguous serious and comical elements, what Waisanen argues is the unique ability for presidents to use "counterfactual rhetoric" within joking.¹¹⁵

At the successive Correspondents' Dinner, and with the White House having recently released Obama's long-form birth certificate, the issue is addressed more extensively, once again utilising a satirical, conspiratorial comic method. After remarking on the recent release of his long-form birth certificate, Obama declares that, to put "all doubts to rest" over its authenticity, a further measure will be taken: "Tonight, for the first time, I am releasing my official birth video. [Laughter.] Now, I warn you - [Laughter.] - no one has seen this footage in fifty years, not even me. But let's take a look."¹¹⁶ In Judy L. Isaksen's analysis of Obama's racio-rhetorical humour as a means of gauging his associations with understandings of black masculinity, she emphasises how he delivers the set-up to this joke "with mock-serious facial expressions and his slow and measured cadence" in order to reinforce the punchline.¹¹⁷ As the display screens show the "birth video", it turns out to be the opening scene of *Disney's The Lion King* (1993), where the main character, Simba the lion cub is crowned on the African plains, surrounded by all the animals of the kingdom. Rather than quelling right-wing suspicions, the video "confirms" theories of the President's African birthplace. After the video ends, Obama, in mock-disappointment, acknowledges this when he remarks, "Oh well. Back to square one."¹¹⁸ Isaksen notes that the "official birth video" joke is the "most powerful comedic disruption" deployed by the President against birther advocates - most noticeably Donald Trump, who was sitting in the audience - by "using their point of irritation - their fear of Africa - to do so."¹¹⁹ Her analysis extends Obama's on-the-offensive, unique use of stand-up to accommodate his position as the first African American president, and his attempt to contest "a manufactured and ritualized discourse of ideological fears that position him as a threatening outsider."¹²⁰ Using *The Lion*

¹¹⁵ Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief", p.351.

¹¹⁶ "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner", *C-SPAN*, 30th April 2011, 26:26. Web. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?299256-1/2011-white-house-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁷ Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor", p.12.

¹¹⁸ "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 27:27.

¹¹⁹ Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor", p.12.

¹²⁰ Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor", p.10.

King, through its obvious and rooted fictionality, provides a perfect means to challenge this narrative, and one in which Gibbs' aforementioned rebuttal of the theory as "made-up, fictional nonsense" is complemented by comparing the theory's ruminations to an animated children's movie.¹²¹ It also emphasises the Bergsonian elements of ridicule in Obama's stand-up persona, what Ikaksen typifies as a reminder to "his haters that they are being disciplined through laughter."¹²² Amongst roars of laughter from the audience, Obama continues by addressing the *Fox News* Correspondents' table directly:

I want to make clear to the *Fox News* table: That was a joke. [Laughter.] That was not my real birth video. [Laughter.] That was a children's cartoon. [Laughter.] Call Disney if you don't believe me. [Laughter.] They have the original long-form version. [Laughter.]¹²³

This use of fictional and non-fictional qualities is reinforced in Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan and Richard Walsh's analysis of Obama's Correspondents' Dinner addresses. Their examinations of fictive and non-fictive elements within his addresses look directly at the "Obama" spoof featuring director Steven Spielberg, a comedy production in which Obama - played by himself - is humorously portrayed as being actually played by method actor Daniel-Day Lewis in the overlay of the video.¹²⁴ As "Day-Lewis" comments in the video, "Was it hard playing Obama? I'll be honest, yeah it was. This accent took a while."¹²⁵ These same fictive and non-fictive qualities can be extended to examples such as the official birth video joke, where its presentation implies that for Obama, "there is no contradiction between valuing verified facts and the playful assertion of manifest falsehoods."¹²⁶ Moreover, it is an act that through its intended satirising of right-wing conspiratorial elements, demands a broad comprehension and appreciation amongst the Correspondents' Dinner audience, what Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh note in how Obama's performances depend "on the ease with which he and his audience can move between the two kinds of discourse."¹²⁷ In a similar way to how the official birth video allowed the President to mock the birther theory by wholeheartedly accepting its supposition within a comic setting, the

¹²¹ "Press Briefing 7/27/09", 29:10-23.

¹²² Isaksen, "The Power of Obama's Racio-rhetorical Humor", p.11.

¹²³ "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 28:15.

¹²⁴ Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", pp.61-62.

¹²⁵ Steven Spielberg's "Obama", 0:46.

¹²⁶ Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", p.62.

¹²⁷ Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", p.62.

following joke at the 2012 Correspondents' Dinner openly accepted popular conspiratorial criticisms of the dinner in order to ridicule it further:

Now, this year, we gather in the midst of a heated election season. And [Senior Advisor David] Axelrod tells me I should never miss a chance to reintroduce myself to the American people. So tonight, this is how I'd like to begin: My name is Barack Obama. My mother was born in Kansas. My father was born in Kenya. And I was born, of course, in Hawaii. [President Obama gives a knowing wink to the audience] [Laughter & Applause.]¹²⁸

In this joke, Obama's performed "acceptance" of the birther theory further exemplifies how he satirises its conspiratorial nature through acknowledging and accepting it within a comic setting. This interpreted comic strategy demonstrates Waisanen's theorising of "alternate frames" within the presidential comedy of the Correspondents' Dinner, where the President's countering of the birther theory "permitted Obama to play within the boundaries of his opponents' reasoning - not simply *stating* his opponents' arguments but *performing* the punchlines as if he *were* them." (Original italicisation)¹²⁹ Furthermore, the joke's effectiveness is drawn from confirming the worst fears of birther advocates: that Obama, who was born abroad and is therefore not eligible to be President of the United States, is openly ridiculing his opponents by candidly admitting his foreign birthplace to the pro-establishment ranks of the Washington Press and liberal Hollywood elites. By presenting the conspiratorial nature of the political-press relationship of Washington D.C. in such a cartoonish light, it not only helps deflect the theory, but counter-arguments as well. Drew Zahn of the right wing, pro-birther American website *World Net Daily* responded to the joke the following day by arguing that Obama's wink was an invitation to the Washington Press to join him in a joke against the American people by helping cover up his foreign birthplace.¹³⁰ However, in doing so, Zahn confirms the conspiracy theory elements that Obama lampoons in his jokes. The conspiratorial mockery found in the President's birther material - that within the comic context of the Correspondents' Dinner he could candidly admit the suspicions of right-wing Americans through these respective jokes - therefore deflates the potential for a counter-argument to be made on the basis that the White House's

¹²⁸ "2012 White House Correspondents' Dinner", *C-SPAN*, April 28th 2012, 22:54. Web. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?305614-1/2012-white-house-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹²⁹ Waisanen, "Comedian-in-Chief", p.351.

¹³⁰ Zahn comments in the masthead of his article that President Obama's joke "invites reporters to join with him in joke on American people." Zahn, Drew, "OBAMA: 'I WAS BORN IN HAWAII,' WINK, WINK", *World Net Daily*, April 29th 2012. Web. <https://archive.is/VvyNt>.

acknowledgement of the issue legitimises the theory by planting the government's response firmly within comical territory.

In this sense, Obama's addressing and mocking of the birther movement is effective in not just giving himself a space to address and mock the movement, but in also immobilising key elements of the right-wing theories. It also supports Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh's analysis of the unique effectiveness of fictionality in disarming one's opponents, where because "the deployment of fictionality takes one's discourse into the realm of the nonfactual, its assertions cannot be directly contradicted."¹³¹ In so doing, they argue that "arguments and counter-arguments have to take place on other levels and with other forms of appeal than those based in facts and documented evidence."¹³² This is undoubtedly true with reference to Obama's "official birth video" joke, where any direct refutation of the video invites mockery due to its clearly fictional nature. The satirical strategy of Obama's birther material helps make the theory more untenable by using its own arguments against it in a comic mode, further illustrating the unique political and rhetorical potential within the President's stand-up comedy. If the theory was as fictional or silly as Gibbs and Obama argue they are, perhaps even comical, then engaging with it within the President's stand-up addresses would prove a significant way of deflecting them without tarnishing the dignity of White House channels. If the theories were indeed comical, the White House perhaps recognised that they had to embrace them through the comic mode to delegitimise them.

1.2.6. Tough Crowd: Interpreting Obama's Drone Programme Joke

A contrasting example can be found in his stand-up comedy address delivered at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner, and perhaps the most controversial joke of all his addresses:

The [teen pop band] Jonas Brothers are here. [Applause.] They're out there somewhere. Sasha and Malia are huge fans. But, boys, don't get any ideas. [Laughter.] I have two words for you - predator drones. [Laughter.] You will never see it coming. [Laughter.] You think I'm joking. [Laughter.]¹³³

¹³¹ Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", p.69.

¹³² Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", p.69.

¹³³ "2010 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 22:29-50.

This joke was quickly met with criticism. The White House's decision to joke about a controversial (and at the time undisclosed) C.I.A programme vigorously promoted by the Obama administration was widely recognised as being in poor taste.¹³⁴ As *The Atlantic's* Max Fisher pointed out, the inclusion of this joke - and the subsequent reaction it faced - proves that "some topics are a little touchy for even the most taboo-flaunting, back-slapping stand-up comedy routines."¹³⁵ *Salon's* Alex Pareene suggests that the joke would have perhaps been less offensive if it had come from anyone but Obama. "It seems like a no-brainer that the people directly responsible for tragedies should not deliver jokes about those tragedies."¹³⁶ Although criticisms of the drone joke stayed predominantly within online circles, *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter felt compelled to defend it two days later in an interview on MSNBC's *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*.¹³⁷ After host Keith Olbermann pressed the point that the drone joke felt too "threatening" to be humorous, Alter countered that "it was a joke", and in doing this, may have hoped to remove any serious qualities that the joke possessed.¹³⁸ In the visual qualities in Obama's delivery of the drone joke, his body language exudes a careful dalliance between comical and serious tones. As he gets ready to pull the punchline of the joke, he lifts his head, fixing a steely eye to the audience. "I have two words for you - predator drones." Reacting to the burst of laughter from the audience and with his right hand held out as if in presidential declaration, he quickly delivers the next line of the joke. "You will never see it coming." As his posture straightens, he focuses on the left side of the audience, waiting for the laughter to die down. Five seconds pass before the final line is delivered, turning his face back towards the podium. With his eyebrows raised slightly and his mouth edged closer to the podium microphone, his gaze turns firm as he delivers the final line. "You think I'm joking. [Laughter.]" Keeping a stern look on his face as the crowd reacts, he shifts his gaze to his notes. Turning the page, he emits a quick chuckle, barely audible against the fading laughter of the audience. The joke's dalliance between a serious presidential tone and a comic attitude is complemented further with the final line of the joke, "you think I'm joking", a perfectly-tuned crossing of serio-comical

¹³⁴ Fisher, Max, "Obama Finds Predator Drones Hilarious", *The Wire*, May 3rd 2010. Web. <https://archive.is/xEPk9>.

¹³⁵ Fisher, "Obama Finds Predator Drones Hilarious", p.1.

¹³⁶ Pareene, Alex, "Obama threatens Jonas Brothers with drone strikes", *Salon*, May 3rd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/epWNA>.

¹³⁷ Fisher, "Obama Finds Predator Drones Hilarious".

¹³⁸ "Countdown with Keith Olbermann' for", *Countdown with Keith Olbermann, MSNBC*, 4th May 2010. Web. <https://archive.is/jkwMH>.

tones that can be broadened to reflect aforementioned examples such as his comic responses to the White House press corps.

On close analysis, the same interpreted strain of political strategy that encouraged the Obama administration to use the President's stand-up comedy addresses to counter the birther theory can be seen in the insertion of this drone joke. Placing the joke within the time-frame of early-to-mid 2010, the confidential nature of the programme and the increasing controversy over its legal status was contested in the days leading up to that year's Correspondents' Dinner, with a hearing before the House Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs taking place just three days before Obama delivered his stand-up address. Although State Department Legal Advisor Harold Hongju Koh presented the government's first legal basis for the drone programme approximately a month before the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner, some commentators felt that the programme still remained firmly within hazy legal territory.¹³⁹ As human rights lawyer Chris Rogers argued, "Koh's mere assertions of the programme's legality fail to provide the kind of accountability that is urgently needed."¹⁴⁰ With the programme coming under increasing pressure from human rights organisations and congressional bodies in the weeks and months leading up to the Correspondents' Dinner, it can be interpreted that the President's joke-writing team may have recognised the necessity of addressing the drone programme through his comedy address. As *Politico's* Amie Parnes comments in an interview with Favreau, the team working on the President's address began and finished it the same week as the Correspondents' Dinner.¹⁴¹ Within this same week (April 25th to May 1st, the latter date being the night of the event), a *New York Times* editorial by Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann was released criticising the drone programme and the Obama administration's hazy confidential stance of "plausible deniability", a stance in itself suited to the ambiguities of Obama's comic rhetoric.¹⁴² Almost simultaneously, the House subcommittee met to determine the legality of the programme, and the American Civil Liberties Union penned a letter to Obama voicing their "profound concern" about the

¹³⁹ Koh, Harold Hongju, "The Obama Administration and International Law", *U.S Department of State*, March 25th 2010. Web. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/s/l/releases/remarks/139119.htm>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Rogers, Chris, "Are Drone Strikes Legal? Koh Offers Assurances, Not Answers", *Huffington Post*, April 3rd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/Q0qdf>.

¹⁴¹ Parnes, Amie, "Jon Favreau on Obama's WHCD Success", *Politico*, May 3rd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/Y2Zer>.

¹⁴² Bergen, Peter & Tiedemann, Katherine, "No Secrets in the Sky", *The New York Times*, April 25th 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/1Sfca>.

drone programme's increased deployment under his administration.¹⁴³ This growing pressure from *The Times*, the *ACLU*, and Congressional bodies happened in the same time period that Obama's speechwriters Favreau and Lovett, National Security Council spokesperson Tommy Vietor, and *Daily Show* writer Kevin Bleyer began and finalised his remarks for the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner.¹⁴⁴ Vietor's inclusion in the writing team is particularly relevant when it is recognised that the N.S.C was understood to have played a prominent role in the drone programme in early-to-mid 2010, a role that also put it under criticism.¹⁴⁵ Vietor's participation in writing and finalising the President's remarks, and the prominent coverage the Obama administration was facing in the week-long writing period, potentially provided the impetus needed for the drone programme to be added to the "list of topics they wanted to cover" in Obama's address.¹⁴⁶

In the same way that the intensely-disputed legal and moral ambiguities of the drone programme stoked so much protest, similar ambiguities of intent, seriousness, and interpretation within the realm of a stand-up comedy address would seem an appropriate moment to address these same protests. Some of the criticisms of the drone programme targeted the semi-official, semi-covert manner of the administration in discussing it, with Micah Zenko writing a month before the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner that it was "remarkable that the Obama administration maintains the false notion that such operations remain secret and are therefore beyond public debate."¹⁴⁷ The ambiguity of the programme is equally matched by the ambiguities of the President's stand-up comedy performances, where although neither is entirely within or outside political grounds, they both exist in an intermediary realm between reality and fiction, certainty and uncertainty, accountability and non-accountability. In this way the comical and the political found an opportune match, where the President could trivialise protests over the drone programme in an unofficial comic capacity, have his remarks inserted onto the public record on the matter, avoid political

¹⁴³ "House subcommittee hearing questions legality of drone attacks", *CNN*, April 28th 2010. Web. <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/04/28/drone.attack.hearing/>. Last accessed on September 11th 2017.; "ACLU Letter Urges President Obama To Reject Targeted Killings Outside Conflict Zones", *American Civil Liberties Union*, April 28th 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/Yrw5J>.

¹⁴⁴ Parnes, "Jon Favreau on Obama's WHCD Success", p.1.

¹⁴⁵ Harris, Shane, "Administration Says Drone Strikes Are Legal and Necessary", *The Atlantic*, March 26th 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/rWMtv>.

¹⁴⁶ Parnes, "Jon Favreau on Obama's WHCD Success", p.1.

¹⁴⁷ Zenko, Micah, "Demystifying the drone strikes", *The Washington Post*, April 2nd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/CnoAr>.

accountability, and hopefully institutionalise an increasingly controversial government programme.

As much as Zenko hoped that the drone programme could be demystified by being brought out of the confines of government confidentiality, the writing team's insertion of the joke adopts a similar strategy of demystification, but one that favoured the needs of the Obama administration by cushioning the drone programme within a comic context.¹⁴⁸ Rather than addressing it within traditional (and possibly problematic) political territories and opening up the moral and legal quandaries to traditional realms of debate, it was aggrandised within the anticipated safety of a stand-up comedy address. So within this interpretation, when it is considered that the drone joke at the 2010 Correspondents' Dinner was the first time Obama had ever referenced this programme in office, and in also recognising the increasingly contentious coverage over the programme, a strategy can be inferred that the White House concluded that the best route to address it through was the President's stand-up, where it could be presented within the formula of a typical presidential power joke.¹⁴⁹ Delivered as a typical joke about an overtly-protective father, it can also be seen as an attempt to institutionalise the programme through the semi-official, semi-accountable realm of a stand-up comedy address, a style of performance redolent in possibilities for negotiations between fictive and non-fictive properties and crisis-based deflection. As Nielsen, Phelan and Walsh argue, fiction and fictive discourse is used by speakers such as Obama "to negotiate their relations with actual states of affairs", but within this communication is a continuous flux between actual and non-actual expectations, arguments and attitudes, with fictive discourse acting as "a means for negotiating an engagement with that world."¹⁵⁰ The comic negotiation construed within Obama's drone joke falls within these interpretations of fictive and non-fictive communication, with the aim of sanitising growing concerns over the programme.

However, the inescapably dark nature of the joke is its core failing, and it once again highlights the Bergsonian qualities of the President's stand-up. In James K. Mish'alani's analysis of the mechanisms of Bergsonian correction, he notes that "laughter as a symbolic

¹⁴⁸ Zenko, "Demystifying the drone strikes".

¹⁴⁹ McCrisken, Trevor, "Obama's Drone War". *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 55, Issue 2 (2013), p.98. Web. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2013.784469>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Nielsen, Phelan & Walsh, "Ten Theses about Fictionality", pp.66, 63.

act is a replacement; it stands in for or is done instead of some other act which remains suspended, unfulfilled.”¹⁵¹ The replacement that Mish’alani argues for is the aspect of threat in laughter, but confined within a form of humour or comedy that suggests it acts - as Bergson characterised it - as a “*social gesture*” (Original italicisation) rather than an outright threat, what Mish’alani argues is the disciplinary function of “acting out of a semblance of assault” through laughter, but retained within comic suspension, both of which can be seen in Obama’s drone joke.¹⁵² As he contends, “Their function of threat or warning rests precisely on this representational character...for all threatening behaviour, as gestural, is mock action.”¹⁵³ However, Bergson’s “threat of correction” at the heart of laughter’s function, even with what Mish’alana characterises as its power of comic insurance through laughter’s capacity for “endless retractions” and “deflections”, is more limited when used in conjunction with the gravity of the Obama administration’s drone programme.¹⁵⁴ If, as he argues, “The representation of harm is there only to be negated” within disciplinary humour, then within Obama’s drone joke it is difficult to wrest and divide it from the actual representations of threat used by his administration in its deployment of the drone programme, especially when it is considered that in early-2010 the President was reported to have “placed himself at the helm of” the approval and management of its ever-expanding “kill list” of designated targets.¹⁵⁵ In a similar vein, in Waisanen’s analysis of President George W. Bush’s controversial weapons of mass destruction jokes, he argues that the issue’s “connections with mass violence created a boundary in which Bush could not extricate himself from his graver responsibilities”.¹⁵⁶ He concludes on the possible limitations of presidential joking, arguing that “when it comes to those at the highest echelons of power, associations of real or perceived violence beg more sensitivity than personal crises.”¹⁵⁷ The rhetorical, comic difficulties of the joke further suggest that, in comparison to Obama’s performance of counterfactual spaces inherent in examples such as his “official birth video” material - and by extension, counterfactual Obamas (i.e. the Kenyan-born, illegitimate President) - this material’s inherently more mortal associations

¹⁵¹ Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society”. p.149.

¹⁵² Bergson, *Laughter*, p.20.; Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society”, p.150.

¹⁵³ Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society”, p.149.

¹⁵⁴ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.135.; Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society”, p.152.

¹⁵⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.135.; Mish’alani, “Threats, Laughter, and Society”, p.152.; Becker, Jo & Shane, Scott, “Secret ‘Kill List’ Proves a Test of Obama’s Principles and Will”, *The New York Times*, May 29th 2012, p.1. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Waisanen, “Comedian-in-Chief”, p.350.

¹⁵⁷ Waisanen, “Comedian-in-Chief”, p.354.

with the reality of the drone programme limits, if not entirely demolishes, any potential to expand and sanitise the programme through comic interpolation. Nonetheless, it allows for an interpretation that behind the comic material of the President's stand-up comedy addresses there are serious strategies at play.

1.3. Conclusion

Although Obama's status as a figure of contemporary power would inevitably suggest that his use of stand-up comedy would be predominantly conservative, in other ways it possesses insubordinate qualities to it. This is best exemplified in his relationship with the Gridiron Club Dinner, where while in office, he only attended in 2011, 2013 and 2015, a spotty attendance record much to the membership's chagrin. This disruption of the association's standing as an annual tradition was first challenged when it was reported that Obama would not be appearing at the 2009 Gridiron Club Dinner, the first president since Grover Cleveland to not attend the dinner in his first year in office, and an absence that incensed the Gridiron's membership further by what was construed as the White House's flimsy justification for the President's absence, his wish to spend the evening with his family.¹⁵⁸ In reaction to the news, Gridiron Club member and *Chicago Tribune* journalist Clarence Page noted an "uncommonly" sense of rejection that the membership felt, commenting on the "implications" this would cause in Obama's relations with the Washington establishment, and how it was not an "ordinary state dinner" that the President should brush off so casually.¹⁵⁹ Although sections of the Gridiron Club's membership tried to brush off Obama's 2009 absence at the event, *The Washington Post's* Dan Zak reported the day after the dinner that "there was some real hurt behind that laughter."¹⁶⁰ Perhaps for an association such as the Gridiron Club, Obama's poor attendance record is due to its increasingly antiquated style, as well as its less-than-progressive history. In Donald A. Ritchie's chronicling of the history of the Washington press corps, the association was recognised as

¹⁵⁸ Stolberg, Sheryl Gay, "Obama to Skip Gridiron Club Dinner", *The New York Times*, March 13th 2009, p.1. Web. https://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/13/obama-to-skip-gridiron-club-dinner/?_r=0. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Mullins, Anne Schroder, "Gridiron singed by Obama no-show", *Politico*, March 16th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/jJYbA>.

¹⁵⁹ Page's quote can be found in Mullins, "Gridiron singed", p.1.

¹⁶⁰ "Gridiron Club", *C-SPAN*, March 22nd 2009, 6:50. Web. <http://www.c-span.org/video/?284773-3/gridiron-club>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

the “the last male bastion of the Washington press corps.”¹⁶¹ The club’s conservatism is certainly a quality that Obama has ribbed it for on a number of occasions. In his first appearance in 2011, he mocked the antiquity of the association:

Good evening. As we gather here tonight, all across the world a powerful spirit of change is tearing down old regimes, decaying institutions, remnants of the past. So, look out, Gridiron Club! [Laughter.] I mean, look at this getup. [Laughter.] Forget about winning the future. How about entering the present? [Laughter & Applause.]¹⁶²

With this contested record towards female reporters, who were banned from registering for membership until 1975, Obama’s noticeable absences from it, and his challenging of what President Franklin Delano Roosevelt criticised as its “Gridiron conservatism” and the overtly serious nature of the membership, allows his lack of attendance to be seen in a more critical and dismissive light towards the association.¹⁶³ As Mullins commented after Obama’s 2009 absence at the “august and tradition-bound” association, “one has to at least entertain the possibility that this institution may not be quite as august as its members assumed.”¹⁶⁴ Obama’s refusal to court the Gridiron Club with the same obedience of former presidents, and his immediate on-the-offensive comic strategy, has challenged its traditionally powerful relationship with the White House. However, any personal disquiet the President may hold towards the Gridiron Club sharply contrasts with his steadfast attendance at the White House Correspondents’ Association, an event bound with even greater contemporary cultural prospects and national influence in defining his presidency. As Leibovich argues, it would be “a political boon” for an American president to ignore the Correspondents’ Dinner “in this anti-Washington day and age”, and would send a positive message to Americans who have grown critical of the association.¹⁶⁵ However, he comments for that for Obama to not attend the latter would be considered as the President sending a clear, confrontational message to the power circles of Washington D.C by not confirming “the great seriousness of” the event.¹⁶⁶ Regardless, Obama’s contentious relationship with the Gridiron Club provides a far from insignificant example of how a

¹⁶¹ Ritchie, Donald A., *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press Inc., 2005, p.177. Print.

¹⁶² Sweet, “Obama at the 2011 Gridiron Club dinner. Transcript”, p.1.

¹⁶³ Free, *The First 100 Years!*, p.100.

¹⁶⁴ Mullins, “Gridiron singed”, p.1.

¹⁶⁵ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.138.

¹⁶⁶ Leibovich, *This Town*, p.139.

Washington D.C humour association - one that *Vanity Fair* journalist and Gridiron member Todd Purdum describes as a historic icon of American power, “like the Statue of Liberty or liver and onions” - has been blatantly challenged.¹⁶⁷ This provides an interesting glimpse into the disrepute that the President created towards an association synonymous with classic American political power.

Returning to the considerations of the secondary research question, Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses at the Gridiron Club and Correspondents’ Dinner highlight the malleability of stand-up as a cultural form that can be used to assist forms of institutional power by confronting popular political criticisms. In the fusing of personal, political, and cultural tensions that defines the drafting of Obama’s material, a sophisticated strategy can be surmised in the way his administration deals with prominent controversies such as its contentious relationship with the Washington press, the birther theory, and the drone programme. In doing so, this chapter contributes to the scholarship of Robinson, Waisanen, Isaksen and Rossing. It delivers an Obama-era contribution to Robinson’s work on presidential comedy, extends Waisanen’s enthymematic examination of presidential joking, builds on Isaksen’s racially-focused analysis of Obama’s jokes at the Correspondents’ Dinner and their construed disciplinary function, and challenges Rossing’s analysis of this association’s democratic qualities. To varying degrees in each association, Obama finds a unique freedom performing within the comic mode, by stepping skilfully between realms of accountability and non-accountability, joking and seriousness, and fiction and reality. The President’s stand-up addresses exemplify a skilful transition from the limitations and hindrances of commander-in-chief into the more liberating and less answerable role of comedian-in-chief. In Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson’s analysis of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, they argue that “by comically playing with the political, one can gain a greater sense of ownership over it and, in turn, feel more empowered to engage it.”¹⁶⁸ I contend that an opposing position can be established in examining the President’s stand-up comedy addresses, where by playing politically with the comical, powerful agents such as Obama can feel more empowered to engage with it, and use it to

¹⁶⁷ Purdum’s quote can be found in Mullins, “Gridiron singed”, p.3.

¹⁶⁸ Gray, Jonathan, Jones, Jeffrey P. & Thompson, Ethan, “The State of Satire, the Satire of State”. Gray, Jones & Thompson, *Satire TV*, p.11.

address and potentially neutralise prominent political criticisms and affirm forms of political power.

Chapter 2: African American Political Stand-up Comedy under an African American Presidency



Figure 2: African American comedian Keegan-Michael Key as “Luther”, President Obama’s deployed “anger translator” during his stand-up comedy address at the 2015 White House Correspondents’ Dinner.

We have a new responsibility as comics. You don't want your sound bite to be the one that brings Obama down, or could be used against him. We have to be more responsible, more even-keeled.

- Rodney Perry¹

2.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the subversive and conservative nature of African American political stand-up comedy in the Obama era. It is guided by the secondary research question: “To what extent can Obama-era African American political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?” Bambi Haggins and Mel Watkins argue that, historically, African American humour and comedy developed in part due to the political marginalisation of African Americans. As Haggins argues in *Laughing Mad* (2007), the

¹ Braxton, Greg, “Black comics on Obama’s win”, *Los Angeles Times*, November 10th 2008, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/ISdeU>.

historic legacy of enforced silences and coded criticism within African American cultural history led to the act of comic amusement becoming akin to “a liberatory act.”² Fellow comic scholar Mel Watkins complements Haggins’ analysis of the subversive power of African American humour in *On The Real Side* (1999), arguing that the physical act of black laughter and black amusement is something that has been treated historically with suspicion by white Americans in large part due to its encryption of internal and external African American expression inaudible to white American intrusion.³ In recent decades, the liberatory edge of African American humour has been channelled and refined through its socio-political and racial commentaries in stand-up, what Haggins argues has enabled the development of “unique insights on the African American (and American) condition”.⁴ As Haggins chronicles, this has ranged from the political radicalism of civil-rights era comedian Dick Gregory to Dave Chappelle’s sophisticated political and racial commentaries during the Bush administration.⁵ This chapter extends this scholarship to the political comic material of Patrice O’Neal and Eddie Griffin, and examines how the election of Obama has altered the traditionally critical tones of African American stand-up comedy, and the form’s potential for political criticism under an African American president, within a subversive and conservative framework.

On Friday 7th November 2008, in a night dubbed the “Def Obama Comedy Jam”, numerous African American stand-up comedians celebrated Obama’s victory as they hit the stage. Rodney Perry opened his set by declaring, “We need some energy up here. We have a new president!” Melanie Camacho joked that, “This is the first time in history that a black man beat...a white man and didn't get locked up for it.” Comedy writer Ian Edwards commented to Braxton at the club that “On [election] night, it was like the whole world was celebrating New Year's Eve”. However, these initial reactions would quickly translate into concerns amongst African American comedians about voicing any critique of Obama, a cautiousness echoed in Perry’s epigraph. Darnell Hunt, head of the Ralph J. Bunche Centre for African American Studies, argued that “The Obamas represent a transcendence that brings everyone into the tent, and comics are now grappling with that. They want to treat it gingerly.”⁶ This

² Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, pp.1-2, p.1.

³ Watkins, Mel, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*. Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999, pp.16-18. Print.

⁴ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.6.

⁵ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, pp.14-24, pp.77-98, pp.178-236.

⁶ Braxton, “Black comics on Obama’s win”, p.1.

critical dearth, not just in comedy, but in other cultural arenas, was significant enough for international commentators such as *The Guardian*'s Gary Younge to call attention to it in May 2013, arguing that "increasingly it feels more like a preference for mythology over meaningful engagement lest the symbolic importance of who Obama is - the first black president - be tainted by a substantial conversation about what he actually does."⁷ Frederick C. Harris echoed this, arguing that there has been far too much constraint to critically engage Obama. "Sadly, when it comes to the Obama presidency and black America, symbols and substance have too often been assumed to be one and the same."⁸ This chapter assesses the comic material of Patrice O'Neal and Eddie Griffin during Obama's first term, and provides an analysis of how black political stand-up has been willing to engage in critical political analysis as a stratum of African American culture, or simply reinforce cushioned state narratives regarding Obama and Obama-era power.

In cataloguing the major arguments and findings of this chapter, an overview of its contribution to the scholarship of African American comedy should be established, as well as any additional texts applied and/or used as general reinforcement. One major text that is extended is Haggins' *Laughing Mad*. Theoretical elements in her work are applied to the chapter's two case studies, from the problematic relationship of publicly and privately-shared African American humour, to treatments of regressive and progressive elements in African American comic material.⁹ In Mel Watkins' *On the Real Side*, he provides an expansive analysis of the performance, presentation and receptivity of African American humour and comedy throughout history, and examines the relationship between seemingly innocuous public expressions of African American humour and its more acerbic counterpart of private humour, "the two faces of black humor".¹⁰ Watkin's reading of covert and public comic expression is applied to O'Neal's critical use of minstrel stereotypes as a means of critiquing Obama-era financial and political institutions. In addition to this, Jonathan P. Rossing's journal article "Dick Gregory and Activist Style: Identifying Attributes of Humor necessary for Activist Advocacy. Argumentation and Advocacy" (2013), a socially and politically-focused consideration of humour's merits in promoting social justice through an analysis of

⁷ Younge, "So, why are we so loyal to a president who is not loyal to us?", *The Guardian*, May 5th 2013, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/3rkv0>.

⁸ Harris, Fredrick C., "The Price of a Black President", *The New York Times*, October 27th 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/bKe0S>.

⁹ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.89, p.48.

¹⁰ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, p.35.

the Civil Rights-era stand-up Dick Gregory, is developed in this chapter. He argues that Gregory's socially and politically-charged stand-up displays humour's potential "to create possibilities for new cultural norms and social understanding", and to "transform his audiences' understanding of race and racial politics and injustices."¹¹ This chapter builds on these elements in Rossing's research through an analysis of O'Neal and Griffin's Obama-era political criticism. Another text, specific to Griffin's stand-up style, is Kara Hunt's "Off the Record: A Critical Perspective on Def Comedy Jam" (2015), a journal article focused on the African American stand-up television show (1992-1997). Examining the show's antagonistic racial, gender and socio-political treatments, Hunt argues that the production stands as a distinct portrayal of African American society through its "reflection of institutionalized antiblackness".¹² Extending her research in the Griffin case study - a progeny of *Def Comedy Jam*'s raucous style of stand-up - provides a means for gauging how a broader reading of stand-up categories such as this style may "amend the manner in which we view black comedy as a tool for resistance".¹³

Other texts used but not directly related to the precise scholarship include Zora Neale Hurston's concept of "feather bed resistance", as characterised in her work *Mules and Men* (1935), and the clandestinely subversive potential of humour to help conceal private expression.¹⁴ In the first case study of O'Neal, this is applied within an interpretation of his discussion of the tension between private criticism and public defence of President Obama in his stand-up special, *Elephant in the Room* (2011). Following this, John Limon's *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000) and Marvin Edward McAllister's *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance* (2011) are used for their interpretations of Richard Pryor's use of racial division and unity to explicate O'Neal's role as a racial and political mediator. This is followed by an analysis of O'Neal's subversive solution to reparations for slavery under Obama's presidency, which is distinctly suited to the racial diplomacy of the period. The comic productions of Dave

¹¹ Rossing, Jonathan P., "Dick Gregory and Activist Style: Identifying Attributes of Humor necessary for Activist Advocacy". *Argumentation and Advocacy*, Vol 50, Issue 2 (2013-2014), p.66. Web. Available online via *Taylor and Francis*. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/ref/10.1080/00028533.2013.11821810?scroll=top>. Last accessed on July 6th 2017.

¹² Hunt, Kara, "Off the Record: A Critical Perspective on Def Comedy Jam". *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 48, Issue 5 (October 2015), p.856. Web. Available online via *Wiley Online Library*. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpcu.12331/abstract>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹³ Hunt, "Off the Record", p.856.

¹⁴ Hurston, Zora Neale, *Mules and Men*. New York City, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008, p.2. Print.

Chappelle and an economic analysis by William A. Darity Jr. are used in an examination of O'Neal's contribution to this debate. This is followed by demonstrating the racially unifying qualities of *Mr P* through his subversion of classic and contemporary ideas of power, in part through his adaptation of minstrel stereotypes in historic African American performance. In the same frame of Watkins' examination of the subversive potential of minstrel humour, Jan Nederveen Pieterse's work, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (1995), is employed in O'Neal's use of minstrel stereotypes. O'Neal's case study is concluded by analysing the Bakhtinian qualities in his stand-up persona, particularly in his critique of aggrandised racial narratives heralded by Obama's election win, and his transposition of the American presidency as a symbolic political icon. Bakhtin's essay, "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" (1941) is employed to interpret O'Neal's uncrowning of Obama and his broader use of laughter to renegotiate distances between authority and individuals.

In the second case study, I introduce my analysis of Eddie Griffin's *You Can Tell 'Em I Said It* by highlighting the interpreted tensions between his initial appraisal of Obama in his stand-up special alongside his other, less flattering remarks, achieved through a wider reading of the authorial context of his stand-up and statements. In the next segment, Griffin's "pimp president" description of Obama is critiqued within the broader bowl of African American impersonations of him, arguing that he provides forms of racial and class-based consolidation in his political comic treatments of the President with symbols of working-class, urban African American culture. This is addressed within a wider social, political and cultural reading of Obama's relationship with certain areas of African American society. In order to explicate the more conservative tones of Griffin's stand-up, classical texts such as W. E. B Du Bois' sociological analyses *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) are applied within this chapter's analysis. With regard to the former text, Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness is used in tandem with Paul Mocombe's application of the concept to Obama in *The Liberal Black Protestant Heterosexual Bourgeois Male: From W.E.B. Du Bois to Barack Obama* (2010). Their works are built upon in a comic reading that interprets Griffin's impersonation of Obama as a problematic Du Boisian comic consolidation between Obama's tentative association with certain, class-based symbols of African American life and comic representations. While portions of Griffin's other material, such as his "no more racism" material subverts exaggerated racial treatments encouraged under Obama's presidency, other segments align him more with African American social

conservative tendencies, with *The Philadelphia Negro* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's Obama-era examinations applied to gauge this further. Kevin K. Gaines analysis of Du Bois in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (2000), is used to interpret Griffin as positioning himself within socially conservative tones similar to comedian Bill Cosby, and the implications this has within a subversive and conservative reading. This case study concludes by examining Griffin's anti-imperialist critique of Obama in the finale of *You Can Tell 'Em*, which shows how he courts softer and sharper forms of political criticism. My main findings are that African American political stand-up maintained a particularly conservative edge in the Obama era, but that O'Neal and Griffin provide definitive moments of comic subversion. The chapter's contribution to comedy scholarship is in chronicling African American political stand-up's subversive and conservative expressions under the unique challenges and difficulties of an African American presidency, and in analysing how this affects the cultural form.

2.2. Reparations, Plantation Huts and the Turkey Presidency in Patrice O'Neal's *Mr P*

Patrice O'Neal did not take long to approach the election of Barack Obama with a greater degree of scepticism than many of his counterparts. However, he became troubled by how his naturally interrogative manner was met with hostility from other African Americans, arguing on the *Alex Jones Show* that, "being black, and having anything to say that might be wrong in terms of Obama, is dangerous."¹⁵ Certainly comic opinion and expression amongst African American comedians was marked by a hesitance to criticise Obama. Examples can be found in the particularly aggressive interventions by fellow African American stand-up comedians in reaction to Cornel West and Tavis Smiley's *Poverty Tour*, a PBS-produced series that explored the heart of impoverished communities of America in order to urge Obama to reconsider his economic policies.¹⁶ The response from many African American

¹⁵ "Patrice O'Neal on Alex Jones Tv 1/4: No Change with Obama!", *TheAlexJonesChannel* (Youtube Channel), March 26th 2009, 1:58. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnfmdivJUS9o>. Last accessed on March 29th 2017.

¹⁶ "The Poverty Tour", "Tavis Smiley", *PBS*. Web. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/features/poverty-tour/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

figures was largely negative.¹⁷ Reflecting this, in his response to *The Poverty Tour*, comedian Steve Harvey derided Smiley and West as “Uncle Toms” for their criticism of Obama and accused them of “poverty-pimping”.¹⁸ A similar example can be found in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch aired a week after the President’s re-inauguration, titled “Obama and MLK”. In the sketch, Obama (played by African American comedian Jay Pharaoh), relaxing in an armchair after the proceedings, is visited by the ghost of Martin Luther King Jr. (played by African American comedian Kenan Thompson). Within the sketch, Dr. King is portrayed as vulgar, crass and superficial, making jokes about Beyonce, Michelle Obama’s new haircut, and the British pop band One Direction.¹⁹ Throughout, Obama remains the comic straight man and pleads for Dr. King to “discuss more important issues”.²⁰ After endorsing Obama (“You’re doing a good job Barack. I’m proud of you.”), the sketch ends with Dr. King rising to take on the President’s adversaries, saying to Obama, “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go visit Cornel West and tell him to take it down about thirty notches.”²¹ This sketch is revealing in its absolute absence of criticism of Obama and the lionization of the President through Dr. King’s endorsement, in which he refutes West’s criticisms. It exemplifies a heightened African American comic timidity in critiquing Obama, where rather than the President being used as the butt of a single joke in the sketch, the entirety is at the expense of Dr. King. This noticeable absence of comic criticism was played for laughs by comedian W. Kamau Bell. On his television series *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*, and in a criticism of the Obama administration’s drone programme, Bell compares Obama to George W. Bush. Immediately following this, confetti bursts from the ceiling while the words “Black Comedian Criticises Black President” flashes in capitalised yellow font on the screen behind Bell and celebratory music plays.²² In so doing, he highlights the idea that African American comic productions are not expected to criticise Obama, thereby stressing the illogicality of not criticising the sitting president. Harvey’s

¹⁷ Serwer, Adam, “All the President’s Frenemies”, *The National Prospect*, September 21st 2011, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/vI3uM>.

¹⁸ “Steve Harvey Calls Tavis Smiley & Cornel West Uncle Toms For Criticizing Obama [New August 2011]”, *ChasinDatPaperMedia* (Youtube Channel), August 10th 2011. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3K1ZQIWkUU>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁹ “Cold Opening: Obama and MLK - Saturday Night Live”, *Saturday Night Live* (Youtube Channel), September 24th 2013, 1:16, 2:15, 3:35. Web. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWis_ijN23U. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁰ “Obama and MLK”, 1:42, 2:28, 2:09.

²¹ “Obama and MLK”, 3:16, 3:51.

²² A video of this can be accessed at Wilstein, Matt, “‘Black Comedian Criticizes Black President’: Late Night Host Compares Obama To Bush On Drones”, *Mediaite*, February 8th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/black-comedian-criticizes-black-president-late-night-host-compares-obama-to-bush-on-drones/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

statement, the “Obama and MLK” sketch, and Bell’s joke provide credence to the idea that African American stand-up comedy has developed a stronger conservative backbone to it under Obama, borne out of a perceived obligation to defend the nation’s first black President against adversarial commentary. In his two stand-up specials, *Elephant in the Room* (2011) and *Mr P* (2012), O’Neal’s political comic material critiques this cultural attitude.

2.2.1. Feather Bed Resistance and Comic Division

Before examining *Mr P*, providing a brief analysis of one particular segment of O’Neal’s *Elephant in the Room* would prove pertinent in engaging with questions of his political comic treatment of Obama and Obama-era power. Within this special, O’Neal enters the contested arena of secret African American discourse over Obama, heralding it with, “I’m going to tell you something you don’t know about black folks”:

*We would be on your side, uh - I’m talking to white people - we would be on your side a lot more, if you would, uh, you know, just not ever talk about how you feel about anything racial. [Mild laughter and applause] We’ll catch up to you, no serious. Cause black people are on the edge of going, ‘What the fuck is Obama doing?!’ [Laughter.] But there’s too many white people outwardly hating him so we can’t. We go [to adversarial white Americans.], “You shut the fuck - you shut up!” I’ll be against him, like, stop having rallies and all kind[s] of stuff.*²³

O’Neal argues that a mixture of ill-advised, naive white American commentaries on race, and instances of racially-charged attacks on Obama, have made many African Americans adopt an absolutist position in defending him. As O’Neal approaches this punchline, he strikes at the heart of the tensions that exist within African American relations towards Obama, and in doing so, illustrates the crucial difference between public and private political exposition towards him. In columnist Touré’s examination of Dave Chappelle’s treatments of internal and public dialogues in *The Chappelle Show* (2003-2006), he notes the dangers in revealing internal commentary to a wider, non-exclusively African American audience: “Telling abrasive jokes about your family when it’s just family in the room can feel cathartic but telling them to a massive audience of outsiders is treason.”²⁴ Haggins points to a similar

²³ O’Neal, Patrice, *Elephant in the Room*, 7:42. New York City, NY: Comedy Central, 2011. Film.

²⁴ Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2011, p.74. Print.

tension in her analysis of *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970-1974), where, although Wilson's comic characters were amusing to African American viewers, many were uncomfortable having them presented to white audiences.²⁵ As O'Neal notes, while there is a less-than-harmonious relationship between African Americans and Obama in private, the acidic comments he faced from some white Americans led many to defend him, regardless of their private reservations. O'Neal admits his own complicity in this material, noting how he would almost instinctively rebuke adversarial white American criticism of Obama while confiding to the audience his own bewilderment and displeasure at Obama's record in office. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), she argues that the historical subjugation of African Americans created a form of "feather bed resistance" to counter white interrogations of their culture. Hurston notes that insults and rebukes from white Americans were "smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries", an intriguing historical example of humour's covertly subversive power in helping to preserve African American private cultural discourse.²⁶ In O'Neal's elucidation of private commentaries on the President ("What the fuck is Obama doing?!"), he alters Hurston's idea of feather bed resistance to counter contemporary ideas of African American self-preservation through - rather aptly - his own cushioning of codified political comic criticism in a stand-up comedy set, the covert becoming public through the comic plane. These comic elements are sharpened in his successive and posthumously released stand-up comedy album, *Mr P*.

In the opening crowd work of *Mr P*, while addressing the differences between younger and older women, O'Neal sets the foundation for his political, racial and sexual analyses, stating, "I'm going to try and make this as not uncomfortable as I can."²⁷ He continues by commenting: "It's good y'all laughing. I like it. And, and I hope everybody ain't laughing, cause that's - it's not fun if everybody is laughing."²⁸ Rather than naturally seeking unity from his audience, O'Neal seems to propose that by pointedly attempting to divide it, it is more successful in breaking through racial and political issues. This is a negotiation which O'Neal recognises early on in his material when he says "it's a little uncomfortable in here right now cause it is, we working out deals right now."²⁹ John Limon's analysis of Richard Pryor's special *Live in Concert* (1979) unearths a similar division along racial lines between

²⁵ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.48.

²⁶ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, p.3.

²⁷ O'Neal, Patrice, "Intro", *Mr P*, 0:00, 3:20. U.S.A: BSeen Media, 2012. CD.

²⁸ O'Neal, "Can't Care", *Mr P*, 4:44.

²⁹ O'Neal, "Can't Care", *Mr P*, 0:51, 1:52.

the white and African American audience members. In a reinforcement of O’Neal’s comic wager, Pryor’s racially divisive introduction - his “first offer in negotiation” - seems to Limon at first “comically suicidal” by effectively dividing the audience in half.³⁰ However, Pryor’s strategy is one that both Limon and Marvin Edward McAllister argue actually worked to create unity through temporary division, what Limon refers to as his encouraging of his interracial audience “to live as a division but laugh as a unity”, and what McAllister sees as Pryor acting as a “half-white/half-black facilitator” between both camps.³¹ O’Neal can be interpreted to be utilising a modification of Pryor’s unity-through-division strategy, a method which is fundamental to his successive political comic critiques. Starting from this division, the successive political topics he investigates develop from a similar form of negotiation on his own part.

2.2.2. O’Neal’s Contribution to the Obama-era Reparations Debate

In his first specifically political piece in *Mr P*, he begins by laying out his own muddled relationship with wealth, and in doing so, provides a contribution - and surmised solution - to the reparations for slavery debate in the United States. In this material, he bypasses the potentially problematic territories of the issue, previously illustrated by Dave Chappelle’s treatment of the issue on the *Chappelle Show*. In his “Reparations 2003” sketch, he depicts the consequences of Congress approving a trillion dollar reparations act.³² Chappelle’s comic treatment questions the limitations of conventional approaches, suggesting that with limited social and political mobility, many African Americans would squander their money, rather than directly benefiting or progressing African American political and social mobility. Chappelle’s assessment was not just recognised in popular culture, but in academia as well, as a thought-provoking analysis of the reparations debate. Professor William A. Darity Jr. references Chappelle’s comic analysis directly as one that reflects a distinctly absent African American economy that could significantly benefit the population, where without a well-

³⁰ Limon, John, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000, p.84. Print.

³¹ Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, p.84.; McAllister, Marvin Edward, *Whiting Up: Whiteface Minstrels and Stage Europeans in African American Performance*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011, p.232. Print.

³² “Reparations 2003 | Chappelle's Show”, *Comedy Central* (Youtube Channel), October 23rd 2015. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ZFHG8wWC5s&t>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

developed black economy or significant black corporate structure, “the Chappelle effect” may prove true if enacted. As Darity Jr. notes:

With respect to African American reparations, a comedy sketch on satirist Dave Chappelle’s television show highlights the most substantial aspect of the transfer problem...If there were a well-developed black economy, and black recipients of reparations bought these goods instead, the Chappelle effect would be mitigated.³³

It is within this cultural comprehension of reparations that O’Neal becomes more radical in his solution to the issue. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times* by Professor Henry Louis Gates in the early years of President Obama’s first term, he proposed that the first African American President would have an unique opportunity to “bridge the great reparations divide” between white and black Americans as both the child of an African and American.³⁴ However, as Kennedy notes, Obama is keenly aware of how any endorsement of predominantly or exclusively African American issues may risk signalling “racial partiality” on his part to American conservatives. As he argues, “This is a risk that Obama is unwilling to take.”³⁵ Naomi Klein similarly reflects on this issue, arguing that “The hardest part of selling reparations in the US has always been the perception that something would have to be taken away from whites in order for it to be given to blacks and other minorities.”³⁶ To avoid being seen as endorsing forms of racial favouritism, Obama made his opposition to reparations clear in his 2008 campaign.³⁷ Although Kennedy criticises Obama’s tactic of minimizing, evading and cleansing racial and political tensions as indicative of his overtly conservative attitude (what he titles as “the Obama way”), he also recognises that it is “probably the most realistic course of action” given the current societal tensions that exist in the United States.³⁸ *The Onion* echoed Obama’s extreme cautiousness in a bogus editorial written by the President days before the 2012 Election, titled, “This May Not Be The Ideal

³³ Darity, Jr., William A., “African American Reparations, Keynes, and the Transfer Problem”. Forstater, Matthew, Vray, L. Randall (eds.), *Keynes for the Twenty-First Century: The Continuing Relevance of The General Theory*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, p.203. Print.

³⁴ Jr., Henry Louis Gates, “Ending the Slavery Blame Game”, *The New York Times*, April 22nd 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/KSeQ0>.

³⁵ Kennedy, Randall, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency*. New York City, NY: Vintage Books, 2012, p.20. Print.

³⁶ Klein, Naomi, “Obama’s big silence: the race question”, *The Guardian*, September 12th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/wpsuV>.

³⁷ “Obama stands firm against reparations”, *The Washington Times*, August 3rd 2008, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/TXsST>.

³⁸ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, p.224, p.238.

Moment Politically, But It's Time To Talk About Reparations.”³⁹ These varying acknowledgements of the issue are reflected in O'Neal's proposal. He introduces his approach by commenting, “But see, people talk reparation[s]. Alright. I could get killed for this, but I'm gonna say it.” Rather than taking a binary approach between African Americans and white Americans, O'Neal views the structure of contemporary power as one that continues to enslave *all* Americans through the government's subservience to the banking structure, creating the situation where “we are all slaves right now.” The depth of this enslavement is further emphasised by his argument that the government itself, through its own debts to the central banking system of the United States, the Federal Reserve, is enslaved as well:

We work so we can pay a debt to the bank that the government got money from. That's, that they're borrowing not on our behalf. So we are paying someone else's debts. So we are slaves to the government, who is a slave to the bank, ok?⁴⁰

Furthermore, he links the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade with continued, more subtle forms of financial enslavement, commenting that for African Americans, this puts them in the unique position of being “double slaves”.⁴¹ For this reason O'Neal dismisses traditional notions of reparations for the “original slavery” as resulting in little more than “a pocketful of money” that would do little to advance African American social and political status in the United States.⁴² To remedy this he suggests that the government should deduct federal income tax from the African American population, relieving their current expenses through tax relief rather than through a crude, single accrument of money: “Since federal income tax *is* slavery...black people should be exempt from federal income tax.” [Laughter & Applause.]⁴³ The radicalism of his proposition, and his articulation of a more developed racial discourse suited to the cultural and racial tones of the Obama era, is illustrated by his following statement: “if you [understood] money, you'd shoot me in the head for just for even thinking that shit.”⁴⁴ O'Neal argues that this solution would relieve the contemporary form of slavery that immobilises African American social and political mobility in the

³⁹ Obama, Barack, “This May Not Be The Ideal Moment Politically, But It's Time To Talk Reparations”, *The Onion*, November 1st 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/KgMIi>.

⁴⁰ O'Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 0:00.

⁴¹ O'Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 3:18.

⁴² O'Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 0:54, 2:08.

⁴³ O'Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 1:57.

⁴⁴ O'Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 2:34.

United States. He suggests that “the ones who understand money gonna take that shit, and create wealth.”⁴⁵ The audience, between bursts of laughter, seems drawn in by O’Neal’s proposition, with each development being met with audible agreement from sections of the crowd as he develops his political comic analyses all the way to a radical proposition on income tax alleviation. His academic incisiveness is a well-tuned expansion of Chappelle’s own commentary on the issue to one that invokes the more complicated issue of racial and political relations under an African American presidency. In his own direct or indirect recognition of the particularly incendiary legacy that the reparations debate occupies in the United States, O’Neal’s proposal provides a more sophisticated modification of the traditional argument more suited to the racial diplomacy of the Obama era, arguing for alleviation rather than imbursement. But while his material can be found to be delicately negotiating these social, political and racial relations, it nevertheless underlines a felt sense of disempowerment within African American life under Obama which he seeks to remedy through his proposition, reinforcing the subversive qualities of his stand-up.

2.2.3. Racial Unification in O’Neal’s Plantation Hut

This political analysis further transcends popular racial analyses as well. After his material on reparations, O’Neal eyes a white audience member, and comments on how uncomfortable he looks: “he didn’t like that shit, he started biting his top lip. [Laughter.]”⁴⁶ In the context of O’Neal’s material, what could initially be viewed as a regressive observation towards a white audience member should be interpreted as more directed at the larger, predominantly white, power structures of the United States. This is implicit in his introduction to his proposition on reparations, when he comments, “It’s definitely not going to be funny to white people.”⁴⁷ As the audience laughs at what appears initially as a rather hackneyed racial dichotomy, O’Neal rebuts them with, “Or Latinos, or Asians, or Jews, anybody.”⁴⁸ By so doing, he shows his sympathy for what he argues is every American’s enslavement to

⁴⁵ O’Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 2:49.

⁴⁶ O’Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 2:28.

⁴⁷ O’Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 0:00

⁴⁸ O’Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 0:13.

financial and political forces. This expressed sympathy that transcends typical racial dichotomies is best articulated in the final moment of his segment on reparations:

[The government] let us have enough to pay for our fucking plantation hut that we live in, that they always threatening to take. [Laughter.] [Imitating power-holder] ‘We’re gonna take your shit!’ [O’Neal imitating African American homeowner in an exaggerated, slave-like African American vernacular.] ‘Whaaat?!! I’s worked so haawd! [Laughter.] Ahhh! They’s gonna do dis!’ That’s everybody, white people too: [O’Neal repeats stereotypical accent.] ‘Whyyyy?!’ [Laughter.] [O’Neal laughs.]⁴⁹

O’Neal makes a concerted amalgamation of the conditions of historic and contemporary African American discrimination in order to illuminate the limitations of present-day progress. By acting out a theatrical division between a white power-holder (akin to a slave owner, as suggested by “plantation hut”) and the powerlessness of a slavery-era minstrel stereotype, he transfers this comic division to a contemporary context. This material provides a unique lens into historic black comic and cultural representations.⁵⁰ Numerous comic theorists have examined African American negative characterisations and stereotypes, and how they fit in with questions of subversion and conservatism towards forms of power. In Ellis Cashmore’s analysis, he argues that the minstrel-like “Sambo” character of slave-era cultural productions was enforced by white theatre producers to portray slaves as happy and non-threatening within an inhumane industry for the amusement of white audiences.⁵¹ This theatrical, comic strategy was depicted by Jan Nederveen Pieterse as an attempt to “choreograph reality” against an increasingly sceptical American population through comic suspension.⁵² Watkins provides an alternative analysis of African American reception to these negative comic portrayals. Countering the idea that the slovenly, uncivilised characteristics of these enforced stereotypes were naively absorbed and accepted by African Americans in early American life, what he titles as “the *masochistic* interpretation” (Original italicisation), he views their incorporation in more strategic terms.⁵³ He argues that the tendentious stereotypes of early African American culture were subverted through their tacit and calculated endorsement, where the integration of negative characterisations into public

⁴⁹ O’Neal, “Reparations”, *Mr P*, 3:25.

⁵⁰ Williams-Witherspoon, Kimmika L.H., “Challenging the Stereotypes of Black Manhood: The Hidden Transcript in *Jitney*”. Nadel, Alan (ed.), *August Wilson: Completing the Twentieth-Century Cycle*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2010, p.42, 41. Print.

⁵¹ Cashmore, Ellis, *The Black Culture Industry*. London: Routledge, 1997, p.27. Print.

⁵² Pieterse, Jan Nederveen, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995, p.153. Print.

⁵³ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, p.31.

expressions of their humour allowed African Americans to conceal more cutting, private expressions of humour away from the gaze of white America, what Watkins sees as “reversing an accepted joke and turning it into one’s advantage.”⁵⁴ O’Neal, in a contemporary appropriation of this strategy, uses Watkins’ “accepted joke” of the minstrel stereotype to usurp historical ideas of private and public African American humour, bridging the subversion of historically private, comic subordination through the cultural vehicle of a conservative comic portrayal. Although the use of regressive stereotypes within modern comedy to critique notions of race and power is not exceptional, what makes O’Neal’s contribution unique is his concerted replacement of an exclusive commentary on African Americans for one that examines the role of economic and political forces in the United States in affecting *all* Americans.⁵⁵

Furthermore, in the culmination of O’Neal’s historic/contemporary synthesis, he portrays white Americans as trapped in an identical, waif-like struggle with political and economic forces, mimicked through the same powerless historical stereotypes of African Americans. Therefore, the piece becomes as much a statement on the nature of American economic and political machinations as on race. Furthermore, if historically-speaking, comic productions of these regressive stereotypes were for the sole amusement of white Americans, the potential of O’Neal’s contemporary comic suspension comes from its encouragement of unified comic amusement to cross racial divisions. If Pieterse argues that historical, negative depictions of African Americans were used in white American theatrical productions to “choreograph reality”, O’Neal’s appropriation of these forms within the comic theatre of *Mr P* can be seen as illuminating the possibility of far more sophisticated, contemporary distortions of power and race in the Obama era, and of similar attempts to enforce a warped presentation of power found under his presidency. In limiting the racial dimension in certain portions of his political material, he reveals his radical edge by substituting popular binary racial notions with more racially unifying and politically scathing ones. And by placing his imitation within a statement of contemporary African American economic disempowerment, O’Neal argues that for all the exalted progressivism of the United States and its acclamations magnified under the lens of an African American presidency, the comparative relationship between

⁵⁴ Watkins, *On the Real Side*, p.33, p.35.

⁵⁵ Carpio, Glenda, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008, p.21. Print.

American power holders and the citizenry remains as brashly antiquated as any comparison from American slavery.

2.2.4. O'Neal's Bakhtinian Uncrowning of Obama

This broader envelopment of all Americans against a smothering political agenda that O'Neal presents in *Mr P* reaches its peak in his ensuing examination of President Obama. A great deal of O'Neal's comic approach runs through tensions between the ideal and the actual, and between propagated narratives on race, politics and society versus their more chaotic realities. His interrogation of these ideas - and the pressure as an African American to not cast criticism on the President - is laid aside in his analysis of Obama. He begins by expressing his wish to investigate *all* ideas, regardless of race, class or politics, but sees this ideal being crushed by societal demands and limitations: "But I'm just saying, it's a human thing. See, I believe - look, any idea's the shit, I love all ideas. But the thing that fucks ideas up is people. We just can't, do the right thing. We fucked up."⁵⁶ Akin to his argument in *Elephant in the Room* when he makes it clear he would naturally like to critique and analyse Obama, this was at odds with expectations from many African Americans. He is forced to recognise the complicity of individuals to ruin, hinder and block meaningful discourse as his typical curiosity and comic playfulness for engaging "all ideas" collides with larger societal pressures and issues. O'Neal's delivery in this segment is strained, illustrating a tension in his political material that can be interpreted as his struggle between wishing to delve into uninhibited discourses and being alert to social, racial and political tensions in this case regarding Obama. Furthermore, his distinct, interrogative manner encompasses traits of Bakhtinian theory. Haggins' appraisal of the stand-up comedian's persona as a conflation of Bakhtin's rogue, clown and fool prototypes, argues for how it is constructed in opposition to "everything that is conventional and false."⁵⁷ O'Neal's mild exasperation as he delivers "we fucked up", is poignant, but lays the foundation for his subsequent critique of the presidency: "That's why look - I like Obama...as a person. [Mild laughter.]"⁵⁸ As the punchline hits the audience responds in mild laughter. *Politico's* Ben Smith comments in

⁵⁶ O'Neal, "Obama", *Mr P*, 0:00.

⁵⁷ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.6.; Bakhtin's quotation can be found in Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.162.

⁵⁸ O'Neal, "Obama", *Mr P*, 0:13.

his editorial written a month before O’Neal recorded *Mr P* at the D.C Improv, that this dichotomy between personal and presidential approval was held by a majority of Americans within this period of Obama’s first term, with 74% of voters responding that they liked Obama, but a narrow majority disapproved of his policies.⁵⁹ However, as O’Neal continues, this personal favourability towards Obama is undercut by questioning the continued relevancy of the presidency: “But the idea of the president is just ridic[ulous], it’s a bullshit idea. The president is a tradition now, like a turkey, he don’t run *shit*. [Applause.]”⁶⁰ For O’Neal, investing in “the idea of the president” seems like a hapless venture in the face of America’s racial and political problems. In his comparison of the presidency to the tradition of a thanksgiving turkey, he suggests that it has become a form of popular culture, a political confectionary, rather than an effective branch of government. O’Neal’s skilful mastery of racial and political territories in *Mr P* provides an application of Haggins’ treatment of Bakhtin’s analysis as one that defines “the essential directive of the comic as cultural critic”, but it also demonstrates the primary carnivalistic act of decrowning Obama and the temporary crowning of O’Neal, what Bakhtin characterises as “the *mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king*.” (Original italicisation)⁶¹ O’Neal as the jester-like figure of Bakhtin’s carnival, “who opens and sanctifies the inside-out world of carnival” by his ridiculing of the presidency, provides a distinctly carnivalesque quality through his dismissal of the ultimate symbol of American power - symbols viewed within Bakhtin’s characterisation of the “noncarnival world” as “single-leveled, absolute, heavy, and monolithically serious” - and in doing so he “proclaims the joyful relativity of everything” through his comic interrogations.⁶² Within this interpretation, where the office of the presidency has no real power to remedy the inequalities of American life, O’Neal continues by offering his insights as to what may be Obama’s true purpose:

Obama, look man, Obama’s purpose, if you believe in this kind of shit, his purpose, was to, make us all stop hating [President] Bush. [Laughter & Applause.] Remember how we loved each other that first couple of days? With just white people and black people: [O’Neal imitates a black gospel singer humming a celebratory, emancipating, post-racial melody] [Laughter & Applause.] Some old fucker, singing a black/white together song: [O’Neal in imitation of a singer.] ‘We are Black! We are White! [Laughter.] Together we’ll

⁵⁹ Smith, Ben, “Liking Obama, personally”, *Politico*, March 3rd 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/7XgTT>.

⁶⁰ O’Neal, “Obama”, *Mr P*, 0:24.

⁶¹ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.6.; Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.124.

⁶² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p.124, pp.124-5, p.125.

be right!’ [Laughter.] It’s like, shut-the-fuck-up nigger. When did racism end?
Shut the fuck - [Laughter.]⁶³

The distinct qualities found in O’Neal’s chronicling of the “post-racial” optimism in the early days of Obama are instantly recognised by his audience, and confirmed by their robust laughter. Numerous commentators have stated retrospectively that early predictions for Obama felt that his presidency would significantly improve race relations, some of which included forecasts that were cartoonish in their optimism, such as the short-lived post-racial ethos. This makes the subject so ripe for comic dissection, as it involves exaggeration, comprehension, and significantly, complicity with these same political and racial narratives. The loud bursts of laughter that greet O’Neal’s gospel-like melody of racial unity suggest that they too may have inadvertently accepted these predictions within this period of time through their belief in Obama’s power to resolve racial and political divisions. In his rebuttal of the post-racial mythology (“When did racism end?”), there is a bittersweet tinge to it that resonates with the African American faction of his audience within the D.C Improv, a population who were perhaps the first to feel alienated from the President’s policies. As *The Washington Post*’s Paul Schwartzman and Nikita Stewart stated in an editorial written the day after O’Neal’s recording of *Mr P*, this was based largely on initial civic and public expectations of him from inside the District:

As the country’s first black president, Obama’s words and biography suggested an innate appreciation for political disenfranchisement...That Obama has not met those expectations is disappointing enough...But their frustration is magnified by who Obama is and what they wanted from an African American president residing in the nation’s most prominent and predominant black city.⁶⁴

Politico’s Joe Williams takes Schwartzman’s and Stewart’s arguments further: “Complaints that Obama is now complicit in a long, racially tinged history of Congress meddling in the city’s affairs, however, echo more general statements that he hasn’t touched stubborn problems in the African American community”.⁶⁵ O’Neal ends his material on Obama with a terse summation of his incapacity in the wider scheme of American power: “[There] ain’t no bosses. It’s just to make us think that we have a leader. But niggers man...the banks run

⁶³ O’Neal, “Obama”, *Mr P*, 0:39.

⁶⁴ Schwartzman, Paul & Stewart, Nikita, “John, I’ll give you DC abortion”, *Washington Post*, April 16th 2011, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/4dPI6>.

⁶⁵ Williams, Joe, “D.C.’s angry at budget deal- and President Obama”, *Politico*, April 17th 2011, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/zlqNb>.

this shit.”⁶⁶ As he concludes that “the banks run this shit”, an audible agreement from audience can be heard. O’Neal’s righteous, albeit resigned, tone in which he delivers his material on the President cuts to the heart of his analysis. Furthermore, his argument that many saw Obama’s appointment as an opportunity to placate the protest and opposition of the American left under Bush is not one confined to fringe opinion. A number of commentaries have noted the dearth of mobilised campaigning and protest between the Bush administration and the beginning of the Obama administration.⁶⁷ While O’Neal’s treatment of Obama’s placatory effects on American protest is specifically confined to the early days of the Obama administration (“Remember how we loved each other that first couple of days?”), his subsequent remarks suggest that he sees it as a far broader issue that relates to the idea of the presidency as a form of public pacification whose aim is to fend off more radical critiques of American political power. On the *Opie & Anthony Show* in September 2011, O’Neal reinforced this material, stating that the President is “not a boss, he can’t change anything...he can’t do anything that says he’s [a] leader. He’s just somebody who makes us feel better while the system continues to fuck us real bad.”⁶⁸ In Bakhtin’s promotion of the power of laughter as a channel for incisive analysis, a “vital factor” that allows an “absolutely free investigation of it” within comic suspension, this can be reflected in O’Neal’s political comic interrogations in *Mr P*.⁶⁹ Bakhtin argues:

Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment - both scientific and artistic - and into the hands of free experimental fantasy.⁷⁰

O’Neal’s comic investigations of the pulp of contemporary American political culture, economics and power, his subversion of racial politics through minstrel mockery, and finally, his critique of the presidency, all serve to reinforce an interpretation of his Bakhtinian “uncrowning” of powerful institutions by drawing these items into the realms of comic

⁶⁶ O’Neal, “Obama”, *Mr P*, 1:58.

⁶⁷ Degroat, Bernie, “Did Obama’s Election mean the End of the Anti-War Movement?”, *Spero News*, April 7th 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/H7VKI>.; Connolly, Katie, “Has the American left fizzled out?”, *BBC News*, October 11th 2010. Web. <https://archive.is/QauLU>.; Scarborough, Joe, “The hypocrisy of the American Left”, *Politico*, March 29th 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/B0rub>.

⁶⁸ “Patrice O’Neal on O&A #135 - You Wouldn’t Spend Money With Obama’s Face On It”, *Weston4020* (Youtube Channel), March 14th 2013, 1:10:06-24. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xDUkpQ8zDQ>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.23.

⁷⁰ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.23.

interrogation.⁷¹ The comic absurdity of O’Neal reducing the presidency to the status of a Thanksgiving Turkey, or his use of minstrel stereotypes to portray contemporary political relations as akin to the slavery era of the United States, can be seen as examples of Bakhtin’s advocacy of the power of the “comical operation” to close distances between the powerful and the disempowered within a mode of comic temporality.⁷² If Bakhtin argues that “the removal of an object from the distanced plane, the destruction of epic distance”, allowed for critical analysis through comic interrogation, then this Bakhtinian method can be interpreted within *Mr P*, and his examinations of American political culture, the nature of American power, and President Obama, by bringing them within the intimacy of a stand-up comedy club.⁷³

2.3. The Pimp Presidency and Anti-Imperialism in the Stand-Up of Eddie Griffin

Eddie Griffin makes for an unorthodox example in contemporary political comic analysis. Compared to O’Neal, Griffin is most comfortably positioned within the *Def Comedy Jam* style of African American stand-up, making his approach more akin to the raucous stadium energy of contemporary African American comics such as Katt Williams. However, his comic history justifies examining him within a political comic standpoint. In his 2008 stand-up comedy special *Freedom of Speech*, Griffin makes a concerted effort to portray stand-up comedy as a form of political interrogation, aligning his comic efforts with the doctrine of Malcolm X: “As Brother Malcolm [X] said, ‘By any motherfucking means necessary.’ That’s what I’m here to do.”⁷⁴ This case study analyses Griffin’s political comic critiques of Obama-era political power in his 2011 special, *You Can Tell ‘Em I Said It* (hereafter *You Can Tell ‘Em*), and its subversive and conservative qualities within the framework of the primary research question. In an interview published four months after *You Can Tell ‘Em* was first aired, Griffin stated that stand-up comedy has “been having a hard time” due to a scarcity of social commentary and political content, a scarcity he argues that his special will

⁷¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.24.

⁷² Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.24.

⁷³ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.23.

⁷⁴ Griffin, Eddie, *Freedom of Speech*, 13:48. Universal City, CA: CodeBlack Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

remedy with its blend of “butt naked, raw truth.”⁷⁵ Griffin sees this depreciation as having a negative impact on African Americans, arguing that comedians are “missing what our people need.”⁷⁶ The opening credits of *You Can Tell ‘Em* seem an attempt to replenish this dearth, beginning with the presentation of a constitutional parchment, declaring the artists and title of the special in brash red ink that immediately sets the political tone. As Griffin is introduced, he appears from behind the curtain, swaggering slowly to the centre of the stage, waiting for the perfect moment to deliver his opening line. He begins: “I wanna fuck Michelle Obama. [Laughter.] [A picture of Michelle Obama appears on the large screen behind Griffin.]”⁷⁷ As the audience reels in laughter from his opening line, Griffin declares his love for the First Lady, laying the foundation for more meaningful political explorations as he moves through his material.

2.3.1. Exploring Tensions in Griffin’s Pimp President Material

Griffin completes his introduction of Obama by comparing him to a “pimp”.⁷⁸ He aggrandises the President with this comparison, noting his “pimping” of political opponents such as Hillary Clinton by offering her the position of Secretary of State.⁷⁹ His retelling of Obama’s 2009 inauguration, which he comments was when he finally knew the President had “some nigga in him”, bears this out:

You remember that day him and George Bush were walking outside the White House, and his first swag was on 250? [Griffin does an impersonation of a cool, elongated walk across the stage.] [Laughter.] I’m sitting at home, and I said, ‘That brother’s a pimp!’” You can damn near hear the conversation. [Griffin as a pimp-like Obama] ‘Hurry up and get your shit out of my house.’ [Laughter.]⁸⁰

Griffin goes on to point to Obama’s actions in office as indicative of his affiliation with everyday working-class African Americans. He notes that he knew the President had “hood in him” when he shook up of the austere traditions of the White House by holding celebratory

⁷⁵ Allah, Shabe, “Eddie Griffin: Take No Prisoners”, *Stark*, 18th June 2011, p.1. Web. <http://www.thestarklife.com/2011/06/18/eddie-griffin-taking-no-prisoners/>. Last accessed on January 19th 2015.

⁷⁶ Allah, “Eddie Griffin”, p.1.

⁷⁷ Griffin, Eddie, *You Can Tell ‘Em I Said It*, 0:00. U.S.A: Comedy Central, 2011. DVD.

⁷⁸ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 2:20, 3:30.

⁷⁹ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 2:20.

⁸⁰ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 3:30.

barbeques on the White House lawn and installing a swing set for his daughters in the gardens of the executive mansion:

He threw a barbeque, at the White House. [Laughter.] He invited the NBA, the NFL, every rapper; I think I was the only nigger who wasn't there. [Laughter.] ...Here's how I really knew he was from the hood. He brought a swing set. I don't think you really all heard. [Laughter.] He brought a swing set, on the White House lawn. That's some nigga shit. [Laughter.]⁸¹

For all of Griffin's bolstering of a President who has challenged tenets of American political power with a barbeque and swing-set for his daughters, there are hints of a degree of personal conflict that challenge his own declared approval of Obama, calling into question the extent to which he has really challenged these political structures. This allows for a degree of authorial context to be conducted within this case study through an analysis of Griffin's remarks regarding Obama found in other examples of his stand-up and interviews. In an interview with Bob Andelman, he expressed trepidation over Obama's credentials in understanding the wider African American culture of the United States, ascribing to him the moniker of "Captain Safe" and commenting that his behaviour is far more conservative than the exaggerated pimp-like President of his stand-up suggests.⁸² He argues that the only changes that have taken place under his administration are those that benefit the established structures of American power: "He's done one helluva job finishing the Bush administration's plan. I'm still waiting on the change part. I ain't seen no change...I've seen the change go to Wall Street...But I ain't seen no change."⁸³ Furthermore, Griffin previously accused Obama in his stand-up special *Freedom of Speech* (2008) of being "slippery" in his evasion in answering basic policy questions during the 2008 presidential debates, where, in Griffin's adoption of a similar elongated walk to his presidential "pimp" counterpart in *You Can Tell 'Em* in his impersonation of Obama, he simply repeats, "I'm Obama" to each question, parodying the presidential candidate's self-assurance. "[Griffin

⁸¹ Griffin, *You Can Tell 'Em*, 5:18.; Details of the installation of the White House swing-set can be found at Swarns, Rachel L., "A Castle at the White House", "The Caucus", *The New York Times*, March 4th 2009, p.1. Web. http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/a-castle-at-the-white-house/?_r=0. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Griffin is likely referring to a barbeque hosted by the White House as part of the President's 49th birthday celebrations two months prior on August 8th 2010. Shear, Michael D., "Obama gets to test his game against hoops greats", *The Washington Post*, August 9th 2010, p.1. Web. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/08/08/AR2010080801558.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁸² Andelman, Bob, "Comedian Eddie Griffin Chooses the Right #@!% Words! Podcast interview", *Mr Media*, April 5th 2011, 5:30. Web. <http://mrmedia.com/2011/04/comedian-eddie-griffin-chooses-the-right-words-over-your-dainty-feelings-interview/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁸³ Andelman, "Comedian Eddie Griffin", 6:17.

as chairperson.] ‘Well what you think about housing?’ [as Obama.] ‘I’m Obama.’ [Laughter.] He’s [a] slippery motherfucker. [Mild laughter.]⁸⁴ In a later example of his stand-up, posted on Griffin’s Youtube channel, he once again assumes this sceptical position. Titled “Eddie Griffin Live - Rant on Obama” and uploaded in October 2013, it shows him rebuking the President for his interpreted role as an intermediary in racial tensions:

“Did you all see Obama on the news talking shit today? That’s everyday. [Laughter.] That nigga’s so frustrating, he just come off TV, [Griffin as President Obama.] ‘Hey, how y’all doing. [Laughter.] You know, them motherfuckers still fucking with the niggers. [Laughter.] Won’t let a nigger do nothing. [Laughter.] I thought I’d come on TV and tell y’all again about the shit. [Laughter.] Aight, fuck it, back to your regular programming. [Laughter.]⁸⁵

Griffin makes the argument that, in Obama’s case, the office of the presidency is used to pacify racial tensions rather than address them. Engaging with *You Can Tell ‘Em* within the broader context of Griffin’s work, it offers an interpretation of Griffin’s political comic persona that critiques the evasive nature of Obama as both presidential candidate and President regarding sensitive racial and political topics, and the sophistication of ongoing racial discrimination and political marginalisation in the United States which feeds into much of the material of *You Can Tell ‘Em*. This challenge to Griffin’s own initial material and opinions allows for an interpretation that illustrates an ongoing flux between his wish to court a softer route of political comic commentary and to engage in more challenging material. This interpretation emphasises the significance of this case study in construing how Griffin presents subversive and conservative items of material under the distinct pressure and responsibilities of an African American stand-up under Obama’s presidency, emphasising aforementioned examinations of covert and public forms of African American expression translated through laughter.

⁸⁴ Griffin, *Freedom of Speech*, 22:54.

⁸⁵ “Eddie Griffin Live- Rant on Obama”, *Eddie Griffin* (Youtube Channel), October 2nd 2013, 0:00. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEiqujFoZfo>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

2.3.2. Racial and Class Consolidation in Comic Impersonations of Obama

Griffin's material allows for an exploration of the relationship between the sympathetic, racial affiliation that many African Americans feel towards Obama, and the manner in which this is expressed in comic portrayals. As Kennedy argues, prior to the arrival of Barack Obama, the idea of an African American presidency was relegated to fantastical representations, where "the prospect of a black president seemed dim indeed - the stuff of science fiction...or comedy."⁸⁶ Foremost among the most popular impersonations of the pre-Obama black president were Richard Pryor's portrayal on *The Richard Pryor Show* in 1977, and Dave Chappelle's hyper-masculine portrayal in the "Black Bush" sketch on *The Chappelle Show* in 2004. The emergence of Obama led to a degree of revisionism within African American comedy over what could be agreed to lie within fictional and serious territory. As Chris Rock noted in the aftermath of the 2008 presidential election, if he had known how imminent an African American president would be, he wouldn't have made his own comedy production *Head of State* (2003), in which he portrays a black president, "as silly".⁸⁷ Kennedy's argument regarding the African American presidency moving from the realms of fantasy into actuality with Obama poses the question as to how African American political stand-up comedy has been able to negotiate with the concept.

The chief qualities found in popular African American impersonations of Obama have been either through a neutralised, straight-man comic positioning, exemplified in *Saturday Night Live*'s "Obama and MLK" sketch, or a more street-wise personality depicted in Griffin's pimp president material. A popular example can be found in the sketch "Obama Meet & Greet" from *Key & Peele* (2012-). The premise of the sketch involves Obama - played by stand-up comedian Jordan Peele - shaking hands with guests after delivering a speech. While greeting white Americans with a formal handshake, his composure breaks momentarily when he greets an African American guest, adopting a friendly, physical handshake or hug, and speaking to them in associated African American vernacular, suggesting the possibility that he is suppressing his natural cultural associations except when engaged with other

⁸⁶ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, p.64.

⁸⁷ Morrissey, Tracie Egan, "Chris Rock Never Believed a Black President Was Possible", *Jezebel*, November 7th 2008, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/mk6ox>.

African Americans.⁸⁸ In these examples, Obama is portrayed as wrestling between a sympathetic commitment to African Americans and his pragmatic, presidential responsibility towards *all* Americans as commander-in-chief. Other examples from *Key & Peele* play further on these ideas of duality, such as their “Obama’s Anger Translator” sketches. This series uses a comic dualism between presidential pragmatism and private exposition from Obama (Peele) for comic effect through a fictional anger translator named Luther (Keegan Michael Key), who, after each diplomatic declaration from Obama, bridges the cultural, racial and political gap in his acerbic, humorous translations of the president’s statements.⁸⁹ The popularity of these sketches would lead to “Luther” joining the President onstage as part of his stand-up comedy address at the 2015 Correspondents’ Dinner, acting as a translator of the president’s grievances towards the Washington press, the upcoming 2016 presidential election, and his objections to Republican officials refusing to heed continued warnings towards climate change.⁹⁰ Furthermore, in Griffin’s portrayal of Obama’s concealed presidential pimperiness, a level of socioracial theory can be invoked. W.E.B. Du Bois’ historic concept of “double-consciousness” drew attention to the psychosocial challenge that African Americans faced in the late 19th century United States in wrestling with dual African and American identities.⁹¹ Contemporary treatments of Du Bois’ idea of double-consciousness accommodate the uniqueness of Obama’s position as the first black president. In Paul Mocombe’s class-based interpretation, the President’s double-consciousness presents itself through a negotiation between his bourgeois upbringing and personal successes, and the stark poverty and institutional discrimination facing millions of African Americans in the United States. Mocombe argues that Obama’s substitution of a traditional dialectic between Du Bois’ African and American double-consciousness is replaced with a class-based negotiation between his “true [American liberal bourgeois

⁸⁸ “Key & Peele - Obama Meet & Greet”, *Comedy Central* (Youtube Channel), September 24th 2014. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nopWOC4SRm4>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁸⁹ Additional, popular examples of *Key & Peele*’s “Anger Translator” sketches are “Key & Peele - Obama's Anger Translator - Meet Luther - Uncensored”, or “Key & Peele- Obama and Luther- Addressing the Critics”, all of which can be viewed on Comedy Central’s YouTube Channel.

⁹⁰ “Luther’s” inclusion in Obama’s 2015 stand-up comedy address can be viewed at “2015 White House Correspondents' Dinner”, *C-Span*, April 25th 2015, 49:46. Web. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?325411-2/2015-white-house-correspondents-association-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁹¹ Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches*. Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903, p.3. Print.

Protestant] consciousness” and the poor social and economic realities of inner-city African American life.⁹²

In a separate segment in *You Can Tell ‘Em*, Griffin visually illustrates this dialectic of class-based differentiation which Mocombe presents between inner-city African American “hip pop culture” and middle and upper-middle class African American society by using the theatre screen to show the difference between the pretensions of middle to upper-middle class “African Americans” and lower-class, streetwise, inner-city “niggers”, the latter group with whom Griffin associates himself.⁹³ As he jokes, “And then you have niggers! [Laughter.] [Several photos of Griffin wearing a full-red tracksuit and raising a glass of red wine in salutation are shown.] Which I happen to be a member of!”⁹⁴ As much as he goes on to note the working class, “hood” qualities that Obama expresses, this is a faction of African American society which Obama has in reality been extremely cautious to associate with.⁹⁵ *The New Yorker’s* Jonathan Alter builds on Mocombe’s analysis by commenting that there is a distinct Du Boisian element in Obama’s ever-present insistence on racial impartiality and his association with the ongoing struggles facing so much of African American society. On the idea of Obama’s public and private disputation, Alter maintains that “The gap between the public and the private Obama is much smaller than it is for most politicians - except when the subject is race.”⁹⁶ Research by political scientist Daniel Q. Gillion qualifies Alter’s remarks, finding that Obama, particularly during his first term in office, made fewer speeches and offered fewer executive policies on race than previous 20th century Democratic presidencies. He notes:

Not only has the first black president had fewer discussions overall that revolve around race, but at each step in time he often has lagged behind his Democratic predecessors...The lack of discussion only intensified toward the end of President Obama’s first term.⁹⁷

⁹² Mocombe, Paul C., *The Liberal Black Protestant Heterosexual Bourgeois Male: From W.E.B Du Bois to Barack Obama*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2010, p.83. Print.

⁹³ Mocombe, *The Liberal Black Protestant*, p.83.; Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 4:10.

⁹⁴ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 4:57.

⁹⁵ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 5:18.

⁹⁶ Alter, Jonathan, “Obama’s ‘Double Consciousness’ on Race”, *The New Yorker*, July 25th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/aef7f>.

⁹⁷ Gillion, Daniel Q., *Governing with Words: The Political Dialogue on Race, Public Policy, and Inequality in America*. New York City, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016, p.48. Print.

Gillion tempers this though by noting that when Obama *has* chosen to discuss race, it has been largely “supportive of minority concerns”; however, in a comparison between politicians talking about race in a negative light and those who rarely discuss race at all, Gillion’s theoretical framework concludes that the latter is more detrimental by doing little to engage politicians “in the necessary deliberation to address and monitor racial equality.”⁹⁸ In a 2014 article for *Politico Magazine* titled, “Did Obama Fail Black America?”, Kennedy reinforces Gillion’s analysis by arguing that there has been “a recurring pattern” on the President’s part in his failure to discuss in-depth, let alone tackle in any legislative-sense, a large number of socio-political issues that have a disproportionately negative effect on African Americans.⁹⁹ This acknowledged gap between Obama’s lauded recognition as the first African American President and his distinct avoidance of race and working-class African American associations while in office, can be interpreted as being compensated for in cultural and class-based projections by Griffin, a gap he acknowledges in his special. Before beginning his pimp president material, he comments on the President’s inconspicuous relationship with these racial and class-based groups: “I knew he had some nigga in him... cause at first you couldn’t tell.”¹⁰⁰ If we were to revive Mocombe’s adaptation of Du Bois’ double-consciousness within a contemporary comic placement, then Griffin’s subsequent imposition of forms of recognisable African American identity onto President Obama - the “hood” mannerisms of an inner-city African American pimp, or as a working-class African American father, as expressed in his barbeque and swing-set jokes - can be interpreted as a means to compensate for this gap between public and private Obamas.¹⁰¹ His promotion of a “pimp”-like persona acts as a political comic impression projected onto a president within a dearth of genuine class-based and cultural associations. Griffin’s acclamation of Obama’s cultural credentials, and his strained “nigga”-ness, can therefore be seen as a Du Boisian consolidation of the President’s “double self” - the presidential and the cultural - through comic substitution, with Griffin using identifiable symbols and characteristics typically associated with working class, inner-city African American culture to reconcile the disconnect between Obama’s bourgeois expressions and the working-class expressions with which Griffin associates himself. As Erin Aubry Kaplan notes, Obama’s distancing from African American issues while in office is based on class

⁹⁸ Gillion, *Governing with Words*, p.49.

⁹⁹ Kennedy, Randall, “Did Obama Fail Black America?”, *Politico Magazine*, July/August 2014, p.2. Web. <https://archive.is/kN11O>.

¹⁰⁰ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 3:30.

¹⁰¹ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 3:30, 5:20.

perceptions as well. In regard to Obama's response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, Kaplan notes:

Identifying as black is risky for Obama always, but identifying with working-class blacks - the kind the country sees as criminal, or at the very least potentially criminal - is risky on a whole other scale.¹⁰²

This acknowledgement by Kaplan regarding the underlying class-based responses that Obama has been tentative to associate with makes Griffin's own comparisons appear even more strained. This interpretation leaves a distinctly conservative taste in Griffin's treatment of Obama, a strained consolidation reminiscent of Chris Rock's parental appraisal of the Obamas as "like the mom and the dad of the country" during the comic's support for increased gun regulation in 2013.¹⁰³ His aligning of Obama with working-class African American credentials is bitterly ironic when, as Eboni M. Zamani-Gallagher argues, it has been the Obama administration's "disastrous" stance of racial pragmatism that has exacerbated the social and economic plights of inner-city African American communities by refusing to confront issues that have a disproportionately negative effect on African Americans.¹⁰⁴ Within this context, Griffin's strained consolidation of racial and class-based affiliations with Obama exemplifies the potential for stand-up comedy to impress associations that can be seen as detrimental and regressive.

Griffin's impersonations of Obama, and more broadly, his reflections on the nature of African American relations to everyday forms of institutional power, are extended in other instances of *You Can Tell 'Em*. The nature of the censored and uncensored segments of *You Can Tell 'Em* raises a number of questions, particularly in how we view Griffin's political comic voice. Away from the small collection of edits that make up the nineteen additional minutes of the uncensored version, there is a discernible amount of censored material that adds a sharper edge to its political commentary. For example, in the opening minutes of the extended version, he critiques aggrandised notions of racial progress under Obama:

¹⁰² Kaplan, Erin Aubry, "Race: It's gotten personal for Obama", *Los Angeles Times*, April 1st 2012, p.1. Web. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/apr/01/opinion/la-oe-aubry-obama-trayvon-martin-20120401>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰³ "Chris Rock: Obama is Like the 'Dad of the Country,' 'When Your Dad Says Something, You Listen'", *CNS News*, February 6th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/rbNTB>.

¹⁰⁴ Zamani-Gallagher, Eboni M. (ed.), *The Obama Administration and Educational Reform*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, p.81. Print.

You know how they say, there's no more racism, you know since Obama got into office, you know, [Griffin as a white American.] 'You've got a black president, there is no more racism.' Bullshit. They just got slick with the shit. They don't say 'nigger' anymore, they just say, [Griffin as a white employer.] 'We're not hiring.' [Laughter & Applause.] Translation: [Griffin adopts a southern accent.] Nigger! [Griffin as a bank clerk.] 'I'm sorry, your bank loan has been denied.' [Griffin's translation voice.] Nigger! [Laughter.] [Griffin as a police officer.] 'Pull over!' [Griffin's translation voice.] Nigger! [Laughter.]¹⁰⁵

In this section, Griffin argues that for African Americans, the election of a black president has so far done little to amend the existent institutional prejudices found in so much of American life. Instead, it has simply made these prejudices more clandestine in nature. He illustrates the sophisticated fluency of contemporary racism in the United States in preventing African Americans from gaining certain forms of employment, financial assistance, and perhaps most viscerally, fair treatment by police authorities.¹⁰⁶ This is complemented by Griffin's adoption of a cock-eyed, provincial posture that bursts out in racist rebuke beneath a faux-progressive veneer of social niceties ("We're not hiring."). The power of his commentary works within the same contemporary/historical synthesis that O'Neal deploys in his "plantation hut" joke, undermining ideas of progressiveness under President Obama. Furthermore, it can be seen as an extension of Kara Hunt's analysis of *Def Comedy Jam* and her assessment of Richard Pryor's legacy in African American stand-up. In what she characterises as the "Pryor Standard", she argues that his ability to deliver forms of black expression palatable to white audiences "set a new standard for black comic achievement."¹⁰⁷ However, from this, Hunt argues that forms of black stand-up "unwilling or unable to resonate with or address white audiences were deemed progress-resistant."¹⁰⁸ This lack, or outright refusal of perceived racial accord in *Def Comedy Jam*, according to Hunt, proved the key to its success in its refusal to ingratiate its comic bite within what she argues is the injudicious racial and social measurements of the Pryor Standard. She argues:

The mantra of *Def Comedy Jam* and programs like it holds that blackness and power are paradoxical. That ultimately, laughing with the specter of blackness, finding some resonance between myth and reality, might prove to be more satisfying than wrestling defenselessly within its folds.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ This quotation, and the entirety of Griffin's uncensored version, can be accessed at "Eddie Griffin You Can Tell Em I Said It (cc)", *Comedy Stage* (Youtube Channel), October 25th 2016, 5:33. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDyJf7TfM30>. Last accessed on March 26th 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Griffin, *You Can Tell 'Em*, 5:20.

¹⁰⁷ Hunt, "Off the Record", p.839.

¹⁰⁸ Hunt, "Off the Record", p.839.

¹⁰⁹ Hunt, "Off the Record", p.853.

Griffin's material can be seen within this filtering of African American stand-up, where his acerbic portrayal of anti-black, institutional racism aggressively refutes any bold mythologies of racial progression under Obama. Its critical observations on African American life and civil society provides a sharper edge to Griffin's political comic voice, and to his treatment of Obama-era power that refuses to court particular racial, social and political niceties.

2.3.3. Reluctant Caretakers: Analysing Griffin's Social Conservatism

To return to the censored version of *You Can Tell 'Em*, as Griffin navigates his material, a rawer political voice emerges, particularly in the final third of the special, which includes some awkward conservative conclusions. While he courts the erraticism of a *Def Comedy Jam*-esque style of stand-up, he appears eager to maintain an intellectual air within it. He discusses this when he explains why he chose to perform *You Can Tell 'Em* in the San Francisco Bay Area:

I had to come to the Yay area. [Cheers & Applause.] Cause I know up here y'all motherfuckers is sharp. [Laughter.] Ya kna ah mean? And you're still street at the same time, so you can - [Griffin uses hands to connote this binary between urban suaveness and intelligence.] ...You actually see niggas with books up here. [Laughter & Mild Applause.]¹¹⁰

Griffin's projected social dualisms between perceived intellectual and non-intellectual African American expression prove problematic. His portrayal of a drug dealer literally running away from a book suggests that to certain sections of African American society, reading, and more broadly education, is a hostile pursuit.¹¹¹ This is underlined as he continues:

Yeah, they say these white people are scared of a nigger with a gun. No they ain't. When they see your ass with a gun, here's what they do: [Griffin as a white American.] 'Gotcha. He'll be in jail soon.' They see your ass with a book, try this shit, cause I do it all the time. Go to Starbucks...sit down with a book. White person sitting over there [Griffin points to his right], they can't resist it nigger, they be like: [Griffin impersonates a white American curiously looking over.] [Laughter.]¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Griffin, *You Can Tell 'Em*, 55:00.

¹¹¹ Griffin, *You Can Tell 'Em*, 5:00.

¹¹² Griffin, *You Can Tell 'Em*, 55:52.

Such reductionist statements, which posit an awkward, condescending reading of the fundamental power of education as an appropriate tool in solving African American societal ailments, accord with more conservative treatments. Furthermore, it yields to previous examinations found in Haggins' *Laughing Mad*. She argues in her critique of Chris Rock's stand-up that comic material can embody both progressive and regressive forces, and is susceptible to ideological biases on the part of the artist, "entirely dependent on which social issue is up for...comedic dissection."¹¹³ This tension between progressive and regressive forces is fundamental to this case study's analysis, and in how it relates to the secondary research question. Certainly Rock was quick to recognise the detrimental racial conservatism of certain aspects of his material, and that can also be felt in Griffin's jokes. Most notorious was Rock's "Niggas vs. Black People" piece from his 1996 HBO stand-up special *Bring the Pain*, a segment in which Hunt argues that sections of his audience "exploited his detailed description of the undesirable traits of 'niggas' in order to verse preexisting antiblack sentiment", and which, for these reasons, Rock later commented that he never performed the material again onstage.¹¹⁴ Regardless, it became an item of socio-comic commentary so popularly ingrained in American culture that even Obama, in a moment of improvisation, referenced it during a Father's Day speech in his 2008 presidential campaign. He commented:

I don't know if you guys remember, but Chris Rock had a routine. He said some-too many of our men, they're proud, they brag about doing things they're supposed to do. They say 'Well, I - I'm not in jail.' Well you're not supposed to be in jail! [Laughter & Applause.] Don't brag about that! [Obama chuckles.]¹¹⁵

In response to Obama's remarks, *Mother Jones*' Nick Baumann argued that "It's odd enough for a politician to cite the work of a comedian. But Obama's specific reference was particularly intriguing. It wasn't in the prepared text - Obama dropped it in himself."¹¹⁶ In an unusual precursor to an African American comic atmosphere which is intensely tentative about criticising Obama through political comic material, Senator Obama's own apparently unprepared referencing of a controversial comic piece that the original comedian dropped out of fear that it was regressive, can be seen to be indicative of Obama's conservative

¹¹³ Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, p.83.

¹¹⁴ Hunt, "Off the Record", p.847.; Leung, Rebecca, "Rock: Bring on Oscar 'Safety Net'", *CBS News*, February 17th 2005, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/L217t>.

¹¹⁵ "Barack Obama's Speech on Father's Day", *BarackObama.com* (Youtube Channel), June 15th 2008, 13:01. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj1hCDjwG6M>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁶ Baumann, Nick, "Obama Channels Chris Rock", *Mother Jones*, June 16th 2008, p.1. Web. <http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2008/06/obama-channels-chris-rock>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

leanings, and another murky example of political / comic interchange. Another reflection on Griffin's education material can be found in remarks made by First Lady Michelle Obama during her commencement address at Bowie State University on the importance of education within African American communities, denigrating the "baller" and "rapper" aspirations of young African American men, and urging the university's students to "reject the slander that says a black child with a book is trying to act white."¹¹⁷ In positing the same social dynamic in *You Can Tell 'Em*, there is little recognition on Griffin's part regarding the essential conservatism of this material, diluting the critical edge of his stand-up. This places Griffin in the company of conservative African American comedian Bill Cosby, or perhaps more significantly, the non-comic figure of Obama, displaying what Ta-Nehisi Coates argues was the President's "strain of black conservatism" and his "Cosby-esque [and as noted above, Rock-esque] appeals to personal responsibility" that he employed through comic appropriation in his 2008 presidential campaign.¹¹⁸

Historically speaking, Griffin's conservative leanings echo the writings of African American intellectuals such as Du Bois, most specifically his work *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899). Although Du Bois' text documented the discrimination faced by Philadelphian blacks, Kevin K. Gaines argues that it nonetheless saw the root of African American poverty as lacking in moral fortitude, what he describes as Du Bois' treatment of impoverishment through the "distorted ideological lens of family disorganization."¹¹⁹ It was this racial sociology that Gaines argues was essential "to claims for the existence of respectable blacks, those proverbial credits to the race."¹²⁰ This interpreted progressive/regressive social synthesis in Du Bois' treatment, voiced by other proponents of African American intellectualism since, is for commentators such as Coates, repeated in the "same rhetoric that Cosby is pushing today."¹²¹ Coates' analysis of historic and contemporary African American conservatism can be extended in an interpretation of Griffin's adoption of the "racial uplift ideology" in *You Can Tell 'Em*, and his rudimentary dismissal of social and economic determinants in

¹¹⁷ Thompson, Krissah, "Michelle Obama gives commencement address at Bowie State, challenges students to keep learning", *The Washington Post*, May 17th 2013, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/zZEYL>.

¹¹⁸ Coates, Ta-Nehisi, "This Is How We Lost to the White Man": The audacity of Bill Cosby's black conservatism", *The Atlantic*, May 2008, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/LSMOK>.

¹¹⁹ Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 1899. Print.

¹²⁰ Gaines, Kevin K., *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996, *Preface*, xix. Print.

¹²¹ Coates, "This is How We Lost", p.1.

this material.¹²² Consequently, Griffin frames himself within the lineage of African American social conservative elites who, in the words of William Jelani Cobb, appointed themselves as “reluctant caretakers of the less enlightened.”¹²³ It is this fine socio-political contour that Griffin courts within *You Can Tell ‘Em* that can be seen to be affirming Haggins’ analysis of regressive and progressive elements within African American stand-up comedy, turning the acerbity of his confrontational comic critiques into nuggets of social conservative appropriation. In taking this line, Griffin provides an intriguing political-comic crossover between his Black Nationalist-inspired, political comic fusions and the social conservatism of African American elites like the Obamas. In light of Griffin’s presumptive affiliation with Malcolm X in his stand-up, his dilution of the real social and economic difficulties of sections of black society aligns him with a number of social conservative tones - akin to Hunt’s treatment of Rock’s “Niggas vs. Black People” - that opens the potential for Griffin’s unsavoury material to be “weaponized as a tool for black subjugation”.¹²⁴

2.3.4. Exploring Griffin’s Imperialist Finale of the Obama Presidency

The development of Griffin’s comic voice within *You Can Tell ‘Em* - particularly in regards to how he critiques Obama - is evident in his closing material. In stark contrast to the softer “pimp” and “hood” humour at the beginning, his final commentary invokes at best Obama’s insignificance in the face of American militarism, or at worst a deliberate concealment of his agenda while running for office.¹²⁵ Beginning by saying “You know Obama ain’t running shit”, a tension can be felt within the audience. He follows this by lifting his hands to his sides, marionette-style, as he announces, “Puppet on a string! [Laughter.]” The way in which Griffin approaches and delivers this material onstage provides a number of interesting perspectives on the body of his physical performance. It is only with his swift comic gestures, his imitation of Obama as a puppet, that he draws a strong reaction from the audience.¹²⁶ Without breaking the sternness of his delivery however, he continues: “That nigga ran for office and said [Griffin as Obama.] ‘I’m gonna stop both wars.’” Pausing, and

¹²² Gaines, *Uplifting the Race, Preface*, xix.

¹²³ Cobb’s quotation can be originally found in Coates, “This is How We Lost”, p.1.

¹²⁴ Hunt, “Off the Record”, p.847.

¹²⁵ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 2:20, 5:18.

¹²⁶ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 57:34-39.

eyeing sections of his audience, he presents an obvious incredulity at this statement, raising his arms to the audience as if in disbelief. He continues: “Didn’t he just send 60,000 more troops to Afghanistan?” Sections of the audience can be heard agreeing with Griffin. “He took them out of Iraq, dem niggers thought they was going home!” The power of his African American soldier imitation comes from his preceding acknowledgement of Obama’s surge strategy in Afghanistan, reinforcing the tragicomedy of what is about to be conveyed, the cruel comic expectation. It is at this juncture in the finale that Griffin once again uses his comic theatricality to great effect. He begins by impersonating a relieved African American soldier at the end of his tour in Iraq, believing he will be returning soon to American civilian life. With arms raised in a mixture of relief and joy, Griffin’s soldier persona celebrates. ““Shit nigga, the war over! We goin’ home!”” However, before he can even put a celebratory cigarette to his lips, his soldier’s short-lived celebrations are crudely quashed. As Obama, Griffin steps into the fray. ““Nope, [points to other side of stage.] over there.’ [Laughter.]”¹²⁷ The punch line is heightened by the stark collision of his soldier’s short-lived celebrations with the military strategy of the Afghanistan surge. Furthermore, Griffin’s masquerade of Obama is hardly sympathetic, directing the soldier in a tone of callous, chess-like stratagem across the stage, from the centre-left of Iraq to the downstage-right of Afghanistan. Tilting his face in unutterable disbelief, Griffin’s soldier completes his transition from Iraq to Afghanistan onstage, walking from centre-stage to centre-left and back to centre-stage, provoking bursts of laughter from the audience through his conveying of this brutal, militaristic arithmetic.

Like his preceding Obama-as-marionette impression that follows his accusation of the President’s irrelevance, it works to dilute Griffin’s more acerbic moments of political exposition. It can be interpreted that he makes a concerted effort to impress the gravity of this to his audience as he returns to the centre-stage, relieving his soldier moniker, saying “They wise an’ shit - family thinking these motherfuckers coming home, niggas they get shipped to a new war.”¹²⁸ A moment of visibly presented irritation returns to Griffin’s face as he delivers this, showcasing the ever-present balance on his part between personal political exposition and comic amusement. This articulated frustration towards Obama’s military strategy in Afghanistan is expounded on further within the censored version. To return to reflections regarding the editorial decision-making of *You Can Tell ‘Em*, the only

¹²⁷ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 57:40.

¹²⁸ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 58:07.

material censored in this segment is a single statement that precedes the aforementioned sentence. After Griffin returns to the centre-stage from his soldier impersonation, he acerbically remarks “That’s some fucked up shit.”¹²⁹ He continues with a commentary on continuing post-imperial American power: “Now Iraq, we annexed that country. You know, took the oil nigga. Now the one thing you know about American motherfucking history is wherever we land we don’t leave.” Griffin raises his hand in declaration. “We already got three bases, permanent bases in Iraq. We *still* in Vietnam, still in motherfucking Korea, still got a base in Japan.” Using the same theatrical stage-posting he used to mark Iraqi and Afghani portions of the stage in his previous material, Griffin’s arms point wildly across the stage, as if in declaration of continued American influence in Iraq, Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Accentuating the punchline, Griffin remarks, “Anywhere we land we don’t leave! [Applause.]” Griffin draws from his cigarette, and his fingers can be seen visibly trembling, displaying an affected frustration. He continues: “You know what I mean? I thought it was called the United States of America, not the United Empire of Earth. [Laughter & Applause.]” [Griffin in a mock-dictatorial voice.] ‘You will do as I say!’¹³⁰ With his eyes bugged out in a masquerade of American imperial villainy as he delivers this punch line, the audience laughs and applauds in equal measure.

Returning to Haggins’ analysis of regressive and progressive tendencies in comic material, Griffin’s finale can at times be problematic and detract from the effectiveness of his political comic critique. His protestation that Obama ran on a platform to end both wars without any form of escalation conflicts with the realities of his 2008 presidential campaign in which he actually proposed an increase in the American military presence in Afghanistan.¹³¹ Most significantly however is the interpretation that Griffin retreated back into harmless comic territory in his final joke to balance his more radical edge. In the final minutes of *You Can Tell ‘Em*, Griffin moves on to the subject of Chinese ownership of U.S foreign debt, only to divert immediately on to jokes about actor and martial artist Bruce Lee.¹³² The displacement between these two sections is abrupt; from his political comic critiques of Obama’s Afghan surge and American militarism, Griffin finishes with hackneyed material on Lee’s karate skills. In gauging the closing material of *You Can Tell ‘Em*, the anti-imperialist subversion

¹²⁹ “Eddie Griffin”, 1:16:15.

¹³⁰ Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 58:10.

¹³¹ MacAskill, Ewen, “Obama promises 10,000 more troops for Afghanistan”, *The Guardian*, July 15th2008. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/15/barackobama.usa1>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹³² Griffin, *You Can Tell ‘Em*, 59:21.

of Griffin's political comic critique of Obama, the potency of his material is undercut by taking refuge in the safety of a joke about Lee's fighting prowess to end his special. If O'Neal's material on Obama can be interpreted to have been heightened by his preceding explorations of political and commercial machinations, then Griffin's prior examinations of clandestine American racism and racial politics provide him with a mandate to launch into a powerful and unique rebuke of American militarism, the President, and Obama-era power in the final minutes of *You Can Tell 'Em*. However, unlike O'Neal, whose initial division of his audience was used to challenge and ultimately unite them through racial and political commentary, Griffin takes a contrasting route of initial unity through his "pimp president" material, before ending on a more cutting note with his "puppet president" material.

In Touré's analysis of African American stand-up comedian Dave Chappelle, he argues that the lessons Chappelle took from his struggles with the incisive political and racial commentaries exemplified how his comic voice had written cheques he was "afraid to cash."¹³³ This same wrangling can be seen in Griffin's *You Can Tell 'Em* and his dalliance between edgy political critique and comic effectiveness, where in the final moments of a unique finale, he opted for the comfort of less threatening material. Civil rights-era African American stand-up comedian Dick Gregory, well known for his acerbic socio-political critiques, provides a relevant strategy for the political comic interrogation echoed in Griffin's material. In his critiques of white American racism, Gregory recognised the necessity to provide softer, self-deprecating humour onstage that would work alongside his more biting critiques. His self-titled strategy of "friendly relations" balanced softer and edgier forms of socio-political comic material, akin to Griffin's own dalliance onstage.¹³⁴ Gregory's difficulties in delivering bold socio-political commentaries during the civil-rights era beg reflection on audience expectations within Obama-era African American stand-up. As Jonathan Paul Rossing argues, Gregory's successes and limitations during this time of racial intensity relied largely on white American expectations and their propensity to listen to his comic discourses. Commenting on Gregory's strategy, he argues that Gregory was aware that "too much vitriol would turn the audience against him. Too weak a response would diminish the entertainer's respectability and control, and thus, the audience would pity the performer."¹³⁵ In contrast, it can be interpreted that Griffin's successes and limitations lean

¹³³ Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, p.74.

¹³⁴ Gregory, Dick & Lipsyte, Robert, *Nigger*. New York City, NY: Pocket Books, 1964, p.132. Print.

¹³⁵ Rossing, "Dick Gregory and Activist Style", p.65.

more towards African American expectations, their willingness to accept his political comic interrogations, and Griffin's variation of friendly relations that he negotiates with the unconventionalities of black political stand-up under Obama. Nevertheless, his critique of glorified race relations under Obama, and his anti-imperialist critique of the President, stands as a unique example of African American political comic commentary.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer the following secondary research question: "To what extent can Obama-era African American political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" This was achieved by gauging the racial, cultural and political tensions of O'Neal and Griffin's material and their critiques of Obama-era political power. Their respective contributions display contrasting political comic strategies. If O'Neal illustrates an academic indifference in *Mr P*, then Griffin projects a more obvious frustration with facets of power and authority. Furthermore, O'Neal's use of a divisive introduction became a ploy to illustrate the relationship between power holders and the powerless, a paradigm between unity and division. This is best exemplified in his explorations of the "purpose" of Obama as a placatory force against increasing left-wing American protest movements, where a strained, state-propagated idea of racial progression or racial unity that characterised his election is countered by the regressive racial, social and economic determinants in present day America.¹³⁶ Compared to O'Neal, Griffin embraces a more visible fusion of subversive and conservative political comic tones, ranging from his biting critique of Obama-era racial politics, of Obama himself, and of contemporary American militarism. Indeed, much of what makes Griffin's political comic persona worth examining is his construed hesitation to delve into political topics to the same depth, and where the racial, cultural and political tensions of an African American comic engaging in political criticism are more overt. If such criticism of Obama can be regarded as unconventional, then this could explain the difference between Griffin's initial and concluding remarks on the President and indicate his struggle to accept this unconventionality. In this respect, O'Neal and Griffin are exceptional in their explorations of racial, cultural and political pressures which they gauge as African American comics. In

¹³⁶ O'Neal, "Obama", *Mr P*, 0:40.

doing so, they demonstrate the conflict between loyalty to their shared historical experience and their sense of duty as responsible political commentators which compels them to point to Obama's shortcomings. This chapter's examination of O'Neal and Griffin contributes to the field of African American comedy scholarship - specifically the works of Haggins, Watkins, Rossing and Hunt - by analysing the unique tensions and negotiations within African American political stand-up under an African American presidency within a subversive and conservative framework. From Haggins' analysis of regressive and progressive tendencies within stand-up, Watkins' examinations of subversion within private humour, Rossings's elucidation of stand-up's potential for social change, and Hunt's assessment of *Def Comedy Jam*'s unique style of stand-up as a tool for resistance, all are extended to a political comic analysis of the Obama-era. With the exceptions of O'Neal and Griffin and their critiques, it is reasonable to assume that the cautiousness of this demographic of stand-up comedy during this period will testify to a conservative and affirmative, rather than a subversive and critical cultural stance, more noted for its chronicling of African American identity politics than for its political criticism. This chapter has shown that, within the distinctly adversative environment of the Obama era, the reputation of this field of political stand-up - a cultural form that has long been recognised for its scepticism of power and the powerful - has been diminished as a result of its toothlessness. The timidity of African American stand-up calls into question the ability of this cultural form to act effectively as an instrument of political critique.

In Dave Chappelle's prophetic stand-up comedy special *Killin' Them Softly* (2000), he discusses the possibility of the United States ever electing an African American president. Although he toys with the idea of running for the presidency himself, he is cautious about it, recognising the dangers of doing so in a country so rife with racial division. He jokes:

See, only reason I don't want to be the president is because I'm black, that make it too hot for me... There could be a black president one day but, you don't want to be the first one. I mean the second or third, that's fine, but that first nigga better watch out, I'm going to tell you that right now. [Laughter.] Too hot.¹³⁷

Chappelle's premonition of the difficulties of being the first black president goes beyond the predictions of racial antagonism. The fact that significant numbers of African Americans do not wish to publicly criticise the first African American President is in itself

¹³⁷ Chappelle, Dave, *Dave Chappelle: Killin' Them Softly*. United States: HBO, 2000, 44:50. TV.

an important comment on the reality of racial divisions in the United States. As Kennedy notes, African American enthusiasm for Obama in fact reflects the ongoing discrimination so many continue to face in the United States:

The extraordinary enthusiasm with which blacks rallied around Obama reflected, sadly enough, a profound neediness. Blacks are so used to being neglected, if not mistreated, that they often tend to exaggerate the virtues of authorities that treat them with even a modicum of respect.¹³⁸

With Kennedy's comments in mind, the need to recognise the reality of historic and ongoing discrimination in the United States is a prerequisite to any examination of cultural criticism (or lack thereof). In Fredrick C. Harris' analysis of Obama-era politics, he suggests that the undeniable hesitation in the black community to criticise the President must be balanced against the powerful symbolism of having the first black president in the White House.¹³⁹ Perhaps the suspension of typical political comic criticism in African American stand-up comedy, as Harris suggests, is the cultural price that has to be paid.

¹³⁸ Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, p.104.

¹³⁹ Harris, "The Price of a Black President", p.1.

Chapter 3: Left-Wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama era



Figure 3: A capture of left-wing political stand-up comedian Bill Maher presenting his million-dollar donation to President Obama's 2012 re-election campaign during his stand-up comedy special *Crazy Stupid Politics* (2012)

As like, really left-wing progressives it was hard during the [2012 Presidential Election] to be on Twitter or on Facebook, because some right-wing person would say some terrible, racist thing, and you'd be like, 'Fuck that guy!' like, 'Don't say racist things about Barack Obama.' And then all your left-wing followers would be like, 'Oh, even though Barack Obama is in the pocket of Wall Street and he supports drone strikes?' And you're like, 'No, no, I don't like that!' [Mild Laughter.] And then you'd tweet something about like, 'Hey, we've got to stop these illegal drone strikes and assassinations', and then there'd be like [a response saying], 'Oh, cause Obama's black?!' Aaah, I don't know what to do! [Laughter.]

- Jamie Kilstein¹

¹ Kilstein, Jamie, "White People Are Going to Be Fine", *What Alive People Do*. U.S.A: Stand Up! Records, 2013. CD.

3.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the subversive and conservative nature of left-wing political stand-up comedy in the Obama era. It is guided by the following secondary research question: “To what extent can Obama-era left-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?” In Alison Dagnes’ challenging of an alleged ideological left-wing bias in political comedy often cited by conservatives, she examines the task facing left-wing political stand-up comedians in critiquing Obama, and notes how this contrasts with the relatively uncomplicated task of satirising George W. Bush.² The historic, social, cultural and racial associations of the Obama presidency posed numerous difficulties for left-wing political comic communication. As *The Montreal Gazette*’s Rick Blue notes, his “apotheosis of the progressive narrative” as a young Democratic African American president ensured that these limitations were felt almost immediately by left-wing political comedians.³ Other commentaries reinforce this. For example, comedian Dana Carvey argues that left-wing stand-up comedians are afraid to criticise Obama in case their material is construed as racist.⁴ He comments that the lines of left-wing political comedy and satire have been redrawn, with the likes of right-wing comedian Dennis Miller’s work - examined in chapter four - replacing the comic edginess often associated with left-wing circles, and his previous work on *Saturday Night Live* being “the true edge” in comparison to a culture of left-wing political comic absenteeism under Obama.⁵ Greg Gutfeld put this dearth in Obama-focused left-wing political comic criticism down to partisan affiliation, stating that loyalties to the President and to the Democratic party makes it illogical for them to be critical

² Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, pp.49-50.

³ Blue, “We make fun of everyone except our President”, p.1.; The use of the term “progressive” in this chapter deserves clarification, as it has significant ramifications on how we view power relations between individual left-wing political stand-up comedians and the Obama presidency. Some analyses give credence to it developing into something of a synonym for “liberal” that has carried into Obama’s presidency, with an emphasis on individual rights and freedoms and other broad qualities associated within the American left. A noticeable example of this replacement in left-wing terminology can be found in Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s expressed dislike of the word liberal and preferred to describe herself a “modern progressive” during the 2007 CNN/YouTube presidential election debate. “Clinton: ‘I consider myself a modern progressive’”, CNN, July 23rd 2007, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/JKZcK>.; Crissie Brown of *Politics USA* argues for a similar replacement of “liberal” with “progressive” within pockets of the American left (particularly amongst politicians), but his semantic overview of the term “progressive” does find considerable differences between “progressive” and “liberal”, as well as in their individual historic contexts. Brown, Crissie, “What are ‘Liberals,’ What are ‘Progressives,’ and Why the Difference Matters”, *Politics USA*, June 15th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/UbBjG>.

⁴ Toto, Christian, “Dana Carvey: Comedians ‘Afraid to Make Fun’ of Obama Because They’ll be Called Racist”, *Breitbart*, November 25th 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/osD3c>.

⁵ Toto, “Dana Carvey”, p.1.

of him, and arguing that “asking a comedian to make fun of Obama is like asking a priest to mock Christ.”⁶ This sensitive dalliance of Obama’s racial and left-wing identification with a broad left affiliation and approval of his presidency finds some common ground with the previous examination of African American political stand-up, albeit one based along more ideological and partisan lines than on racial affiliation. *Saturday Night Live* writer Jim Downey recalls the increasing sense of duty within the show to avoid criticism of the President, to the point that “we just stopped doing anything which could even be misinterpreted as a criticism of Obama.”⁷ Downey’s observation of perceived and admitted timidities highlights a recurring theme in Obama-era political comic analyses, namely left-wing comics being accused of evading - or as Kyle Smith argues, “shielding” - Obama from criticism.⁸

Another element at play, characterised in Waisanen’s *An Alternative Sense of Humor*, is the concept of “instability”. He makes the point that comic discourses play on the exploitation of multiple meanings, which “may leave *too* much room for audiences to negotiate and stabilize these meanings in terms that not even the producers of the content would have wished from their performances.”⁹ The ever-present promise of racial misinterpretation that surrounds political comic material on Obama is enough to heighten the potential of failure onstage. Therefore, the promotion or absence of criticism may be as much rooted in theoretical and performative qualities as in a broad political and partisan loyalty. Exploring these issues allows for a consideration of left-wing political stand-up’s subversive and conservative tones in the Obama era and its associated ideological, partisan, performative and theoretical pressures. This chapter showcases three distinct examples of subversive and conservative left-wing political stand-up comedy - Jamie Kilstein, Lewis Black, and Bill Maher - and examines the multi-faceted tensions involved in their performances. Each

⁶ Sheppard, Noel, “Greg Gutfeld: ‘Asking a Comedian to Make Fun of Obama Is Like Asking a Priest to Mock Christ’”, *NewsBusters*, p.1. Web. <http://newsbusters.org/blogs/noel-sheppard/2012/04/16/greg-gutfeld-asking-comedian-make-fun-obama-asking-priest-mock-christ>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁷ Miller, James Andrew & Shales, Tom, “‘SNL’ Political Secrets Revealed: Hillary’s ‘Entitlement,’ the Sketch Obama Killed and the Show’s ‘Karl Rove’”, *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 20th 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/6wVlg>.

⁸ Smith, Kyle, “Why comedians and ‘SNL’ are shielding President Obama”, *New York Post*, August 24th 2014. Web. <https://archive.is/jVhdy>.

⁹ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.305.

embraces a left-wing ideology, so their respective contributions provide insight into the limitations and successes in performing political stand-up in this period.

In registering the major arguments and findings of this chapter, its contribution to the following scholarship on left-wing political stand-up comedy, and any additional texts referenced and/or applied to the arguments, are considered. Rebecca Krefting's *All Joking Aside*, and her concept of charged humour, is extended in an assessment of the limitations and strengths of critical left-wing stand-up under Obama.¹⁰ Alison Dagnes' *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar* deliberates over Obama's effect in stalling left-wing political comic critique due to his unique racial symbolism and the field's ideological association with him.¹¹ Her arguments regarding Obama's effect on left-wing political comedy are developed in this chapter's three cases studies. Another relevant text is David M. Jenkin's thesis, "Was It Something They Said? Stand-up Comedy and Progressive Social Change" (2015), an examination of stand-up as a vital part of modern American intellectual and social culture, and one heavily entwined in ongoing processes of progressive social change.¹² In Jenkin's analysis of Chris Rock, Sarah Silverman and Louis C.K., he argues for their distinctive ability to promote and also hinder social changes by stepping fluidly between the role of comic entertainer and public intellectual.¹³ All three case studies in this chapter build on his work by gauging the degree to which they can be interpreted to be promoting forms of social change from a left-wing comic platform.

Outside of this base of directly relevant scholarship, numerous, less immediately related texts are also applied. In the case study of Jamie Kilstein, his monologue on *Conan* is interpreted as a critique of the Obama Doctrine and aggrandised notions of Obama's foreign policy strategy, and analysed through an overview of journalistic accounts. An initial text used is Don Handelman and Bruce Kapferer's examination of joking frames in *Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach* (1972), in which they argue that comic effectiveness is dependent on the comedian's relationship with the cultural, political and social identifications of one's audience. This is extended to Kilstein's stand-up monologue on *Conan*, where it is proposed that he performs within their joking framework in order to

¹⁰ Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, p.13, p.7.

¹¹ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p18, p.49, p.136, p.186.

¹² Jenkins, David M., "Was It Something They Said? Stand-up Comedy and Progressive Social Change". *Graduate Theses and Dissertations, Scholars Commons*. University of South Florida. PhD. Available online via *Scholars Commons*. <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5710>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹³ Jenkins, "Was It Something They Said?", p180.

ingratiate himself with his audience as a left-wing comedian, and grant himself the comic license to criticise Obama. Bakhtin is also employed to argue that Kilstein's critique of the Obama Doctrine and the Afghan Surge can be interpreted as a form of carnivalesque inversion used by the comic to uncrown Obama and the Obama Doctrine as a concept. This case study also draws upon George E. C. Paton's *The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality* (1988) by interpreting Kilstein's subversive stand-up persona as one that steps between both setting-specific and category-routinised forms of joking frame. In doing so, he provides a unique political comic critique of the Obama Doctrine from a left-wing perspective.

The second case study of Lewis Black analyses his critiques of the Obama-era healthcare debate, gauging his comic responses prior to and after the enactment of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (herein the ACA). Don Waisanen's aforementioned analysis of comic limitations in political / comic interchanges is applied to Black's critique of the profit motive narrative in the American healthcare debate, particularly his concept of simplism, reflecting the potential limitations of political / comic crossover. In addition to this, Jill Quadagno and J. Brandon McKelvey's work *The Consumer-Directed Health Care Movement: From Social Equity to Free Market Competition* (2010) is useful in an interpretation of Black's work as an attempt to usurp social and political categorisations of healthcare as a commodity. Murray Edelman's text *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988) is employed to analyse Black's ethical critique of the profit motive. This is interpreted as an exemplification of Edelman's characterisation of artistic language as an antidote against the obfuscation of establishmentarian political language. In the second half of this case study, and with support from Gary Dorrien's *The Obama Question: The Progressive Perspective* (2012) and his analysis of left-wing disappointment over the insurance-guided nature of the ACA during the bill's negotiations, two other contributions emphasise Black's critique of the partisan exploitation of the term "Obamacare". The first comes from Christopher R. Darr's "A "Dialogue of the Deaf": Obama, his Congressional Critics, and Incivility in American Political Discourse" (2013), in which he contrasts the civil rhetorical strategies used by Obama and the Democratic Party with the uncivil rhetoric of the Republican Party during the ACA negotiations. The second is Edward C. Appel's "Where is the Democratic Narrative, FDR Style?" (2013), in which he argues that the modern-day Democratic Party lacks a substantial left-wing counter-narrative of the Rooseveltian tradition which is able to challenge the modern-day Republican Party. This

interpretation of Black's stand-up reinforces both Darr and Appel's work in the comedian's comparison of the ACA to the healthcare efforts of Richard Nixon, interpreted as a means of redefining the healthcare debate beyond the partisan lens of the Obama-era healthcare debate, and to promote continued left-wing campaigning for reform.

The third case study of Bill Maher offers a distinctly partisan reading of left-wing political stand-up. Grounding the analysis in a reading of Obama-era partisanship, it begins by introducing Maher through his lampooning of the Republican voting base, and his condemnation of their criticisms of President Obama that he argues are racist in character. Bergson's theory of laughter as a form of corrective is applied in Maher's treatment of racial intent surrounding Republican opposition to Obama that reinforces the disciplinary nature of his political comic material. Waisanen's concept of regulation is also used to examine the less constructive elements of Maher's stand-up in hindering debate. Another important text applied is Kenneth Burke's *Attitudes Towards History* (1984), in particular his dual explication of the poetic categories of a comic frame of acceptance and contrasting burlesque frame of rejection. This concept is applied to the instances of Maher's injudicious responses to Republican criticisms. It is succeeded by analysing Maher's critique of the profit motif in healthcare and other capitalist foundations within American institutions, but this quickly reverts back into the strong, partisan frame of most of his political comic material. In his dismissal of Republican concerns over the IRS scandal, Maher exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of measuring political stand-up comedy within a subversive and conservative analysis when delivered through a deeply-partisan focus. The overall research findings from the three case studies indicate that these comedians fluctuate between subversive and conservative degrees of criticism, dependent on their positioning towards, and affiliation with, President Obama, in accord with their respective political leanings and in the context of their live political comic material. Furthermore, a mixture of partisan, ideological, performative and theoretical considerations, as well as the potential of racial misinterpretation surrounding any comic material on Obama, are key principles that measure the subversive and conservative potential of each case study.

3.2. Left-Wing Romanticism, the License to Joke, and Criticisms of the Obama Doctrine in Jamie Kilstein’s Political Comic Monologue

Jamie Kilstein is one of the most notable left-wing political comics in the contemporary United States. His literary, radio and political contributions exemplify his affiliation with left-wing ideology, and are reflected across his three Obama-era stand-up comedy albums, *Zombie Jesus* (2009), *Libel, Slander & Sedition* (2011), and *What Alive People Do* (2013). In addition to this, his independent radio show, *Citizen Radio*, provides weekly commentaries on American political culture, and his literary contribution - co-written with his partner Allison Kilkenny - *Newsfail* (2014), a “comedic-memoir-slash-political-manifesto”, constitutes his strong resume as a political stand-up comedian. In this book, Kilstein condemns what he sees as an ideological hypocrisy in the way many left-wing pundits and socio-political figureheads have defended Obama’s policies in comparison to their treatment of Bush. They aim this critique in particular at *The Daily Show*, and its perceived decline in incisive political comic criticism under Obama, accusing it of being as “guilty of cheerleading some of Obama’s worst offenses as Fox ‘News’ was of rooting for [President Bush’s] never-ending wars.”¹⁴ Their perception that it has complied under Obama rather than critiqued provides a foundation to gauge elements of conservative and subversive reaction in his stand-up. As a variation of the traditional theatre/comedy club performance which the majority of this thesis analyses, the theoretical and performative tensions involved in a television monologue set are examined through Kilstein’s appearance on the late-night television talk show *Conan* on February 2nd 2011, which illustrates the subversive and conservative nature of his critique of Obama-era foreign policy.

3.2.1. The New Boyfriend: Joking Frames and Left-Wing Hazines

After O’Brien welcomes him to the stage, Kilstein opens with, “So, I like Barack Obama, I do”.¹⁵ What his introductory sentence conveys is his desire as a left-wing political comic to

¹⁴ Kilstein, Jamie & Kilkenny, Alison, *Newsfail: Climate Change, Feminism, Gun Control, and Other Fun Stuff We Talk About Because Nobody Else Will*. New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014, p.22. Print.

¹⁵ Kilstein’s monologue can be viewed at “Jamie Kilstein- Conan O’Brien Show talking War Torture Drones”, *Jamie Kilstein* (Youtube Channel), October 8th 2012, 0:20. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZGAqWpZBQU>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

reinforce his favourability towards Obama, even if he may fiercely disagree with a number of his administration's policies. The prefix, "I like Barack Obama", suggests an awareness of the tender political negotiation that, as an acerbic political comic on late-night television, is required. By softening the acerbity and critical bite of numerous parts of his monologue, such as his endorsement of Obama on a personal level, it can be interpreted that he provides a political concession to his audience to allow him to delve into more critical material. His opening compliment of Obama reinforces the conception of "joking frames" theorised by anthropologists Don Handelman and Bruce Kapferer, who propose that combined societal and cultural pressures guide the comic boundaries of socio-political interrogation through "the expressed agreement of the participants".¹⁶ The likelihood of left-wing political comics being misinterpreted in relation to Obama and/or being seen as out of sync with the liberal political accord which his presidency had come to define, is perhaps what drives this introduction. His opening declaration - that he likes Obama - can therefore be interpreted as a means of lessening this possible misinterpretation. In doing so, he can be construed to be ingratiating himself with the broad field of left-wing American affiliation, what Handelman and Kapferer define as a "category-routinized" joking frame that permits comic criticism through "common recognition", by reminding his audience that he is part of the group, giving him the "license to joke".¹⁷ Although category-routinized joking is invariably more conservative than its counterpart, setting-specific joking, Kilstein's monologue tests the boundaries of this joking frame.

He proceeds by introducing a core theme, the difficulty caused by left-wing, Democrat-affiliated Americans feeling that they have to refrain from criticising the President out of political and ideological loyalty, and the repercussions of this on core political issues. "So, I like Barack Obama, I do, but I don't like how a lot of Democrats don't want to criticise him."¹⁸ He qualifies this by discussing his incredulity at an Obama supporter - being interviewed in a network news segment - calling Obama the greatest President of all time. When asked by the network reporter to qualify his opinion, the man replies, "[Kilstein as supporter.] Because Barack Obama doesn't torture innocent people!" Kilstein's convergence of one of the darkest issues of the Bush administration with left-wing

¹⁶ Handelman, Don & Kapferer, Bruce, "Forms of Joking Activity: A Comparative Approach". *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 74, No. 3, June 1972, p.484. Available online via *JSTOR*. Web. https://www.jstor.org/stable/671531?seq=1#page_scan_tab_content. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷ Handelman & Kapferer, "Forms of Joking Activity", p.484.

¹⁸ "Jamie Kilstein", 0:20.

admiration of Obama, fuses into a tragicomic reflection on left-wing sentiment. Amid the uneasy audience laughter following this statement, he continues: “Right, cause I’m like, that’s *good*, but when did not torturing innocent people make you the best president the entire world has ever seen? I’m like, when did the bar get placed so low? [Mild Laughter.]”¹⁹ The inevitable conclusion, which Kilstein builds into the remainder of this piece, is that it was the fault of Obama’s predecessor: “And I think it’s cause our last president was so crazy that it’s sort of like America just got out of an abusive relationship. [Laughter & Applause.]” He illustrates this idea of a national, post-Bush imbalance by imitating two young women in discussion, treating Obama as “the new boyfriend” that one of them has started dating: “[Kilstein as Female Friend # 1.] Hey, how’s the new boyfriend?” [Kilstein as Female Friend # 2.] ‘Well he doesn’t waterboard me!’ [Kilstein as Female Friend # 1.] ‘Mmm, put a ring on that finger girlfriend!’ [Laughter & Applause.]”²⁰ The significance of this piece is not in how it critiques Bush in isolation, but in how his actions in office affected American citizens, particularly left-wing Americans, to feel placated under Obama and encourage uncritical, idealistic misapplications, an issue that raises questions of complicity as Kilstein continues.

3.2.2. “You Have to Criticise Obama”: Kilstein’s Critique of the Obama Doctrine

Kilstein’s illustration of a national political haziness in this romantic analogy, the political deficiency left-wing Americans felt under Bush succeeded by the olive branch of Obama’s left-wing rhetoric, sets the scene for his subsequent, more critical material. In his reflection on the danger of left-wing timidity, Kilstein - in a variation of O’Neal’s material on this issue - highlights the necessity of presenting reasonable criticism of the current administration, or facing the prospect of allowing exaggerated, right-wing co-ordinated narratives against Obama to dominate. As he argues, “the problem is if we don’t criticise him, it’s just the crazy people who do.”²¹ From his observation of left-wing caution, to the recognition of right-wing pressures on Obama, Kilstein begins to adopt a more instructive tone in his

¹⁹ “Jamie Kilstein”, 0:30.

²⁰ “Jamie Kilstein”, 1:09.

²¹ “Jamie Kilstein”, 1:44.

monologue. “You have to criticise Obama”, he repeats.²² In his subsequent critique of the President’s foreign policy, specifically the Afghan Surge and his administration’s considerable expansion of the drone programme, it is clear that, amidst the partisan loyalties many Democrats have to Obama, Kilstein wishes to emphasise the significant, negative consequences of remaining silent, and the utmost need to remain interrogative. One way he does this is by questioning the promoted distinction between Obama’s foreign policy strategy and that of Bush. A common narrative that began to emerge in this period of time - which Kilstein is interpreted to be critiquing - was the Obama administration’s propagation of the idea of a “smart power” diplomatic approach to foreign policy issues, a convergence of diplomatic, dialogue-based, “soft power” and a coercive, typically military-based “hard power” strategy, as defined by Joseph Nye.²³ The increasing use of Nye’s term “smart power” in the early months of Obama’s first term fuelled the emergence of the phrase “Obama Doctrine”, signalling the new administration’s awareness of the importance of reframing domestic and international perceptions of foreign affairs and counter-terrorist tactics.²⁴ In an early example chronicled by *The New York Times*’ Eric Etheridge, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the term “smart power” over a dozen times during her confirmation hearing a week before Obama took office.²⁵ Journalistic and academic analyses of the emerging administration’s smart power emphasis interpreted it as being guided by multilateralism, a rejection of an overtly-aggressive, exceptionalist attitude, and an emphasis on foreign aid over military power.²⁶ Furthermore, as Matt Spetalnick notes, the Obama administration’s unveiling of a national security doctrine on May 27th 2010 that promoted “multilateral diplomacy over military might” was seen as an important attempt to signal its departure from the Bush administration’s contentious legacy of “cowboy

²² “Jamie Kilstein”, 2:09.

²³ Nye Jr., Joseph S., “Get Smart”, *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/9T6vv>.

²⁴ For an overview of initial interpretations of an “Obama Doctrine”, see Hallams, Ellen, “From Crusader to Exemplar: Bush, Obama and the Reinvigoration of America’s Soft Power”, *European journal of American studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2011, Article 4. Web. <http://ejas.revues.org/9157>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁵ Etheridge, Eric, “How ‘Soft Power’ Got ‘Smart’”, *The New York Times*, January 14th 2009, p.1. <https://archive.is/uTOW0>.

²⁶ Holmes, Kim R. & Carafano, James Jay, “Defining the Obama Doctrine, Its Pitfalls, and How to Avoid Them”, *The Heritage Foundation*, September 1st 2010. Web. <https://archive.is/b58Rq>; Kitchen, Nicholas, “The Obama Doctrine- Détente or Decline?”. *European Political Science*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, March 2011, pp.27-35. Web. <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/eps/journal/v10/n1/full/eps201071a.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Good, Chris, “The Obama Doctrine - Multilateralism With Teeth?”, *The Atlantic*, December 10th 2009. Web. <https://archive.is/DONia>.

diplomacy”²⁷ Kilstein’s monologue was delivered in the backdrop to this period of hazy redefinition. As he continues, he takes aim at these overtly-generous notions of the administration’s markedly different approach:

You have to criticise Obama. He is sending forty-thousand more troops to Afghanistan. Forty-th- [Kilstein raises voice.] that is the opposite of none! [Kilstein chuckles.] That is the opposite of ending the war! That is George Bush, Genghis Khan, “My Nuts Are Bigger Than Your Nuts” nonsense, and it has to stop.²⁸

Kilstein, pausing with a soft, incredulous chuckle, questions the logic of escalating U.S military presence in Afghanistan in order to de-escalate the U.S military presence in Afghanistan. Most pertinently, his monologue fuses Obama’s foreign policy with the unpopular foreign policy actions of Bush, a legacy from which his administration hoped to distance itself. Far from the sanitized treatment that Obama received as the “new boyfriend” in his previous piece, Kilstein lambasts Obama’s Afghan Surge strategy as an identical continuation of Bush-era militarism, as well as possessing the viciousness of Genghis Khan. In doing so, he equates his concept of the *new boyfriend* (Obama) with the *same boyfriend* (Bush). This is further emphasised in Kilstein’s depiction of Obama’s continued efforts to find Osama Bin Laden as a distinctly Bush-era expression of political vengeance, the doctrine of the “My Nuts Are Bigger Than Yours” type.²⁹ As he continues, Kilstein humorously suggests that if Obama and Bin Laden wish to invest their respective citizens’ lives in quenching militaristic or religious bloodlust, they should resolve their differences in one-on-one combat:

If leaders have problems with each other, then instead of sending hundreds of thousands of poor kids to go shoot each other in the face, I say Obama and Bin Laden [should] just strap on a sword, jump on a horse, and get ready to duel at high noon. [Laughter, Cheers & Applause.]³⁰

Rather than encouraging swathes of underprivileged Americans to enlist in excursions overseas, Kilstein argues that these issues should be restricted to the political figures to settle by themselves through his solution of a Middle Ages joust between Obama and Bin Laden. The comic exaggeration of a jousting tournament is well received by *Conan*’s audience, with

²⁷ Spetalnick, Matt, “Obama security doctrine stresses diplomacy”, *Reuters*, May 27th 2010, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/1vhtL>.

²⁸ “Jamie Kilstein”, 2:09.

²⁹ “Jamie Kilstein”, 2:09.

³⁰ “Jamie Kilstein”, 2:23.

the punchline being heightened by Kilstein physically acting out the scenario by imitating the action of strapping a sword to his right side, bouncing onto a horse, and thrusting a lance. Indirectly, his equation of Obama-era and Bush-era foreign policy strategies is made even clearer when it is considered that this piece of his monologue was originally presented as a duel between Bush and Bin Laden in *Zombie Jesus* in 2009.³¹ In addition, he provides a unique proposal to curb Middle East insurgency by coalescing America's "greedy capitalism with our foreign policy" by shipping American corporate titans such as the fast food outlets *KFC* and *McDonalds* to Iraq and Afghanistan as part of a sophisticated U.S military strategy. "You could call it Operation Kill the Terrorists Slowly. [Laughter.] They'd be like, [Kilstein as first U.S military man.] 'Hey, how'd they finally get Bin Laden?'" [Kilstein as second U.S military man.] 'Type-two diabetes. [Laughter.]'"³² If Kilstein's feudal and fast-food strategies are clearly unrealistic, the set-ups to these jokes provide potent reminders of his anti-war, political comic credentials, and one performed within a period of gauged, national fatigue over U.S military involvement in the Middle East, particularly in Afghanistan.³³ In his opening proposition of feudal combat, he describes it as an alternative to sending hundreds of thousands of poor, young Americans and Muslims to "go shoot each other in the face" - a reminder of the devastation wrought in Iraq and Afghanistan - is sobering in its reflection on the fatal cost of these vaguely-justified, arbitrary military decisions.

3.2.3. Kilstein's Bakhtinian Uncrowning of Obama

This segment also provides space to interpret Kilstein's use of theatricality and exaggeration as a means of fusing comedy and anti-war protest. Reinforcement of this can be found in Cami Rowe's analysis of the use of political comic qualities in the anti-war protests of the social justice movement Code Pink. Relating to their Bush and Obama-era protests against foreign aggression and the expansion of the drone programme, she examines the unique ability of comedy in encouraging the authorities to behave with leniency when these protests were "cloaked in a comedic form".³⁴ This leniency can be applied to Kilstein's efforts in his

³¹ Kilstein, Jamie, "Confronted by the Army", *Zombie Jesus*, 0:00.

³² "Jamie Kilstein", 3:26.

³³ Wilson, Scott & Cohen, Jon, "Poll: Nearly two-thirds of Americans say Afghan war isn't worth fighting", *The Washington Post*, March 15th 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/BoYJK>.

³⁴ Rowe, Cami, *The Politics of Protest and US Foreign Policy: Performative construction of the War on Terror*. Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2013, p.124. Print.

own anti-war contribution, where by softening his political critique using a comic mode, he provides numerous moments for his audience to reflect seriously on the tragic consequences of Obama-era foreign policy. Furthermore, Code Pink's use of inversion in their protests can also be found in Kilstein's monologue. His portrayal of Obama and Bin Laden as feudal-era knights applies a similar inversion of established political power, his own variation of what Rowe argues is Code Pink's "destabilizations of hierarchy" in their War on Terror-focused, comedic-coded protests.³⁵ It invokes Bakhtin's ideas of carnival, particularly his treatment of the role of "clowns and fools" in carnival festivities and their mimicking of "serious rituals" such as tributes to "victors at tournaments...or the initiation of a knight."³⁶ Kilstein's jousting example can be interpreted as a Bakhtinian suspension of political assumptions, privileges and ranks, what the theorist argues is the "temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank" found in carnivalesque inversion.³⁷ These notions of inversion can be extended to Kilstein's comic imaginings and his "uncrowning" of Obama and his administration's overstated, smart-power foreign policy approach.³⁸ Kilstein then moves on to the ethical dilemmas of Obama's drone programme, appearing to be bewildered to his audience at the use of such a technology: "We are literally killing people with robots with guns. Oh good! It's not like I've ever seen that go terribly wrong before, except every science fiction movie ever made, ever! [Laughter & Applause.]"³⁹ For all of the exalted varnish of the smart power diplomacy of the Obama Doctrine, Kilstein reminds his audience of how these kinds of operations are likely to be construed by the populations caught in the crossfire, reducing the programme to the simple, nightmarish scenario of "robots with guns". In posing the question as to how such operations *may* be perceived abroad - framed by asking his audience how they would respond to cruise missiles and drone strikes on their residences - his material is defiant in its dismantling of an U.S-centric narrative.⁴⁰ Furthermore, by contrasting the American people's approval of the programme, Kilstein exposes a complicity amongst a particular ideological group in giving their approval to such an ethically dubious military programme, and perhaps most importantly for the Obama administration's controlling of political (and in this case, diplomatic) narratives, specifically the demographic of left-wing affiliated Americans. This is reinforced in a *Washington Post-ABC News* poll

³⁵ Rowe, *The Politics of Protest*, p.128.

³⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.5.

³⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.10.

³⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.197.

³⁹ "Jamie Kilstein", 4:56.

⁴⁰ "Jamie Kilstein", 4:47.

released the following year which showed that 83% of Americans approved of Obama's drone programme being used against terror suspects overseas.⁴¹ More pertinently, Democrats supported drone strikes on American citizens by a 58-33 margin, and liberals by a 55-35 margin.⁴² As *The Washington Post*'s Greg Sargent notes, "It's hard to imagine that Dems and liberals would approve of such policies in quite these numbers if they had been authored by George W. Bush."⁴³ As some political analysts have noted, approval amongst left-wing Americans for these counter-terrorist measures has proved an unusual political disconnect under Obama, one that, as Joan Walsh notes, goes beyond left-wing political and cultural silencing to outright endorsement. In an editorial written in February 2013, Walsh noted new research that found links between Obama's strongly-held personal amiability and approval amongst left-wing Americans and their respective approval for his administration's drone programme and other forms of expansive, questionable counter-terrorist measures. As Walsh argues, "Some of the very people who might be expected to raise objections to such moves are instead accepting them because they are made by Obama, and they like and trust him."⁴⁴ Kilstein's opening comic concession - that he likes Obama on a personal level - becomes more embroiled in degrees of political complicity when viewed alongside these examples of a trusting personal-legislative endorsement that Walsh underlines amongst the American left in regard to the drone programme.

His monologue can be seen to be urging left-wing Americans to provide vocal, meaningful criticism of Obama by questioning their left-wing support for continued, Bush-era aggressive policies. For all of the vaunted diplomacy of the Obama administration with respect to its foreign policy, Kilstein's critique of this, in part through his cartoonish, fiction-like "robots with guns" presentation, reminds his audience of the administration's limitations in this regard.⁴⁵ If the comic space is one that has been discussed previously to suspend typical ideas of responsibility and actuality in its performances, then Kilstein's network monologue is a prompt for the serious danger of treating non-comic, political spaces too trivially through left-wing, Obama-induced placation. In his analysis of Handelman and

⁴¹ Sargent, Greg, "Liberals, Dems approve of drone strikes on American citizens abroad", *The Washington Post*, February 8th 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/jm0tb>.

⁴² Sargent, "Liberals, Dems approve of drone strikes", p.1.

⁴³ Sargent, "Liberals, Dems approve of drone strikes", p.1.

⁴⁴ Walsh, Joan, "Targeted Killings: OK if Obama does it?", *Salon*, February 19th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/MzwMB>.

⁴⁵ "Jamie Kilstein", 4:56.

Kapferer's concept of joking frames, George E. C. Paton argues that "the truly radical comedian" is one who can move between the pairing of setting-specific and category-routinized joking frames, definably subversive and conservative frames of comic performance.⁴⁶ In his political comic monologue on *Conan*, and his rebuke of Obama-era smart power for its continuation of Bush-era foreign policy principles, Kilstein relies on numerous transitions between both joking frames. Within this theoretical reading, he tests the boundaries as to the degree of criticism he can communicate in regard to the President's inflated, liberal, diplomatic foreign policy credentials through a live performance on network television. In doing so, his critique within the sphere of a left-wing political stand-up comedian provides a bold example of criticism of Obama-era foreign policy.

3.3. Examining the Obama-era Healthcare Debate through the Political Stand-up of Lewis Black

Lewis Black's prominence as a popular left-wing political stand-up comedian, and his array of comic critiques on a number of Obama-era issues as a self-described American socialist, establishes his unique position as a left-wing comic under Obama. In an address presented at the National Press Club in Washington D.C in 2014, he reiterated his identification as an American socialist, an affiliation that he jokes puts him in a particularly toothless position: "I do say that I'm a socialist, and I *am* a socialist, and that is about as powerless a position as you can be in, in the United States".⁴⁷ Illustrating this ideological disconnect in his address, Black mocked right-wing Americans who characterised the President as a socialist, arguing that "to call Obama a socialist, you have got to be out of your goddamn mind."⁴⁸ Furthermore, he raises this sentiment to the level of a national psychology with respect to Obama's centrist positions, remarking in an interview with *The Huffington Post* that "he's as far away from socialism as the whole country is."⁴⁹ Black's own professed alienation is conducive to his political comic style, and provides him with a distinct sense of

⁴⁶ Paton, "The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality", p.212.

⁴⁷ "Lewis Black speaks at the National Press Club - April 14, 2014", *The National Press Club* (Youtube Channel), April 14th 2014, 6:40. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXANL8m6cfg>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁴⁸ "Lewis Black speaks", 6:57.

⁴⁹ Zaino, Nick, "Lewis Black on his new special, The Daily Show, and the Root of All Evil", *HuffPost TV*, *The Huffington Post*, September 4th 2009, p.1. Web. <http://www.aoltv.com/2009/09/04/lewis-black-on-his-new-special-the-daily-show-and-the-root-of/>. Last accessed on September 29th 2015.

disenfranchisement from Obama's policies in contrast to other left-wing political comedians. His muted celebration of his presidential victory, as chronicled in his first Obama-era stand-up comedy special, *Stark Raving Black* (2009), records how his elation as a socialist comedian over the first African American being elected conflicted with his long-established disappointment in the Democratic Party. He notes that Obama won on the Democratic ticket, "and that didn't seem to me to be an improvement over Republican", a view not unrelated to his deeply entrenched disillusionment with America's two-party political construct, which he equates to "a bowl of shit looking in the mirror at itself".⁵⁰ Like much of Black's material, this comment indicates his interest in the subtexts of complex political issues, rather than more accessible, partisan elements, adding a very tangible sense of flexibility to his comic critiques which allows him to look at more subtle issues of political power. Furthermore, as explored in this case study, as much as Black is inclined to joke about his political ineffectiveness as an American socialist, his treatment and critique of the national debate over healthcare under Obama's presidency, prior to and in the wake of the enactment of the ACA, provides him with an opportunity to address and expand left-wing notions and concepts on this topic.

3.3.1. Black's Critique of the Profit Motive

In the closing material of *Stark Raving Black*, Black alludes to the contentious debate over healthcare reform which led that year's debate on the domestic front, arguing that "no-one should have to choose between finances and their health".⁵¹ In the burgeoning debate fuelled by the signing of the ACA on March 23rd 2010, Black's promotion of continued healthcare reform is strongly advocated in his successive stand-up specials, *In God We Rust* (2012) and his 2013 special *Old Yeller: Live at the Borgata* (hereafter *Old Yeller*). Broader comic reactions to the ACA were largely fed by lampoons of conservative, anti-ACA activism, with satirical sketches and articles presented by *FunnyOrDie*, *The Second City* and *Upright Citizens Brigade* portraying the act as a positive legislative improvement to the existing

⁵⁰ Black, Lewis, *Stark Raving Black*, 6:41. Stark Raving Black Productions, USA, 2009. DVD.

⁵¹ Black, "Stark Raving Black", 1:16:27.

national healthcare structure.⁵² The lack of critical left-wing material on the ACA is an issue which Dagnes highlights in her interview with Peter Sagal, host of the comedy panel game show *Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!*, noting the difficulty of lampooning the ACA as a result of this dearth. He argues:

A lot of people say to me, 'You should make fun of Obama.' Granted. What should we make fun of? 'Well you should make fun of his healthcare policy because it is going to ruin healthcare in America.'...And, I say, okay...Tell me how/why healthcare is funny and I would be glad to make that joke. They always look at me and they say: 'But it is dangerous, it is dumb.' [Shakes head] Not funny."⁵³

Although some stand-ups such as Hari Kondabolu have voiced their dissatisfaction over a lack of discussion of a public option model being included in the healthcare negotiations for the ACA within his stand-up, the general comic reaction to healthcare was one of approval for the act's expansion of insurance coverage.⁵⁴ However, Sagal's comments emphasise the challenge of critiquing an act that is generally endorsed by the American left, and one which contains a distinct absence of critical comic material. In contrast, Black expressed his pessimism over Obama's healthcare negotiations in an interview conducted in September 2009: "What's the big change that's going to happen? We have shitty health care, now we're going to have shitty health care? What difference does it make?"⁵⁵ Furthermore, he - along with other socialists - registered his incredulity over the use of socialist terminology regarding the ACA, particularly by its opponents.⁵⁶ As Black argued, "They don't know what the word means. They have no clue what the word means."⁵⁷ In the backdrop to the ACA's enactment, his critique of the free market capitalist formula that has guided modern healthcare reform is presented in *In God We Rust* (2012). His initial reflections echo his

⁵² A full list of *FunnyOrDie*'s "Obamacare" satire can be viewed at *FunnyOrDie*. Web. http://www.funnyordie.com/topic/obamacare?cc=d_&ccid=z5f878.nwbk06. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Additional satirical examples can be found in "Horribly Injured Americans Against Obamacare: a COMMERCIAL PARODY by UCB Comedy", *UCB Comedy* (Youtube Channel), September 23rd 2009. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nK2jmFIK9u8>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; "The Partisans - VICTIMS of OBAMACARE", *The Second City* (Youtube Channel), July 2nd 2012. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UgK6ltQTfM>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁵³ Sagal's quote can be read in full in Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.49.

⁵⁴ Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, pp.102-3.

⁵⁵ Zaino, "Lewis Black on his new special, p.1

⁵⁶ Smerconish, Michael, "What Do Socialists Think of Obamacare?", *The Huffington Post*, October 6th 2013. Web. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-smerconish/what-do-socialists-think_b_4054666.html. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁵⁷ Zaino, "Lewis Black on his new special, p.1.

dissatisfaction over what he perceives as the largely unquestioned role of the profit motive in these discussions.

A root theme in *In God We Rust* is the issue of deficiency within mainstream American debate, in which radical or reformative coverage of socio-political issues such as abortion, gun control, and healthcare are side-lined. Black presents this as a diminution of the country's democratic health caused by a regressive cycle of non-debate, circling around the same stale arguments and strict boundaries. As he argues, "We don't decide much, do we? We really don't seem to. We really seem to be just happy arguing."⁵⁸ He extends this accusation of triviality to ongoing discussions over healthcare in the wake of the ACA's enactment. The importance of widening the debate beyond these boundaries is Black's central theme in this material, questioning the ingrained national assumption of a profit motive. He comments: "The reason we're at where we're at is cause way before I was born, the decision was made, that because we're a capitalist country, that, health should be seen as a profit-making institution. That's the way people saw it."⁵⁹ This assumption is one that he deems to be no longer compatible with the demands of contemporary American life, but which nevertheless continues as a core ideology. He continues by stating: "That's why it's so odd, that we're actually making an argument over something that was decided so long ago, and there are still people who defend that."⁶⁰ Black pauses momentarily, removing his glasses and wiping his forehead. The feigned uncertainty with which he performs this material accentuates his impending punch line and counter-argument regarding the profit motive. He notes:

Now I'm not sure that health is a, uh, profit institution. [Cheers & Applause.] I'm not sure. Because - because, it's what stands between you, [Black shouts.] *and fucking dropping dead!!* [Laughter.] It's not soy beans, is it? It's not fucking bottled water. It's not goddamn cell phone coverage...it's none of that. It's your health.⁶¹

Black punctures the assumption that healthcare reform has to function within the structure of a profit-making, insurance-guided framework. The cautious, litigious set-up of this joke reinforces the absurdity that he perceives in national considerations of the debate, with his full-throated, acerbic punch line acting as a stark reminder of the fatal consequences of not

⁵⁸ Black, Lewis, *In God We Rust*, 55:55. Stark Raving Black Productions, USA, 2012.

⁵⁹ Black, *In God We Rust*, 56:40.

⁶⁰ Black, *In God We Rust*, 57:13.

⁶¹ Black, *In God We Rust*, 57:22.

being able to afford healthcare insurance coverage. His critique of the profit motive can be seen as reflecting critical reactions to the Obama administration's caution in lobbying for more European-style universal coverage options in favour of one that focused on regulating and expanding the marketplace of insurance providers. Indeed, much of what makes discussion surrounding the ACA - both pre-enactment and post-enactment - worth examining is the expansion of alternative ideas to the healthcare debate, and how this ties into the compromised nature of the act's framework and its relationship with the left. Gary Dorrien notes that Obama's insurance-guided option was criticised by many on the left as an unnecessary compromise that underwhelmed the public appetite for substantial healthcare reform, planting a perception that the President had "settled too easily for a half loaf that he could win", much to the chagrin of many of Obama's left-wing base and certain congressional groups within his own party.⁶² However, Black's discussion of the historic capitalist foundations of the debate provides a critique that goes beyond the "timidly bold" political operation of the ACA.⁶³ If Black can be seen as reflecting this palpable disappointment many on the American left felt over the negotiations over the act's framework, exemplified in examples such as when Obama gave approval to Senate Democrats to eliminate the public option from the healthcare bill, his disappointment is nonetheless directed more towards presenting arguments of citizen and institution-based complicity than being overtly focused either on Obama or any other political official.⁶⁴ One possible limitation in Black's material that Waisanen categorises, in *An Alternative Sense of Humor*, is "simplism", where the immediate, audience-guided tensions of live comic performance can provide a powerful deterrent against more methodical, measured ways of acquiring and disseminating ideas.⁶⁵ Considering this, Black's punchline could be seen as diluting, rather than expanding, the actualities of the healthcare debate. However, this can be countered by arguing that his moral directive to see the healthcare debate through the lens of life and death is effective *because* of its simplicity, and it is this sense of the political possibility of rerouting and challenging orthodox narratives that characterises his take on

⁶² Dorrien, Gary, *The Obama Question: The Progressive Perspective*. Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012, p.119. Print.

⁶³ Dorrien, *The Obama Question*, pp.101-124.; Halpin, Helen. A. & Harbage, Peter, "The Origins and Demise of the Public Option". *Health Affairs*. Vol. 29, No. 6, June 2010, p.1121. Web. <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/29/6/1117>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁴ Miller, S.A., "Liberals irked by Obama's compromises", *The Washington Times*, December 17th 2009, p.1. Web. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/dec/17/left-out-liberals-frustrated-by-obamas-compromises/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁵ Waisanen, "An Alternative Sense of Humor", p.304.

restricted debate on issues such as healthcare. In Jill Quadagno and J. Brandon McKelvey's examination of the consumer-directed healthcare movement (CDHC), they demonstrate that the chief aim of the movement's insurance lobbying is to promote healthcare as a commodity just like everyday goods. They discuss the notion of political and social "frames" in propagating central organizing ideas that "define the issues, manage public impressions...and outline the boundaries of the debate."⁶⁶ Black's comical caution in the set-up to his joke satirises these narrow frames of commodity-focused discussion over profit-based healthcare before delivering an acerbic rebuttal and rejection of this system of commodification in an attempt to reframe the debate beyond the stilted, re-tread boundaries of a patient-consumer ideology.

Complementing Quadagno and McKelvey's examination, Black's critique is evocative of Murray Edelman's text *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988) in which he argues that a confluence of events, language, and media help construct a political spectacle that maintains establishment ideologies and perpetuates political, economic and social inequities. In Edelman's examination of political language as political reality, he underlines political language's "capacity to reflect ideology, mystify, and distort", a stratagem that can be seen in Black's critique and response to ongoing discussions surrounding American healthcare as a profit-led institution.⁶⁷ From this, Edelman argues that the critical element to political advantage is the creation of meaning that can both rationalise and challenge existing inequalities.⁶⁸ He comments: "In politics, moreover, the incentive to preserve privileges or to end inequalities is always crucial, offering fertile psychological ground for using language and action strategically, including slippery definitions of means, ends, costs, benefits, and rationality."⁶⁹ Edelman points to the "inventiveness" and idiosyncratic nature of artistic language in particular as a counter to this, what he argues is its position "as an antidote to political mystification" through its contrasting, diverse characteristics and freedom from conventional presuppositions that dominate political language.⁷⁰ Extending this to Black,

⁶⁶ Quadagno, Jill & McKelvey, J. Brandon, "The Consumer-Directed Health Care Movement: From Social Equity to Free Market Competition". Banaszak-Holl, Jane, Levitsky, Sandra & Zald, Mayer (eds.), *Social Movements and the Transformation of American Health Care*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York City, NY, 2010, p.7. Web. http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195388299.001.0001/acpr_of-9780195388299. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁷ Edelman, Murray, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1988, p.103, p.104. Print.

⁶⁸ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.104.

⁶⁹ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.109.

⁷⁰ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.112, p.113, p.126.

his fiery rebuttal of the profit motive can be seen as an example of Edelman's argument regarding art's deconstruction of establishmentarian political language through his derision of a profit-based ideology through its moral and ethical appeals. If Edelman argues that "the language that purges consciousness of the disturbing consequences of established institutions is defined and ordinarily accepted as objective and scientific" (in contrast to opposing language that is labelled "ideological and polemical"), then Black counters the accepted objectivity of this form of institutional language by challenging a continued focus on profit within healthcare and highlighting its inherent cruelties. Edelman notes that political language often succeeds in violating moral qualms by "denying the premises on which such actions are based", Black's political comic material counters this by defining the very existence of the profit motive as a form of moral violation and highlighting the sometimes fatal consequences inherent in the premises of such a healthcare structure.⁷¹ Within this context, if, as Dorrien argues, Obama came to view single-payer or public option models as politically impossible to bring to the roundtable of congressional discussion as President, then Black's political comic material assists in expanding the boundaries of political possibility within American cultural discussion, challenging the basic assumptions of a profit-guided healthcare foundation through his political comic examinations.⁷²

3.3.2. Keeping Your Eye on the Ball: Examining Black's Response to "Obamacare"

Black returns to the issue of healthcare reform and the ACA more directly in his succeeding stand-up special *Old Yeller* (2013). In this material, he critiques the use of the popular colloquialism "Obamacare" in defining the healthcare act, particularly when used pejoratively by opponents. Having been used more than 3,000 times in congressional speeches between July 2009 and June 2012, according to an analysis by the Sunlight Foundation, the use of "Obamacare" became more and more defined by partisan opposition than as a description of the realistic merits and failings of the act - what Ari Shapiro notes

⁷¹ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.115.

⁷² Dorrien, *The Obama Question*, p.116.; Madden, Mike, "Why Obama snubbed single-payer", *Salon*, March 12th 2010. Web. <https://archive.is/9WWIZ>.

had become the term's defined "shorthand for big bad government" in Republican rhetoric.⁷³ Christina Brown's analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post's* coverage of the debate from 2009-2010 found that mainstream media coverage focused more on the "political game" of Capitol Hill dramatics than on the actual contents of the proposed bill.⁷⁴ What's most troubling to Black however, is how the term "Obamacare" came to be used by supporters of the act, such as Democratic congressional representatives and President Obama himself, in an attempt to defuse the partisan toxicity of the term.⁷⁵ Black argues:

And it's amazing, because uh, they started calling it - the Republicans, to prove how stupid they are - started calling it Obamacare. And then the Democrats in response - to say, 'You may be stupid, we're fucking dumb.' [Laughter.] - *They* started calling it Obamacare. [Laughter.] Then the president, to show that he is the president of the Dumb and the Stupid, [Laughter.] he started calling it Obamacare. [Laughter.]⁷⁶

The partisan framing of the ACA as an Obama-centric, pejorative term by Republicans, and the subsequent complicity of the Democratic Party and the President in their usage of the politically-loaded term, supports analyses of the dearth of meaningful discussion in congressional debate. Christopher R. Darr concurs with this in his investigation of civility and incivility in the political discourse between Obama and his Republican opponents during the healthcare bill negotiations, arguing that the congressional debate over the act was largely defined as a contest between Obama's own civil, rhetoric and the uncivil rhetoric of his Republican opponents. However, he suggests that Obama may have weakened the substantiality of the ACA by drawing attention to civic notions of bipartisanship and compromise, thus "marginalizing important differences between the Democratic and Republican positions."⁷⁷ Similarly, Edward C. Appel notes the "above-the-fray bipartisanship" that became an early hallmark of Obama's presidency may have exposed his

⁷³ "'Obamacare': The word that defined the health care debate", *Cable News Network (CNN)*, June 25th 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/uOazR>.; Shapiro, Ari, "'Obamacare' Sounds Different When Supporters Say It", *National Public Radio*, March 31st 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/WwO0B>.

⁷⁴ Brown, Christina, "Media Framing of the 2009-2010 United States Health Care Reform Debate: A Content Analysis of U.S Newspaper Coverage". *Media@LSE MSc Dissertation Series*, The London School of Economics and Political Science, No. 91, 2012, p.32. Web. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/mediaWorkingPapers/MScDissertationSeries2012/91.pdf>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁷⁵ Nelson, Steven, "Democratic Rep. John Conyers wants to reclaim 'ObamaCare,' make it a compliment", *Daily Caller*, June 8th 2011. Web. <https://archive.is/r7opL>.; Jackson, David, "Obama embraces the term 'Obamacare'", *USA Today*, August 9th 2012. Web. <https://archive.is/iqIfa>.

⁷⁶ Black, Lewis, *Old Yeller*, 19:25. U.S.A: Stark Raving Black Productions, 2013. DVD.

⁷⁷ Darr, Christopher R., "A 'Dialogue of the Deaf': Obama, his Congressional Critics, and Incivility in American Political Discourse". Rountree, *Venomous Speech*, Vol. 1, p.33.

administration's inability to project a successful "Democratic Narrative" in the face of Republican mantras.⁷⁸ His critique of Obama echoes Black's declaration of partisan complicity, what he argues is a "dumb and stupid" reductionism over an important issue, and which was allowing the promotion of the ACA to become tainted by mulish, partisan language. As Black argued in an interview published in October 2013, the trivial nature of the partisan attacks against the ACA was side-lining the importance of the issue itself: "It's health care. Do we want to deal with the problem we have, which is the rising cost of health care, or don't we?"⁷⁹ In Black's critique in *Old Yeller*, he maintains that the Democratic response uncloaked a severe deficiency in tactics by allowing the debate and promotions of the ACA to be rooted within the noxiousness of Republican rhetoric. However, the second half of his critique expands into a cautiously optimistic attempt to re-route the debate over the ACA into one that promotes continued left-wing mobilisation towards healthcare reform:

It is not Obamacare, it is the not the "Care and Feeding of Obama". [Laughter.] It's healthcare. And when you call it Obamacare you take your eye off the ball. Okay? For those of you think it was his idea, you know, he's not that smart. [Laughter.] Okay? The basis of this healthcare plan came from Richard "The Fuck" Nixon. [Mild Laughter.] That's right. So call it Nixonacare. [Laughter.]⁸⁰

Black mocks the concept of Obama being the sole benefactor of the ACA's mechanisms, reminding his audience of the importance of recognising the more important issue of expanding and improving healthcare coverage. Calling the act "Obamacare", according to Black, is taking "your eye off the ball", and allowing the issue to become tainted by partisan-targeted superficialities rather than guided by a wish to improve American healthcare, with his initial use of "Okay?" emphasising this.⁸¹ His critique of Obama as being "not that smart", in terms of the creation of the ACA's framework, raises an important issue for American left-wing activism, namely the need for mobilised, united effort, regardless of who is in the White House, to ensure legislative milestones. Black's suggestion - that rather than calling the ACA "Obamacare", it should be called "Nixonacare" - skilfully dilutes the partisan element within the healthcare debate by reminding his audience that the foundation of the ACA was first laid out in legislation proposed by President Richard Nixon. Certainly,

⁷⁸ Appel, Edward C., "Where is the Democratic Narrative, FDR Style?". Rountree, *Venomous Speech*, Vol. 1, p.93.

⁷⁹ Gilloly, Jon, "Lewis Black to address politics at Cobb show", *The Mariette Daily Journal*, October 17th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/D8AJU>.

⁸⁰ Black, *Old Yeller*, 19:53.

⁸¹ Black, *Old Yeller*, 19:53.

as Michael Meyer notes, Nixon's attempts at reform "came closer than any president until Barack Obama to enacting universal health care", arguments that reinforce Black's critique.⁸² Samantha Olson similarly notes that "Compared to Democratic President Barack Obama, Nixon went far beyond the reaches of a radical liberal" in his original healthcare proposal in 1971, going beyond the ACA's framework in terms of the bills' capping of insurance premiums and a requirement for employers to provide basic health insurance for all employees.⁸³ In fact, the irony of Nixon and Obama's healthcare comparisons in regards to the ACA - an act plagued by right-wing, anti-socialist rhetoric - is the recognition that Obama's efforts were in many ways to the right in political ideology of Nixon's own attempts to reform American healthcare forty years earlier. By making this comparison, Black invokes the prisms of political opportunity for *any* president or influential political leader who is at least in part guided by public pressure and constant left-wing activism, something he refers to by reminding his audience not to take their "eye off the ball".⁸⁴ To return briefly again to Darr's analysis, he likens the divergent political perspectives of Obama's and his Republican opponent's respectively civil and uncivil practises as essentially nullifying meaningful political debate, which he likens to Pierre Bayard's "dialogue of the deaf".⁸⁵ Likewise, it can be interpreted that what fuels Black's numerous outbursts and flurries of theatrical anger is his position as a socialist amidst piecemeal, constrained debate over degrees of partisan, profit-based and capitalist deliberation, rather than the discussion of substantial or radical alternatives. However, if Mike Madden argues that a great degree of left-wing reaction to the ACA was one of reluctant acceptance - a "best anyone can hope for at this point" sentiment - then Black's political comic critiques recognise the need to expand the debate so that greater steps can be taken by future administrations through left-wing mobilisation.⁸⁶

In examining Black's subversive and conservative political comic qualities, despite his pessimism with respect to the national character embodied in his stand-up, there is much to

⁸² Meyer, Michael, "Nixon and the PPACA". *Annals of Health Law: The Health Policy and Law Review of Loyola University Chicago School of Law*. The Beazley Institute for Health Law and Policy: Chicago, IL, Vol. 22, Issue 1, Fall 2012, p.33, p.38. Web. <http://www.luc.edu/media/lucedu/law/centers/healthlaw/pdfs/advancedirective/pdfs/issue9/meyer.pdf>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁸³ Olson, Samantha, "A Historical Perspective On Health Care: How Does Obamacare Measure Up To Former President Richard Nixon's Health Plan", *Medical Daily*, July 13th 2015, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/Y8iLp>.

⁸⁴ Black, *Old Yeller*, 19:53.

⁸⁵ Darr, "A 'Dialogue of the Deaf'", p.33.

⁸⁶ Madden, "Why Obama snubbed single-payer", p.1.

consider in the wake of self-described “democratic socialist” Senator Bernie Sanders’ remarkable success as a Democratic party presidential candidate in the 2016 presidential election. Sanders’ success has undeniably challenged Black’s descriptions of American socialism as an eccentric, fringe ideology, with his advocacy of tighter regulation over financial institutions and promotion of universal healthcare finding impressive popularity with wide sections of the electorate.⁸⁷ His success led to Black offering his endorsement of the candidate in a June 2015 interview. He comments that “I’m mostly excited that [Sanders is] just stating stuff that needs to be reiterated that the [Democrats], basically, don’t reiterate. And it’s in terms of financial inequality.”⁸⁸ Furthermore, it can be interpreted that Sanders’ campaign found particular favour *because* of the cultural contributions produced by Black, among others, and his long-term promotion of a left-wing agenda. Sanders’ success indicates a political development in the final years of Obama’s presidency that demonstrates that Black’s incisive critiques may well have helped aid the normalisation and popularity of these ideas. In remarks that are particularly pertinent to Black’s more cynical comic persona, Edelman concludes that the role of art in challenging political language can be found in its use of pessimism. He argues: “Pessimism in art is a component of its humanizing power; it offers a liberating contrast to the rosy promises with which political and commercial pitchmen assault the public.”⁸⁹ Black, as a consummate example of political comic pessimism, complements Edelman’s reading of the contrasting power of comic expression as one that challenges “the mystifications of politics.”⁹⁰ His critiques of the American healthcare debate speak to malleable notions of redefinition and expansion within it, using his political comic material to extend the debate beyond the chokehold of insurance-guided considerations, or the partisan-framed discourse over the ACA into one that takes a more historic, long-term vision of American left-wing campaigning for continued reform.

⁸⁷ Seitz-Wald, Alex, “Bernie Sanders explains democratic socialism”, *MSNBC*, November 19th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/MP6mo>.

⁸⁸ Suebsaeng, Asawin, “Lewis Black Endorses Bernie Sanders, Tells Bill Cosby to F Themselves”, *The Daily Beast*, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/K1JWg>.

⁸⁹ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.127.

⁹⁰ Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, p.128.

3.4. “President Blackenstein” and the Health of Political Partisanship in Bill Maher’s *Live from D.C*

Maher’s political comic material, both within his HBO political television show *Real Time with Bill Maher* and his stand-up comedy specials, is imbued with a flagrantly partisan ethos against American conservatism, what *Politico*’s Lucy McCalmont defines as a cultivated, “no-apologies liberal commentary” established in his strong critiques of the Republican Party.⁹¹ Maher’s status as an affluent political comic and television host has provided numerous opportunities for him to declare his relationship with the Democratic Party, and more specifically, President Obama. His support of Obama’s policies in office led Maher to pledge a donation of one million dollars to his re-election campaign’s official independent-expenditure only committee (commonly referred to as a Super PAC), *Priorities USA Action*, during the recording of his stand-up special *Crazy Stupid Politics* on February 23rd 2012, making him one of its largest single donors.⁹² His well-established affiliation with the Democratic Party was noticeably criticised by fellow television host and stand-up comedian Craig Ferguson. During a 2013 interview on *The Late Late Show*, Ferguson argued that Maher’s political stand-up comedy provided a break from his strong political associations, allowing the comedian to “get a sense of autonomy” from the “Borg that controls you...in your case the Democratic Party”, a consideration that Maher dismissed as inaccurate.⁹³ Certainly in comparison to Kilstein and Black, Maher reflects a broader left-wing, more partisan-fuelled comic perspective under Obama in his stand-up special *Live from D.C* (2014), HBO’s most watched comedy special in five years when it debuted on September 12th 2014.⁹⁴ This case study examines how Maher can be gauged through the distinctly-partisan lens of his political comic critiques in *Live from D.C*, and how this material functions within a subversive and conservative framework.

⁹¹ McAlmont, Lucy, “Maher takes D.C., skewers GOP”, *Politico*, September 13th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/fXUZe>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁹² Maher, Bill, *Crazy Stupid Politics - Live from Silicon Valley*. U.S.A: Yahoo, 2012, 1:01:10. Video.; Kahn, Carrie, “Bill Maher’s Obama SuperPAC Donation Causing Stir”, *NPR*, March 28th 2012, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/vKUVd>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁹³ Kirell, Andrew, “CBS Late Night Host Taunts Bill Maher: The Democratic Party ‘Controls’ You”, *Mediaite*, June 5th 2013, 0:30, Web. <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/cbs-late-night-host-taunts-bill-maher-the-democratic-party-controls-you/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017. Archive.is version: <https://archive.is/oQz2c>.

⁹⁴ See Kenneally, Tim, “Bill Maher Scores Most-Watched HBO Comedy Special Since Robin Williams Show in 2009”, *The Wrap*, September 15th 2014. Web. <https://archive.is/IhtjA>.

If elements of chapter two scrutinised the notion of Obama's presidency heralding in a "post-racial" ethos, there was a similar expectation that it would initiate an era of "post-partisanship", and create a more unified polity in Washington D.C decision-making circles between Democrats and Republicans. However these expectations were quickly dashed as he settled into office.⁹⁵ The dream of congressional harmony quickly became defined by party-affiliated obstructionism, but in a broader sense, American values under Obama were also becoming even more defined along partisan lines. As Gerald F. Sieb argues in the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, if "Washington remains a deeply divided place, there is good reason: The nation beyond the people's representatives remains just as deeply divided."⁹⁶ These partisan divisions in Obama's first term were accompanied by a growing chasm between both factions of traditional voter base, with polling during his presidency discovering "the most extreme partisan reaction to government in the past 25 years".⁹⁷ These findings were subsequently reflected well into Obama's second term in office.⁹⁸ Importantly, the partisan divide has given rise to a significant no-man's-land of non-communication between political party and voters from both sides. This has allowed both Democrats and Republicans to propagate exaggerated narratives about each other rather than more factually-based representations, "apparent differences in factual beliefs" that one particular research paper concluded to be "more illusory than real."⁹⁹ If a defining quality of Obama-era politics has been a diminution in congressional bipartisanship and a significant increase in the partisan divide, then analysing the conservative and subversive elements of Maher's political comic approach, and the role of party affiliation and partisanship in shaping the critical function of cultural forms such as American political stand-up, is key to gauging this chapter's secondary research question.

⁹⁵ "Bipartisanship didn't last long in Obama's first 100 days", *CNN*, April 27th 2009. Web. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/04/27/congress.100.days/index.html?iref=24hours>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; See Feldman, Linda, "Was Obama's promise of a post-partisan era ever possible?", *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 8th 2009. Web. <https://archive.is/tdeON>.

⁹⁶ Sieb, Gerald F., "Election Sharpens the Partisan Divide", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 11th 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/0hF6D>.

⁹⁷ "Section 1: Understanding the Partisan Divide Over American Values", "Partisan Polarization Surges in Obama, Bush Years", *Pew Research Center*, June 4th 2012, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/YWh1A>.

⁹⁸ Calmes, Jackie & Thee-Brennan, Megan, "Electorate Reverts to a Partisan Divide as Obama's Support Narrows", *The New York Times*, November 6th 2012. Web. <https://archive.is/FZ8yn>.; Cillizza, Chris, "President Obama promised to end our partisan divide. It hasn't worked." *The Washington Post*, April 1st 2015, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/NiLDe>.

⁹⁹ Bullock, John G., Gerber, Alan S., Hill, Seth J., Huber, Gregory A., "Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics". *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 10, Issue 4, 2015, p.519. Available online via *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, Working Paper No. 19080. Web. <http://nber.org/papers/w19080>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

3.4.1. Exploring Bergsonian Correction in Maher's Stand-up

The partisan divide in America's political culture is a fundamental component of *Live from D.C.*, with Maher professedly working from a political comic construct of major differentiation between the two parties. In his initial material, Maher comments on the differences between the Democratic Party's traditional voting base and that of the Republicans. Aligning women, minorities and young Americans with the traditional voting affiliation of the Democrats, Maher jokes that the Republicans have a less broad coalition, largely consisting of the elderly: "Conservatives have, uh - [Laughter.] People who make sighing noises when they get up, that's who they have who - [Laughter.] People who buy gold from Glenn Beck. The Rascal Scooter crowd [popular manufacturer of elderly mobility scooters]. [Laughter.]"¹⁰⁰ His stereotypical characterisation of the Republican base becomes even more acerbically pronounced later in *Live from D.C.*, defining them as "a crazy patchwork of Jesus Freaks, and Gun Nuts...and the Super-Rich."¹⁰¹ It is this no-holds barred partisan absolutism that makes Maher's political comic persona compelling, but also problematic, in gauging left-wing political stand-up comedy as a form of critical analysis. In his critique of Republican animosity towards Obama, he argues that their opposition to him and his administration is undeniably racist in character. In his initial incursion into this territory, he typifies Republican depictions of Obama as virtually monstrous, coining the term, "President Blackenstein" in his mirroring of Republican exaggerations.¹⁰² In a later segment, he states what he believes drives opposition against Obama in more detail:

Now, what is making right-wingers crazy these days is that, not only did America elect a black president, it went ahead and re-elected a black president. [Laughter & Applause.] This is my little pet theory, about why they're crazy. I mean the first time they didn't like it, but they were like, [Maher imitates an exaggerated, southern drawl.] 'Well, everybody experiments.' [Laughter.] [Maher chuckles.] Now they're like, [Maher adopts same southern moniker.] 'Oh shit, what if that, 'Once you go black' thing is true? [Laughter & Applause.] What if it turns out the coloureds is good at presidentin'? [Laughter.] And I think the coloureds is good at presidentin'! [Maher laughs.] [Laughter.] I do.¹⁰³

Although Eddie Griffin adopted a similar provincial moniker as a means of satirising left-wing American exaggerations over the nature of Obama-era race relations, Maher's adoption

¹⁰⁰ Maher, Bill, *Live from D.C.*, 9:15. U.S.A: HBO, 2014. TV Movie.

¹⁰¹ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 18:10.

¹⁰² Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 10:52.

¹⁰³ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 11:50.

of a provincial accent is far more partisan-based in its lampooning of right-wing Americans. Perceptions of a racist motive became a defining trademark of anti-Obama opposition, particularly when promoted by Republicans, shaping what Perry Bacon Jr. argues is “virtually an article of faith among liberals and sharply rejected by conservatives.”¹⁰⁴ In a sympathetic analysis of the American conservative base, Gerard Alexander argues that many Obama-era accusations are a “vastly oversimplified” end result of Republican political strategies in previous decades, explaining the continued popularity of “the old conservatism-as-racism story” in the contemporary United States.¹⁰⁵ Although there is evidence to suggest that an ideological, rather than racial, disagreement guides much of right-wing opposition to Obama, the relevance of this issue is how this popular perception is deployed within Maher’s stand-up.¹⁰⁶ As he moves through his material in *Live from D.C.*, he briefly returns to the race question in his sardonic imitation of Republican bemusement over Obama’s re-election in 2012. “[Maher as a Republican.] How could we have lost twice to [African American stand-up comedian] Cedric the Entertainer?”¹⁰⁷ His final piece on right-wing racial animus towards the President is decidedly more acerbic in its condemnation:

I think when they say he’s the most radical president we’ve ever had, what they mean is, he’s black. [Maher laughs.] [Laughter.] Okay? [Applause.] This is the word that sticks in their throat, they are *dying* to say it every minute...But they can’t say that.¹⁰⁸

The question of race is certainly one of the most important factors in comic caution around President Obama, and is appropriated by Maher as a vehicle against the Republican Party and right-wing America. However, his assessment of right-wing critiques as inherently racist raises questions as to how political stand-up comedy can encourage radical, divisive notions of a political Other, and actually hinder more pragmatic, evidence-based deliberations. His assertions of racism as the primary Republican drive against Obama places right-wing Americans in an extremely toxic - even impossible position - to critique

¹⁰⁴ Jr., Perry Bacon, “How much is race driving opposition to Obama?”, *The Grio*, April 9th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://thegrio.com/2014/04/09/is-race-the-story-of-barack-obamas-presidency/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Alexander, Gerard, “Conservatism does not equal racism. So why do so many liberals assume it does?”, *The Washington Post*, September 12th 2010, p.1, p.2. Web. <http://archive.is/6Wf40>.

¹⁰⁶ Beinart, Peter, “Reminder: Not All Republican Opposition to Obama Is Racist”, *The Atlantic*, May 2th 2014. Web. <https://archive.is/nBUhG>.; Greenblatt, Alan, “Race Alone Doesn’t Explain Hatred Of Obama, But It’s Part Of The Mix”, *National Public Radio*, May 13th 2014. Web. <https://archive.is/zO71E>.

¹⁰⁷ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 16:00.

¹⁰⁸ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 23:07.

the policies and legislative decisions of the Obama administration without being accused of a racial intent. Furthermore, Maher's material can be interpreted to be employing a considerable number of Bergsonian elements within it. As Bergson argues, "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed."¹⁰⁹ What makes this racial material on Obama significant is the way Maher uses it as an instrument against right-wing criticism of the President, and in his deployment of Bergsonian qualities for the purpose of correcting adversarial behaviour through provocative political comic prognoses, posing considerations for treating his stand-up within a subversive and conservative framework.

3.4.2. Political Comic Limitations through a Partisan Lens

In examining his conclusions on the Republican base, Maher's critique of Republican opposition to Obama may seem inequitable, but it is nevertheless effective in highlighting a dichotomy of racist and anti-racist positioning, illustrating what Waisanen notes as the problematic use of comic distortion to position opponents "beyond reasonable ends" in political/comic exchanges.¹¹⁰ If Maher's broad critique of the American right can be regarded as unfair, it nevertheless allows it to be gauged further within a Bergsonian lens, and what Bergson argued was the often injudicious nature of laughter's social corrective function which doesn't "always hit the mark or is invariably inspired by sentiments of kindness or even of justice."¹¹¹ Another limitation that speaks to this tension between political comic presentation and evidence-based practicality is explored by Waisanen in his examination of the comic function of regulation. Rather than promoting incisive, critical interrogation, he suggests that "the very vividness of jokes may prevent voices from entering public discussion, be used to trivialize rather than debate an issue, or absolve communicators from the need to present evidence for their claims."¹¹² Accordingly, Maher's material - centred on the contentious and alienating stigma of racism - provides very little space for debate for right-wing, Republican-affiliated replies, what Waisanen argues is the ability of

¹⁰⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.197.

¹¹⁰ Waisanen, "An Alternative Sense of Humor", p.309.

¹¹¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.197.

¹¹² Waisanen, "An Alternative Sense of Humor", p.302.

comic presentation to regulate and forestall “necessary rebuttals.”¹¹³ From this, the employment of an anti-racist comic corrective strategy that Maher introduces can be argued to hinder, rather than expand, meaningful political debate.

Furthermore, his imitations of Republicans have parallels with the comic theory of Kenneth Burke, particularly his categorising of rhetorical and narration frames and the psychology of acceptance and rejection of social systems through literary genres such as tragedy, satire and comedy. Far from adopting what Burke conceived as the diplomatic negotiations of a “comic frame of acceptance”, a frame defined as neither “wholly euphemistic, nor wholly debunking” in its presentation, Maher’s imitations of the Republican platform are more akin to Burke’s burlesque frame of rejection, using exaggerated, “heartless” imitation in order to reject its opponent.¹¹⁴ His burlesque exaggerations of Republicanism are undoubtedly used in order “to be able to ‘discount’ what it says”, opting for a strategy of burlesque rejection rather than comic identification.¹¹⁵ The burlesque framing in Maher’s critique of his partisan opponents, and the mode of comic exaggeration in such framing, is well-received by his audience, but as Burke notes in his own definition of the burlesque, this frame of rejection is not “well-rounded” as a mode of critique or interrogation, characterising it as “partisan” in its “sense of incompleteness.”¹¹⁶ In contrast to Burke’s conception of the comic frame’s sense of self-analysis and empathy, what he defined as its sense of “maximum consciousness”, the incompleteness of Maher’s burlesque rejection drives much of his critique of the Republican platform.¹¹⁷ This raises questions as to the possibility of impartial treatment of one’s opponents within such a strongly-guided partisan frame, and one especially driven primarily through comic performance. As C. Wesley Buerke states in his 2011 analysis of *The Daily Show*’s use of Burkean comic and rejection frames in presentations of same sex rights issues, the deployment of a more accepting frame (comic) or dismissive frame (burlesque) depended on whether the opponent in question was deemed “capable of an intelligent, productive engagement.”¹¹⁸ If not, “rejection occurs.”¹¹⁹ In

¹¹³ Waisanen, “An Alternative Sense of Humor”, p.302.

¹¹⁴ Burke, Kenneth, *Attitudes Towards History*. Berkeley, CA & London: University of California Press, 1984, p.166, p.55. Print.

¹¹⁵ Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, p.55.

¹¹⁶ Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, p.55.

¹¹⁷ Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, p.171.

¹¹⁸ Buerkle, C. Wesley, “Gaywatch: A Burkean Frame Analysis of The Daily Show’s Treatment of Queer Topics”. Goodnow, Trischa, (ed.) *The Daily Show and Rhetoric: Arguments, Issues and Strategies*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011, p.200. Print.

¹¹⁹ Buerkle, “Gaywatch”, p.200.

contrast, Maher's satirising of Republicans is strongly burlesque in its absence of comic concession or negotiation to his opponents, and displays an absolutism that diminishes the subversive aspects of his political comic persona through his partisan-guided framing of Obama-era political culture.

It would be unfair to present Maher as completely non-interrogative however. There are occasions in *Live from D.C* in which he criticises Obama and the Democratic Party over their perceived compromise over the ACA. In response to Republican-led, socialist-fuelled characterisations of the act, Maher argues that "the problem with Obamacare is not too much socialism, it's still too much capitalism", echoing Black's own critiques. This leads into an evaluation of the profit motive in American institutions such as healthcare, where he argues that certain aspects of society, "like people living and dying", should be exempted from the capitalist market, as well as American prison and educational systems.¹²⁰ These hints of a more critical comic voice, however, quickly retreat to the comfort of a partisan framing. In subsequent material, the difficulties of Maher's political party-based comic critique, where one half of the American political party system is largely exempted and the other half is fiercely denigrated, emphasises the darker consequences of partisan affiliation. In one example from *Live from D.C*, Maher dismisses concerns over the revelation in 2013 that the Internal Revenue Service (herein the IRS) had selected predominantly right-wing, conservative political groups applying for tax-exempt status for intensive scrutiny. Although a section of the IRS' targeting focused on identifiably left-wing groups as well as conservative ones, a resulting letter published by Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration, J. Russell George, found that out of 298 political groups identified by the IRS for closer inspection, only six of these had the words 'progress' or 'progressive' in their names.¹²¹ This gave credibility to Republican criticisms of concerted partisan-based targeting, where approximately 30% of defined left-wing political groups audited were found to have been placed under additional inspection, in contrast to 100% of defined right-wing groups.¹²² Maher's treatment of this taxonomic bias provides further proof of the degree of partisan colouring in his political comic material, arguing that the scandal was akin to the hysterics of a "Mexican soap opera", and justifying their audits by arguing that the

¹²⁰ Maher, *Live from D.C*, 32:40.

¹²¹ Condon, Stephanie, "IRS: Progressive groups flagged, but tea party bigger target", *CBS News*, June 27th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/NNYob>.

¹²² Johnson, Eliana, "IG: 'Progressive' Groups Not Targeted By IRS", *National Review*, June 27th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/kr9Mv>; Condon, "IRS: Progressive groups flagged", p.1.

IRS had the right to inspect “a little more into groups with names like, ‘Fuck the IRS’ [Laughter.]...”¹²³ However, in contrast to Maher’s portrayal of avowedly right-wing groups, internal IRS documentation uncovered during the scandal found that the revenue service applied significantly closer examination to more civically-titled groups that referenced words such as “Tea Party” or “Patriots”, that focused on challenging the ACA, or advocated further education about the U.S Constitution and the Bill of Rights.¹²⁴ Maher nonetheless dismisses this issue as one of a collection of baseless “Obama Scandals” manufactured by the “drama queens” of the Republican Party.¹²⁵ This response illustrates the disciplinary function in his comedy, where his response to this scandal puts him in a more conservative position than the IRS, who formally apologised for the controversial auditing process, as well as that of Obama, who described the revelations as “inexcusable”, and whose personal leverage led to the resignation of acting commissioner of the IRS, Steven Miller.¹²⁶ Maher’s dismissal of this controversy suggests a consistent theme in American partisanship, in which perceptions of government as a threat are tied to personal affiliation. In partisan terms, this has meant that Democrats have been more likely to view a Republican administration as threatening, and vice versa, a trend that polling, academic and journalistic accounts have evidenced as a significant factor in American public opinion in the Obama era. For instance, an opinion poll published by *Gallup* in October 2010 found that 57% of Democrats agreed with the statement that the federal government posed an immediate threat in September 2006 under President Bush, compared to only 21% of Democrats agreeing with the same statement in September 2010 under President Obama. In contrast, while only 21% of polled Republicans agreed with the statement in September 2006 under Bush, this increased to 66% in September 2010 under Obama and only 21% amongst Democrats.¹²⁷ Similar findings by *Pew Research Center* from June 2014 found that partisan animosity has increased significantly over the last two decades, with 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans agreeing with the statement that the opposing party’s policies “‘are so misguided that they

¹²³ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 20:13.

¹²⁴ Bash, Dana & Carter, Chelsea J., “Obama says some IRS employees ‘failed,’ orders accountability”, *CNN Politics*, *CNN*, May 15th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/q9kIE>.

¹²⁵ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 20:13.

¹²⁶ Weisman, Jonathan, “I.R.S Apologizes to Tea Party Groups Over Audits of Applications for Tax Exemption”, *The New York Times*, May 10th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/OemLx>.; MacAskill, Ewan, “Obama fires IRS chief over ‘inexcusable’ tax targeting scandal”, *The Guardian*, May 16th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/3ShVW>.

¹²⁷ Jones, Jeffrey M., “Republicans, Democrats Shift on Whether Gov’t is a Threat”, *Gallup*, October 18th 2010, Table 1. Web. <https://archive.is/LxABr>.

threaten the nation's well-being.”¹²⁸ By appreciating this, we can see not just how integral the partisan divide is in determining how Democrat and Republican-affiliated Americans approve or disapprove of government policy, but its importance in gauging the critical and conservative qualities of Maher's partisan political comic commentaries. In April 2014, Will Wilkinson noted how the partisan mind frame in American politics can have profound effects on hindering or altogether avoiding fact-based assessments: “when it comes to belief, correspondence with our comrades trumps correspondence to reality.”¹²⁹ Wilkinson's comments strike a chord with Maher's material, where through an avowed partisan framing, he largely absolves left-wing Americans from critique within the heightened complexities of racial and political issues under Obama.

Maher's political comic criticism dulls much of the critical bite of his material by making it vulnerable to attacks of duplicity in a way that Kilstein, and to a slightly lesser extent Black, are able to avoid. However, the distinct difference between Maher and his contemporaries may come down to his own aforementioned million-dollar donation to Obama's 2012 re-election campaign, which might have lessened his inclination to be overtly critical of Obama and his administration. Interestingly, Maher doesn't refrain from reminding its audience of this donation during his stand-up special. He jokes about it in *Live from D.C.*, commenting, “I can't believe I was so scared that [2012 Republican presidential candidate] Mitt Romney was going to be president that, a million dollars flew right out of my pocket. [Laughter.]”¹³⁰ The makeup of his material in *Live from D.C.*, and his moneyed endorsement of Obama, provides a significant space to question the constraints of a political comic to provide meaningful, perhaps even radical critiques from within the sphere of a mainstream political party affiliation and promoting a staunchly partisan absolutism towards socio-political issues. These considerations should be taken into account in gauging their possible effects on the political comic tones of *Live from D.C.*, and Maher's position within a subversive and conservative framework under Obama's presidency. As Ezra Klein notes, the partisan gamesmanship of American mainstream politics, most potently found in Washington D.C., “is a bitter war between two well-funded, sharply-defined tribes that have their own

¹²⁸ “Political Polarization in the American Public”, *Pew Research Center*, June 12th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/flpNc>.

¹²⁹ Wilkinson, Will, “Ezra Klein's strangled Vox”, *The Economist*, April 11th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2014/04/journalism-and-democracy>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹³⁰ Maher, *Live from D.C.*, 2:59, 17:38.

machines for generating evidence and their own enforcers of orthodoxy. It's a perfect storm for making smart people very stupid."¹³¹ In Maher's *Live from D.C.*, the partisan-focused criticism of his special, together with the basic pressures and successes of live political comic performance, supports Klein's critique, and begs one to reflect on the limitations and successes of political comic criticism in acting as a critical cultural agent through the double-lens of a partisan *and* comic prism.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter sought to answer the following secondary research question: "To what extent can Obama-era left-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" This was done through an analysis of Kilstein, Black and Maher's political comic material. This chapter contributes to the field of comedy scholarship through its analysis of the subversive and conservative qualities of left-wing political stand-up comedy in the Obama era. It builds on existing works such as Krefting's *All Joking Aside* and her concept of charged humour through a subversive and conservative analysis of left-wing political comic material, Dagnes' *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar* by extending her analysis of Obama's stalling of left-wing political comic criticism, and Jenkin's "Was It Something They Said?" by gauging Kilstein's anti-war critique and Black's promotion of more substantial healthcare reform as strategies to promote social change, and Maher's more complex and partisan analysis of the health of Obama-era politics.

Concluding on their political comic material, their positioning, with respect to Obama, proves key in gauging their critical and conservative qualities. In Kilstein's instructive to Democrat-affiliated Americans, the edifying quality of his monologue on *Conan* marries his approval of Obama as a person to a warning against blinkered and uncritical acceptance of his administration's controversial programmes. It develops from a tempered endorsement of the President into a repudiation of Obama's quixotic effect on the American left, undermining aggrandised accounts of his early foreign policy record, as exemplified in his critique of the Obama Doctrine. In Black's institutionally-focused political comic deliveries, the President is treated less importantly within the constructs of his critiques, focusing

¹³¹ Klein, Ezra, "How politics makes us stupid", *Vox*, April 6th 2014, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/T1muC>.

instead on perceived national ailments like the profit-based narrative of American healthcare and partisan rhetorical strategies regarding the ACA. However, this is concluded by analysing Black's critique of Obama-focused partisan terminology over the ACA, and one in which he *does* bring the President to the forefront of his comic analysis, proffering an indirect endorsement of the ACA as a step towards more substantial healthcare reform through organised, left-wing activism. In doing so, he offers a left-wing political perspective on possibilities *beyond* Obama, promoting more substantial advocacies of healthcare reform regardless of who is in office. Maher's political comic treatment of Obama is certainly the most supportive, and utilises the distinct racial dimension of his presidency to address and deflect criticisms of the President from the American right. His enthusiasm for Obama, reflected both in his examined stand-up, and of course his significant financial donation, indicates a more whole-hearted appreciation of him than either Kilstein or Black. This positions Maher in a more indebted position as a self-identified left-wing political stand-up comedian towards Obama and Obama-era power than either Kilstein or Black. In doing so, Maher illustrates the complex relationship between the political comic, the President, and spheres of cultural and political influence from a more establishment frame of left-wing comic critique. This chapter's unique contribution to comedy scholarship is in its appraisal of the subversive and conservative qualities of left-wing political stand-up comedy in this presidential era. I have shown that ideological affiliation, partisan-framed political discourse, performative and theoretical pressures, and the ever-present issue of racial misinterpretation surrounding any material on Obama, are key elements that both bolster and hinder these respective left-wing political comic critiques. In comparison to O'Neal and Griffin's racial affiliation with Obama analysed in *African American Political Stand-up Comedy*, while race is certainly a substantial factor in left-wing critiques, what drives these tensions is the ideological and political affiliation of these respective comedians to Obama, the Democratic Party, and the general ethos of the modern American left. They showcase the complexities of the cultural and political atmosphere under his presidency and the numerous caveats which influence their abilities to traverse these varying loyalties through the niche of left-wing political stand-up comedy, and its respective subversive and conservative qualities.

Chapter 4- Right-Wing Political Stand-up Comedy in the Obama Era



Figure 4: Right-wing political stand-up comedian Dennis Miller and his prop presidential podium used during his political stand-up special *The Big Speech* (2010).
Image Credit: *The Big Speech*. DVD.

Conservative humor has never been dead and has never lost its voice...Just don't look for it in the comedy club.

- Paul Lewis ¹³²

4.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the conservative and subversive qualities of right-wing political stand-up comedy in the Obama era through the case studies of Nick DiPaolo and Dennis Miller. The guiding secondary research question of this chapter is: “To what extent can Obama-era right-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?” As reflected in this chapter’s epigraph, analyses of this topic largely agree that right-wing political comedy is extremely limited. In Alison Dagnes’ analysis of conservative and left-wing political comedy in the United States, she addresses

¹³² Lewis’ quotation can be accessed in Libit, Daniel, “The lonely life of conservative comics”, *Politico*, February 4th 2009, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/UdtHc>.

the conspicuous lack of right-wing political comics: “The bottom line: the average political comedy fan is hard pressed to come up with many more conservative political humourists - because there aren’t many.”¹³³ This scarcity has sparked a wish to expand the American right’s political comic hold in American culture, what *The Atlantic*’s Oliver Morrison argues is their aspiration to “produce their own Jon Stewart.”¹³⁴ Obama’s tenure has further compounded the difficulties for right-wing political comic criticism within an already enervated cultural market. His fractious relationship with the American right also reverberates in his perceived challenge to traditional white identity. As *The Guardian*’s Gary Younge notes, his ascendancy for many white Americans has been viewed as an indication of their own considerable loss of status and power:

Demographically and geopolitically, being a white American no longer means what it used to; Obama became a proxy for those who could not accept that decline, and who understood his very presence as both a threat and a humiliation.¹³⁵

Against this backdrop of white American and conservative disempowerment, the difficulties facing right-wing political stand-up comedy under Obama’s presidency can be measured by a number of indicators. For instance, the complex relationship which the American right has historically had (and continues to have) with African Americans creates an obvious disadvantage. As comedian Linda Smith notes, “right-leaning comics must walk through a historical minefield to mock the first black president.”¹³⁶ There is also the difficulty of making right-wing opinion and criticism funny within an arena that does not often absorb it. A recurring cultural theme found in John Dombrink’s text *The Twilight of Social Conservatism* (2015) is how left-wing comedians such as Bill Maher were perceived by conservatives to feel completely free to pronounce their “liberal critiques” against movements such as the American Tea Party, an unrivalled cultural power much to the chagrin of the American right.¹³⁷ These expressions on right-wing political stand-up are not just important in their pronouncements on the infirmities of right-wing comedy, but in their

¹³³ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.1.

¹³⁴ Morrison, Oliver, “Waiting for the Conservative Jon Stewart”, *The Atlantic*, February 14th 2015, p.1. Web. <https://archive.is/q3Neg>.

¹³⁵ Younge, Gary, “Yes, he tried: what will Barack Obama’s legacy be?”, *The Guardian*, March 19th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/mASk7>.

¹³⁶ Smith’s quotation can be found in Toto, Christian, “For political comedians, the joke’s not on Obama”, *The Washington Times*, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/Z5wXQ>.

¹³⁷ Dombrink, John, *The Twilight of Social Conservatism*. New York City, NY & London: New York University Press, 2015, p.48. Print.

broader expressions of exasperation in attempting to promote them against a backdrop of polished and nationally comprehended left-wing comic distribution. In addition, Dagnes notes the difficulty of right-wing comic expression being popularly associated with established power or political stasis: “Ideology clearly plays a role here because liberalism serves as a better foundation for satire than conservatism does...Put another way: conservatives want to maintain the status quo and liberals want to change it.”¹³⁸ The linkage between conservative cultural productions such as political stand-up and these expressions of established power forms a major part of the Obama-era journalistic response to the right-wing political comic question. David R. Dietrich’s Obama-era analysis of conservative social movements tackles this same dilemma by noting the difficulty of recognising right-wing social protest movements as oppressed rather than privileged within the make-up of contemporary American power structures. In response to Doug McAdams theory of cognitive liberation - the peremptory collective understandings that help to initiate emergent collective action - Dietrich asks:

How can cognitive liberation come about if there is no long-standing oppression? How can one define one’s problems as being caused by the existing social structure if the existing social structure has historically provided advantages to one’s group?¹³⁹

For a form of cultural expression that is typically defined by its outsider status and remoteness from forms of power and authority, these comic and social analyses have important consequences for how we perceive the subversive and conservative qualities of right-wing political stand-up. Considering this range of political, cultural, performative, partisan and theoretical elements, among others, this chapter analyses two examples of subversive and conservative right-wing political stand-up in the Obama era through the case studies of Nick DiPaolo and Dennis Miller and their professions of conservative disempowerment under his presidency.

In setting out the various arguments and findings of this chapter, two works on Obama-era right-wing political stand-up comedy, in addition to certain other texts that aid the arguments, are considered. The first is Ron Von Burg and Kai Heidemann’s examination of right-wing stand-up Brad Stine in “What’s the Deal with Liberals?: The Discursive

¹³⁸ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar*, xiv.

¹³⁹ Dietrich, David R., *Rebellious Conservatives: Social Movements in Defense of Privilege*. New York City, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p.5. Print.

Construction of Partisan Political Identities in Conservative Stand-Up Comedy” (2017). Their interpretations of Stine argue that his use of Kenneth Burke’s concept of burlesque ridicule “is not just mockery, but a mode of identity construction that feeds on the ridicule”, a form of stand-up that they additionally argue affirms and constructs right-wing identity through “recasting conservatives as the victim of liberal oppression”.¹⁴⁰ These elements of right-wing political comic expression are built upon in the case studies of DiPaolo and Miller. Dagnes’ *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar* (2012) is built upon through an analysis of DiPaolo and Miller’s political stand-up. A particular consideration underlined by Dagnes is the difficulty of right-wing political comedy being seen to be affiliated with establishmentarian norms and values.¹⁴¹ Her considerations are expanded upon in this thesis’ analysis of the subversive and conservative aspects of DiPaolo and Miller’s critiques.

Additional texts referenced, but not necessarily within the frame of the focused comic scholarship of this chapter, should also be considered. In the first case study of Nick DiPaolo and his stand-up special *Raw Nerve*, I begin by exploring the political, cultural, and racial considerations involved in his critique of Obama’s racial symbolism. John Dombrink’s text *The Twilight of Social Conservatism* (2015) is used to highlight the dwindling influence of social conservative issues under Obama, and how his presidency came to be seen by many conservatives as “a foreign presence that was portrayed as a challenge to ‘traditional American values.’”¹⁴² Dombrink’s analysis of diminishing social conservative influence is extended within a political comic examination of DiPaolo and Miller. In the following segment, I explore DiPaolo’s problematic critique of the Obama Administration’s release of the torture memos and prohibition of the interrogation practise of waterboarding that he argues is not a form of torture. Furthermore, his defence of waterboarding is complemented by the academic analyses of Jared Del Rosso’s journal article *The Toxicity of Torture: The Cultural Structure of US Political Discourse of Waterboarding* (2014) and Marita Sturken’s journal article *Comfort, irony, and trivialization: The mediation of torture* (2011) that analyse rhetorical and humorous strategies used in congressional and military defences of the same practise. In the final portion of the case study, I analyse DiPaolo’s critique of unions, and how this ties in with right-wing, anti-immigration rhetoric. Another text applied in this case study is David R. Dietrich’s text *Rebellious Conservatives: Social Movements in*

¹⁴⁰ Von Burg & Heidemann, “What’s the Deal with Liberals?”, p.164.

¹⁴¹ Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.172.

¹⁴² Dombrink, *The Twilight of Social Conservatism*, p.18.

Defense of Privilege (2014), and its expansive analysis of right-wing social movements in the Obama era. I extend his analysis of right-wing American movements to explicate DiPaolo's critique of the hotel workers as fuelled by a perceived devaluation of traditional, conservative American values. Bergson's corrective function within laughter is also applied in this segment, primarily through a reading of the detachment aspects in DiPaolo's stand-up material on immigrant hotel workers. Another text used is Rory McVeigh's power devaluation model, originally composed in his journal article, *Structural Incentives for Conservative Mobilization: Power Devaluation and the Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 1915-1925* (1999). McVeigh's model is developed by explicating DiPaolo as acting within the second concept of an interpretative process of right-wing devaluation. Finally, Michael Billig's work *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005) is re-introduced, particularly his concept of the "joking rebel", by framing DiPaolo as an insubordinate of political, social and cultural expectations from a right-wing comic platform.¹⁴³ This case study concludes by noting the subversive qualities of DiPaolo's critique of Obama's glorified racial symbolism, but this is tempered by examining his dismissive, detached attitudes towards detainees and hotel workers, revealing the distinct difficulties of right-wing political comic expression.

The next case study of Dennis Miller begins by analysing his use of a theatrical model map of the United States to illustrate Obama-era conservative devaluation, interpreted through a Bakhtinian reading of carnivalesque inversion. Reinforced through readings of carnival's ambivalent nature by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, and also Charles Byrd, it is construed that Miller's use of this map presents an inversion of conservative power and influence under Obama, which Miller is attempting to reverse. This is fortified through a reading of Barbara Babcock's examination of forms of symbolic inversion and cultural negation. In his critique of Obama-era welfare and taxation, Dietrich's treatment of right-wing movements is applied within Miller's ethical and moral categorisation of deserving and undeserving access to welfare benefits, and what manifests in some portions of his material as a blatantly cruel perception of welfare recipients, complemented by tying his material to broader Republican critiques of moral relativism. This segment is critiqued through Dolf Zillman and Joanne R. Cantor's chapter *A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth* (2007), which argues that the potency of a response to a humorous presentation is dependent on the audience's disposition towards the targets of the humour. This model is

¹⁴³ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

applied to Miller's critiques of welfare culture. In the final section of the case study, I analyse Miller's treatment of post-racialism within *America 180*, and how his proclamation of a realised, or near-realised post-racial society under Obama's presidency has a substantial effect on the subversive and conservative qualities of his work. A useful text applied to Miller's post-racial conclusions is Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks' *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama* (2014), which provides a critical reading of Republican party rhetoric under Obama's presidency as being unquestionably saturated in racist intent and purpose, arguing that "the Right has actively critiqued him...from a place of implicit racial bias."¹⁴⁴ Other works referenced as relevant to the field of Obama-era racial politics include John Heilemann & Mark Halperin's *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (2010), Amilcar Antonio Barreto and Richard L. O'Bryant's *American Identity in the Age of Obama* (2013), Tim Wise's *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity* (2010), and Michael Eric Dyson's *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (2016). All four texts, in conjunction with additional journalistic support, provide an array of opinions over the post-racial debate under Obama, built upon with a political comic reading through Miller's own acclamations of post-racialism. Finally, two journal articles by Jonathan P. Rossing are used to illustrate the critical nature of comedy towards post-racialism. Catherine Squires' post-racial treatment of comic response is examined within her assessment of broader media reactions in *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). These texts are used to emphasise the unique nature of Miller's post-racial conclusions in *America 180* with his belief in an already realised, or close-to-being-realised, post-racialism in the United States, resulting in a problematic conclusion on Miller's understanding of socio-political realities under Obama's presidency. In doing this, it is concluded that Miller's incongruous notions on post-racialism have a major effect in gauging his role within a subversive and conservative framework, where his awkward conclusions on Obama-era racial politics demonstrate his own alienation from reasonable analyses of the realities of this era. The chapter concludes by noting that for all of DiPaolo and Miller's limitations, their vulnerability from a right-wing political comic perspective offers a strongly subversive element to their work, where in comparison to other fields studied in this thesis, their critiques and explorations of Obama-era political

¹⁴⁴ Hughey, Matthew W. & Parks, Gregory S., *The Wrongs of the Right: Language, Race, and the Republican Party in the Age of Obama*. New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2014, p.4. Print.

power are performed with little, if any, comic insurance, giving their position a distinct, subversive edge that other case studies don't reflect.

4.2. Barack "Messiah" Obama and Torture Memos in Nick DiPaolo's *Raw Nerve*

Defining Nick DiPaolo as a right-wing political comic raises numerous intriguing questions, among them his own thoughts as to the extent to which he considers himself right-wing and political in his stand-up comedy. He notes in an interview that his reputation as a "right winger" initially came from his past appearances on *Comedy Central's* comedic talk show *Tough Crowd with Colin Quinn* (2002-2004).¹⁴⁵ His regular appearances on this show, the television comedy series *Louie* (2010-), and his portrayal as what James Donaghy titles a "predictably outspoken Republican" on *Horace and Pete* (2016) have helped to further consolidate his right-wing comic reputation.¹⁴⁶ In addition, commentaries on DiPaolo's political ideology and his own characterisations identify him as someone who leans to the right on the political spectrum. In an August 2015 appearance on stand-up comedian Ari Shaffir's podcast *Skeptic Tank*, Shaffir asks DiPaolo whether he would consider himself a conservative. DiPaolo responds, "I lean right, I'm not conservative."¹⁴⁷ This is borne out by *The Washington Post's* Emily Wax's description of DiPaolo's beliefs as a fusion of social liberalism and fiscal conservatism.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, a convincing argument can be made that, although DiPaolo states that he is "not that political", he can be naturally classified as a right-wing political comic, particularly in an analysis of his first Obama-era stand-up comedy special, *Raw Nerve* (2011).¹⁴⁹ Moreover, DiPaolo's comic voice registers a beleaguered sense of estrangement under Obama, but it is this disassociation from power that allows him

¹⁴⁵ Wilson, P.F., "Nick DiPaolo: 'It just so happens what I believe goes against the status quo.'", *City Pages*, November 11th 2013, p.1. <http://archive.is/4vm8M>.

¹⁴⁶ Donaghy, James, "The top-secret TV event of the year: Louis CK's Horace and Pete", *The Guardian*, February 1st 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/LHHtc>.

¹⁴⁷ "Skeptic Tank #320 - Unconservative and Incorrect with Nick DiPaolo", *NotLogan HighestPrimate* (Youtube Channel), August 4th 2015, 15:08. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pD6zqfeGXXQ>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Wax, Emily, "Laughing Liberally pours on the tea party jokes", *The Washington Post*, April 24th 2011, p.1. Web. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/laughing-liberally-pours-on-the-tea-party-jokes/2011/04/18/AF87rcdE_story.html. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, "Nick DiPaolo", p.1.

to regard himself as an outsider. As he comments in his interview with Wilson, “It just so happens that what I believe goes against the status quo. It’s not a choice.”¹⁵⁰ His apparent revulsion towards established, popular thinking provides scope for analysis with respect to his relationship to Obama-era forms of power in *Raw Nerve*, and how it fits into a subversive and conservative political comic framework.¹⁵¹ In contrast to the self-described “apolitical” nature of his second Obama-era special, *Another Senseless Killing* (2014), *Raw Nerve* explores the nature of left-wing embellishments of Obama’s racial symbolism as the first African American President, his administration’s prohibition on waterboarding, and the corrosive national influence of American unions and how his critique ties into a conservative treatment of immigration.¹⁵²

4.2.1. DiPaolo’s political critique of Obama’s racial symbolism

The cultural currency available to right-wing comics to explore racial issues under Obama has undoubtedly been affected by codified, or sometimes outright, racist Republican critiques. This has resulted in an archive of tendentious political rhetoric from the American right, as catalogued by Matthew W. Hughey and Gregory S. Parks in their chronicling of “racial fears, coded language, and explicit as well as implicit (automatic/subconscious) racism...drawn upon and manipulated by the political Right.”¹⁵³ The effect that this has in the presentation, and subsequent reception, of right-wing political stand-up under Obama’s presidency is reflected in remarks that DiPaolo made in an interview with Dagnes. He narrates the example of a pork-based joke which he performed on *Fox News* that alludes to conservative theories about Obama being a covert Muslim, noting that the reaction this received put pressure on him to avoid sensitive socio-political issues:

I mean, even if the audience is mostly Republican they’re afraid to laugh out loud because this politically correct environment that’s been created over the last 40 years...You see what I’m up against? And you’re gonna tell me that Jon Stewart or a left-leaning comic has these conversations when they want to rip Senator [Larry] Craig or something?...And like I said, even people who have the same politics as me, they get uncomfortable sometimes if I do something that’s

¹⁵⁰ Wilson, “Nick DiPaolo”, p.1.

¹⁵¹ DiPaolo, Nick, *Raw Nerve*. USA: Image Entertainment, 2011. DVD.

¹⁵² Wilson, “Nick DiPaolo”, p.1.

¹⁵³ Hughey & Parks, *The Wrongs of the Right*, p.4.

really off-color in a club, because they might be construed as racist or misogynist, for laughing at it out loud.¹⁵⁴

This quote offers an insight into the few concessions that are available to a self-identified right-wing comedian in an already highly sensitive political environment, which in turn affects the boundaries of his own material, and is absent to the same degree in left-wing comic explorations. In his opening section on Obama in *Raw Nerve*, he interrogates this political / racial relationship:

Friggin' Obama, I don't know. You know look, I like him personally like everybody else, I don't like his politics and, but can we quit calling him the first black president? This guy makes Bryant Gumbel look like Flava Flav. [Laughter.] My nipples are darker than Obama, okay? [Laughter.] If you're not darker than my nipples you're not black, okay? [Mild Laughter.] Everytime I see Tiger Woods on TV I put my tit against the flat screen and I'm like, "He's like Irish and Chinese, who are they shitting?" [Laughter & Mild Applause.]¹⁵⁵

As in the case studies of O'Neal and Kilstein, DiPaolo prefixes this section by stating that he likes Obama as a person, his own finely-tuned comic concession before he begins his critique. Following this, his dilution of the much-heralded racial symbolism of Obama is bold in its criticism of perceived left-wing aggrandisements of the President's racial symbolism. His diminution of Obama's unique importance as the first African American President can be seen as aimed less at Obama than at left-wing supporters, who base a significant part of their acclaim for him on the racial barrier he passed when taking office. This acclamation however may have been at the expense of an alienated right-wing electorate, what John Dombrink calls the "extended referendum" shroud that Obama's election win affected in its depreciation of the cultural and political capital of social conservatism.¹⁵⁶ DiPaolo's material not only addresses the delicate topic of race in this context, but critiques what he sees as an exaggerated significance surrounding Obama in an era marked by a right-wing opposition intractably defined by a racist stigma. If Obama's election win was prematurely hailed by some political commentators as the death of modern conservatism, then DiPaolo's refutation of left-wing acclamations of his election win restores some confidence to the American right in order to counter this, doing so in an emboldened way by raising and rerouting the subject of race surrounding Obama from a

¹⁵⁴ DiPaolo's quotation can be found in Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar*, p.159.

¹⁵⁵ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 27:59.

¹⁵⁶ Dombrink, *The Twilight of Social Conservatism*, p.4.

conservative perspective.¹⁵⁷ In the final moments of this material, he not only critiques Obama's racial symbolism, but what he perceives as a Messianic adoration of the President by the left:

Obama's got no foreign policy experience, what, did he play [the board game] *Risk* in high school twice? [Laughter.] And the libs love him, I know you libs love him. You think he's the messiah. I think he *is* the messiah, you know why? Because the night he got elected I was pointing at my TV going, 'Jesus Christ! [Laughter.] Jesus Christ!'¹⁵⁸

DiPaolo maintains that this adulation cloaks more significant issues that he wishes to bring to the forefront, such as Obama's lack of foreign policy experience, or what he typifies as a stark "media bias" in his favour by television network channels such as *CBS*. He comments, "The media has been blowing this guy for two years straight. [Mild Laughter.]...They *love* this guy!"¹⁵⁹ His Obama material poses some difficulties for a critical and conservative analysis. Although DiPaolo's nipple-based barometer is clearly designed for amusement, this segment is hardly sympathetic to the racial and cultural complexities of African American identity. His reference to the television journalist Bryant Gumbel and hip pop artist Flava Flav - perceived popularly as cultural antitheses - is reminiscent of Obama's struggles as a presidential candidate with an initially apprehensive African American electorate who viewed him as "not black enough", a popular tête-à-tête of the Obama presidency that David A. Graham chronicles.¹⁶⁰

As DiPaolo continues, he notes that he would "have voted for a real black guy", citing actor John Amos' portrayal of the strong-minded father figure James Evans, Sr. from the sitcom *Good Times* (1974-79), or stand-up comedian Redd Foxx's role as the cantankerous Fred G. Sanford on the *NBC* sitcom *Sanford and Son* (1972-77).¹⁶¹ DiPaolo's characterisation of "real" African American identity, fuelled through the exaggerated comic personalities of two sitcom characters, indicates a shallow appreciation of the complexities of racial identity and caricatures in his critiques. This is compounded when it is considered that Amos argued that

¹⁵⁷ Tanenhaus, Sam, "Conservatism is Dead", *The New Republic*, February 18th 2009. Web. <https://newrepublic.com/article/61721/conservatism-dead>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁵⁸ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 29:00.

¹⁵⁹ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 29:24.

¹⁶⁰ Kennedy, Randall, *The Persistence of the Color Line*, p.10.; Graham, David A., "A Short History of Whether Obama Is Black Enough, Featuring Rupert Murdoch", *The Atlantic*, October 8th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/gGOJE>.

¹⁶¹ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 28:30.

he was fired from *Good Times* for his disagreement with what he considered to be an emphasis on regressive, minstrel-like characterisations by the show's writers.¹⁶² Taking this into consideration, DiPaolo's material can nonetheless be interpreted as an unique attempt to analyse a virtually taboo subject from a right-wing stance that seeks to critique the fragility of such glorifications of Obama as a significant left-wing racial and political symbol. His material attests to an attempt to extend or rebalance right-wing American discussions of Obama's race in a cultural space loaded with all manner of tendentious presumptions about his political affiliation, making his analysis all the more exceptional. Although Frank Rich describes DiPaolo's Obama material as "nothing if not innocuous", it can be countered that it is an example of subversive right-wing political stand-up in the way that it provides a critical space to measure the parameters of left-wing support for Obama from an unique political comic perspective.¹⁶³

4.2.2. "It's not torture": Analysing DiPaolo's critique of anti-torture rhetoric

DiPaolo continues his critique by discussing the issue of torture, beginning with what he perceives as an overtly-apologetic framing of the issue's legacy throughout Obama's presidency. He introduces it by discussing the administration's decision to publish and rescind the Bush administration's legal memoranda on the use of enhanced interrogation techniques used against suspected terrorist detainees (titled in press reportage as "The Torture Memos") in the early months of his first term.¹⁶⁴ Initially DiPaolo comments: "Here's where the Obama administration kind of lost me - well, when he got elected, but uh - [Laughter.] uh, when they released the torture memos, remember they interrogated the detainees, they were going to go after them." He follows this by focusing on the practise of waterboarding, repudiating it as a form of torture:

¹⁶² Callahan, Yesha, "John Amos Says He Was Kicked Off *Good Times* Because He Didn't Agree With the Shucking and Jiving", *The Root*, June 4th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/N0r9E>.

¹⁶³ Rich, Frank, "Can Conservatives Be Funny?", *The New Yorker*, May 20th 2014, p.4. Web. <http://nymag.com/news/frank-rich/conservative-comedians-2014-5/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Macaskill, Ewen, "Obama releases Bush torture memos", *The Guardian*, April 16th 2009. Web. <http://archive.is/dWvDm>.

By the way, in my opinion waterboarding is not torture. Pouring water over somebody's face for forty to fifty seconds to simulate drowning is not torture. [Mild Applause.] And if it is, they [ought] to investigate the girl that shampoos my hair at Supercuts. [Laughter & Applause.] Last week when she was rinsing me I admitted to killing [missing American teenager] Natalee Holloway. [Laughter.] 'Yeah it was me and the Indian kid, get that hose out of my face for Christ's sake, I'm drowning over here, please!' [Laughter.]¹⁶⁵

This alleged diminution of a national security emphasis under Obama's management is emphasised by DiPaolo alongside an earlier joke revolving around his irritation at being fined for not wearing a seatbelt in New York City:

It's good to see the NYPD has their priorities straight. I have Al-Qaeda selling me pizza on 42nd Street, [Laughter.] and these assholes are making sure I'm buckled up tight and I don't get hurt. [Laughter.]¹⁶⁶

Although this material can be interpreted as racist in the way DiPaolo links Al-Qaeda with everyday Muslims, it nonetheless illustrates the frustration that defines his relationship as a right-wing political comic with contemporary power structures and his perceived disempowerment as a conservative. In addition, his comparison of waterboarding with receiving a shampoo treatment at his local hair salon indicates his political leanings in his justification of certain state-managed practises, particularly those which involve matters of state security. This critique can be interpreted as a contribution to American conservative irritations over a perceived litany of Obama-era apologies in regards to national security matters, what *Foreign Policy's* Michael Cohen describes as a common accusation of Democratic administrations being "soft" on defence, echoed by Republican officials.¹⁶⁷ Although DiPaolo's material on waterboarding has a critical edge to it in the sense that it disagrees with a major policy decision enacted by Obama, who outlawed its use in the wake of the Torture Memos' release by arguing that it was indeed a form of torture, it places DiPaolo in a unusual position within a subversive and conservative political comic analysis.¹⁶⁸ His dismissal of Obama's prohibition, and his attempted normalisation of waterboarding through comic triviality, leaves him in the complex position of being a self-

¹⁶⁵ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 31:39.

¹⁶⁶ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 6:00.

¹⁶⁷ Cohen, Michael, "When Democrats Became Doves", *Foreign Policy*, December 2nd 2011, p.1. Web. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/12/02/when-democrats-became-doves/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁶⁸ Wallston, Peter & Miller, Greg, "Obama gives nuanced defense of his stance on torture", *Los Angeles Times*, April 30th 2009, p.1. Web. [http://archive.is/jsxLb.](http://archive.is/jsxLb;); Wilson, "Nick DiPaolo: 'It just so happens what I believe goes against the status quo.'", p.1.

titled, anti-establishment figure arguing for the continuation of a notorious interrogation practise. Imposing a tight absolutism on the issue, DiPaolo continues by stating that “It’s not torture. None of that shit is torture”, followed by his mocking of the Army Field Manual’s definition of torture as a facial slap: “Slapping somebody across the face with an open hand is considered torture now. Well maybe somebody might want to look into my dad’s past. [Laughter.]”¹⁶⁹ His final segment in this material builds on his shampoo analogy by comparing the enhanced interrogation techniques as no more traumatic than the homoerotic fraternity games he participated in during his time at college: “I don’t remember reading in *The New York Times* about Khalid Sheikh Mohammed having to eat a ritz cracker with his own jizz on it, do you? [Laughter & Sounds of Disgust.]”¹⁷⁰

DiPaolo’s shampoo and frat culture comparisons are particularly reminiscent of justifications from conservative radio host and political pundit Rush Limbaugh in reaction to the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal as the U.S guards just “‘having a good time.’”¹⁷¹ Furthermore, the Obama administration’s perceived anxiety over this issue perhaps motivated him to repeat the central argument of his material four times, that waterboarding is not torture. It also fits comfortably with academic readings of political rhetoric found amongst advocates of waterboarding as a tool of interrogation. As Jared Del Rosso argues in his examination of the rhetorical framing of waterboarding found in Bush-era Congressional hearings, the strategic goal of denying that waterboarding is indeed torture shared by its (predominantly Republican) advocates “involves rich symbolic and cultural work”.¹⁷² This crucial element found in tolerant frames of argument over waterboarding relies on a distinction “between the practise and the toxic associations that water torture carries”, of which DiPaolo’s shampoo analogy can be specifically construed as an example.¹⁷³ Furthermore, these inherent functions that can be interpreted in DiPaolo’s material, particularly his normalisation of waterboarding and trivialisation of anti-waterboarding critiques, finds academic support in the work of Marita Sturken. Looking at

¹⁶⁹ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 32:22.

¹⁷⁰ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 32:45.

¹⁷¹ Wildau, Gabe & Seifter, Andrew, “Limbaugh on torture of Iraqis: U.S. guards were ‘having a good time,’ ‘blow[ing] some steam off’”, *Media Matters*, May 5th 2004, p.1. Web. <http://mediamatters.org/research/2004/05/05/limbaugh-on-torture-of-iraqis-us-guards-were-ha/131111>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷² Del Rosso, Jared, “The Toxicity of Torture: The Cultural Structure of US Political Discourse of Waterboarding”. *Social Forces*, Vol. 93, Issue 1 (September 2014), p.397. Web. <http://sf.oxfordjournals.org/content/93/1/383.full>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷³ Del Rosso, “The Toxicity of Torture”, p.397.

both the Abu Ghraib controversy and torture reports at the Guantánamo Bay detention camp, one cultural form which she identifies in its preservation of the practise of torture is humour. Sturken reinforces this argument by analysing the humorous Guantánamo Bay-styled, kitsch merchandise available from the prison's official gift shop, commenting that the slogans and jokes on this merchandise gives credibility to the prison's brutal practises through the mediation of humour.¹⁷⁴ She notes:

Just as the trivialization inherent in the coffee mug and consumer object itself is a form of disabling distancing, the making fun of torture is a means of affirming its legitimacy and its justification.¹⁷⁵

These “distancing strategies” identified by Sturken can be seen in DiPaolo's material through his trivialisation and simultaneous reduction of the practise to a societal norm.¹⁷⁶ Viewing it within a subversive or transgressive frame, his ideological rejection of waterboarding as a form of torture can be read as a rebuke to left-wing, ethical concerns over the practise through the trivialising theoretical functions of his live political comic performance. However, it presents a complex picture of the challenges faced by a right-wing political comic in his/her attempts to defend established (or in this case, now prohibited), controversial state policies with nuance, without becoming either duplicitous or overtly coloured by partisan-guided attacks. DiPaolo's trivialising and attempted normalisation of brutal interrogation tactics such as waterboarding fits into a similar vein of cultural promotion by conservative advocates of this practise. Within this promotion however, he illustrates the complicit vulnerability within political stand-up comedy to act as an arm of brutish modes of ideological thought and practice.

4.2.3. Unions, Immigration and Bergsonian Qualities in *Raw Nerve*

In another critique of Obama-era policy, DiPaolo addresses what he sees as an over accommodating position on American trade unions, and the way this highlights the

¹⁷⁴ Sturken, Marita, “Comfort, irony, and trivialization: The mediation of torture”. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (July 2011), p.433. Available online via SagePub. Web. <http://ics.sagepub.com/content/14/4/423>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Sturken, “Comfort, irony and trivialization”, p.434.

¹⁷⁶ Sturken, “Comfort, irony and trivialization”, p.424.

complexity of right-wing cultural ideas which sometimes betray more problematic undertones within his views on matters of race and nationality. As DiPaolo argues:

Obama's a big union guy, and I'm sure unions had a place in this country like sixty years ago when we chained a woman to a loom for twenty two hours without a piss break to make umbrellas or something. [Laughter.] But I hate unions now.¹⁷⁷

DiPaolo's disaffection with unions is presented through the incongruity of their present obsolescence against their continued influence in guiding the national agenda of numerous administrations, including Obama's. The historic hostility conservatives have towards unions makes it a natural topic for critique in *Raw Nerve*. As labour activist Richard Yeselson argues, "There is no more consistent trope of conservative ideology stretching back over a century than a nearly pathological hatred of unions."¹⁷⁸ Certainly under the Obama' presidency the partisan divide towards the status of unions is noticeably polarised, with a poll published the same year of *Raw Nerve*'s release showing 78% of Democrats approving of labour unions in comparison to just 26% of Republicans.¹⁷⁹ DiPaolo's reflections on this right-wing American antipathy continue with his observations on a recent hotel strike:

I'm in a hotel in Cleveland a couple of weeks ago, the hotel workers were on strike, and they were picketing out front, like sixty people. Half the picket signs were in Spanish. [Mild Laughter.] You haven't even learned the language and you want a raise? [Laughter.] A year ago these people were whacking a donkey in the ass with a stick to get to a sneaker factory, to make 8 cents a week [Loud Cheering & Applause.] - now they spend their days in air conditioned hotel rooms dusting flat screen TVs, watching their favourite soap operas...¹⁸⁰

This critique of the hotel strike ties into a historic, conservative opposition to organised labour as a continuing depreciation of American traditions under Obama. As Jake Rosenfeld argues, union interference with the free market is a particular concern to many conservatives, noting that "for others, the very notion of a union challenges the values of individualism and self-reliance".¹⁸¹ For DiPaolo, the very presence of the hotel workers with picket signs in

¹⁷⁷ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 33:28.

¹⁷⁸ Yeselson, Richard, "Not With a Bang, But a Whimper: The Long, Slow Death Spiral of America's Labor Movement", *The New Republic*, June 6th 2012, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/WMW7b>.

¹⁷⁹ Greenhouse, Steven, "A Challenge for Unions in Public Opinion", *The New York Times*, September 2nd 2011, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/aEhky>.

¹⁸⁰ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 33:42.

¹⁸¹ Rosenfeld, Jake, *What Unions No Longer Do*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2014, p.17. Print.

Spanish threatens both of these important conservative tenets. His incredulity at the inconsistency between non-primary English speaking hotel workers and their demands for a salary increase goes to the heart of his critique: “You haven’t even learned the language and you want a raise? [Laughter.]”¹⁸² DiPaolo contrasts what he sees as arrogance in the Spanish-speaking hotel workers’ strike in contrast with the immigrant history of his grandparents who also worked in hotels when they arrived in America.¹⁸³ It serves to differentiate his lineage as an Italian American from the lack of personal strength that typifies the Spanish hotel workers in their demand for a raise. He reinforces this by averring that the hotel workers already “eat like kings and queens”, feeding on the rich leftovers of food in the hotel hallways:

Those hotel workers, I mean, they eat like kings and queens. You’ve seen the shit we leave in those trays in the hallways, right? [Laughter.] You gonna tell me some guy from Juarez who’s been chasing a waterbug with a stick for the last ten years isn’t gonna eat a Veal Piccata because it got a few teethmarks in it? [Laughter.]”¹⁸⁴

Although this particular joke functions through its exaggerative quality, it verges towards the kind of rhetoric which is commonly employed by less savoury elements of the conservative anti-immigration movement, particularly in his condescending illustration of a provincial Mexican economy and the dismissal of their demands on the basis that the hotel workers do not speak English as their primary language. While this is undeniably racist in tone, the relevance of this rhetoric is in how it transmits into respective subversive and conservative qualities in his performance. By expressing the comical solution of immigrant hotel workers eating scraps left by hotel guests, it resonates more broadly with DiPaolo’s rebuke of their demands and enhances his proposal to restrict benefits and rights to these workers by illustrating just how good their conditions already are. From this conceptualized position of irritated disempowerment in comparison to the relative “kings and queens”-like privileges of the union-managed hotel workers, DiPaolo goes on to argue that there should be a restriction on their benefits and rights, whether it’s a salary raise, or tax-qualified pension plans in their current occupations (known commonly as 401(k) plans): “[DiPaolo as a hotel worker.] ‘I want a 401 plan!’ No, you want [a Formula] 409 cleaner and mop, shut

¹⁸² DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 33:48.

¹⁸³ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 34:33.

¹⁸⁴ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 34:32.

up. [Laughter.]”¹⁸⁵ His irritation at the hotel workers’ demands feeds into the argumentation of the conservative anti-immigration movement, “the loss of cultural capital in the form of traditional American values” that David Dietrich argues was a crucial driving force behind the Tea Party movement.¹⁸⁶ In this material, one can sense the moral and ethical deficiency of Dietrich’s paradigm, and what he titles as the “agents of threat” that bodies such as labour unions represent with their perceived threat to right-wing American privileges.¹⁸⁷

DiPaolo certainly shows little sympathy for their union-managed demands for a salary raise, basing their current ineligibility on their cultural differences from what Dietrich argues are conservative conceptualizations of authentic American identity, defined as those who exemplify the traits and values of “true” Americans, one of which is identified by DiPaolo as an understanding of the English language.¹⁸⁸ In Dietrich’s analysis of the anti-illegal immigration movement, he notes that nearly half of the claims he analysed from within the movement specifically emphasised language: “That is, to be a ‘true’ American, you must speak English.”¹⁸⁹ This language barrier, Dietrich comments, disqualifies many immigrants from access “to the privileges of “Americanness” in the eyes of many conservative Americans.¹⁹⁰ As importantly though, this perceived lack of integration reflected in DiPaolo’s rebuttal of unions and the hotel workers’ demands feeds into *Raw Nerve*’s tone of right-wing disempowerment under Obama. As Dietrich also argues, the framing of power relationships in anti-immigration discourse is crucial in recognising the perceived subjugation of conservative Americans who see themselves as “oppressed”, mainly because “the mainstream culture, as they see it, refuses to accept their ideological definition of American or Christian”.¹⁹¹ It also reflects the ideological, ethical and culture-based erosion of traditional (read conservative) American identity and Republican values by immigrant groups, what Amílcar Antonio Barreto and Richard L. O’Byrant typify as arguments of

¹⁸⁵ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 34:48.

¹⁸⁶ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.77.

¹⁸⁷ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.86.

¹⁸⁸ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.14.

¹⁸⁹ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.14.

¹⁹⁰ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.38.

¹⁹¹ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.13.

“norm violation” found in this rhetoric towards immigration, the perception that “immigrants will alter the ‘normal’ way of life.”¹⁹²

DiPaolo can be explicated as operating within the pattern of Rory McVeigh’s “power devaluation model” used in conservative social movement theory to explain the perceived threat to the economic, political, or status-based interests that incentivises conservative collective action, used originally to analyse the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and later examples such as the American Tea Party movement.¹⁹³ The model’s usefulness in a political comic analysis is in McVeigh’s development of “grievance”, new or emerging issues that help create conservative social action, and which political stand-up comedy can be seen to be articulating from a cultural perspective.¹⁹⁴ His power devaluation model focuses on three key aspects of conservative mobilisation, “incentives to act”, “interpretive processes”, and finally, “movement growth and trajectory”.¹⁹⁵ Noting that his model can be “easily adapted to different historical and cultural contexts”, DiPaolo can be seen to be performing within McVeigh’s interpretative role, demonstrated in his presentation of cultural critiques and promotions within a “framing opportunity”, with this opportunity being his resonance with right-wing Americans over their broadly-felt “group-based power devaluation” under Obama’s presidency.¹⁹⁶ Within this interpretive context of right-wing cultural promotion, DiPaolo’s disregard for established norms around ideas of race and American identity is subversive within the frames of conservative thought and political and cultural conservative devaluation. As Michael Billig notes, racist humour (or humour that can be easily interpreted as racist) has an expressly rebellious quality to it, where “part of the pleasure resides in being offensive, leaving the liberal in the position of unlaughing seriousness”, a technique also found in DiPaolo’s Obama and waterboarding materials.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹² Barreto, Amílcar Antonio & O’Byrant, Richard L., *American Identity in the Age of Obama*. New York City, NY & Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014, p.100, p.107. Print.

¹⁹³ McVeigh, Rory, “Structural Incentives for Conservative Mobilization: Power Devaluation and the Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 1915-1925”. *Social Forces*, Vol. 77, No. 4, (June 1999), pp.1461-1496. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3005883>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; McVeigh, Rory, “What’s New About the American Tea Party?” Van Dyke, Nella & Meyer, David S. (eds.), *Understanding the Tea Party*. Surrey, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014, pp.15-34. Print.

¹⁹⁴ McVeigh, “Structural Incentives for Conservative Mobilization”, p.1477.

¹⁹⁵ McVeigh, “What’s New About the American Tea Party?”, p.19.

¹⁹⁶ McVeigh, “What’s New About the American Tea Party?”, p.19, p.21.

¹⁹⁷ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.210.

However, problematic elements of DiPaolo's union material should also be considered in the way it affects his critiques of Obama-era power. The theoretical framework that can be surmised raises questions of distance or detachment characteristic of Bergson's corrective function, particularly in DiPaolo's framing of the demands of the hotel workers as going against the treasured conservative ideals of hard work and self-reliance. Dismissing their demands by telling them to "quit their fucking whining", or "shut up" in response to their unionised protests, he demonstrates what Bergson regarded as laughter's "unavowed intention...to correct our neighbour".¹⁹⁸ While the stringent moral absolutes found in American conservatism make the ideology well-suited to a disciplinary, Bergsonian-styled form of comic response, DiPaolo's framing of the issue demonstrates an emboldened justification for being unsympathetic towards the hotel workers within the confines of his own devaluation as a conservative, which comes at the expense of a noticeable detachment from his targets. DiPaolo's political comic persona itself can be seen as an exemplification of comic disconnect, what Billig argues is the emancipatory qualities of Bergson's observation, "the customary restrictions of social empathy, as the target of our mirth momentarily becomes an object, not a fellow human being."¹⁹⁹ It can be inferred that DiPaolo's select critiques of the heralded racial dimension of Obama's presidency, the management of national security issues, and the role of unions and questions of national identity are main themes presented because they pose challenges to his right-wing social and political identity. His contribution in *Raw Nerve* can be seen as an attempt to counter these at a time when the dimensions and leverage of social conservatism under Obama is perceived as decreasing. Nonetheless, his material in *Raw Nerve* illustrates the complexities involved in critiquing these ethereal "agents of threat", to borrow from Dietrich, within a right-wing political comic spectrum.²⁰⁰

The instructive tone of much of his material exemplifies a divergence in practise between left-wing and right-wing cultural treatments of socio-political issues, where, in considering the previous left-wing examples of Jamie Kilstein, Lewis Black and Bill Maher, their critiques generally revolve around broad targets of established power and a promotion of expanding existing privileges and advantages. In contrast, DiPaolo's material can be seen to be often at the expense of less empowered individuals, critiques that are integrally linked

¹⁹⁸ DiPaolo, *Raw Nerve*, 34:32, 34:48.; Bergson, *Laughter*, p.136.

¹⁹⁹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.120.

²⁰⁰ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.86.

to the comic mode's deployed ability to address, marginalize and rebuke the concerns and anxieties of the targets involved. However, the three items analysed in *Raw Nerve* evoke Billig's concept of rebellious humour, by arguing that this form of humour embodies a degree of defiance to authority. As Billig notes, the position of "the joking rebel" is a valued one, and one that as importantly cannot be applied exclusively to radical or conservative positions towards power and authority, noting that "Radicalism has no monopoly on rebellious humour."²⁰¹ If DiPaolo positions his comedy as anti-authoritarian ("It just so happens that what I believe goes against the status quo"), his framing gives credence as one which allows him to position himself as one of Billig's joking rebels through his insubordination of racial, social and political codes.²⁰² As Billig argues, "Not only can bigots laugh, but they can also position their laughter as rebellious, mocking the seriousness of tolerance and reason."²⁰³ If Billig's critique of traditional treatments of rebellious humour aims to tackle notions of humour being the exclusive weapon of rebelliousness and seriousness as the distinct weapon of authority, then DiPaolo's lack of sympathy, and his own position as a conservative white male comedian towards the groups he critiques, gives credence to this.²⁰⁴ This is particularly important when we consider - in contrast to the majority of the case studies' foci examined in this thesis - that two-thirds of the targets of DiPaolo's "grievances" in *Raw Nerve* are detainees of the U.S government's counter-terrorist efforts and immigrant hotel workers.²⁰⁵ In comparison to his critique of Obama's racial symbolism and its nuanced manoeuvring and subversion of mainstream political readings of his presidency from a right-wing position, his later material is more troubling in its conclusions, and showcases the complexities involved in analysing the subversive and conservative nature of right-wing political comic productions in the Obama era.

²⁰¹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

²⁰² Wilson, "Nick DiPaolo", p.1.

²⁰³ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*.

²⁰⁴ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, pp.207-214.

²⁰⁵ McVeigh, "What's New About the American Tea Party?", p.18.

4.3. The Right-Wing Political Comic Criticism of Dennis Miller's America 180

Dennis Miller is arguably the most well-known right-wing political stand-up comedian in the modern United States, having defined much of the territory of this cultural field over the past few decades. His popularity (or perhaps infamy) as a right-wing political comic has come about in part due to a rescinding of his earlier, liberal beliefs enunciated in his work with *Saturday Night Live* in the mid-1980s to the early-1990s, a shift that Bernard Weinraub describes as Miller's metamorphosis from "iconoclastic liberal to free-wheeling conservative."²⁰⁶ Having produced two Obama-era political stand-up comedy specials, *The Big Speech* (2010) and *America 180* (2014), his comic pronouncements contain an exceptional degree of right-wing commentary on Obama-era power, and his sense of devaluation as a conservative American. In a 2012 interview with *Fox News*' Bill O'Reilly, much of Miller's language illustrates his perceived sense of estrangement and alienation from the national culture, and his belief in the weakening of and threat to the conservative political and cultural currency that he champions. These sentiments are further fed by what he perceives to be Obama's antipathy towards the American right. As he states to O'Reilly, "I'm a guy out here thinking, 'Wow, this is the first time in my fifty-nine years I've got a President who I believe actively dislikes people like me.' That's a weird place to be for a country." He goes on to note his sense of estrangement as a conservative outside of the working dynamics of Obama's presidency in tackling major issues: "You know, [American conservatives] are part of this deal too, and we feel completely estranged to you."²⁰⁷ This view of conservative estrangement speaks again to a principal theme of this chapter, with Miller exhibiting an ongoing irritation with his perceived diminished status as a right-wing American. This case study focuses on *America 180*, examining Miller's reflections of the nature of Obama-era conservatism and its perceived relation to established power, his critiques of welfare and taxation, and his reflections on the American right's position with Obama-era racial politics, in particular ideas of the "post-racial".

²⁰⁶ Weinraub, Bernard, "The Joke Is on Liberals, Says Dennis Miller, Host Of His Own Show Again", *The New York Times*, January 15th 2004, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/YOKWc>.

²⁰⁷ "Dennis Miller slams Obama for not being the president of all Americans", *The Right Scoop*, December 12th 2012. Web. <http://therightscoop.com/dennis-miller-slams-obama-for-not-being-the-president-of-all-americans/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

4.3.1. Bakhtin's Carnavalesque in Miller's Theatrical Map

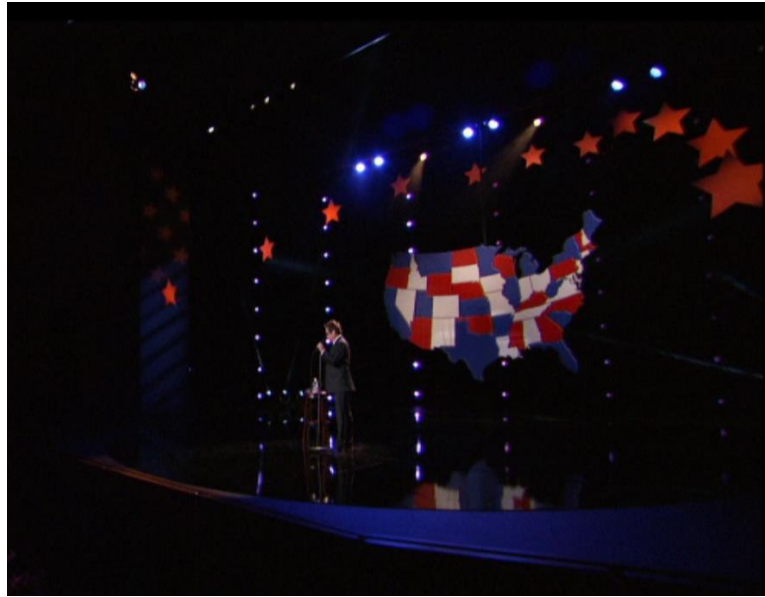


Figure 5: Dennis Miller's U.S map, as viewed in its original form onstage in *America 180*.

The theatrical presentation of Miller's political stand-up comedy special allows for an interpretation as to how it portrays the power relations of the Obama presidency. As the opening credits introduce *America 180* with a balcony shot of the Barclay Theatre, a large model map of the United States is suspended over the theatre stage (see Image 5).²⁰⁸ Miller's material in this section broadly revolves around his promotion of the conservative ethos of personal responsibility and self-reliance, reinforced through his chronicling of certain Obama-era developments which he believes have flipped these treasured, conservative American values. By emphasising the ethical and moral corrosion of American conservative capital by focusing on critiquing liberal belief and narratives surrounding global warming, and "the intention deficit disorder" of typical left-wing approaches to national problems, he moves toward the first moment of substantial political exposition within *America 180*.²⁰⁹ It is at this point that the significance of the map becomes evident. Miller comments:

Boy, the whole country's gone nuts, hasn't it? Everything's turned inside out, flipped around. Football, the IRS, Benghazi, Fast & Furious [formally described

²⁰⁸ Miller, Dennis, *America 180*, 0:14. New Wave Entertainment, Burbank, CA & New York City, NY, 2014. DVD.

²⁰⁹ Miller, *America 180*, 6:05, 18:29.

as the 2010 A.T.F gunwalking scandal], the A.P [Wire-]Tapping Scandal, tapping James Rosen’s phone...Amnesty, this country is tattered right now. [An assistant walks onstage mid-way through Miller’s delivery of this material and turns the model map around 180 degrees. Instead of the structured red and blue states previously displayed, the audience is presented with a chaotic mass of predominantly red and yellow streaks, akin to an American abstract expressionist painting. Coarse, brutal lines have replaced the coordinated state lines of the map across a foreboding purple foundation. Miller points to the transformed model map behind him.] *It, is America 180.* [Applause.]²¹⁰



Figure 6: The chaotic flipside of Miller’s U.S Map presented in *America 180*.

Against the setting of this reversed map, a testament to Miller’s depiction of the numerous national perversities under Obama, he displays his literal conception of “America 180”. Showcasing the moral and ethical flipside of his opposing political ideology, he presents a picture of an America which contrasts dramatically with the political simplicity of the opposite face of the model map, a possible satire on perceived left-wing passivity under Obama that leads him to declare that “the whole country’s gone nuts.”²¹¹ Moreover, the contrast between the topographic ghoulishness of Miller’s flipped map and the managed, neat counter-map can be interpreted as a clear reaction to Obama’s presidency in terms of the unsettling effect it has on conservative values and norms. This theatrical quality is strongly evocative of Bakhtin’s conception of carnival, the “carnavalesque upside down” ethos denied in noncarnival life, which is particularly pertinent in an analysis of Miller’s

²¹⁰ Miller, *America 180*, 18:46.

²¹¹ Miller, *America 180*, 18:46.

America 180 and conservative devaluation under Obama's presidency.²¹² As Jamelle Bouie argues, the rise of presidential successor Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election was in part a reaction to the perceived deterioration of conservative power and status under Obama:

For millions of white Americans who weren't attuned to growing diversity and cosmopolitanism, however, Obama was a shock, a figure who appeared out of nowhere to dominate the country's political life... More than simply "change," Obama's election felt like an *inversion*... it seemed to signal the end of a hierarchy that had always placed white Americans at the top, delivering status even when it couldn't give material benefits. [Original italicisation]²¹³

Bouie's argument of Obama's inversion of traditional conservative status and power is a key theme that runs through this chapter. Following this, as Bakhtin argues, "The fool or clown is the king of the upside-down world".²¹⁴ Miller, faced with this cultural and political disempowerment as an Obama-era conservative, confronts and counters this upside-down world through a political comic role.²¹⁵ His considerably more acerbic political comic persona gives credence to an explication within *America 180* that seeks to subvert the antithetical, left-wing flipside that exists in the Obama-era United States through right-wing political comic critique, expressed in the final moments of the special as his wish that America will eventually "auto-correct" from its current ideological trajectory.²¹⁶ This wish allows for an interpretation of Bakhtin's upside-down world of carnival in Miller's special, particularly illustrated through his use of a model map. This rendering allows for Miller to be seen as seeking to reverse and restructure Obama-era power back to a conservative ideology rather than a left-wing radical one, as is normally the case in the application of carnival, Bakhtin's "breaking up of the world's hierarchical picture."²¹⁷ While Bakhtin argued that laughter was "never used by violence and authority", analyses such as that provided by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have countered a "false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression" by noting the potential for carnival elements such as comic inversion to be as readily deployed by establishmentarian, conservative agents as by radical,

²¹² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.410.

²¹³ Bouie, Jamelle, "How Trump Happened", *Slate*, March 13th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/rWFcd>.

²¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.426.

²¹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.426.

²¹⁶ Miller, *America 180*, 56:21.

²¹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.410.

subversive ones.²¹⁸ A similar critique is offered by Charles Byrd, who argues that Bakhtin's theory of carnival neglects "humour's service to ideological authority and the status quo".²¹⁹ If Miller's political comic persona in *America 180* can be seen as an illustration of the wish to usurp this reversal and maintain traditional ideas of conservative power, then the use of the U.S model map provides a potent interpretation of ideas of the upside-down ethos of Bakhtin's carnival against his own framed ideological or institution-based perceptions of established power and authority.

It reveals Bakhtinian qualities in Miller's work, and consolidates his attempts to demystify and critique the perversions of Obama-era liberalism under a weakening of the cultural and political power of the American right in an America upturned. Miller's stand-up can be construed as deploying ideas of Bakhtinian inversion to emphasise his disillusionment as a conservative, what Barbara Babcock defined in the broader conception of carnival as "symbolic inversion and cultural negation", the inversion of established cultural, social and political codes, in conjunction with Miller's promotion of alternative, conservative codes in *America 180*.²²⁰ Perhaps more pointedly, in a theoretical framework that is typically used to demonstrate how humour and comedy can usurp established power and privilege through comic inversion, this case study demonstrates how Miller uses these comic effects to try and *reverse* this inversion of established power under Obama by applying this technique to conservative cultural, political and ideological devaluation. An interpretation of the Bakhtinian qualities in Miller's work illustrates how a traditionally implemented, subversive theory of humour can be transformed into one of conservation within the confines of a right-wing political comic production, as Miller, through Bakhtinian comic subversion, attempts to place the world and concepts of established power and traditional conservatism back on its rightful axis. In doing so, he offers a striking example of the relative nature of conservatism and subversion, providing insubordinate political comic critiques from the disempowered position of an Obama-era right-wing stand-up, and in doing so, challenging the concept of subversion as inherently left-wing or radical. How this transmits in his

²¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.90.; Stallybrass, Peter & White, Allon, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1984, p.14. Web. https://keats.kcl.ac.uk/pluginfile.php/1215090/mod_resource/content/1/stallybrass%20%20white%2C%20introduction.pdf. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.90.; Byrd, Charles L., "Freud's Influence on Bakhtin: Traces of Psychoanalytic Theory in Rabelais and His World". *Germano-Slavica: A Canadian Journal of Germanic and Slavic Studies*, Vol. 5-6, 1987, p.228. Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo. Print.

²²⁰ Babcock, Barbara, *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*. Ithaca, New York City, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978, p.14. Print.

successive examinations of Obama-era welfare and racial politics however, tests the critical nature of his political comic persona.

4.3.2. Helping the Helpless, Not the Clueless: Miller on Obama-era Welfare

In a subsequent part of *America 180*, Miller shifts his focus to American welfare. Similar language of right-wing moral and ethical depreciation found in his model map material emerges in his argument for welfare reform, recognising the need for a basic welfare safety net for some people, but nonetheless suggesting the need to restrict the privileges of these benefits:

Believe me, I want to pay tax to help the helpless. I don't want to pay taxes to help the clueless. [Laughter.] And I especially hate paying taxes to people who hate me. [Mild Laughter.] You know the Occupy movement? I'm now subsidising people whose plight I actually delight in. [Laughter.] And I'm expected to write a cheque for the rest of their lives.²²¹

Referring directly to Occupy Wall Street activists, Miller presents this movement as a confluence of undeserving, "clueless" welfare recipients, with those who share antagonistic political beliefs to himself acting as a double-edged sword that incentivises his comic advocacy for welfare reform further. He suggests a major restructuring of the current system in which taxed citizens pay a one-on-one sponsorship to a specific individual allocated to them, rather than have their taxes directly siphoned off by the federal government:

We've got one person paying taxes now and one not. If it is half and half now can we at least go to an actual one-on-one sponsorship, alright? Where I get to meet the guy once a month, [Laughter.] and slide the cheque across the table at the diner, [Applause.] ask him if he's even looking for a fucking job. [Cheers & Applause.]²²²

His proposal for social welfare and tax reform can be seen in other variations across the ideological spectrum, finding common ground with previous political comic case studies. Miller's argument is not completely dissimilar to the ideologically-oppositional example of

²²¹ Miller, *America 180*, 46:23.

²²² Miller, *America 180*, 47:00.

Kilstein in his first Obama-era album, *Zombie Jesus* (2009), in which he proposes a solution to tax distribution in which citizens could designate what programmes and agency operations they would personally fund with their taxes.²²³ However, in comparison to Kilstein's socially-liberal proposal of tax designation, Miller's suggestions are far more conservative in their evocation of a more stringent means-tested approach to benefit recipients. This dichotomy exemplifies important facets of Dietrich's analysis of conservative social movements that Miller reflects in his material, particularly the moral imperative to "reduce the population that has legitimate access to particular areas of privilege by excluding those who do not belong and are undeserving".²²⁴ Miller's critiques sit comfortably within Dietrich's designation of the "morally unfit" characterisation that justifies exclusion from these queried benefits and advantages.²²⁵ For him, in an increasingly softening culture, this is the most important "internal battle" that the United States has to face under Obama, his struggle against the weakening of the national moral and ethical backbone caused by a government-managed entitlement mentality.²²⁶ Miller affirms, somewhat grimly in his closing material, his hope that America "will auto-correct historically" and move beyond its current spiritual and moral nadir: "Perhaps even the takers will fix it when they realize they are about to croak the host organism."²²⁷ These characterisations imply that America is hurtling ever closer to its moral and spiritual oblivion because of its abandonment of traditional conservative values. Miller's "helpless" vs "clueless" framework of determining the deservedness or exclusion of Americans from welfare benefits can be seen as an extension to this conservative rhetorical lineage. Zack Beauchamp argues that critiques of welfare policy through rhetorical frames accusing administrations of plying "government handouts" to indolent citizens "has been an essentially permanent staple of modern Republican rhetoric and policymaking".²²⁸ Within Miller's political comic offerings, there is little demonstration that he speaks from a position of power. In his presented outrage at the state of America's health, he positions himself quite definitely outside the mechanisms of Obama-era power and influence, with his "helpless" vs "clueless" dichotomy portraying

²²³ Kilstein, Jamie, "Drugs", *Zombie Jesus*, 0:30. U.S.A: *Stand Up! Records*, 2009. CD.

²²⁴ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.38.

²²⁵ Dietrich, *Rebellious Conservatives*, p.14.

²²⁶ Miller, *America 180*, 43:57.

²²⁷ Miller, *America 180*, 56:55.

²²⁸ Beauchamp, Zack, "Republicans, Race, And The Reason Attacking Welfare Will Backfire", *Think Progress*, August 13th 2013, p.1. Web. <http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2013/08/13/2458341/race-republicans-welfare/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

the dutifully hard-working conservative as a victim of exorbitant taxation, and abused by a population of the gleefully unemployed.

His welfare material can be seen as a continuation of right-wing derisions of the American left's morally relativist diagnoses of socio-political issues, what Jonathan Merritt in 2016 defined as a "conservative boogeyman" of classic ideological antagonism since the Cold War.²²⁹ Prominent conservative condemnations of the left's moral relativism can be found in remarks made by Republican congressman Paul Ryan in November 2011, condemning a "culture of moral relativism" as "the biggest problem in America".²³⁰ Miller's "helpless" vs "clueless" categorisation in his welfare material is similar to Ryan's assessment of moral relativism, an adherence to the framework of ethical and moral failings found in arguments of "principled conservatism" analysed by Hughey and Parks in *The Wrongs of the Right*.²³¹ This is emphasised by Ryan noting his concerns over a "culture of people just having no work ethic" in the same interview.²³² However, Miller's blatantly unpleasant framing of welfare recipients through a parasitic analogy raises questions over the judiciousness of political comic presentations, where a large proportion of Americans who are welfare recipients are treated in an aggressive, detached manner. This detachment provides an opportunity to explore Dolf Zillmann and Joanne R. Cantor's disposition theory of humour. This theory posits that the strength of a response to a humorous presentation is dependent on the respondent's "affective disposition towards the protagonists involved", a response which is enabled when the respondent feels antipathy or resentment towards the disparaged targets and impaired when they feel sympathy for them.²³³ Miller's critique of welfare recipients fits well within this disposition model of humour, particularly with the interpretation that he is building upon their concept of "disparaged entities", to which Zillman and Cantor refer in contrast to the traditional indifference more commonly found in variations of the theory.²³⁴

²²⁹ Merritt, Jonathan, "The Death of Moral Relativism", *The Atlantic*, March 25th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/03/the-death-of-moral-relativism/475221/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017,

²³⁰ Pethokoukis, James, "Paul Ryan speaks! Part two! Moral relativism, the EU debt crisis, inflation and more ...", *American Enterprise Institute*, November 18th 2011, p.1. Web. <http://www.aei.org/publication/paul-ryan-speaks-part-two-moral-relativism-the-eu-debt-crisis-inflation-and-more/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²³¹ Pethokoukis, "Paul Ryan speaks!", p.1.; Hughey & Parks, *The Wrongs of the Right*, p.116.

²³² Pethokoukis, "Paul Ryan speaks!", p.1.

²³³ Zillman, Dolf & Cantor, Joanne R., "A Disposition Theory of Humour and Mirth". Chapman, Anthony J. & Foot, Hugh C. (eds), *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research, and Applications*. New York City, NY: Transaction Publishers, 2007, p.93. Print.

²³⁴ Zillman & Cantor, "A Disposition Theory", p.99.

This is crucial in its application to this chapter's core analyses of power devaluation within right-wing political comic production, where Miller's acerbity towards Obama-era welfare is based on the perceived diminution of his own power as a conservative in contrast to the empowerment of perceived enemies of the state. Furthermore, Zillman and Cantor note that these forms of humour model (affiliative versus non-affiliative) are constructed in absolute terms, where, once the disparaged agents are classified as fitting one or the other category, "predictions of humour appreciation can be made. Thus, affiliation and non-affiliation are not conceived of in terms of degrees."²³⁵ Miller's theoretical comic absolutism of affiliation and non-affiliation in his critique of "takers" is illustrated in his welfare material, material which exemplifies the classic "basic truths" or "moral absolutism" embedded in traditional conservatism.²³⁶ While working from a position of stated disempowerment, one major complexity that sits within Miller's material is the dilemma caused by his use of political comic critiques to exclude - rather than expand - the benefits and advantages of American life to groups categorised as either deserving or undeserving. In his ideologically-prescribed categorisation, there is an agreement that there are some who are of deserving and undeserving affiliation, posing difficulties from a presented position of disempowerment, which shapes the overall subversive bite of his political comic persona.

4.3.3. Getting Beyond Race under Obama: Miller's embracing of the Post-Racial

Another significant issue explored by Miller in *America 180* is the thorny area of racial politics, in which on several occasions he offers an informal suffix to segments of his material to profess his tolerant, specifically non-racist credentials. After joking about Mexican immigration, he notes: "No doubt I'll be called a racist for that joke by *MSNBC*, but you know something? It doesn't even stick that word anymore, they've used it too much...they've made racist the new 'doodyhead'. [Laughter.]"²³⁷ Miller's joke about the liberal policing of racist intent provides a concrete example of how he attempts to wrest the ever-present stigma of racism away from himself as a conservative. The spectre of this racial

²³⁵ Zillman & Cantor, "A Disposition Theory", p.99, 101.

²³⁶ Miller, *America 180*, 56:12.; Farmer, Brian, *American Conservatism: History, Theory, and Practice*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005, p.52. Print.

²³⁷ Miller, *America 180*, 20:43.

intent is particularly heightened when it involves discussions of Obama, an issue that he explores at two specific points in *America 180*. In the first example, following immediately after his section on left-wing racial policing, he extends this into an affirmation of a post-racial United States which has been realised (or is significantly close to being realised) by Obama's election to the presidency:

You know, I always thought that post-racial meant getting beyond it, right? I always thought, 'Well let's get beyond it, so we're not hung up everyday.' I didn't realize it meant spending every waking-second completely obsessed with it. Al Sharpton sees more code words than Dan Brown working on *The Enigma Project*. [Laughter & Applause.] Meanwhile, the only diversity that really interests me is the fact that there are assholes and there are non-assholes.²³⁸

There is sufficient evidence to allow for a reconsideration of Miller's post-racial proclamation. Argued by Catherine Squires to be the offspring of the phrase "post-civil rights era", theories about the post-racial surged after Obama's historic presidential win, a concept defined by Polycarp Ikuenobe as a belief in "an environment or a condition where people do not have negative and false beliefs about or contemptuous attitudes toward a racial group."²³⁹ However, as Hughey and Parks argue, "despite the utopian proclamations that we now live in either a 'color-blind' or a 'post-racial' country, social-scientific research illuminates the grim reality that racial biases are more entrenched than ever."²⁴⁰ In the months following *America 180*'s taping on April 4th 2014 (and release on June 13th 2014), polling found that an almost equal number of Americans felt that race relations in the United States were worsening than felt they were advancing under Obama.²⁴¹ Racial tensions were particularly prominent in Obama's second term with the high-profile police shootings of African Americans Trayvon Martin in 2012 (and George Zimmerman's controversial acquittal of Martin's murder in July 2013), as well as the killings of Michael Brown and Eric

²³⁸ Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²³⁹ Squires, Catherine R., *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century*. New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2014, p.3, p.4. 2014. Print.; Ikuenobe, Polycarp, "Conceptualizing and Theorizing About the Idea of a "Post-Racial" Era". *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol. 43, Issue 4 (December 2013), p.463. Web. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jtsb.12023/abstract>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁴⁰ Hughey & Parks, *The Wrongs of the Right*, p.1.

²⁴¹ Bacon Jr., Perry, "Deep Racial Divide Remains Under Obama", *NBC News*, August 31st 2014, p.1. Web. <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/barack-obama/deep-racial-divide-remains-under-obama-n186211>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Bykowitz, Julie, "Most Americans See Race Relations Worsening Since Obama's Election", *Bloomberg*, December 7th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2014-12-07/bloomberg-politics-poll-finds-most-americans-see-race-relations-worsening-since-obamas-election>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

Garner at the hands of police officers in the summer of 2014, causing negative readings of race relations to plunge to a seventeen-year low by December of the same year.²⁴² In the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal, Obama addressed the concept of post-racialism, arguing that while America was certainly making progress in terms of racial equality, "It doesn't mean that we're in a post-racial society."²⁴³ Within this backdrop, and in the final ten minutes of *America 180*, Miller returns to questions of Obama and post-racialism:

You know, it's not all that dramatic with me and Barack Obama. He's, uh - it's not racist, it's not classist, it's not ideological. He's just an inept, civil servant. He's the guy at the toll booth who constantly gives out the wrong change. [Laughter & Applause.] And I'm glad we finally have a black president, quit dropping the racist thing on me, it was time! It's also a vivid reminder that we *are* all created equal, and that we now know that men of all races, colours and creed can really suck at that job! [Laughter & Applause.]²⁴⁴

The sharp contrast between these conservative ruminations on racial progress under Obama-with Miller's wish for Americans to "get beyond race" - and the gloomier reality, raises the question as to whether cultural instruments such as stand-up comedy actually critique or promote regressive socio-political terms such as post-racialism within a right-wing political comic utilisation.²⁴⁵ As *The Atlantic's* Ta-Nehisi Coates argues, while ideas about the post-racial are used more often to measure racial progress in the United States, the term "is almost never used in earnest."²⁴⁶ Jonathan P. Rossing in particular has compiled a body of literature on the critical tendencies within comic treatments of post-racialism. Using case study analyses of satirist Stephen Colbert within his journal article, *Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project* (2012), and *The Daily Show* host Trevor Noah and other comedians within a successive article, *Emancipatory Racial Humor as Critical Public Pedagogy: Subverting Hegemonic Racism* (2016), Rossing illustrates how their respective interrogations of post-racialism exemplify comedy's interrogative and emancipatory

²⁴² "Michael Brown and Eric Garner: The police, use of force and race", *CBS News*, December 10th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/michael-brown-and-eric-garner-the-police-use-of-force-and-race/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁴³ Obama, Barack, "America is not a post-racial society", *The Guardian*, July 19th 2013, p.1. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/19/america-not-post-racial-society-barack-obama>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁴⁴ Miller, *America 180*, 52:51.

²⁴⁵ Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²⁴⁶ Coates, Ta-Nehisi, "There Is No Post-Racial America", *The Atlantic*, July/August 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/hFBgi>.

qualities in critiquing the concept during and before Obama's presidency.²⁴⁷ In broader cultural reflections, in particular on how the media presented post-racialism, Squires details a contrasting mix of opinions on the post-racial, with divergent interpretations of the term from left-wing and right-wing commentators and partisans. More relevantly, she steadies left-wing comic critiques of post-racialism by noting how these same dismissals of the concept can actively diminish the importance of Obama-era racial politics - what she titles as the detrimental "ironic/humorous post-racial stance" of left-wing comic productions - by neglecting to treat race with seriousness as "a measurable phenomenon".²⁴⁸ However, the wider body of post-racial comic investigation is one largely, if not entirely, dismissive of the concept.

In contrast to this, the term post-racial takes on a unique energy in its application in *America 180*, with Miller providing a distinct example of a live comic production using the term in sober affirmation rather than denigration. This reading seems to conflict with the political comic supposition found in his treatment of the post-racial, which within the first of the two quotations referenced, suggests that the reality has already been realised under Obama, or at least is close to being realised. For all of Miller's apocalyptic-like pronouncements regarding the diminution of the national character engendered under Obama, one of the more intriguing qualities of his political comic material is its focus on Obama's racial symbolism as an affirmation of his conservative ideology.²⁴⁹ Regardless of the fragile qualifications for Miller's belief in a post-racial reality, it stands as a rare example of political comic negotiation - and celebration - of racial politics under Obama. Presenting his belief in post-racialism as an indication of political advancement towards his conservative values, it can be inferred that Miller's confidence in the meritocratic durability of traditional conservative principles in overcoming the perceived institutional racial injustices of American society often protested by the left, is now strengthened by the election of the first African American President. If DiPaolo re-routes progressive acclamations of Obama's racial symbolism to dilute his own sense of estrangement as a conservative American, Miller alternatively interprets his tenure in the White House as "a vivid reminder that we *are* all created equal",

²⁴⁷ Rossing, Jonathan P., "Deconstructing Postracialism: Humor as a Critical, Cultural Project". *Journal of Communication Studies*, Vol. 36 (January 2012), No. 1, pp.44-61. Web. <http://jci.sagepub.com/content/36/1/44.refs>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Rossing, Jonathan P., "Emancipatory Racial Humor as Critical Public Pedagogy: Subverting Hegemonic Racism". *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2015, Vol.1 (2015), No. 1, pp.614-32. Web. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cccr.12126/abstract>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁴⁸ Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique*, p.11.

²⁴⁹ Miller, *America 180*, 54:43.

a proclamation of the equal opportunities ethos of American conservatism and the elimination of race as a barrier in everyday life.²⁵⁰ This recognition of conservative values certified by Obama's election win is framed within Miller's self-titled paradigm of "assholes" and "non-assholes", his belief in the importance of personality and temperament in calculating one's worth.²⁵¹ This becomes clearer in the way that he proceeds to denigrate left-wing political and social factions, portraying the American left as obsessed with race while he argues for the already established irrelevance of the issue as a socio-political determinant.

His post-racial material is unique not just in its application within a right-wing political comic mode, but in its significant depoliticisation of racial identity and racial politics within an explicitly-political cultural mode. Furthermore, if Miller's initial quote can be seen as giving credence to the post-racial as an ongoing process, his second quote makes it even clearer that it is, or is very close to becoming, a reality, only obstructed in Miller's estimate by an oppositional, grievance-focused left-wing leadership that wishes to continue its trivial focus on race rather than "get beyond it".²⁵² This is exemplified by Miller's citing of civil rights figure Al Sharpton, whom he sees as negating Obama's profound socio-political achievement through his continued focus on racial issues.²⁵³ For Miller, his wish for Americans to "'get beyond it'" is framed as being hindered by the regressions of non-conservative sections of society who still see it as an identifiable factor in the modern United States.²⁵⁴ This material illustrates the complexity of the present political and racial landscape that Miller attempts to communicate through a live political comic performance, with its own variety of mechanisms that both hinder and promote the subversive and conservative nature of his material.

Furthermore, it speaks to the multifarious racial conclusions that Obama has had to balance in regards to managing post-racialism as a concept. As Hughey and Parks argue, the President's statements have often measured as a "double helix" of left-wing and right-wing ideologies, stepping between left-wing, historically-sympathetic treatments of race in the United States and a contrasting "boot-strapping hyper-individualism" of conservative

²⁵⁰ Miller, *America 180*, 52:51.

²⁵¹ Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²⁵² Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²⁵³ Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²⁵⁴ Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

leanings which argues that those barriers can nevertheless be overcome with enough personal willpower.²⁵⁵ Furthermore, as John Heilemann & Mark Halperin note in their 2008 presidential election account *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (2010), Obama's campaign ran in part on the basis that the candidate's "post-racial appeal...would prove to be durable, even transcendent", giving weight to an aspirational quality of post-racialism that helped drive his candidacy.²⁵⁶ This tactic of racial transcendence is examined in Amilcar Antonio Barreto and Richard L. O'Bryant's analysis of his 2008 presidential campaign, in which they argue that Obama was purposefully framed as "a black American who had purportedly moved beyond concerns of racial appeal and redress", a strategy which presented him as "fundamentally unthreatening to white America".²⁵⁷ Tim Wise additionally argues that "Obama's [2008] victory, dependent as it was on a rhetoric of racial transcendence and a public policy agenda of color-blind universalism, can be seen as the ultimate triumph for the post-racial approach."²⁵⁸ This interpreted, stage-managed foundation of racial transcendence has caused difficulties for the American right in interpreting and understanding when the President *has* chosen to intervene in race-related issues. Obama's rejection of post-racialism in the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal, according to Michael Eric Dyson, proved a transformative moment in the President's engagement with race, with his acquittal acting as an impetus for Obama to leave "his presidential cubbyhole of racial non-engagement" that he had cultivated in previous years.²⁵⁹ However, Dyson goes on to note that Obama's intervention was particularly poorly received by white conservatives due to the President's well-established practise of racial discretion, where they viewed "Obama's 'one-sided' explanation of black suffering - a radical departure from the tough blows he had thrown black people's way in most of his public pronouncements on blackness - as a surly betrayal of his racial agreement."²⁶⁰ The socio-political tightrope that the President has had to deal with, characterised by Hughey and Parks as "Obama's 'post-racial' persona", leaves the potential for strained, right-wing conclusions to be reached on the basis of him being President, with Miller's statement that

²⁵⁵ Hughey & Parks, *The Wrongs of the Right*, p.3.

²⁵⁶ Heilemann, John & Halperin, Mark, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime*. New York City, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2010, p.72. Print.

²⁵⁷ Barreto & O'Bryant, *American Identity in the Age of Obama*, p.77.

²⁵⁸ Wise, Tim, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2010, preface, iv. Print.

²⁵⁹ Dyson, Michael Eric, *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*. New York City, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2016, p.9. Print.

²⁶⁰ Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, p.9.

Obama is “a vivid reminder” reinforcing this.²⁶¹ In this light, Miller’s remarks cannot be easily separated from the kind of post-racial rhetoric sometimes deployed in interpretations of Obama’s political stratagem. Nonetheless, his profession of post-racialism is troubling in its simplification of complex racial, economic and class-based determinants.

Miller’s post-racial material calls into question the critical and conservative bite of his political comic persona through its strained, near-utopian assumptions during Obama’s second term, presenting it within a period of racial politics more defined by the disillusioned acerbity of the African American activist movement *Black Lives Matter* than by a regressive, “obsessed” left-wing polity chasing redundant racial fictions as presented by Miller.²⁶² If one of his primary grievances with the ideological direction of the modern United States is its focus on “righting historical wrongs” - which Miller argues has been realised in part through Obama’s election to the presidency, and his expectation of a succeeding female presidency - then Miller can be seen to be attempting a similar correction of perceived contemporary wrongs through a comic rebuttal of the widely-perceived, unsavoury attitude that the Republican platform is seen to have towards Obama, and his inadvertent recognition of the complex nature of his ideology’s relationship with contemporary racial politics.²⁶³ However, the socio-political conclusions of this material are taxed when faced with the realities of Obama-era racial politics. The importance of Miller’s dismissal of race as an important signifier is that it casts light on the relative privileges and status that he enjoys, such that he is able to treat race as an insubstantial aspect of American life, a privilege many do not share in the racial and social turbulence of the contemporary United States. In doing so, his critiques of Obama run alongside a strained proclamation of a post-racial United States, or a near-realised testament to post-racialism under Obama’s presidency, which raises important questions about Miller’s political acuity in positing such a degree of political comic criticism within the context of affirming this socio-political fiction.

The conclusions of Miller’s material in *America 180* on examining political stand-up comedy within a subversive and conservative analysis are unique. Although at a performative level the tendency of any individual stand-up to tend towards reductionism, brevity and comprehension in live comic performance is almost invariably present, these

²⁶¹ Hughey & Parks, *The Wrongs of the Right*, p.4.; Miller, *America 180*, 52:51.

²⁶² Miller, *America 180*, 20:57.

²⁶³ Miller, *America 180*, 26:01.

mechanisms, combined with Miller's conservative ideology, demonstrate the role - and complicity - of political stand-up comedy in accommodating awkward racial and political conclusions, such as his dismissal of the complex nature of racial politics under Obama. If much of his political comic bite is driven by a self-described estrangement from the levers of power, his tenuous conclusions on the racial politics of the Obama era show how alienated and significantly out of step Miller is with widely agreed political and racial realities under his presidency.²⁶⁴ If there is anything to be said about the broad, imbalanced stigmatising of right-wing opinion towards Obama through the frame of racist intent, a frame that Miller seeks to undercut, then it would be that his assertion of post-racialism leaves him in an extremely solitary landscape of political comic presentation. However, Miller, in the various concoctions of racial, political and comic conclusions that emerge in this material, nevertheless reveals the complexities of performing political material as a right-wing comic under Obama, and with that, its own varying successes and limitations within this ideological sphere of stand-up.

4.4. Conclusion

The secondary research question of this chapter was: "To what extent can Obama-era right-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" It was answered through an analysis of Dennis Miller and Nick DiPaolo's political comic material. This chapter provides a specific contribution to right-wing comedy scholarship, and in particular the works of Dagnes, and Von Burg and Heidemann. It extends Dagnes' examinations of the tensions and negotiations within this arena of stand-up through my interpretation of its subversive and conservative qualities, and I build on Von Burg and Heidemann's study of conservative comedian Brad Stine by expanding their arguments - through DiPaolo and Miller - of how disempowerment is presented through right-wing stand-up, and how antipathy towards left-wing groups and concepts helps construct right-wing identity. Not only have I provided an extensive analysis of a particularly neglected field of stand-up, but have also reframed conventional treatments of subversion and conservatism, and traditional applications of theory such as Bakhtin's concept of carnival, within a conservative comic placement, and through the lens of right-wing disempowerment

²⁶⁴ "Dennis Miller slams Obama", 1:17.

under Obama. Furthermore, my analysis of DiPaolo shows how he bolsters right-wing cultural confidence at a time of diminution, and through the vehicle of political stand-up, through a subversive critique of the President's racial symbolism. However, I also critiqued the sinister implications of DiPaolo's criticism of Obama's prohibition of waterboarding, and the implications of the cruel and racist qualities within his rebuking of the union-organised immigrant hotel workers. My analysis of Miller provided a more coherent presentation of right-wing enervation, but also showed similar complications in his detached treatments of welfare recipients. More presciently, he greatly undermines the acerbity of his stand-up in his awkward post-racial conclusions. I have shown that the accommodation of these elements of vocalised disempowerment speaks to the seductive nature of political stand-up comedy as an instrument of political critique, but can also provide a platform for less savoury conclusions. I have also shown that, while sympathetic to the evident lack of right-wing comic representation, and the way in which this dearth is reflected through the frustrations of DiPaolo and Miller, the mode of stand-up allows comics to place themselves outside of perceived frames of power, regardless of their actual status and privileges. Within this comic framework of disempowerment, DiPaolo and Miller's often negative treatment of individuals can be justified.

In measuring the various performative, theoretical, social and cultural difficulties inherent in the previous analyses of presidential, African American and left-wing political stand-up comedy, I have established that the cultural field of right-wing political stand-up comedy faces the greatest challenge in expressing and critiquing Obama-era power. Their material is constrained within intensely difficult social, cultural and political boundaries that provide few defences for their rarely-explored, conservative comic opinions. Although previous chapters have revealed similar difficulties for African American and left-wing political stand-up comedians, the racially and ideologically-affiliated identities they broadly share towards Obama was shown to provide a degree of insurance in their respective critiques. In contrast, my analysis demonstrates that right-wing political comedians find themselves in far more precarious territory. Their varying successes and failures, from DiPaolo's critique of left-wing aggrandisements of Obama's racial symbolism, to the awkwardness of Miller's affirmation of post-racialism, evidences this. However, the lack of cultural protection affords the possibility of gauging these right-wing political comic productions as more critical for precisely these reasons, with DiPaolo and Miller exploring Obama's racial symbolism, welfare, immigration, and racial politics in a cultural field which is unused to

such conservative comic interrogations. Perhaps it is the rarity, and vulnerability of these political comic interrogations that led actor and stand-up comedian Dana Carvey to cite Miller as “the true edge” in contemporary stand-up comedy in the face of toothless, left-wing-led comic representation.²⁶⁵ The switching of political and cultural arms under Obama lead Carvey to suggest that right-wing comedy has become the critical cultural face under Obama while the left has simply acquiesced. While Carvey’s claim of left-wing timidity can be critiqued by looking back on the previous chapter’s findings, his viewpoint is nonetheless prescient in its recognition of the intensely isolated position of right-wing comic variations under Obama's presidency. Carvey’s comments, set against the findings of this chapter, allow for a characterisation of Miller - and by extension DiPaolo - as the comic edge in an era dazed by the cultural, social and political ramifications of the Obama presidency.

²⁶⁵ Blosser, John, “Dana Carvey: Liberals ‘Brutalize’ Conservative Comics”, *NewsMax*, November 26th 2014, p.1. Web. <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsmax-Tv/carvey-snl-dennis-miller-comedy/2014/11/26/id/609708/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

Chapter 5: Comedy's Trump Problem and the Health of Political Comic Criticism at the end of the Obama Era



Figure 7: *The Daily Show* host Jon Stewart (1999-2015) raising his arms in jubilation as Donald Trump announces his presidential bid.

“Satire, of course, is hardly the only weapon that has failed to make a difference to Trump’s success...But comedians face a particular challenge with Trump: His behaviour and proposals are so outlandish as to make it difficult to distinguish satire from reality. The Trump phenomenon confounds political ridicule.”

- Leonard Freeman ¹

5.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the final year of the Obama presidency through a case study of Republican presidential candidate and successive President Donald Trump. Pertinent journalistic, theoretical, political and cultural reinforcement is rooted in the analysis of his 2016 presidential campaign in particular, and is guided by two secondary research questions. The first question is: “To what extent does Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy - and political comic responses to his candidacy - provide reflection on the subversive and conservative qualities of the cultural form in the Obama era?” The second question is: “What

¹ Freeman, Leonard, “How ‘The Donald’ Trumps Satire”, *Zócalo Public Square*, May 17th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/0UzZd>.

are the implications for a subversive and conservative political comic analysis when Trump's own use of live comic stylistics and significant saturation of comical qualities within his presidential candidacy are considered?" Compared to the political comic predicament when Obama entered the White House, Trump's possibilities seemed at first endless. However, as suggested by Leonard Freeman in this chapter's epigraph, the disparity between Obama's polished veneer and Trump's theatrical, exaggerated comic personality served to overwhelm the typical processes of political comic response. This chapter argues that, more than any other presidential candidate in recent decades, Trump has significantly challenged the methods, responsibilities and influences of political comedy in the United States, and has had a monumental effect on the conservative and subversive qualities of political comic response. For a cultural field that functions by exaggerating and conflating political statements in order to create comic amusement, Trump in fact weakened, rather than empowered, political comic productions in the 2016 campaign. This chapter's secondary research questions build on the thesis' primary research question, with the first focusing on how political comic responses to Trump revealed unprecedented difficulties in how to respond to his candidacy using typical processes. The second research question analyses the implications of Trump's own live comic style and saturation of comic elements within his campaign. While this thesis till now has concentrated directly on political stand-up, for the sake of analysing the broader effects and influences on the form in relation to Trump, it is important to look at the wider sphere of political comic contributions during the campaign. These aims are furthered by examining the performative and rhetorical qualities that Trump deploys in his use of stand-up stylistics.

In chronicling the arguments in this chapter, a summary of its contribution to the existing scholarship on Trump's comic stylistics and political comic reaction to his presidential campaign, together with additional texts that aid the arguments, or are referenced, are considered. This chapter provides an extension to Kira Hall, Donna M. Ingram and Matthew Bruce's gestural analysis of Trump in "The hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, gesture, spectacle" (2016). Examined through the frames of cultural and linguistic anthropology and linguistic theory, their analysis of Trump's comedic and gestural techniques argues that his success and popular appeal was partly through his value and definition as a comedic

entertainer rather than a conventional politician, as well as his creation of spectacle.² This chapter extends “The hands of Donald Trump” from an exclusively political comic treatment. Their work is used to detail Trump’s insult-comic style of stand-up deployed during the Republican primaries, and to look at how their research on how his impersonation of the disabled reporter Serge Kovalski supports this chapter’s arguments and illustrate the Bergsonian and Burkean qualities of his stand-up style. Another essay built upon within this chapter is Mark Chou and Michael Ondaatje’s “The Drama of Politics: Enacting Trump’s Presidential Self” (2017), an analysis of Trump’s presidential campaign through political dramaturgy. Chou and Ondaatje’s theatrical, performative and political examination of Trump argues for the various theatrical techniques he used during his presidential campaign.³ Their work is extended by engaging in a reading of Trump’s theatrical and performative qualities through an interpretation of his use of stand-up stylistics as a presidential candidate, which draws on Chou and Ondaatje’s use of Erving Goffman’s theatrical concept of keying in frame analysis as characterised by Eli Rozik. Two non-scholarly additions, one of which inspired the title of this chapter, are John Hugar’s analyses of Trump’s disruption of typical comic response in “Jimmy Fallon Is Just the Most Visible Representative of Comedy’s Trump Problem” (2016) and “How Donald Trump Has Made Political Satire Weaker” (2016). Both articles are built upon within this chapter through a more expansive analysis of political comic destabilisation created by Trump’s candidacy.

Other texts not directly related to the specific field of Trump-focused comic scholarship are also applied or referenced in this chapter. In addition, the contemporary nature of Trump’s comic style and the extensive political comic reaction to his presidential bid provides an opportunity to enlist a greater degree of journalistic sources. I begin by detailing the speculated comic blowback revisited in Obama’s comic response to Trump during the President’s 2011 Correspondents’ Dinner address, and how journalistic responses associated Trump’s decision to run in 2016 with him being incentivised by this comic humiliation. Bergson is employed to explicate how Trump’s campaign toyed with perceptions of seriousness and nonseriousness, and how this challenged cultural, social and political expectations during the campaign. Bakhtin is revisited in an analysis of the carnival qualities

² Hall, Kira, Goldstein, Donna M. & Ingram, Matthew Bruce, “The hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, gesture, spectacle”. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2016), p.71, p.79. Web. <http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau6.2.009>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³ Chou, Mark & Ondaatje, Michael, “The Drama of Politics: Enacting Trump’s Presidential Self”, *ABC Religion & Ethics*, January 9th 2017, p.1. Web. <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/01/09/4601757.htm>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

of Trump's campaign. Support from readings of Bridget Storrie and Nancie Loudon Gonzalez aids this chapter's interpretation of Trump's campaign that illustrates qualities of Bakhtinian inversion, and complements the conservative disempowerment analysed under Obama's presidency in chapter four. I then proceed to detail Trump's destabilising effect on political comic responses throughout his presidential bid, and how the sheer amount of comic definition (i.e. nonserious, trivial responses to his candidacy) used by critics against his campaign became an important strategy. I also use Hall, Goldstein and Ingram's analysis of Trump as a comedic entertainer, and Chou and Ondaatje's dramaturgical analysis to interpret Trump's insult-comic stylistics during the Republican primary debates. Bergson's concept of laughter as a form of social corrective is reintroduced and used to reinforce Trump's employment of this comic approach against his Republican rivals.

I also analyse his darker side in his widely interpreted, controversial impersonation of the journalist Serge Kovalski using Kenneth Burke's frame of burlesque rejection. Michael Billig's work *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005) is reintroduced, where Trump, through examples such as his anti-political correctness stance, is characterised as one of Billig's joking rebels, and Don Waisanen's "An Alternative Sense of Humor" is used again to highlight Trump's less than constructive elements of political / comic communication. Finishing with an overview of the political comic post-mortem in the wake of Trump's election win, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry, as characterised originally in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944), is applied to explore the relationship between the televisual, comic and political elements of Trump's campaign and their idea of comic transgression. Taken in conjunction with Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951), it is engaged within scholarly and journalistic analyses of Trump's relationship to the concept of the culture industry. This chapter analyses Adorno and Horkheimer's dismissive views on comedy and the function of laughter as an instrument of this system of cultural pacification, in conjunction with Shea Coulson's analysis in *Funnier than Unhappiness: Adorno and the Art of Laughter* (2007) and Robert W. Witkin's *Adorno and Popular Culture* (2004). Following this, Trump is interpreted as fulfilling Adorno and Horkheimer's contrasting, rebellious characteristics of comedy and laughter in his anarchic, clown-like and absurdist presidential campaign, providing a subversive link between their concept of the culture industry and his candidacy. I conclude with an overview of his unprecedented disruption of political comic production and presentation, arguing that Trump's candidacy - and his subsequent victory - left the broad political comic field in a

significant state of enervation. His unconventionality and comic saturation led to a series of introspections in political comedy as to its continued responsibilities, influences, and relevance within its previous enviable cultural position in a presidential election. With this in mind, this final case study shows how the subversive and conservative nature of Obama-era political comic production, which, in its intensely oppositional approach to Trump, was left beleaguered by his comic candidacy.

5.2. Introducing the Comic Spectre of Donald Trump

As Obama finished his last comedy address at the Correspondents' Dinner on April 30th 2016, concluding by saying "Obama Out", and dropping the microphone to an ensuing mix of laughter and applause from the audience, a curtain fell on his remarkable reshaping of the presidential comedy address as his own time in office came to a close.⁴ As the Republican and Democratic primaries drew to a close, Obama once again chronicled the year through his annual stand-up comedy address. Halfway through, he steered his material towards the inevitable, "serious note" conclusion by appraising the role of the Washington press. However, this turned out to be a final presidential comic curveball from Obama:

Well, let me conclude tonight on a more serious note...The free press is central to our democracy, and - nah, I'm just kidding! You know I've got to talk about Trump! Come on! [Laughter & Applause.]⁵

From here, Obama went on to deliver jokes on Trump's un-presidential qualities, mocking his gaudy style and poor-quality branded goods, his thin-skinned reproaches on Twitter, and his poor business record. Noting that Trump was not in attendance, Obama joked, "Is this dinner too tacky for The Donald? [Laughter.] What could he possibly be doing instead? Is he at home, eating a Trump Steak - [Laughter.] tweeting out insults to Angela Merkel? [Laughter.]"⁶ Obama concluded by rebuking the national press in the audience for the enormous coverage provided to Trump's campaign:

⁴ "2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner", *C-SPAN*, April 30th 2016, 40:00. Web. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?407237-103/2016-white-house-correspondents-dinner>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁵ "2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 27:22.

⁶ "2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 28:20.

Following your lead, I want to show some restraint. [Laughter.] Because I think we can all agree that from the start, he's gotten the appropriate amount of coverage, befitting the seriousness of his candidacy. [Laughter & Applause.] I hope you all are proud of yourselves. [Laughter.] The guy wanted to give his hotel business a boost, and now we're praying that Cleveland makes it through July. [Laughter.]⁷

While some commentators have provided more nuanced opinions on the media's exact role in enabling Trump's success, Obama's comments nonetheless reflect a popular sentiment regarding media treatment of Trump, with a Pew Research Center poll published the previous month finding that 75% of Americans believed the press had given too much coverage to Trump's campaign.⁸ However, the President's jokes raise broader questions of complicity that involve a much larger political and cultural tapestry. One particular journalistic narrative involved a more direct charge of Obama's comic complicity in regards to his 2011 stand-up address at the Correspondents' Dinner, speculating as to whether his comic assail on Trump had emboldened him to run for the presidency.⁹ In the backdrop to Trump's prominent advocacy of the birther theory that year, Obama addressed him directly within the audience of the Correspondents' Dinner and mocked his reported presidential ambitions, his experiences as the host of *NBC's* reality competition series *The Apprentice* (2004-2015), and his gaudy taste as exemplified in the designs of his hotel brand.¹⁰ As *The New Yorker's* Adam Gopnik noted, "If [Trump] had not just embarked on so ugly an exercise in pure racism, one might almost have felt sorry for him."¹¹ *The New York Times's* Maggie Haberman and Alexander Burns concluded in March 2016 that "Trump's evening of public abasement" by Obama, "rather than sending Mr. Trump away, accelerated his ferocious efforts to gain stature within the political world."¹² Certainly the popularity of Obama's

⁷ "2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 29:48.

⁸ Robinson, Eugene, "No, the media didn't create Trump", *The Washington Post*, March 28th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/rAzpg>; Shafer, Jack, "Did We Create Trump?", *Politico*, May/June 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/45d1Z>; Lee, Conrad, "The Media's Obsession with Trump Isn't Justified by Data", *Media Shift*, June 3rd 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/32y1i>; "1. Views of the primaries, press coverage of candidates, attitudes about government and the country", *Pew Research Center*, March 31st 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/skvlB>.

⁹ "Was Trump Motivated to Run For President After Obama Ridiculed Him at 2011 Dinner?", *Inside Edition*, March 15th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/4MuXD>.

¹⁰ "Top Republicans try to scotch birther theories", *The Washington Post*, April 19th 2011, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/tnami>; Obama's comic response to Trump can be viewed at "2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner", 34:00.

¹¹ Gopnik, Adam, "Trump and Obama: A Night to Remember", *The New Yorker*, September 12th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/rI3cT>.

¹² Haberman, Maggie & Burns, Alexander, "Donald Trump's Presidential Run Began in an Effort to Gain Stature", *The New York Times*, March 12th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/28nOe>.

comic roasting of Trump would become a mainstay of the President's veritable comedy legacy, being amongst the most viewed "Obama comedy" videos on YouTube.¹³ Furthermore, this narrative of comic humiliation was maintained during Stephen Colbert's live *Showtime* special as the 2016 presidential election results were announced in real-time, which included an animated comedy short depicting how Trump decided to run for president after being humiliated by Obama.¹⁴

While this narrative of comic blowback is dismissed by *The Washington Post's* Roxanne Roberts as an example of journalistic armchair psychoanalysis (and as a "false narrative" by Trump himself), it highlights the importance of Obama's comedy addresses in journalistic and cultural circles nonetheless.¹⁵ It also provides an important indicator (and a major deficit) in the way that journalistic, political and cultural bodies attempted to diminish Trump's electoral chances through methods of comical delegitimation, primarily by illuminating the nonserious nature of his candidacy in comparison to conventional candidates. However, to an unprecedented degree for a presidential candidate, Trump's celebrity and business history has involved continuously promoting himself in comic presentations for decades, from his numerous appearances on sitcoms, comedy shows and movies, on *WWE Wrestlemania* in 2007, and even in his own *Comedy Central* roast in 2011.¹⁶ Haberman and Burns state in their editorial on Obama's mortification of Trump that the businessman was often considered akin to a "court jester or silly showman" within the ranks of the Republican elite prior to his run for the presidency.¹⁷ With this in mind, the dynamics and methods of comic examination used throughout the election campaign were directly challenged by the uniqueness of Trump's comprehensive comic saturation. Bergson argued that the promise of the "latent comic element" within the sterility of the social body depended on a public perception of their opposition to each other, the humorous and the serious.¹⁸ As he noted, "They owe their seriousness to the fact that they are identified, in

¹³ As of August 2017, the video has accumulated 18.8 million views. "President Obama Roasts Donald Trump".

¹⁴ "The Making of Donald Trump | Stephen Colbert's Live Election Night | SHOWTIME", *Showtime* (Youtube Channel), November 8th 2016. Web. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCo_XypJJus. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁵ Roberts, Roxanne, "I sat next to Donald Trump at the infamous 2011 White House correspondents' dinner", *The Washington Post*, April 28th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/fW20U>.

¹⁶ "Every Donald Trump Cameo Ever", *CH2* (Youtube Channel), November 14th 2015. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yosAVMB47-Y>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; "Donald Trump Roast Best Bits | The Roast Of Donald Trump", *Comedy Central UK* (Youtube Channel), March 2nd 2016. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nf5BKAS5o6A>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁷ Haberman & Burns, "Donald Trump's Presidential Run", p.1.

¹⁸ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.44.

our minds, with the serious object with which custom associates them”.¹⁹ However, Trump’s presidential run provided an extremely disarming concoction of serious and nonserious elements in his challenging of political ceremonies and etiquette. In keeping with Bergson’s typification of the ever difficult dichotomy between “the trifling and the serious” in the comic character, Trump made this dichotomy even more indistinguishable within his campaign.²⁰ The universal underestimation of Trump and his comedic skills would lead to a considerable re-evaluation of the conservative and subversive potential of political stand-up comedy, and more broadly political comedy overall, when he announced his presidential bid.

5.2.1. “Trump is Funny” vs. “Trump is No Longer Funny”

In order to engage with the secondary research questions of this chapter, Trump’s presidential campaign can be divided into two self-defined phases of comic reaction: the “Trump is Funny” period, and a lengthier “Trump is No Longer Funny” period that continued for the remainder of the election. *Fusion*’s Jason O. Gilbert attempted to pin-point the break in reaction in December 2015 by outlining comic (stand-up and late-night reaction in particular), cultural and journalistic responses as a series of milestone moments in Trump’s early candidacy.²¹ On the basis of his analysis, the “Trump is Funny” period lasted from June to December 2015, and was followed by the “Trump is No Longer Funny” period with the sobering announcement of his Muslim ban proposal.²² In the first of these two periods, “Trump is Funny”, there was an initial jubilation amongst political comedians, satirists and late-night comedy hosts when Trump announced his presidential candidacy on June 16th 2015. In reaction to his announcement, Jon Stewart, weeks from stepping down as host of *The Daily Show*, appeared ecstatic in anticipation of the sheer amount of comedy material that Trump’s candidacy would bring. As Stewart comments, “Thank you, Donald

¹⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.45.

²⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.137.

²¹ Gilbert, Jason O., “When did Donald Trump stop being funny? An investigation”, *Fusion*, December 8th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/tOneh>.

²² Diamond, Jeremy, “Donald Trump: Ban all Muslim travel to U.S.”, *CNN*, December 8th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/TrHDD>.; Gilbert, “When did Donald Trump stop being funny?”.

Trump for making my last six weeks my best six weeks.”²³ That same night on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, the host thanked him for deciding to run for the presidency: “Donald Trump is running for president, and he’s going to make late-night television great again.”²⁴ Tina Fey also celebrated in the early weeks of Trump’s announcement, noting that he would be “great for comedy”²⁵ However, others such as Mexican American stand-up comedian George Lopez found his presidential bid less amusing. In the wake of Trump’s controversial comments about Mexican immigrants, Lopez led a chant of “Fuck that puto [A derogatory, emasculating Spanish term connoting a male prostitute]” during a stand-up routine in July 2015.²⁶ The use of comic definition, largely to critique Trump, would become a more and more popular strategy, reflected in Obama’s own responses to Trump that mocked the nonserious ethos of his presidential bid. In an interview with television journalist Matt Lauer in January 2016, when asked if he could ever envision Donald Trump becoming president and presenting a State of the Union Address, Obama responded, “Well I can imagine it - in a *Saturday Night [Live]* skit.”²⁷

Within the “Trump is No Longer Funny” period, the issue of comic responsibility towards the Republican candidate became more pronounced, raising serious questions about the conservative and subversive qualities of political comic critique. This was addressed through the establishment of a “No Longer a Joke” type of press, political and cultural narrative, where emphasising the seriously non-serious nature of Trump’s campaign marked an attempt to shift the cultural language from one that treated his candidacy as a comic confectionary to one which portrayed him as an increasingly viable, and dangerous, presidential candidate.²⁸ The “No Longer a Joke” narrative can be chronicled clearly in the

²³ Lopez, German, “Jon Stewart: ‘Thank you, Donald Trump, for making my last 6 weeks my best 6 weeks’”, *Vox*, June 17th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/s7CGh>.

²⁴ “Announcing: an Announcement!”, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (Youtube Channel), June 16th 2015, 2:32. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFVC3qYGYiE>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

²⁵ Moraes, Lisa de, “Tina Fey: Donald Trump Candidacy “Great For Comedy!” – TCA”, *Deadline*, July 28th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/jOXZk>.

²⁶ Sieczkowski, Cavan, “George Lopez Uses Anti-Gay Slur In Anti-Donald Trump Chant”, *The Huffington Post*, July 21st 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/72XNI>.

²⁷ Hensch, Mark, “Obama: I can only see Trump in a ‘Saturday night skit’”, *The Hill*, January 12th 2016, 5:00. Web. <http://archive.is/bjqC3>.

²⁸ Abramsky, Sasha, “Think Donald Trump is a joke candidate? That’s what they said about Hitler”, *New Statesman*, December 8th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/xGicH>; Taibbi, Matt, “In the Year of Trump, the Joke Was On Us”, *Rolling Stone*, December 29th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/WIatl>; Khan, Hannan, “The Trump Jokes Aren’t Funny Anymore”, *The Huffington Post*, January 3rd 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/XjCB3>; Pace, Thomas & Reardon, Patrick T., “Trumpy McTrumpface: A joke that's now no laughing matter”, *Chicago Tribune*, May 24th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/x7u4G>.

example of the *New York Daily News*. Having initially mocked his candidacy as comical, the newspaper documented his campaign with entertaining front-page lampoons, exemplified in a running joke that began with a published response to Trump's bid with the headline, "Clown Runs For Prez", alongside a photoshopped Trump in clown makeup.²⁹ However, it revised its strategy in September 2016 stating that "This Isn't a Joke Anymore" on its front cover and urging the candidate to abandon his campaign after making remarks that were broadly interpreted as encouraging an assassination attempt against Hillary Clinton.³⁰ This strategy was picked up and emphasised by Clinton herself, initially in remarks she made in a December 10th 2015 interview with late-night comedy host Seth Meyers, arguing that in Trump's call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, he had gone beyond comic amusement: "I no longer think he's funny... What he's saying now is not only shameful and wrong, it is dangerous."³¹ For a candidate who was previously undermined through comic characterisation ("the "clown" candidate), the diminishing of this nonseriousness comic element as he continued to maintain his trajectory towards the presidency came to be seen as a new and vital strategy by politicians and journalists alike. These changing reactions to Trump are evidence of the importance of gauging the broad cultural, political and journalistic treatment of Trump's campaign through styles of comic definition.

The main comic aspects attributed to Trump's political persona and campaign behaviour contain a strong Bakhtinian element to it. This is particularly noticeable in the way that his candidacy inverted conventional ideas of political etiquette and presidential campaigning, as well as in measuring the influence of typical journalistic, cultural and political forces within a presidential campaign. Furthermore, Trump's use of comic stylistics to subvert a variety of accepted cultural and political power dynamics can be seen as a reflection of Bakhtin's emphasis on the subversive power of carnival and its questioning of "prevailing truths and

²⁹ The aforementioned "Clown Runs For Prez" front cover from the June 17th 2015 edition of the *New York Daily News* can be viewed at "June 17, 2015: 'CLOWN RUNS FOR PREZ'", *New York Daily News*, Slide 78 of 93. Web. <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/new-york-daily-news-front-pages-presidential-election-gallery-1.2512941?pmSlide=1.2474203>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

³⁰ Mazza, Ed, "New York Daily News Urges Donald Trump To Quit Campaign: 'This Isn't A Joke Anymore'", *Huffington Post*, August 9th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/m5qO2>.; "Trump must go: Hinting at assassination is too much, even for him", *New York Daily News*, August 9th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/agLCm>.; Nelson, Louis, "Trump in trouble over 'Second Amendment' Remark", *Politico*, August 9th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/MILeo>.

³¹ Gambino, Lauren, "Donald Trump is no longer funny, he's dangerous, says Hillary Clinton", *The Guardian*, December 11th 2015, p.1. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/11/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-is-no-longer-funny-hes-dangerous>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

authorities...a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations and comic crownings and uncrownings”.³² Instances of these Bakhtinian qualities were also noted by Bridget Storrie and Nancie Loudon Gonzalez, with Gonzalez drawing attention to the “carnavalesque attraction” of his political persona.³³ Storrie argues that the clear unconventionality of Trump’s campaign is strongly evocative of Bakhtin’s idea of the clown king, a reading in which she characterises Trump as the “Carnival King”).³⁴ She notes that the vulgarity of his “topsy-turvy and grotesque campaign” can be seen through a Bakhtinian lens as a rebuttal, and reversal, of conventionally understood power dynamics, the “essential element” of hierarchic reversal in carnival, where the jester and clown become kings in the gaiety and transgression of carnivalesque inversion.³⁵ As noted previously in Haberman and Burns’ analysis of Trump’s appearance at the 2011 Correspondents’ Dinner, if the businessman was indeed considered a “court jester or silly showman” by members of the Republican elite prior to announcing his presidential bid, it further supports Storrie’s carnivalesque characterisation.

Furthermore, his Bakhtinian qualities provide an interesting development from the conservative enervation explored in the fourth chapter, with Trump’s political and cultural rejuvenation of conservative confidence complementing the concept of carnivalesque inversion. In reference again to Peter Stallybrass’ and Allon White’s analysis of the “false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression” (used previously in the case study of Dennis Miller), they argue that the potential for carnival elements such as comic inversion is as readily available to establishmentarian, conservative agents it is to subversive, radical counterparts.³⁶ Charles Byrd’s aforementioned analysis argues similarly, noting that Bakhtin’s theory of carnival neglects humour’s facility to establishmentarian ideology.³⁷ As noted in chapter four, Jamelle Bouie commented in March 2016 that “Obama’s election felt like an *inversion*” of perceptions of white American status, resulting in a desire for restoration amongst many voters that Trump spoke to.³⁸ As Bakhtin notes, “The fool or clown is the king of the upside-down world”, a characterisation construed in the chapter’s

³² Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, p.11.

³³ Gonzalez, Loudon, Nancie, “Carnival or Campaign? Locating Robin Hood and the Carnavalesque in the U.S. Presidential Race”, *The Humanist*, April 19th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/BuGeV>.

³⁴ Storrie, Bridget, “Hail the Carnival King!”, *TransConflict*, March 7th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/cT0Qg>.

³⁵ Storrie, “Hail the Carnival King!”, p.1.

³⁶ Stallybrass & White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p.14.

³⁷ Byrd, “Freud’s Influence on Bakhtin”, p.228.

³⁸ Bouie, “How Trump Happened”, *Slate*, p.1.

analysis of right-wing political comic identity, and one that has obvious parallels in Trump's presidential bid through his anti-establishment, anti-political correctness ethos.³⁹ Within this context, analysing the Bakhtinian, and broader theoretical qualities of Trump can be viewed in part as a successor to the previous chapter through a further measuring of perceived conservative enervation under Obama, and one which Trump - the carnival king - wished to remedy through his presidential bid.

5.2.2. Outraged and Unemployed: Political Comic Crisis in the wake of Trump

As Trump's carnival-like campaign moved from success to success, his candidacy would go on to expose a noticeable deficit within political comic responses. In many respects this was due to the difficult task facing the field of political comedy in tackling a political figure who had been dismissed as so absurd it was significantly disarming.⁴⁰ *The New York Times'* James Poniewozik provided an editorial on the "conundrum" that Trump's rise was posing for political comedians, arguing that in the same way Trump "has defied conventional politics and confounded conventional pundits, so has he frustrated conventional satire."⁴¹ For a cultural field that relies heavily on agreed political conventionalities so that they can be disseminated within the disorderly concoctions of comic exaggeration, Trump's embrace of comic effects disarmed political comic critique from the moment he announced his campaign for the presidency. Declaring his intention to run at Trump Tower, he made his entry to awaiting press cameras accompanied by Neil Young's "Rockin' in the Free World" playing through the foyer speakerphones, while he made his way slowly and anti-climactically down an escalator to his podium.⁴² As *The New Yorker's* Ian Crouch commented, "What writer could think of a political entrance more absurd than riding down an escalator to kick off a

³⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p.426.

⁴⁰ Czajkowski, Elize, "How comedians struggled to parody Donald Trump", *The Guardian*, November 8th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/cl5DK>.

⁴¹ Poniewozik, James, "Donald Trump Is a Conundrum for Political Comedy", *The New York Times*, February 16th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/1CKss>.

⁴² Trump's escalator entrance can be viewed in the opening of *C-SPAN's* recording of his presidential announcement. "Donald Trump Presidential Campaign Announcement Full Speech (C-SPAN)", *C-SPAN* (Youtube Channel), June 16th 2015, 0:00. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apjNfkysjbM>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

major campaign?”⁴³ *The New Republic*'s Elspeth Reeve initially anticipated the discombobulating effect Trump would wreak on comic responses through his adoption of comic stylistics, titling the candidate, “America’s Most Gifted Political Satirist”.⁴⁴ A major point Reeves raises in her analysis is Trump’s effect on how we view and separate a serious bid for the presidency from a nonserious one, a question that would be imbued in editorials across the national press in these initial months in an attempt to ascertain the exact purpose of Trump’s candidacy, a narrative of journalistic incredulity chronicled by *The Atlantic*'s Molly Ball.⁴⁵ In his editorial for the comedy website *Splitsider*, John Hugar astutely defined this period in comic crisis as “Comedy’s Trump Problem”.⁴⁶ In a separate piece, he notes:

Put it this way: a key part of political satire is finding the insidiousness wrapped between the pretty words and platitudes put out there by politicians...With Trump it wouldn't matter; he's said things far worse when he knew the camera was on, and he's shrugged it off.⁴⁷

For a field of comic interrogation that prospers on exaggerating stifled political personalities and interpreting coded meanings behind the formality of their statements, Trump’s brash, no-frills and frequently insulting statements have in contrast neutralised these typical comic responses through his unconventional political persona, making the majority of anti-Trump comic criticism, in Hugar’s opinion, “frustratingly stale” in comparison.⁴⁸ As the campaign continued, “Comedy’s Trump Problem” became more pronounced. Conservative political satirist P.J O’Rourke likened the election to being “completely self-satirising”, making it difficult for him as a political commentator “to get a word in edge-wise” against the candidate’s bombastic rhetoric: “not only am I outraged by this, I’m unemployed”.⁴⁹ *The Daily Show* host and stand-up comedian Trevor Noah registered a similarly disarming effect, arguing that Trump’s hyperbolic remarks and humorous statements removed the necessity

⁴³ Crouch, Ian, “Donald Trump is Impervious to Comedy”, *The New Yorker*, February 10th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/rf4RO>.

⁴⁴ Reeve, Elspeeth, “Donald Trump Is America’s Most Gifted Political Satirist”, *The New Republic*, June 16th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/PQKgt>.

⁴⁵ Reeve, “Donald Trump”, p.1.; Ball, Molly, “1,001 Times the Media Acted Shocked That Trump Was Running a Real Campaign”, *The Atlantic*, October 20th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/RkB89>.

⁴⁶ Hugar, John, “Jimmy Fallon Is Just the Most Visible Representative of Comedy’s Trump Problem”, *Splitsider*, September 19th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/EvWWt>.

⁴⁷ Hugar, John, “How Donald Trump Has Made Political Satire Weaker”, *Splitsider*, June 9th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/gXWyy>.

⁴⁸ Hugar, “How Donald Trump Has Made Political Satire Weaker”, p.1.

⁴⁹ “Is Donald Trump beyond satire?”, *BBC Politics*, October 13th 2016, 0:37. Web. <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20161013-how-do-you-out-satire-trump>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017. Archive.is version: <http://archive.is/tMBLb>.

for him to impose comic embellishment. He cites Trump's accidental use of the expletive "titties" at a live rally, his insulting of the Khan Family in response to their Democratic convention speech, and asking for a crying baby to be removed from one of his rallies, Noah laments, "I have to complain... We would have had that as an escalation in a joke. But he did this for real, and that's not fair."⁵⁰ For a political candidate described by *Esquire's* Matt Miller as "seemingly writing his own *SNL* sketch", in his dialogue with Mike Drucker, stand-up comedian and writer for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, notes a similar difficulty of keeping up with Trump.⁵¹ Offering the example of when Trump felt the need to defend the size of his penis during a *Fox News* Republican Debate, Drucker notes the "extremely difficult" effect Trump has had in immobilising heightened comic responses to already exaggerated, comical statements: "And that's one of the things that a lot of us have been struggling with. Because in a way we're like, this guy likes talking about his dick. How do you make fun of that?"⁵²

However, there have been attempts by a handful of comedians to modify more typical approaches to Trump in the wake of his seemingly impervious nature to comic critique. One refreshing stratagem can be found in stand-up comedian Anthony Atamanuik's well-polished impersonation of Trump. Atamanuik, who captures the candidate's physical and rhetorical style extremely well, also embodies his impersonation with a substantial, palpable tone of violence and cruelty, presenting what *Slate's* Andrew Kahn typifies as a "downright monstrous" presentation that deviates from the more conventional, "theatrical polish" of televised impersonations.⁵³ Atamanuik argues that the strategy behind this is clear, noting that in his aggressive, yet empathetic comic tackling of Trump as a troubled individual - "a person in pain" - he comments that he feels that he has to "make sure to take something away from him in the process. I think that's the only way to do him".⁵⁴ Correspondingly, *The Onion's* editorial team acknowledged that the sheer "instability, irrationality and

⁵⁰ Moraes, Lisa de, "Trevor Noah: Donald Trump Not Fair To Comedians", *Deadline*, August 9th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/GBgXR>.

⁵¹ Miller, Matt, "Comedy vs. Donald Trump: The Great, Hilarious Battle for America", *Esquire*, April 27th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/TpWax>.

⁵² "Trump defends his manhood after Rubio's 'small hands' comment - video", *The Guardian*, March 4th 2016. Web. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/video/2016/mar/04/trump-defends-his-manhood-after-rubios-small-hands-comment-video>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Miller, "Comedy vs. Donald Trump", p.1.

⁵³ Kahn, Andrew, "How a Few Weird, Surrealist Comedians Are Proving That Trump Is Not Actually Immune to Satire", *Slate*, July 6th 2016, p.1. <http://archive.is/ODPY3>.

⁵⁴ Zarum, Lara, "'Of Course I Have Empathy For Him. He is a Person in Pain': Comedian Anthony Atamanuik on Playing Trump", *Flavorwire*, November 2nd 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/ehaop>.

incoherence” of the campaign made it challenging “to come up with fresh avenues of amusement”, bringing with it at times a “comic fatigue” inside the writers’ room.⁵⁵ However, in an intriguing theoretical twist reported by *The New York Times*’ Sarah Lyall, she notes that rather than trying to out-exaggerate Trump, the editorial team “turned him into a new character: Donald Trump, sensitive loner, stuffing birdseed into his pockets and talking tenderly to the pigeons he keeps on the Trump Tower roof.”⁵⁶ *The Onion*’s take on Trump confirms the recognised necessity to alter typical comic and satirical routes to gain comic effectiveness, by making Trump more serious and less exaggerated through comic mastery. *The Onion*’s strategy illustrates how the total unconventionality of Trump resulted in a comic transition from nonserious political clown candidate within the arena of American presidential politics to a tentative figure within their own satire, a unique inversion of typical comic and satirical processes borne out of a very atypical presidential candidate.

5.2.3. Examining the Stand-up Comic Qualities of Donald Trump

Numerous commentators and comedians have written on the ingrained stand-up comedy elements of Trump’s rhetorical and performative manner, with Poniewozik observing that his live presentations embrace “the mode and rhythms of a stand-up”.⁵⁷ This was also noted by *The Daily Show* host Trevor Noah, who compared Trump to a stand-up comic, particularly at his campaign rallies: “I know a stand-up comedian when I see one.”⁵⁸ Atamanuik likewise described his rallies as “semi-improvised stand-up routines” and Trump as “an open-micer who somehow made it to the top.”⁵⁹ More specifically, Jeet Heer characterises Trump’s stand-up style as a form of “insult comedy”, a genre typified by classic

⁵⁵ Lyall, Sarah, “How to Satirize This Election? Even the Onion Is Having Trouble”, *The New York Times*, November 4th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/q5PA5>.

⁵⁶ Lyall, “How to Satirize This Election?”, p.1.; “‘It’s Hard Being Away From You All,’ Says Donald Trump While Spreading Bird Feed Around Rooftop Pigeon Coop”, *The Onion*, June 20th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/fjPo6>.

⁵⁷ Poniewozik, “Donald Trump Is a Conundrum for Political Comedy”, p.1.

⁵⁸ Leeds, Sarene, “Trevor Noah Says Donald Trump Is Better Suited for a Stand-Up Comedy Career”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2016/08/11/trevor-noah-says-donald-trump-is-better-suited-for-a-stand-up-comedy-career/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Noah’s original remarks can be viewed in full at “The Daily Show - Did Donald Trump Call for Hillary Clinton's Assassination?”, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* (Youtube Channel), August 11th 2016, 5:20. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25w439VNqTw>. Last accessed on November 6th 2016.

⁵⁹ Miller, “Comedy vs. Donald Trump”, p.1.

stand-up comedians like Don Rickles and Joan Rivers, and the candidate's unique ability to utilise it beyond the margins of conservative talk radio and transform it into "the fuel for electoral politics."⁶⁰ What makes Trump's rise to the presidency so unique is not just his manipulation and command of comic qualities, but the way in which he has also been able to use comedy to disarm his opponents and enable his campaign. In Mark Chou and Michael Ondaatje's dramaturgical analysis, they note that for someone who approached the campaign trail "as if it were a stage for his foul-mouthed comedic routine", a significant part of his success was due to his mastery of theatrical qualities of style, performance and drama on a political platform.⁶¹ Furthermore, they note that his stand-up qualities and broader entertaining elements did not just accommodate and enable Trump's candidacy, but also helped replace his lack of political experience.⁶² The uniqueness of Trump's comic stylistics is documented in Kira Hall, Donna M. Goldstein and Matthew Bruce Ingram's examination of his use of gestures as a critique of contemporary political structures and as a means of creating spectacle. From rolling his eyes to his use of torso shrugs, his deployment of sarcasm, his adversarial stance (for example his anti-political correctness tone), his repetition of packaged comic routines, and bullying of opponents, they argue that these gestures give him the air of a comedic entertainer more than a conventional presidential candidate.⁶³ These qualities would be used to great effect by Trump during the Republican primary debates.

His polished insult comic style was popularly showcased by the manner in which he handled his Republican opponents during the televised Republican primary debates. His refined comic insult approach and his general stand-up ethos was in addition empowered by the subdued presentations of his opponents, described by *Bloomberg's* Leonid Bershidsky as "a field of rivals so unfunny they could have been selected for that quality."⁶⁴ His use of an insult comic-style within the debates can also be interpreted as possessing an arresting utilisation of Bergson's concept of social correction through laughter. Examples of Bergsonian correction found in the primary debates include Trump's mocking of his

⁶⁰ Heer, Jeet, "Donald Trump's Comedic Genius", *The New Republic*, September 8th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/4AudO>.

⁶¹ Chou & Ondaatje, "The Drama of Politics", p.1,

⁶² Chou & Ondaatje, "The Drama of Politics", p.1.

⁶³ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump", p.79.

⁶⁴ Bershidsky, Leonard, "Trump Won the Stand-up Competition", *The Japan Times*, p.1. Web. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/05/08/commentary/world-commentary/trump-won-gops-stand-competition/#.WbRc99QrKt8>. Last accessed on September 9th 2017.

opponent Rand Paul's physical appearance, summarizing Jeb Bush's campaign as a "total disaster" and sneering at his "weak" manner, his derisive characterisation of Marco Rubio's response to Obama's 2013 State of the Union address as "one of the saddest things I've ever seen", and his labelling of Ted Cruz "as the single biggest liar" in the nomination race and a "basketcase".⁶⁵ His insult comic style was laughably unconventional and never displayed a particular want to treat his opponents in an even-keeled manner, a further exemplification of Bergson's positing of humour's "useful function" as an injudicious tool.⁶⁶ As Bergson maintains, "In this sense, laughter cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating."⁶⁷ Furthermore, Trump would offer moments of ad-libbed responses during the debates as another element of his corrective humour. In response to remarks that Trump had previously made about his family, Jeb Bush remarked to Trump, "My mom is the strongest woman I know", to which Trump responded, "She should be running."⁶⁸ Within this comic rebuttal is Trump's Bergsonian-style attempt to humiliate Bush by reminding him - and the wider, national audience - of the perceived weak qualities with which Trump had labelled him, evocative of Bergson's concept of laughter as a disciplinary agent.⁶⁹ This was further demonstrated in his invention of nicknames for his Democratic and Republican opponents. Examples included "'Crooked Hillary'" for Clinton, "'Little Marco'" for Republican senator Marco Rubio, "'Low-Energy' Jeb" for Florida Governor Jeb Bush, and "Crazy Bernie" for Democratic Party presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.⁷⁰

This analysis is supported by Chou and Ondaatje's theatrical interpretation of Trump's use of Erving Goffman's concept of "key" in frame analysis, and given even greater credibility by remarks made by senior Trump campaign strategist Paul Manafort during the primaries that the candidate was "'projecting an image'" onstage distinct from his offstage

⁶⁵ These examples from the Republican primary debates can be accessed at "How Donald Trump Insulted His Way to the Presidency", *filmhd* (Youtube Channel), September 8th 2017, 0:24, 3:02, 3:58, 15:45, 9:40, 17:31. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xJXIDV3jTc>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁶⁶ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.197.

⁶⁷ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.198.

⁶⁸ "How Donald Trump Insulted His Way to the Presidency", 8:20.

⁶⁹ "Donald Trump Straight Up Calls Jeb Bush 'Weak' To His Face", *tpmtv* (Youtube Channel), January 14th 2016, 0:33. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYhtNM0irZQ>. Last accessed on December 15th 2016.; Bergson, *Laughter*, p.136.

⁷⁰ Chavez, Paola & Stracqualursi, Veronica, "From 'Crooked Clinton' to 'Little Marco', Donald Trump's Many Nicknames", *ABC News*, May 11th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/N2nQl>.

personality.⁷¹ Goffman's concept of keying is defined by Eli Rozik as the transformation of an activity that is already meaningful in terms of its primary framework (in this case the Republican primary debates) but "is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else [e.g, a theatre event]."⁷² "In other words," Rozik notes, "a keyed event should thus be understood as reflecting different rules."⁷³ In Chou and Ondaatje's development of Trump's use of keying, they note numerous tendencies used by keyed actors to "employ playfulness, irony and exaggeration in the context of a primary frame to distract an audience", a strategy which they argue can be commonly found in Trump's melodramatic, comical performative body.⁷⁴ Certainly the degree to which Trump's manipulation of political and theatrical divisions changed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate in a politically-agreed space, as demonstrated in his "comedic callousness" showcased and confirmed in the Republican primaries.⁷⁵ In doing so, he established a dynamic in which we can view the responsibilities of live comic instrumentation when deployed by a presidential candidate within a politically-agreed space.⁷⁶ With the Republican primary campaign having been described in its early months as the "GOP Clown Car", it is ironic that Trump - the consummate clown - usurped a field of candidates unwilling (or unable) to engage in humorous retorts or comic insult themselves.⁷⁷ In doing so, some commentators recognised early within the campaign Trump's potential to master the race through nonseriousness, leaving it vulnerable, as Jennifer Rubin argues, to "a ludicrous figure with no chance to win".⁷⁸ However, it was Trump's masterful exploitation of these absurd, nonserious, comical elements within the framework of agreed political spaces that allowed him to dominate his opponents and go on to win the party's nomination.

⁷¹ "The Donald is 'projecting an image,' Trump election strategist says", *CTV News*, April 22nd 2016, p.1. Web. <http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/the-donald-is-projecting-an-image-trump-election-strategist-says-1.2870365>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁷² Rozik, Eli, *Generating Theatre Meaning: A Theory and Methodology of Performance Analysis*. Brighton, Portland, OR & Toronto, ON: Sussex Academic Press, 2010, pp.164-5. Print.

⁷³ Rozik, *Generating Theatre Meaning*, p.165.

⁷⁴ Chou, & Ondaatje, "The Drama of Politics", p.1.

⁷⁵ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump", p.89.

⁷⁶ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump", p.89.

⁷⁷ Taibbi, Matt, "Inside the GOP Clown Car", *Rolling Stone*, August 12th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/prIrG>.; Schneider, Bill, "Is 2016 the year of the Republican 'clown car'?", *Reuters*, June 4th 2015. Web. <http://archive.is/dFIfH>.

⁷⁸ Rubin, Jennifer, "The Trump clown show", *The Washington Post*, June 16th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/qunsn>.

5.2.4. The “Evil Clown” Undertones of Trump’s Comic Manner

In detailing the sophisticated comic techniques Trump used during the Republican primary debates, other interpretations of its strategic use can be considered. As demonstrated during the debates, his persona outside the typical realms of a politician was greatly defined by his use of live comic stylistics. However, it also raises questions as to the ambiguities and implications of other remarks made by the candidate that have employed an array of comic techniques, or have been defended, through his candidacy’s significant comic saturation. As Bershidsky darkly comments in the wake of Trump all but clinching the nomination, “The public picked the funniest man; so what if he was maybe a little racist, slightly misogynist, not always coherent, less than consistent?”⁷⁹ These remarks lend weight to this chapter’s interpretation that the candidate’s use of comic stylistics within an already codified culture of Republican rhetoric aided and abetted the more insidious messages of his political campaign. In Hall, Goldstein and Ingram’s analysis of Trump’s performative and gestural language, one of their key findings is that the two-fold deployment of his unique performative style acted as a compelling source of everyday entertainment value for national media consumption and simultaneously answered many conservative American anxieties with its strong anti-political correctness ideology. As they note:

These depictive gestures operate cross-modally to signal to Trump’s base that he challenges what is widely viewed as the political establishment’s debilitating rhetoric of political correctness.... Yet as entertainment, his gestures intensify the force of his words, attracting and holding the attention of the wider public as they dominate the news cycle.⁸⁰

Certainly as the Trump campaign continued into the general election, the candidate’s rhetorical and performative body was recognised by some to contain a more insidious ploy that went beyond mocking and humiliating his Republican primary opponents. To illustrate this, they analysed the widely mediatised example of Trump’s alleged impersonation of Serge Kovaleski, a disabled reporter for *The New York Times*.

⁷⁹ Bershidsky, “Trump Won the Stand-up Competition”, p.1.

⁸⁰ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, “The hands of Donald Trump”, p.74.



Figure 8: A screencap of Trump’s controversial impersonation of an unnamed reporter during a speech on November 25th 2015.

This impersonation was set within the backdrop of Trump critiquing the disarming use of political correctness by media forms regarding an unsubstantiated assertion he had made previously about the September 11th attacks, and in which Koveleski was directly involved as the source.⁸¹ This impersonation by Trump involved the use of limp, flailing limbs, (akin to Kovalesski’s muscular condition), facial contortions, and incoherent speech, a performance typified by Hall, Goldstein and Ingram as “a multimodal image depictive of disability.”⁸² In response to the critical media reaction, Trump denied the anti-disablist tones of his impersonation by responding that he “merely mimicked what I thought would be a flustered reporter trying to get out of a statement he made long ago” and stated that he didn’t know who Kovalesski was or that he had a disability.⁸³ This response led to the reporter stating that he had interviewed and interacted with Trump around a dozen times.⁸⁴ Whatever the truth really is, the use of these comical gestures by Trump is argued by Hall, Goldstein and Ingram to provide an advantage of intense ambiguity about so many of the candidate’s highly controversial, and often comically imbued statements. According to them, Trump’s use of

⁸¹ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, “The hands of Donald Trump”, p.74.; Kessler, Glenn, “Donald Trump’s revisionist history of mocking a disabled reporter”, *The Washington Post*, August 2nd 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/fK2g5>.

⁸² Video of Trump’s impersonation can be accessed at “Trump mocks reporter with disability”, *CNN* (Youtube Channel), November 25th 2015. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PX9reO3QnUA>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, “The hands of Donald Trump”, p.86.

⁸³ Haberman, Maggie, “Donald Trump Says His Mocking of New York Times Reporter Was Misread”, *The New York Times*, November 26th 2015, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/tCmus>.

⁸⁴ Haberman, “Donald Trump Says His Mocking of New York Times Reporter Was Misread”, p.1.

comic gestures allowed repeatedly for journalistic focus to transition from initial critique to one that focused on divergent opinions over interpretation. They argue:

Although the media response was initially condemning, Trump's defense transformed the critique into an interpretive discussion. Regardless of the relationship between the performance and the object depicted, Trump moved political discourse to a new place by highlighting gestural ambiguity through comedic routine.⁸⁵

They note that this in itself is testament to how Trump was able to alter typical conventions of journalistic, political and comic instrumentation to avoid overtly critical scrutiny on the campaign trail. Trump's comical impersonation also displays qualities associated with Kenneth Burke's poetic categorisation of the burlesque frame of rejection. In performing an exaggerated, "heartless" imitation of Kovalski's disability in order to reject his denial, Trump exhibits a typification of burlesque rejection, defined by Burke as the performer's contentment to "select the externals of behavior, driving them to a 'logical conclusion' that becomes their 'reduction to absurdity'".⁸⁶ The inherent cruelty in the methods of much of Trump's comic responses invokes a mixture of Bergsonian characteristics and Burkean poetic categorisation, particularly in how they reaffirm the candidate's hyper-masculine political persona through attempted humiliation. In other examples cited by Hall, Goldstein and Ingram, the ambiguous tones of Trump's impersonations are viewed as presenting an antagonism against "the censorship ideals of political correctness" by using comedic gesture and comic qualities, while staying within the realms of "plausible deniability by defying standardized interpretation".⁸⁷ This analysis of a duality in deviating interpretations is reminiscent of Michael Billig's examinations of rebellious humour, previously analysed in chapter four, and his characterisation of a "joking rebel" that cannot be exclusively applied to radical or conservative ideologies towards power.⁸⁸ It is a humorous strategy that perfectly complements Trump's own anti-politically-correct stance, according with Billig's argument that "not only can bigots laugh, but they can also position their laughter as rebellious, mocking the seriousness of tolerance and reason."⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump", p.88.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Attitudes Towards History*, p.54.

⁸⁷ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, "The hands of Donald Trump", p.90, p.82.

⁸⁸ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

⁸⁹ Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.209.

Through this concoction of comic strategy, Trump's style of rebellious humour is one that can appeal to the grievances of Republican voters while largely avoiding the accountability of more sinister interpretations, a further example of comic complicity within the fabric of his campaign. An additional and particularly infamous example of performative and rhetorical ambiguity can be read in what many perceived to be a codified threat to Hillary Clinton in August 2016 over her stance on the 2nd Amendment. In his widely mediated remarks, Trump was heavily criticised for seeming to suggest that gun owners may be the only ones capable of stopping Clinton from implementing an anti-gun rights agenda through judicial nominations if she was elected president.⁹⁰ As Trump comments, "By the way, and if she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people, maybe there is, I don't know."⁹¹ The effect of these remarks was predictable, with both critics and defendants emphasising their arguments through comic language. Dan Gross, President of the Brady Campaign and Center to Prevent Gun Violence, described the violent quality in many of Trump's remarks as "a common punchline" in his campaign, and Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan responded to it by describing it as "like a joke gone bad."⁹² Even though Trump's former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski joined the chorus of Republican figures who likened Trump's remarks to "a joke", the statement was taken seriously enough to incentivise the Secret Service to speak to the Trump campaign regarding it.⁹³ Once again the relevance of gauging the seriousness and nonseriousness of this major event in the 2016 presidential race is camouflaged in a context of comic definition. In Noah's response to Trump's remarks on *The Daily Show*, he criticises him by insisting that "one of the most basic qualities of a president is that we know what they mean", a quality which Trump was continuously able to avoid as a presidential candidate.⁹⁴ After showing a clip of stand-up style jokes and insults that Trump had made during the Republican primaries, Noah illustrates the unique dalliance between political and comic rhetoric that Trump has invented, commenting that the candidate's mixture of evocative and disarming comic stylistics with codified, and sometimes sinister Republican rhetoric allows for wildly

⁹⁰ Gambino, Lauren, Becket, Lois & Jamieson, Amber, "'Like a joke gone bad': Trump faces wide range of criticism for 'assassination' line", *The Guardian*, August 10th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/Sc1S7>.

⁹¹ "Trump: '2nd Amendment people' could stop Clinton", *USA Today*, August 9th 2016, 0:00. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELL-aYFgkXI>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

⁹² Corasaniti, Nick & Haberman, Maggie, "Donald Trump Suggests 'Second Amendment People' Could Act Against Hillary Clinton", *The New York Times*, August 9th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/oQgiY>.

⁹³ Luhby, Tami & Sciutto, Jim, "Secret Service spoke to Trump campaign about 2nd Amendment comment", *CNN*, August 11th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/2kUVH>.

⁹⁴ "Did Donald Trump Call for Hillary Clinton's Assassination?", 4:30.

divergent interpretations, what Bershidsky typifies as Trump's "evil clown" quality that often emerges in his use of comedy.⁹⁵ Furthermore, Noah sarcastically mocks the popular view of journalistic disservice that many Americans perceived in the media's handling of Trump, commenting that "We were all spending so much time focusing on his racism and sexism and xenophobia and threats to democracy that we missed all the jokes! [Laughter.]"⁹⁶

These commentaries cast a critical eye on the dangers of focusing too much on the entertaining or comical elements of a candidate rather than on sharpened journalistic scrutiny, which is especially pertinent when it is considered just how unconventional Trump proved to be in regards to his numerous, entirely false statements during the campaign. According to *Politifact's* "Truth-O-Meter", more than two-thirds of selected statements which Trump made during the 2016 presidential election were found to be either "Mostly False", "False" or entirely false.⁹⁷ Trump's ability to use comic instrumentation so effectively in combination with this record gives credence to an interpretation of comic duplicity with a candidate who was recorded as the most dishonest mainstream candidate running in the presidential election. Furthermore, in previous case studies, Don Waisanen's examination of key limitations found in political / comic interchanges and humour's potentially negative features and effects was applied. Qualities raised by Waisanen include notions of "simplism", "negativity" and "distortion", which can be seen for example in Trump's apparent comic impersonation of Kovalski.⁹⁸ However, Waisanen's analysis of comedy's limitations has a noticeably different tinge to it when removed from the stand-up arenas of Lewis Black and Bill Maher and placed at the forefront of Trump's presidential bid. While this chapter seeks to underline the masterful use of comedy by Trump, it also seeks to emphasise how comedy - in particular stand-up comic qualities - have aided and abetted his bid for the presidency. For a candidate whose political persona continually moved between interpretations of seriousness and nonseriousness, funny and unfunny, politician and clown, the ambiguous nature of comic intent and comic interpretation was a vital and unique cultural ally in enabling Trump's campaign to evade accountability while maintaining its envious hold on the cultural and journalistic foundation of the presidential election.

⁹⁵ Bershidsky, "Trump Won the Stand-up Competition", p.1.

⁹⁶ "Did Donald Trump Call for Hillary Clinton's Assassination?", 7:00.

⁹⁷ Eugene Emery Jr., C, "Politifact's guide to the third presidential debate", *Politifact*, October 19th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/BEVvE>; "Donald Trump's file", *Politifact*. Web. <http://archive.is/Pwf11>.

⁹⁸ Waisanen, "An Alternative Sense of Humor", pp.303-304, pp.306-308, pp.308-310.

5.2.5. Questions of “Post-Trump Political Credibility” in Political Comedy

As Trump’s chances of winning the presidential election increased, “Comedy’s Trump Problem” became more pronounced. *Literary Hub*’s Zack Stovall went as far as describing Trump as essentially “killing comedy” weeks before the election.⁹⁹ More pertinently, as the race entered its final months, many political comic retrospectives on Trump began to pepper the cultural field, and specifically the cultural agent’s own role in enabling and standardising Trump as a candidate. One major player in the election, *Saturday Night Live*, found itself under intense criticism for allowing him to host the show on November 7th 2015.¹⁰⁰ In response, *SNL* writer and comic Michael Che argued that the decision made sense given the comical nature of his candidacy.¹⁰¹ Despite Che’s defence, the fallout from *SNL*’s decision led to a legitimacy crisis amongst cultural critics such as *Rolling Stone*’s Ryan McGee, who on September 27th 2016, penned a strategy to aid *SNL* in retrieving its “Post-Trump Political Credibility.”¹⁰² However, outside the weighty political comic and satirical expectations of *SNL* in an election year, a somewhat unexpected and provocative moment occurred in late-night television host Jimmy Fallon’s interview with Trump on September 15th 2016, in which Fallon finished his exchange by tousling the presidential candidate’s famous hairstyle.¹⁰³ Fallon received a great deal of criticism over this incident from fellow comedians and numerous journalists, many of whom cited the dangers of enabling him through such humanising gestures.¹⁰⁴ Political comedian Samantha Bee responded to questions about *SNL* and Fallon’s comic complicity on her show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, seeing their treatments of Trump as normalising him - a perceived dangerous presidential candidate

⁹⁹ Stovall, Zack, “How Donald Trump is Killing Comedy”, *Literary Hub*, October 20th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/rYfk3>.

¹⁰⁰ Cobb, Kayla, “Does ‘Saturday Night Live’ Regret Letting Donald Trump Host?”, *Decider*, October 28th 2016. Web. <http://decider.com/2016/10/28/does-snl-regret-letting-trump-host/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰¹ The relevant segment of Che’s interview can be viewed in the second video clip at Frucci, Adam, “Colin Jost and Michael Che Talked About Working with Trump on ‘SNL’ with Seth Meyers”, *Splitsider*, July 29th 2016, 0:00. Web. <http://archive.is/FPzyq>.

¹⁰² McGee, Ryan, “How ‘SNL’ Can Get Its Post-Trump Political Credibility Back”, *Rolling Stone*, September 27th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/SEeK6>.

¹⁰³ “Donald Trump Lets Jimmy Fallon Mess Up His Hair”, *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* (Youtube Channel), September 15th 2016. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0BYqzdiuJc>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Pierce, Robbie, “Comedians Eviscerate Jimmy Fallon’s Shameful Trump Pandering”, *Advocate*, September 16th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/5sTXM>.; Sims, David, “The Embarrassment of Jimmy Fallon”, *The Atlantic*, September 16th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/HjrQ6>.

- on the basis that “he’s good entertainment”.¹⁰⁵ Referencing the news network *NBC* severing its business relationship with Trump after he made derogatory remarks regarding immigrants in June 2015, Bee mocks the network’s continued comic relationship with him through his numerous appearances on *NBC*’s *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and *SNL*. As Bee comments, “To their credit, *NBC* did sever ties with Trump after he called Mexicans rapists. If by severing ties you mean inviting him on their flagship comedy programmes to show millions of Americans what a fun guy he is!”¹⁰⁶ Bee’s critique marks an interesting gauging of professional, journalistic responsibilities on behalf of *NBC* to that of its late night entertainment / comedy component in regards to Trump, and gauging the roles of established “serious” and “nonserious” cultural markets in how they can be interpreted to have aided his candidacy.

In addition, Hugar argues that Fallon’s comic controversy with Trump can be seen as symptomatic of a wider national disenfranchisement over the media’s excessive, uncritical coverage of Trump’s campaign: “The image of Fallon rubbing Trump’s hair was a perfect visual representation of every bit of soft coverage Trump had ever received since he began his campaign”.¹⁰⁷ However, his argument can also be seen as a pertinent illustration of the greatly increased sensitivity over the issue of the complicity of comedy productions in assisting Trump’s campaign. Reinforcing this, Joe Allen notes that due to the unorthodox nature of the 2016 election campaign, Fallon’s stunt became intensified and called into question accepted ideas of comic standardisation in regard to a political figure seen by many within the world of comedy as decidedly unworthy of such treatment.¹⁰⁸ As much as the reception to Fallon’s hair tousele can be interpreted as an expression of anger at the media’s disfavour in covering Trump’s candidacy, it can also be construed as a weakening of political comic expectations and effectiveness against the candidate. The crucial element in the reception to Fallon’s hair-tousele is in how it acted as an indicator in gauging a prevalent sentiment of neutralisation within the political comic community as Trump seemed continuously impervious to scrutiny. The noticeable depreciation in spirit, moments of cited infighting, and feelings of delegitimisation and helplessness that defined political comic

¹⁰⁵ “Too Close for Comfort (Act 1, Part 1) | Full Frontal with Samantha Bee | TBS”, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (Youtube Channel), September 19th 2016, 3:25. Web. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urMYjS97omY>. Last accessed on October 31st 2016.

¹⁰⁶ “Too Close for Comfort (Act 1, Part 1)”, 3:35.

¹⁰⁷ Hugar, “Jimmy Fallon”, p.1.

¹⁰⁸ Allen, Joe, “Jimmy Fallon Ruffles Trump’s Hair, Angers the World”, *Paste Magazine*, September 16th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/NR8zC>.

reactions to Trump would reach its crescendo on November 8th when, against virtually all official polling, and political, cultural and journalistic opinion, he was elected the 45th President of the United States.

In his chronicling of immediate comic reactions to Trump's election win, *The Daily Beast's* Matt Wilstein noted, "Just before midnight on the east coast Tuesday night, Donald Trump finally stopped being hilarious."¹⁰⁹ From late night comedy shows to stand-up comedy, there have been few more intense moments of recorded comic disillusionment in American cultural history than in the aftermath of Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 United States presidential election. As recorded in an overview provided by *The Washington Post's* Emily Yahr and Bethonie Butler, the major themes found in immediate comic reactions across late-night television were of complete shock, disbelief, the temptation to move to Canada, mixed with a cautious hopefulness about the health of the American republic.¹¹⁰ Late-night television hosts such as Noah found it difficult to contain their genuine disbelief and dread at Trump becoming president, stating on air that it felt like "the end of the world".¹¹¹ Trump's election win left much of the political comic field feeling vulnerable to all manner of accusations, many of which at best expressed feelings of redundancy in the face of Trump's absolute unconventionality, and at worst, admissions of comic complicity. In fact, Trump's victory opened up a debate on the role and responsibilities of political comedy in its interaction with politics in a manner unprecedented in modern American cultural history. To return to *SNL's* predicament of "Post-Trump Political Credibility", others such as *Cosmopolitan's* Laura Beck went further in their criticism of the show, arguing that it must take some blame for empowering the candidate to a national audience through comedy.¹¹² As Beck argues in reaction to *SNL's* post-election tribute to Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton:

But let us be real: This is an empty gesture - and, frankly, hypocritical horse shit. *Saturday Night Live* has repeatedly made light of Donald Trump's myriad terrifying ideas and actions, and even had him on to host the show last year,

¹⁰⁹ Wilstein, Matt, "Can Comedy Survive President Trump?", *The Daily Beast*, November 9th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/Ebso1>.

¹¹⁰ Yahr, Emily & Butler, Bethonie, "Late-night TV hosts react to Trump's presidency with disbelief, lots of jokes", *The Washington Post*, November 10th 2016. Web. <http://archive.is/spsc2>.

¹¹¹ A video of Noah's comments can be found at Wilstein, Matt, "Trevor Noah Shocked by Trump Surge: How Can America Be This 'Hateful'", *The Daily Beast*, November 9th 2016, 0:20. Web. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/08/trevor-noah-shocked-by-trump-surge-how-can-america-be-this-hateful.html>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹² McGee, Ryan, "How 'SNL' Can Get Its Post-Trump Political Credibility Back".

normalizing his behaviour to their millions of viewers. Sorry, but you don't get to help elect a pile of trash and then cry because your house smells like garbage.¹¹³

Such commentaries provide palpable expressions of concern over how political comedy might have inadvertently played a role in legitimising and enabling Trump's candidacy. Others such as *Westword's* Byron Graham put forward a different argument, that, "despite the best efforts of political comics", the form's lack of influence over policy was made "devastatingly clear" in the wake of the election result.¹¹⁴ He goes on to note that beyond just a failure to stop Trump from winning the presidency, "it feels like Trump's victory was a vote against comedy."¹¹⁵ If 2016 has been nominated as a year of political upheaval - as a result largely of the United Kingdom's unexpected vote to leave the European Union, and Trump's shock victory in November - it has been no less tumultuous in terms of redefining the relevance and influence of broad cultural forms like political comic production, in stand-up or otherwise.

5.2.6. Revisiting the Culture Industry in the Wake of Trump's Victory

Trump's presidential victory also provides a pertinent indicator of the intertwining relationship between American culture and politics. The role of the televisual element which an analysis of his presidential candidacy brings with it allows for a broadening of this chapter's theoretical framework. One example can be found in the classic theory of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry founded in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the theory of popular culture that argues that the production of standardized cultural goods (films, radio, and television) act as tools of societal manipulation and the mass pacification of society into a state of docility.¹¹⁶ Broadening this to a more

¹¹³ Beck, Laura, "Saturday Night Live's 'Hallelujah' Opening Was a Bunch of B.S", *Cosmopolitan*, November 13th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://archive.is/NgGqU>.

¹¹⁴ Graham, Byron, "Please Stop Saying President-Elect Trump Is Good for Comedy", *Westword*, November 15th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://www.westword.com/arts/please-stop-saying-president-elect-trump-is-good-for-comedy-8497399>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁵ Byron, "Please Stop Saying President-Elect Trump Is Good for Comedy", p.1.

¹¹⁶ The chapter in question, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", can be accessed at Adorno, Theodor W. & Horkheimer, Max, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Noerr, Gunzelin Schmid (ed.), Jephcott, Edmund (trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002, pp.94-136. Print.

general application of Trump within the culture industry, given his continued campaign successes and ultimate victory, numerous commentators revisited Adorno and Horkheimer's concept.¹¹⁷ As Alex Ross argues, in the wake of a reality-television star becoming the 45th President through "a combination of economic inequality and pop-cultural frivolity", his victory can be seen as a fulfilment of Adorno's predictions of cultural mass distraction in the face of elite power monopolisation.¹¹⁸ Quoting Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951), in which he argued that American life in the 1940s was comparable to the mechanisms of a vast reality TV show, Ross postulates that this fusing of reality and cultural fiction which Adorno foreshadowed becomes even more substantiated in the wake of Trump's win:

As early as the forties, Adorno saw American life as a kind of reality show: "Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary film which has no spectators, since the least of them has his bit to do on the screen." Now a businessman turned reality-show star has been elected. Like it or not, Trump is as much a pop-culture phenomenon as he is a political one.¹¹⁹

In Ross' revisiting of the Frankfurt School, he questions the exact nature of complicity in this merging of cultural and political spaces, noting in what sense cultural power can be co-opted to enable and aid authoritarian personalities and regimes. This is especially pertinent when considering how much of this chapter's analysis touched on the way in which comic definition was used by detractors and supporters alike in regards to Trump's presidential bid (i.e. the clown candidate), and the way in which techniques of reality and fiction, seriousness and nonseriousness, were weaponised by both sides of the electoral divide. Furthermore, Trump's potent entertainment value leads Ross to conclude that the vast majority of established media in the United States wanted Trump to be elected president for his sheer entertainment value, seeing the contrary choice of Clinton as uninspiring in comparison. As

¹¹⁷ Jones, Paul K., "Demagogic Populism and US Culture Industries: A Long Tradition". *Australasian Journal of American Studies*: Adelaide, South Australia, Vol. 35 (Issue 1), July 2016, pp.11-28. Web. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306286653_Demagogic_Populism_and_US_Culture_Industries_A_Long_Tradition. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Osbornmr, "Blindsided by the Culture Industry: President Donald Trump", *To the Roots: A Radical Approach to Societal Problems*, November 29th 2016. Web. <https://rampages.us/osbornmr/2016/11/29/blindsided-by-the-culture-industry/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Bates, Robin, "Culture Theorist Foresaw Trump's Rise", *Better Living Through Beowulf*, December 8th 2016. Web. <http://betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/theodor-adorno-foresaw-trumps-rise/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁸ Ross, Alex, "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming", *The New Yorker*, December 5th 2016, p.1. Web. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-frankfurt-school-knew-trump-was-coming>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹¹⁹ Adorno's cited quotation can be found in Adorno, Theodor W., *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Jephcott, E.F.N., (trans.). London & New York City: Verso, NY, 2005, p.55. Print.; Ross, Alex, "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming", p.1.

he argues, “Of the clouds and shadows that hung over Clinton in the press, the darkest, perhaps, was the prospect of boredom.”¹²⁰ Comedy’s position within this mixture, whether through political comic response or Trump’s own masterful use of live comic qualities, is prominent. As Hall, Goldstein and Ingram conclude on these elements of cultural and journalistic responsibility, Trump’s “comedic debauchery” within the milieu of unprecedented levels of media exposure acted as a natural evolution, posing questions of accountability through comic definition. They note, “His rise is the next logical chapter of a hypermediatized politics that lacks content, sells itself as entertainment, and incorporates comedic stylistics so as to immunize itself from critique.”¹²¹ The relevance of Adorno and Horkheimer’s conception of the culture industry for this case study’s analysis lies in their original, excoriating remarks on comedy and the function of laughter. Critiquing the product of laughter in mass-produced comedies as a vital and regressive element of “organized amusement” in 1940s capitalist culture, they argue that it helps complete mass culture’s “triumph over beauty”, acting as just another instrument of cultural pacification.¹²² Moreover, their arguments regarding comic production are related to issues of disempowerment, in which the product of laughter is seen as a mere cultural placebo, complicit in both its false expression of reconciliation through comedy productions and its avoidance of meaningful challenge to established modes of power. They argue:

Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible, always accompanies the moment when a fear is ended. It indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter copes with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power. Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness.¹²³

For Adorno and Horkheimer, whether it is “reconciled laughter” that merely provides an “echo of escape”, or “wrong laughter” that, in the face of intimidation, defers to powerful agencies, the cultural production of laughter is largely toothless in the face of powerful capitalist forces, and merely acts as an escape from seriousness.¹²⁴ Their indictment in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Shea Coulson characterises it, shapes a picture of humour as

¹²⁰ Ross, “The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming”, p.1.

¹²¹ Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, “The hands of Donald Trump”, p.93.

¹²² Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: p.110, 112.

¹²³ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.112.

¹²⁴ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.112.

“a loathsome accomplice of the culture industry”.¹²⁵ While Adorno and Horkheimer’s excoriating reflections on 1940s comic production might not easily translate into a more complex political / comic (or more broadly, cultural) relationship in the dawning years of the Obama era, many of their ideas on the culture industry and their analysis of laughter’s regressive functions have some application to Trump’s success. Their views on comedy and laughter provide not just an opportunity to gauge Trump within the context of the culture industry, but in how he performs as a subversive and conservative political entity. Robert W. Witkin’s analysis in particular has sought to question the perception that Adorno and Horkheimer saw laughter and comic production as a largely complacent cultural arm of capitalist power, seeing the critical potential in their ideas of reconciled laughter and humour that deviated from notions of wrong laughter. In his analysis of their characterisation of complacent and rebellious forms of laughter and comedy, Witkin offers examples of comedy that they approved of: “Where the comedy embodied resistance to the rationalized force of the existent; where it was characterized by anarchic spirit or by absurdity, they give it the seal of approval.”¹²⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer’s appreciation for “the pure nonsense” of physical clowning provides credence to this, “a trace of something better” within the general outputs of the culture industry, as does their reference to Mark Twain’s absurdist humour as a “corrective” to the general flabbiness of American art.¹²⁷ In this sense, Trump’s own clown-like, absurdist comic persona outlined in this chapter can be interpreted as fulfilling the transgressive qualities of Adorno and Horkheimer’s arguments as described in their conception of comedy and laughter, with his political persona dominating the 2016 election’s cultural, journalistic and political realms through his theatrical, absurdist comic qualities and entertaining qualities. The absurdist element invoked by Adorno and Horkheimer proves most significant when it is considered that numerous characterisations of Trump throughout the campaign viewed him as invoking qualities normally associated with the performative school, the Theatre of the Absurd.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Coulson, Shea, “Funnier than Unhappiness: Adorno and the Art of Laughter”. *New German Critique*: New York City, NY & Los Angeles, CA, No. 100 (Winter 2007), p.142. Available online via *JSTOR*. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669190>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹²⁶ Witkin, Robert W., *Adorno on Popular Culture*. New York City, NY: Routledge, 2004, p.45. Print.

¹²⁷ Witkin, *Adorno on Popular Culture*, pp.45-6; Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.109, p. 114.

¹²⁸ Nichols, John, “Donald Trump’s Absurdly Appropriate Candidacy”, *The Nation*, June 17th 2015, p.1. Web. <https://www.thenation.com/article/donald-trumps-absurdly-appropriate-candidacy/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Fields, Suzanne, “Politics Becomes Theater of the Absurd”, *Townhall*, May 27th 2016. Web. <http://townhall.com/columnists/suzannefields/2016/05/27/politics-becomes-theater-of-the-absurd->

Furthermore, it is noticeable that they cite Bergson as an example of humour's subversive potential in their conception of the culture industry, viewing his social corrective function as liberating in a culture of misapplied laughter and comedy. As they argue, "Laughter about something is always laughter at it, and the vital force which, according to Bergson, bursts through rigidity in laughter is...the irruption of barbarity, the self-assertion which, in convivial settings, dares to celebrate its liberation from scruple."¹²⁹ Far from the significant Bergsonian elements in Obama's stand-up comedy addresses, isolated to an agreed comic space, this chapter interprets how these same qualities of Bergsonian corrective can be read - through the candidacy of Trump - more broadly into the unconventionality of expected political (i.e. serious) spaces, for instance in his campaign responses and his general political behaviour. As Bergson argues, "Any form or formula is a ready-made frame into which the comic frame may be fitted"; for Trump, the serious, yet fragile "ceremonial element" inherent in press, cultural and political expectations of a contemporary presidential candidate provided a space for comic subversion.¹³⁰ In doing so, it provides an additional interpretation of the candidate's presentation of Adornian comic subversion within the unprecedented frame of a United States presidential election. Furthermore, if Trump, as Ross argues, is indeed as much of a pop culture phenomenon as a political one, it makes an analysis of political comic mechanics more apposite in the 2016 presidential campaign than any election so far, and one that deepens ideas of cultural complicity as explored in this chapter. Reflecting on the volume of comic saturation involved in his campaign, it is difficult to overstate just how important a cultural weapon comedy was in Trump's presidential campaign, and in response, how disarmed typical political comic production became in reaction to his unique concoction of cultural and political space.

5.3. Conclusion

This chapter's analysis was guided by the following two secondary research questions, which tie into the primary research question of examining the subversive and conservative

n2169551. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.; Micallef, Joseph, "Theatre of the absurd, presidential style", *Troy Media*, October 14th 2016. Web. <http://www.troymedia.com/2016/10/14/trump-clinton-theater-of-the-absurd/>. Last accessed on September 8th 2017.

¹²⁹ Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.112.

¹³⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, p.45.

nature of political stand-up comedy in the Obama era. The first question was: “To what extent does Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy - and political comic responses to his candidacy - provide reflection on the subversive and conservative qualities of the cultural form in the Obama era?” The second question was: “What are the implications for a subversive and conservative political comic analysis when Trump’s own use of live comic stylistics and significant saturation of comical qualities within his presidential candidacy are considered?” Through a series of political comic examples from across the spectrum during the campaign, and with relevant theoretical, cultural, political and journalistic reinforcement, these questions have been answered. Through Trump’s sheer unconventionality within both political and cultural spheres, his success has created a plethora of self-interrogation as to the responsibilities, influences and effects of political comedy, and therein, political stand-up comedy. Throughout this thesis, attention has been drawn to the relatively timid nature of political comic interaction as a subversive agent under Obama’s presidency, concluded through an analysis of the cultural field’s methods and functions. Reflecting on this, the intense theoretical, performative and ideological contestation within political comic production in respect to Trump’s presidential campaign stands in profound contrast to this thesis’ Obama-era analysis. Furthermore, the way in which both Obama and Trump have so far been critiqued within the medium of political comic forms illustrates the glaring differences between them. For example, in comparison to a more divided, but often sympathetic field of ideological opinion on Obama, the political comic community in the 2016 election was virtually unanimous in its opposition to Trump’s presidential bid, especially as his chances of winning increased. Performatively speaking, Trump’s exaggerated, bombastic manner was in complete contrast to the diplomatic, polished veneer of Obama’s demeanour. In comparison to the often-stated exasperating difficulties that political stand-ups found in exploring Obama’s less accessible political disposition, the sheer quantity of satirical and comic material that defined Trump’s persona ironically provided an equally treacherous path for comic interrogation. While the Trump phenomenon has posed difficulties, not just within comedy, but in other areas of culture, political comic and satirical production’s traditionally favoured status within the cultural definition of a presidential election, in particular comedy shows such as *SNL*, have appeared largely redundant in contrast to the excesses, exaggerations and unconventionalities of Trump.

This chapter provides a direct contribution to scholarship focused on Trump and comedy, in particular Kira Hall, Donna M. Ingram and Matthew Bruce’s *The hands of Donald Trump*,

Mark Chou and Michael Ondaatje's "The Drama of Politics: Enacting Trump's Presidential Self", and John Hugar's editorials on Trump's destabilisation of satire and political comedy. It builds on their work within a broader political comic framing of his presidential campaign and within a subversive and conservative framework, by examining the implications of Trump's unprecedented use of stand-up and comic qualities within the tapestry of a presidential campaign. After examining the subversive and conservative nature of political stand-up comedy under Obama's presidency through eight previous case studies, this chapter's case study, and its distinct contribution to comedy scholarship, is in demonstrating that Trump's presidential candidacy, and subsequent presidential victory, left the field of political comic production substantially enervated and unsure of its influence, power and relevance. Although Trump's victory created a considerable degree of political comic introspection, this should be evaluated from within the broader arena of journalistic, political and cultural responsibilities. A number of interpretations have emerged in the wake of Trump's victory, from the no-man's-land, self-affirming nature of myopic partisanship from both the American left and right, the sensationalist, ratings-obsessed nature of the wider bowl of American media that gorged itself on the engrossing tragicomedy of Trump's campaign, a growing, intense disillusionment with conventional politics amongst swathes of Americans, down to the increasing rise in economic inequality in the United States. Comedy, or satire's place, has to be considered more carefully and critically given the widely-perceived depreciation of faith in journalistic and political conventions in classic American institutions. Hugar, in his defence of Fallon's hair touse, reflects on this assignation of responsibilities, arguing that comedy's failure is symptomatic of wider failures, more explicitly, that of the media, and that they should be measured within this wider frame: "Their complacency might not have been laid quite as bare as Fallon's was, but that doesn't mean they aren't just as guilty."¹³¹ In this sense Trump's candidacy was a perfect storm of sorts in its incorporation of clown-like theatricality, strategic saturation of mainstream media outlets, anti-establishment Republican rhetoric, and his commandeering of comic stylistics to attack his opponents while safeguarding himself and his statements. While it has been noted that the massive volume of anti-Trump political comic production was just one segment of a virtually unanimous political and cultural unity against his candidacy, the historic and reputational legacy of political comic productions in the United States has made Trump's victory even more bruising. Regardless of the future of political

¹³¹ Hugar, "Jimmy Fallon", p.1.

comedy, in all its variations, during his tenure in the White House, his presidential victory in 2016 can be interpreted as political comedy's distinct failure.

Conclusion

The primary research question of this thesis, “To what extent has political stand-up comedy acted as a subversive and conservative cultural form in the Obama era?”, was answered through five chapters and nine case studies. In order to underline this thesis’ distinct contribution, I initially offer a brief summary of the relevant findings and conclusions of each chapter and case study before ending by stating its broader value to comedy scholarship. In chapter one, I focused on Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses at the Gridiron Club Dinner and the White House Correspondents’ Dinner. It was guided by the secondary research question: “To what extent do President Obama’s stand-up comedy addresses reflect on an analysis of political stand-up comedy as a subversive and conservative cultural form under his presidency?” It makes a direct extension to the presidential comedy scholarship of Peter M. Robinson, Don Waisanen, Judy L. Isaksen, and Jonathan P. Rossing, and which I built upon within my analysis.

Alongside contemporary journalistic and academic reinforcement, the chapter interprets the unique emancipatory qualities of the Gridiron Club Dinner, and shows how Obama used stand-up to mock and trivialise criticisms from the White House press corps. The way in which he addressed this issue exemplifies a freeing of the President’s typical accountabilities through the stand-up comic mode. This is succeeded by an investigation of the implications of Obama’s confrontation of the controversies of the birther theory and the drone programme at the White House Correspondent’s Dinner. Considering Obama’s position as President of the United States, and the unique platform that this provides him to deflect prominent political criticisms and defend establishmentarian norms and policies, it is not particularly surprising that his comic persona delivers perhaps the most conservative case study in the thesis. However, Obama’s subversive tendencies towards the Gridiron Club, as well as his broader subversion of previous presidential comic stylistics, temper this. Nonetheless, I balance this by noting his annual attendance at the more politically tempting and rewarding White House Correspondents’ Dinner. This chapter’s principal contribution is in its extensive analysis of how Obama can be interpreted to be using stand-up comedy as a weapon to address and deflect controversial political issues, and how in doing so, he has substantially redefined the presidential comedy tradition. It builds on existing comedy

scholarship by outlining the malleability of stand-up comedy to be used by powerful political officials to emancipate them from their official roles in public office, and as a cultural form of significant strategic importance for powerful institutions such as the White House. It also provides an analysis of how the Gridiron Club offers a setting for a unique conservative adoption of Bakhtin's concept of carnival as a means of emancipating the powerful circles of Washington D.C. Rather than a cultural form that echoes outside the realms of power, this chapter provides an examination of stand-up comedy as a unique instrument of the Obama administration.

Chapter two examined the subversive and conservative nature of African American political stand-up comedy under Obama. It was guided by the following secondary research question: "To what extent can Obama-era African American political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" It builds on the African American comedy scholarship of Bambi Haggins, Mel Watkins, Jonathan P. Rossing, and Kara Hunt. The case study of O'Neal highlights the numerous subversive qualities of this field of Obama-era political stand-up comedy. His proposition of a federal income tax-based form of reparations, rather than direct reimbursement, provides a solution distinctly suited to the racial diplomacy of the Obama era. Furthermore, the grim tragicomedy of his depiction of modern-day African American life through his plantation hut analogy and its presentation of contemporary disempowerment is another example of his subversive bite. O'Neal's dismissal of the importance of the American presidency, and his disillusionment with Obama, provides space to invoke questions of individual complicity with problematic socio-political narratives such as the post-racial narrative, reinforcing the more radical, complex nature of his treatments. I conclude by arguing that O'Neal's performance in *Mr P* is the strongest application of Bakhtin's idea of comic subversion in the thesis, particularly in the way that he revives the theorist's advocacy of the power of the comic mode to close the distance between the powerful and the disempowered. All of these qualities emphasise O'Neal's particularly subversive comic presentation, and is the most impressive in terms of its political acumen.

In the second case study of Eddie Griffin, the value of my interpretation of tensions between his conservative comic material in *You Can Tell 'Em* and his more politically acerbic and subversive material on Obama and racial politics in this period, is in its demonstration of the tensions which are highlighted in the primary research question, with the case study

illustrating the shifting conservative and subversive composition and complex dynamics at play within Obama-era political stand-up comedy. For instance, the interpreted, Du Boisian consolidation in Griffin's material between the perceived gap in President Obama's private personality and cultural identity and his publicly perceived racial pragmatism lessens the subversive edge of his stand-up, while other sections encourage it, such as Griffin's fiery rebuttal of exaggerations of racial and social progression under Obama's presidency. Furthermore, the regressive tones of his education material, analysed within the lineage of historic and contemporary examples of African American social conservatism, and the awkward mixture of critical and innocuous material in his final material, definitively blunts his critical edge. In comparison to O'Neal, Griffin best demonstrates this dynamic fluidity between conservative and subversive tones by demonstrating how live political stand-up comedy can be deployed to both subvert and affirm Obama-era power. While this chapter provides a rich overview of how African American comedians have, understandably, acted particularly conservatively in their cultural engagement with Obama, there are nonetheless subversive elements to be found in both case studies. In doing so, it provides an incisive contribution that analyses the potential for African American political stand-up comedy as a cultural form to subvert and affirm Obama-era power. This chapter's distinct contribution to comedy scholarship, and in particular the works of Haggins, Watkins, Rossing, and Hunt, is in analysing and interpreting these subversive and conservative comic tensions under the distinct negotiations of performing under an African American presidency, and the varying unique theoretical, performative, cultural and socio-political qualities this brings with it.

In chapter three, I analysed the subversive and conservative nature of left-wing political stand-up comedy through studies of Jamie Kilstein, Lewis Black and Bill Maher. The partisan and ideological elements in this chapter were guided through the following secondary research question: "To what extent can Obama-era left-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" This chapter extends the left-wing comedy scholarship of Rebecca Krefting, Alison Dagnes, and D.M Jenkins. In the first case study of Jamie Kilstein, with his critique of a perceived Obama-influenced left-wing haziness, I interpret his attempts to subvert the Obama Doctrine by aligning it with the unpopularity of Bush-era foreign policy strategies. Kilstein's particular contribution to the thesis is emphasised in the interpretation of how his flux between conservative and subversive degrees of political criticism on *Conan* falls within George E. C. Paton's definition of the "truly radical comedian", with Kilstein testing the boundaries of left-wing

permission to critique Obama's foreign policy narratives, and providing a subversive challenge to the ethical self-portrayal of his administration.

The second case study of Lewis Black provides an expansive critique of the healthcare debate under Obama. Reinforcing my interpretations through theoretical considerations from Waisanen, I note the double-edged effects of Black's critiques of the profit-motif in U.S healthcare, arguing that his heated directive that argues for the removal of the profit motive from healthcare considerations makes his material subversive. His satirising of commodity-focused discussions of healthcare effectively reframes the debate established, stilted boundaries toward achievable, bolder, left-wing political alternatives. In my interpretation of Lewis' "Obamacare" material, I posit that his analysis serves both as a reminder of Obama's limitations in pushing for substantial healthcare reform, and of the need to move beyond the partisan confines of this term and to refocus efforts to push for further reform. In line with Black's more institutional focus, the subversive power of his comedy lies in his attempts to redefine the widely accepted mechanisms of American society.

In the case study of Bill Maher, I argue that his flagrantly partisan support for Obama had a significant effect on his ability to position his material within a subversive and conservative framework. Its unique value however is in providing a left-wing comic case study from an intensely partisan variation of political commentary, and the consequences of this within *Live from D.C.* For instance, I argue that his commandeering of a racial stigmatisation against the Republican platform raises considerations as to how political stand-up comedy can actively encourage radical, divisive notions of political opponents through negative racial and social characterisations. His work is interpreted to contain Bergsonian and Burkean characteristics in its political comic responses to the Republican platform, which I argue demonstrates the limits of political comic criticism to provide nuanced, critical analysis when presented through the dual lens of a partisan and comic examination. Maher is one of the thesis' most conservative examples in terms of his timidity to criticise Obama and his justification of very debatable policies and issues administered by his administration.

Ideologically speaking, the three case studies proved intriguing in their differences, from Kilstein's left-wing, radical credentials, Black's socialist ideology, and Maher's Democrat-affiliated centrist-leftism, and in how these differences were transmitted under the pressures

of live comic performance. A key finding of the chapter was in interpreting the importance of the comic's affiliation to Obama on their respective subversive and conservative makeup. For instance, Kilstein's monologue is interpreted as one that emphasises the dangers of left-wing Americans becoming overtly focused on the President's favourability, and the implications this has for their endorsement of controversial policies such as the drone programme. In Black's comic deliveries, the President is treated less significantly with the more institutional readings of his material, with the exception of Obama being used to provide an indirect endorsement of the ACA as a means to promote more substantial healthcare reform. In contrast, the effect of Maher's enthusiastic support for the president and partisan focus diminishes much of his subversive possibility, and consolidates his more conservative status. While these left-wing comic critiques are not as cautious as those explored in chapter two, nevertheless a confluence of ideological, partisan, performative and theoretical pressures, as well as the ever-present issue of racial misinterpretation surrounding material on Obama, guides the subversive and conservative qualities of their critiques. This chapter's distinguishing contribution to comedy scholarship is through its analysis of the subversive and conservative qualities of left-wing political stand-up comedy under Obama's presidency and its gauging of the capacity for political stand-up to perform critical and complacent functions in relation to Obama-era power. It builds on the work of Krefting, Dagnes and Jenkins in showing how these left-wing political comics, with varying ideological and political associations to Obama and the broader American left, guide the criticality of their material.

In chapter four, I analysed the subversive and conservative qualities of right-wing political stand-up comedy through the case studies of Nick DiPaolo and Dennis Miller. One crucial difference in the fourth chapter is the diminished cultural armoury of conservative America compared to its left-wing counterpart, and how this gives rise to questions of disempowerment, subversion and conservatism. It was directed through the following secondary research question: "To what extent can Obama-era right-wing political stand-up comedy be analysed as a subversive and conservative cultural form?" This chapter builds on existing comedy scholarship, particularly the work of Ron Von Burg and Kai Heidemann and Alison Dagnes.

Beginning with DiPaolo, my analysis of his "black president" material, while an initial hotchpotch of regressive and subversive elements, nonetheless provides an evaluation of

Obama's racial symbolism from the unique space of a right-wing political comic, providing a distinct contribution from a conservative comic platform. I succeed this by examining DiPaolo's defence of the controversial (and now prohibited) practice of waterboarding as a form of state interrogation, and how this material testifies to stand-up comedy's ability to become complicit with controversial, even cruel, forms of ideological thought. In the final segment, I examine his criticism of unions and forms of immigration, and how this fits within an interpretation of Michael Billig's categorisation of racist humour as expressedly rebellious, a reading that underlines the subversive nature of DiPaolo's material. However, this contrasts conclusively with a Bergsonian reading of his hotel workers material, which emphasises DiPaolo's detachment from his targets. It is this material in particular that compels one to question DiPaolo's potential limitations in recognising his own privileged position in comparison to those he critiques, and how this fits into his perceived status of disempowerment as a conservative American.

In the second case study of Dennis Miller, and in terms of the secondary research question, Miller's employment of a model map of the United States provides an effective presentation of right-wing disempowerment in the thesis. Furthermore, my interpretation of its placement in *America 180* demonstrates a unique reversal of traditional treatments of Bakhtinian carnival and its subversive potential from a right-wing, conservative perspective. However, Miller's critique of Obama-era welfare and taxation, and the problematic issue of his advocacy of exclusion - rather than inclusion - from the benefits of American life in his categorising of recipients as deserving and undeserving, underlines similar, problematic tendencies highlighted by DiPaolo and emphasise the uniquely conservative qualities of these case studies. Following this, I maintain that his confident proclamations of post-racialism significantly obfuscate the real socio-political realities of the Obama era, which raises numerous questions about both his conservative ideology and the vehicle of stand-up comedy. The importance of his dismissal of race as an important signifier is in that it ignores the relative privileges and opportunities that he enjoys. This inconsideration provides one of the most unique - and controversial - political comic expositions in the thesis. While much of his delivery speaks powerfully to his perceived disempowerment, this material in particularly substantially limits his critical edge.

Gauging the subversive and conservative content of DiPaolo and Miller's political comic material within a conservative ideology reveals an intensely complex framework which

offers few defences. Despite this handicap, there are impressive moments of subversion, but which at times are bogged down by their often awkward conclusions on immigration, welfare, and Obama-era racial politics. This chapter's unique contribution to comedy scholarship, and one that builds on the works of the work of Von Burg and Heidemann and Dagnes, is in its analysis of the nature of Obama-era right-wing political stand-up under Obama within a subversive and conservative framework. Furthermore, another distinct contribution I make is my adaptation of traditional applications of theory, such as Bakhtin's concept of carnival, within the framework of a conservative comic analysis. This is reinforced through its examination of how the cultural form of stand-up can both affirm and subvert Obama-era power, while reframing typical treatments of subversion and conservatism - and with that, traditional applications of comic theory - within a right-wing context.

In chapter five, I analysed Donald Trump's presidential candidacy in the 2016 presidential election through two secondary research questions, with the first being: "To what extent does Donald Trump's presidential candidacy - and political comic responses to his candidacy - provide reflection on the subversive and conservative qualities of the cultural form in the Obama era?" The subsequent, secondary research question was: "What are the implications for a subversive and conservative political comic analysis when Trump's own use of live comic stylistics and significant saturation of comical qualities within his presidential candidacy are considered?" I argue that Trump challenged the methods, responsibilities and influences of political comedy more than any other political figure in recent history, and had an unprecedented effect on the subversive and conservative qualities of political comic response. This chapter builds on the comedy scholarship of Kira Hall, Donna M. Ingram and Matthew Bruce, Mark Chou and Michael Ondaatje, as well as the non-scholarly, journalistic contributions of John Hugar and his editorials, "Jimmy Fallon Is Just the Most Visible Representative of Comedy's Trump Problem" (2016) and "How Donald Trump Has Made Political Satire Weaker" (2016).

My examination of Trump's unique comic style as a presidential candidate demonstrated his ability to destabilise accepted political comic mechanisms. My analysis of Trump's stand-up comedy stylistics, partly interpreted as a Bergsonian, insult-comic style of performance, demonstrates his mastery of live comic qualities. I further argue that there is a deeply sinister side to Trump's use of comedy, as exemplified in his construed response to reporter Serge

Kovaleski and his 2nd amendment remarks to Hillary Clinton. Considering these, I argue that stand-up, and comic qualities more generally, were a unique cultural ally in allowing Trump to evade accountability whilst simultaneously allowing him to keep an unequalled hold on the cultural and journalistic parameters of the election. I conclude by arguing that Trump's subversive qualities left the political field severely bruised, with the typical methods, processes and mechanisms of comic and satirical response being substantially unbalanced by his unique style to such a degree that it affected the reputation of political comic and satire's enviable cultural position during a United States presidential election. The major contribution of this chapter to comedy scholarship, and in particular the works of Hall, Ingram and Bruce, Chou and Ondaatje, and Hugar, is its extensive reading of Trump through the lens of political comic analysis, which - through building on a considerable array of direct and indirect comic scholarship - provides a reading of American political comedy's significant destabilisation by his presidential candidacy. Furthermore, for a thesis that focuses on the subversive and conservative aspects of stand-up, this last case study provides an intriguing conclusion on the unprecedented use of stand-up and comic stylistics within the fabric of a presidential campaign, and the implications this has for viewing the cultural mode within the spheres of power and influence in the United States.

In conclusion, my research throughout this thesis enables me to state confidently that political stand-up comedy in the Obama era has at times been in many ways subversive towards political power, but on most occasions has been locked into more conservative tones through a combination of timidity, ideological, racial and cultural sympathies to Obama, and with the understandable fear of being misconstrued, particularly in regards to the racial element of his presidency. My five chapters have illustrated the varying limitations and successes of political stand-up in this era, and the questions they raise about this cultural mode as a form of political critique that reinforce the thesis' contribution to existing scholarship. My analysis of Obama's stand-up comedy addresses highlights the impressive position of this cultural form within the annual traditions of the American presidency, and demonstrates his potent use of it as a unique and refined form of political strategy. Any considerations about the ability of stand-up comedy to act as an instrument of established power are given reinforcement through my findings. My examination of African American political comic commentary under the spectre of an African American presidency reveals an exceptional cultural caution with a form of stand-up typically associated with scepticism of authority and concepts of established power. In analysing this fusion of comic and political

circumstances unprecedented in American history, it makes the artistry of O’Neal and Griffin all the more powerful when gauged under the era’s conservative comic unconventionalities, and further illuminates the thesis’ contribution in analysing the uniqueness of this field of African American political comedy. My examination of left-wing political stand-up demonstrates how comedians of this field were motivated more by a mixture of their ideological affiliation and sympathy with the President, as well as the ever-present and unique possibility of racial misinterpretation. My distinct contribution in this chapter, and one shown in Kilstein, Black and Maher’s divergent treatments of Obama-era power, is in impressing the importance of the political comedian’s positioning towards Obama as a barometer for gauging the subversive and conservative tones of their works. Outside of the cultural protections of African American and left-wing political stand-up, my examination of right-wing political comic critique draws attention to this ignored area of stand-up. My interpretation of the varying successes and limitations of right-wing political stand-up under the unique pressures under Obama balances the subversive elements of DiPaolo and Miller’s material by critiquing the often cruel discrimination in their comic material. The major contribution of the fifth chapter and the final case study of Trump is in demonstrating the significant degree to which his presidential candidacy disrupted typical political comic processes in the 2016 election. In comparison to Obama’s agreed use of comic spaces within certain contexts, Trump’s far more expansive, clown-like deployment of stand-up and comic stylistics provides a distinct finale to the thesis’ considerations of Obama-era political stand-up by showing its expansive use outside of the arenas of the American comedy club and theatre and into the conventions of mainstream American politics.

Beyond each chapter’s distinct contribution to the field, as outlined previously, this thesis extends a large number of works within the current field. In terms of its contribution to the broader scholarship, its framework of analysing subversive and conservative political comic commentary provides a particular extension to the authority-supporting and authority-subverting construction of David L. Paletz’ analysis in “Political Humor and Authority” (1990). Beyond the formalisation of the employed framework, the thesis builds more broadly on Don Waisanen’s gauging of political comic limitations in “An Alternative Sense of Humor” (2013), Joseph Boskin’s analysis of political humour’s often superficial examinations of American power in “American Political Humor and Taboos” (1990), and Todd McGowan’s questioning of the subversive nature of comedy as outlined in “The

Barriers to a Critical Comedy” (2014) by providing a means to gauge the varying mechanics and functions of political stand-up comedy’s subversive and conservative nature. This thesis’ focus, key arguments and findings primarily build on Michael Billig’s countering to dominating, good-natured theories of humour in *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Rebecca Krefting’s analysis of charged humour in *All Joking Aside* (2014), the efficacy of political comedy underlined in Todd McGowan’s “The Barriers to a Critical Comedy”, Alison Dagnes’ analysis of the ideological, cultural and performative considerations of left-wing and right-wing political comedy in *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar* (2012), and Sophie Quirk’s examination of the social and political usefulness of stand-up comedy as a form of political communication in *Why Stand-up Matters* (2015). It additionally provides a contribution to Matthew R. Meier & Casey R. Schmitt’s collection of stand-up’s potential for social transformation in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change* (2017) - in particular Von Burg and Heidemann’s right-wing political comic analysis of Brad Stine through chapter four - as well as that of the more classic literature in the field provided by Lawrence E. Mintz and Stephanie Koziski. In terms of the broader scholarship’s investigation of the positive and negative, and critical and complacent qualities of political comedy in its relations with American power, this thesis provides an assertive addition through its analysis of political stand-up comedy in the Obama era and its exploration of the far less analysed side of political comedy through an analysis of its subversive and conservative qualities. Furthermore, it fits comfortably with a wide range of tones and developments in the current scholarship, from questioning the efficacy of political comic communication, the nature of political comedy and satire’s relation to forms of power, and the negative and positive elements of humour within the less-explored arena of stand-up comic analysis. In doing so, this thesis provides a solid roadmap of performative, theoretical, cultural and political analysis for any future scholarship on this niche of political comedy. Certainly there are key areas where further research could be conducted. The longer term implications of a Trump presidency for political comedy would certainly be worth examining within the same subversive and conservative framework. Given his controversial refusal to attend the 2017 Correspondents’ Dinner, and substantial amount of political comic reaction initiated by his presidency, as well as the ongoing role of satirical sketch shows like *Saturday Night Live*, there are a host of areas in which further research could be conducted. Female political stand-up comedy, with a litany of political comic contributions from comedians such as Samantha Bee, Amy Schumer, and Jena Friedman, is guaranteed to be a fruitful area for exploration. Given the particularly adversative reaction

Trump's election-win provoked amongst many American women, this particular area could end up seeing something of a cultural renaissance.

Another important and pertinent contribution that the thesis provides to comedy scholarship is in its application and extension of Bakhtinian and Bergsonian theory within a stand-up comedy analysis. As explored in numerous chapters of the thesis, while Bakhtin has been questioned by the likes of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, and Charles E. Byrd for overestimating the exclusive ownership of carnival laughter as a tool for radical, left-wing groups, this thesis' interpretation of carnival qualities within the establishmentarian environment of the Gridiron Club Dinner, Dennis Miller's right-wing critiques of the Obama era, or Donald Trump's carnival like campaign rallies, provides a relatively novel application of Bakhtin's concept within stand-up comic analysis. Outside of these more unconventional adaptations of carnival however, more standard applications of Bakhtin within the case studies of Patrice O'Neal and Jamie Kilstein additionally emphasise the unique investigatory and incisive qualities of laughter as proposed by the theorist, and illustrate how it can be applied in relation to political stand-up comedy's examinations of Obama-era power. As for this thesis' use of Bergson, particularly his concept of laughter as a form of social correction, it confidently applies this concept to several case studies, in particular those of President Obama, Bill Maher, Nick DiPaolo and Donald Trump. In comparison to Bakhtin, Bergson is far less utilised within stand-up comedy analysis, and political comedy scholarship more generally; this thesis therefore provides a valuable and extensive application of the social corrective function within an examination of stand-up comedy. Furthermore, engaging with Bergson's social corrective function within the subversive and conservative makeup of the thesis' framework provides numerous examples of the ability for stand-up to both rebuke and bolster controversial policies, ideas and values through its powerful, disciplinary mechanisms. In an analysis of political stand-up's relation to Obama-era power, its value to the contrasting, subversive elements of Bakhtin's carnival is in demonstrating the often injudicious qualities involved in political comic examination. In doing so, it questions the cultural form's ability to deliver incisive, critical political commentary when varying partisan, ideological, performative and theoretical qualities are combined with the disciplinary and deeply dismissive qualities of Bergsonian correction. In this way, it strengthens the thesis' contribution by underlining the difficult nature of political stand-up comedy as a form of political communication and critique of American power when it is driven by theoretical qualities that can imbalance a fairer, more pragmatic approach in

exchange for more partisan-fuelled exaggerations or wholesale, excessive dismissals of opposing policies, values and ideas.

The ramifications of this thesis on analyses of political comedy and power are valuable. The reputational idea of political comedy as a powerful tool of political communication is questioned through examining its stand-up comic variant, and demonstrates how the extremely fragile mechanisms and functions of this cultural form gave way on occasions to subversive political exposition, but more often to conservative comic timidity under Obama. While political stand-up comics such as Patrice O'Neal provide an enriching example of the cultural form at its best in terms of political critique and commentary, this thesis has demonstrated the delicate conditions that guide its ability in regards to acting as a subversive and conservative cultural form in relation to Obama-era American power, and one which is deepened under the intensity of live performance. Certainly a major reason why this thesis focused on political stand-up comedy exclusively was because of the varying strengths, limitations, tensions and tones that are deeply linked to live stand-up comedy. This is not to suggest that these same tensions do not exist in other areas of political comedy, but that they are at their most visceral when analysed within the negotiations and deliberations of a live stand-up comedy performance. Finally, chronicling this cultural form in the Obama era provides some sharp contrasts which further underline its contribution. For instance, the divergence between the broad timidity of political stand-up comedy against Obama in comparison to the wholesale cultural unity against the presidential candidacy of Trump provides an analysis of the varying methods, functions and abilities of political stand-up in critiquing two significantly different political officials. Furthermore, it also interprets a development in the favourable cultural role and reputation of political comedy more broadly in the wake of Trump's satire-destabilising election campaign and ultimate victory, with the thesis' final chapter providing a testament to the significant challenges which faced the field due to Trump's unprecedented use of stand-up comic qualities. Because of the restraints of broad, live political comic response under his presidency, Obama's comedy legacy in the White House may well be defined more by himself and his own extensive, skilful comic ventures than by any critiques or responses to him and his administration. His presidency will leave a rich comic history, but one that is largely toothless in terms of its political comic critiques for a variety of ideological, performative, cultural and racial reasons.

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