

LAUGHING FROM THE OUTSIDE: HIPSTERS AND
AMERICAN STAND-UP COMEDY

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Abstract: In recent years, stand-up comedy has enjoyed increased attention from both popular and scholarly audiences for its potential as a forum for public intellectualism. This study traces this rise in prominence to the hipster as both a cultural figure in post-war America and a comic persona in the years that followed. Through identification and analysis of the hipster and its aesthetic traits, I attempt to follow this persona and the type of comedy it performs from its origins to its current examples in order to understand what role this persona may play in both stand-up's popularity and in society at large. The hipster is a stand-up persona that utilizes a hip sensibility and satiric perspective both to produce itself and to critique the modes of production and consumption with which it interacts through constant and evolving use of technology and new media as a conduit for personal, existential, and social play. I begin with Lenny Bruce's hipster and, using the development of technology as my organizing principle, follow the footprints of hip through Bruce to Richard Pryor and then to twenty-first-century comedians Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari. This study reveals the comic and intellectual sensibility of the hipster persona in its various iterations and examines that persona's role in the development of comedy as an intellectual forum in American society in the last half-century.

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PREFACE

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT STAND-UP COMEDY

Comedy is all the rage these days. In popular media, critics like *The Atlantic's* Megan Garber seek to understand “How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals” (May 2015). Beginning February 2017, CNN aired its eight-part documentary *The History of Comedy* exploring “what makes people laugh and how comedy has affected the social and political landscape throughout history.” In academic circles, the 2016 MLA Convention included its first-ever panel on stand-up, seeking “to provide a forum for serious consideration of the cultural and rhetorical work of stand-up comedy” (*Rhetoricomedia*). And, at the recent conference on Lenny Bruce’s legacy held at Brandeis University in October 2016, comedian Lewis Black jokingly accused conference participants of “legitimizing” comedy.

Taken together, these examples indicate a growing awareness that, at this moment in American history, comedy seems particularly capable of capturing the public’s imagination and inspiring critical thought. To explore this phenomenon, I suggest a literary approach to the examination of American stand-up comedy’s rise in popularity and continued social importance by focusing my attention on the development of the

trickster figure as a stand-up persona. In the postwar years, a new type of trickster came onto the scene and altered the course of stand-up comedy and, I will argue, America's relation to it. The trickster—well known and theorized in discussions of comedy, folklore, and American culture—becomes a popular and visible figure in stand-up comedy through the hipster persona of Lenny Bruce and then in the various hipsters that have taken the stage in the half-century since Bruce's death.¹ Recognizing that the label "hipster" is fraught with multiple, contradictory, and often negative connotations today, I want to employ it here as the subject of my study for three reasons. First, labeling the comedians under study here "hipsters" rather than simply "tricksters" points to an important point of separation between stand-up comedians and literary characters: unlike the rogues and clowns of novels or the tricksters of folklore, hipster comedians share a coterminous body with an actual living human being that is essential both to their humor and to that humor's satiric potential as I will define and explore it in the coming chapters. Second, the contradictory and competing connotations of the hipster label lend

¹ For a theoretical introduction to the comic and European literary origins of the trickster, see Bakhtin's "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" in which Bakhtin theorizes the functions of Rogues, Clowns, and Fools as character types that exist as outsiders and subject humanity to parodic laughter; Bakhtin's theories are taken up by Kathleen Rowe's study of female comedians in *The Unruly Woman* in which Rowe argues for the disruptive force of the female trickster as a regenerative satirical trope. Mel Watkins's history of African American humor from slavery to Chris Rock, *On the Real Side*, follows similar lines of thought specifically associating African American comedy with the tricksters of African and African American folklore, particularly Brer Rabbit and his human counterpart the cunning slave "John (sometimes Jack, Goliath, Pompey, or Nehemiah)" (75). Watkins importantly recognizes the trickster as a figure that exists in many folklores, but whose African American iterations have played a crucial role in both the development of African American humor and the development of American society in the twentieth-century—a development which is also of interest to this study—because of their ability to enact social critique through ironic double-consciousness. John Leland's *Hip: the History* places the trickster at the center of his discussion of hip's history as America's history when he argues that "tricksters are hip's animating agents" (162).

themselves to this study because comedy deals precisely in these things: paradox, irony, and incongruity underlie all major theories of comedy and laughter from ancient Greece to the present day.² Like comedy, which becomes increasingly difficult to define or explain the more scrutiny one gives it, hipness and its extreme embodiment in the hipster defy easy explanation and by their very nature subvert attempts at stable definition, a point that will become increasingly important to this study and help to establish this figure's role within and without American society. Finally, the hipster label as I will define it in the first chapter offers a more fitting umbrella under which to place the comedians studied here because its evolution from the early twentieth-century to the early twenty-first is intertwined with the intellectual, comic, economic, and technological evolutions of American society during that time in a way that "trickster" is not. The hipster as a stand-up persona is closely related to the hipster as a social phenomenon and is thus linked to society's development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries. This interconnectedness of the hipster figure to its contemporary society heavily informs my analysis of early hipster comedians Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor and contemporary hipster comedians Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari. Through this

² For a detailed exploration of traditional theories of laughter and humor including primary materials and secondary commentary, see John Morreall's *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Morreall provides the foundational texts of the three major theories of comedy in Western thought: the Superiority Theory, the Relief Theory, and the Incongruity Theory. While each of these theories and their various particular iterations succeeds in explaining some instances of comedy, none is capable of encapsulating all humor and the student of comedy is better served thinking of comedy for its inability to be succinctly defined than under the umbrella of any one theory. Contemporary thinkers like Simon Critchley and Michael North offer theories of humor as an intellectual stance in which humorist and audience alike express, through comedy, awareness of the ineffable multiplicity of all life and all attempts to define it in clean and easy terms. These latter arguments will form much of the basis of my work here as it develops in the following pages, but for now they suggest that humor, like hipness as I will define it in the next chapter, becomes less clearly identifiable the closer one looks at it.

analysis, I will show that the hipster as a comic persona is one of the forces that has led to our current fascination with comedy as both a mode and subject of popular and scholarly discourse.

I will begin in the first chapter by attempting to sketch the satiric hipster persona as a character for study. To do so, I will define and examine the cultural forces that combine to form the outline of the hipster comedian and its role in American society: hipness both as a sensibility and as a major thrust in American culture, satire as a mode of intellectual exploration and play, and technology as a hip conduit. Having provided this outline of the hipster stand-up persona, the chapters that follow will fill in the outline and flesh out the hipster. Chapter Two will examine Lenny Bruce's development of the hipster stand-up persona in the 1950s and 1960s and its satirical potential in a time of great social upheaval, particularly as it becomes inextricable, for various reasons, from the media through which the persona interacts with an audience.

In the years after Bruce's death, as stand-up comedy began its rise in popularity and cultural relevance, the most important medium for comedy, especially subversive and socially challenging comedy, became the concert film or special. Chapter Three will examine this medium of stand-up expression as brought into the popular imagination by hipsters. While most conversations on the subject identify the first stand-up performance film as 1979's *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, that's not entirely true. Rather, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1967) holds this honor. However, as the gritty recording of Bruce's penultimate performance before his death captured while he was still very much obsessed with his legal troubles, this film fails in several ways to be either funny or hip. After examining the failings of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, I will turn to

Richard Pryor's *Live in Concert* and *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982) to provide detailed analysis of the hipster persona as more fully and vibrantly constructed on film, and of film's potential for hipness as a medium capable of allowing the comedian to maintain the hybrid and mobile identity that is so essential to the hipster.

I will conclude with an examination of the ways that twenty-first-century media and society provide unique opportunities for both self and social exploration and how contemporary hipsters stay on the cutting edge by finding new uses for old media—constantly shifting the public perception of and respect for comedy's role in social life. Chapter Four will examine Bo Burnham's postmodern special *what.* for its use of convergent media to satirize society through an exploration of the self and celebrity, and will conclude by exploring Aziz Ansari's repetition of the twentieth-century hipster with twenty-first-century difference that allows him to explore racial, sexual, and technological existence today through playful subversion and satire. In all of these comedians' embodiments, the hipster is a stand-up persona that utilizes a hip sensibility and satiric perspective both to produce itself and to critique the modes of production and consumption with which it interacts through constant and evolving use of technology and new media as a conduit for personal, existential, and social play.

CHAPTER I

WHAT IS A HIPSTER?

Today, to call someone a hipster is to associate them with trust-funded unicycle riders, Instagram accounts devoted to beard art, Pabst Blue Ribbon, and gentrification. However little the hipsters of 2017 may resemble their postwar counterparts on the surface, there is an element of the hipster's aesthetic and its playfully imaginative stance toward society, whether Eisenhower's or Obama's, that hipsters of every generation share and through which they hold a critical eye to their society in order to possibly increase thought and provoke inquiry. Satire is hip, I will argue, but not all satirists are hipsters; hipsters are often satiric, too, but not always satirists. Similarly, to be hip is not necessarily to be a hipster, just as having a satiric frame of mind does not necessarily make one a satirist. I am dealing with extremes here. In these extremes, the hipsters of the postwar years and the hipsters of today share many traits that I wish to identify in this chapter and to study further in the chapters to come. I will begin by sketching an outline of hipsters and their most essential, albeit elusive, trait: hipness. With a clearer, though hardly stable, sense of this admittedly unwieldy concept, I will then examine some potential similarities between hipness and satire as modes of performance that question society in a progressive effort to open its consciousness and provoke thought. Within

Within this outline of the hipsters I am interested in, I will also briefly examine how hipsters have shaped American society in the latter half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first-centuries and the role that technology plays in both the creation and consumption of satirically hip comedy. These basic tenets of my subject sketched, I will then move to the study of this comic character and its social potential by exploring the ways in which hip humor makes its propositions through both humor and hipness in the examples of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, Bo Burnham, and Aziz Ansari.

Footprints: Tracing the Hipster

After noting the difficulty of his project, musicologist Phil Ford identifies what is at stake in his analysis of a hip aesthetic in *Dig: Sound & Music in Hip Culture* (2013):

For more than half a century, the hip sensibility has structured self-understanding and self-representation, thought and expression, in various recognizable ways. Certain ideas, images, critiques, and tropes of representation have recurred in hip culture since World War II, persistently shaping how people imagine themselves and their relationship to society. Hipness is not weightless; it leaves footprints. (4)

Ford looks for these footprints—the “ideas, images, critiques, and tropes of representation” that create and participate in the hip culture that is ultimately contemporary American society—in popular music and Beat literature. I will identify them in stand-up comedy. Ford recognizes right away that to attempt to define hip is antithetical to hip’s essential mobility and irony. Rather than attempt a formal definition, he applies the metaphor of footprints and weight to argue that hip’s aesthetic imprints on society provide its members opportunities to communicate in a variety of ways with

diverse discourse communities that occupy the broad spectrum between hip and square, counterculture and dominant culture, liberal and conservative. A footprint is the result of someone or something that has come before, but only just, an essence that might be followed even if it is never caught. A footprint is also a sign that communicates some meaning to anyone who happens upon it and can be read by those with the necessary skill and investment. Ford notes the socio-political potential of chasing these footprints by pointing to the difference between his study and other studies of popular culture, “the goal [of which] has almost always been to find a political understanding of the aesthetic”; rather, Ford wishes “to find an aesthetic understanding of politics” (40). Like Ford, my goal here is not solely to argue that these comedians are political but also to see how their politics express themselves through a particular comic persona. This analysis begins by more closely examining the footprints of the hipster as envisioned in the postwar years and following its trail into today through the economic and technological paths through which hipness became, as Ford puts it, “the discourse within which American culture found a new psychological, existential, metaphysical orientation—an orientation that is still with us today, whether we like it or not” (43).

Hipsters entered the American cultural lexicon in the early 1940s to describe those who either possessed some knowledge or thought they did.³ In the decades that

³ The *OED* dates the first recorded use of the term “hipster” at 1941, as a term used to describe a “know-it-all” in Jack Smiley’s *Hash House Lingo*. The next entry is Mezz Mezzrow and Bernard Wolfe’s *Really the Blues* (1946) and defines a hipster as a “man who’s in the know, grasps everything, is alert.” In both of these early uses, the interplay between hipness as a pose or performance and as an intellectual perspective is already present. This will be explored further throughout this project and helps to explain the various connotations that the hipster label contains today. In some ways, to call someone a hipster has always been simultaneously insult and high praise depending on who applies it to whom and what happens to be hip at the time—or, in the far more

followed World War II, the hipster became more than a label as it was an increasingly living and present cultural phenomenon that required explanation and exploration. The most influential and widely known such exploration is Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" which looms large in any examination of hipsters from its day to ours. Mailer famously defines the hipster as "the American existentialist" who sees that "the fate of twentieth-century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence" and who chooses "to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (43). Mailer's hipster, as self-exiled outsider who exists within society—an important difference between the hipster and the emigrants of the Lost Generation that is implied in the title of Caroline Bird's *Harper's Bazaar* article "Born 1930: The Unlost Generation" to which Mailer's "White Negro" is a response—takes its essence from African Americans whose very existence is a model of this inside/outsiderness and whose life has always been one that "live[s] with death as immediate danger." The imminent danger of being black in America, argues Mailer, leads African Americans to develop "existential synapses" (46) that become an essential element of hip because they allow the hipster, who sees every moment as a navigation of the ultimate binary between life and death, to exist "in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention" (43) and thereby to stay on the right end of the binary between hip (living) and square (living death). This position as existent individual links Mailer's hipsters to the larger tradition of existential philosophy. As Jean Wahl locates existentialism's origins in

complicated situation of the post-hip era examined in Chapter 4, to whose version of hip the speaker refers.

Kierkegaard and traces its path through Sartre, existentialism is the study of existent individuals in “an infinite relationship with” themselves, defined by an understanding of these selves as always in the process of “Becoming” and “impassioned with a passionate thought” (4). The existentialist, like the hipster, exists in the present moment of becoming and, in this moment, considers this existence through examination of one existent individual’s relationship to many existent individuals on the one hand, and an examination of existence’s relationship to non-existence on another. As an existentialist, the hipster’s existence in this “enormous present” of becoming helps to explain the elusiveness of his identity, but it also helps to begin outlining the footprints of the hipster as a comic persona for study.

This presence in the present requires that the hipster comedian be drawn not from stock character types or generalizations but from the living being that is coterminous with the persona—this is one of the crucial differences between hipsters and their more literary counterparts, tricksters, and it identifies the subject of this study as autobiographical.⁴ Joined with the existential and racial tensions that underlie Mailer’s reflections, this autobiographical nature begins to sketch the footprints of the hipster

⁴ To claim that these comedians’ personas are autobiographical is, of course, not to claim that they are accurate representations of a real historical person or that the subject of their comedy is the life of the comedian from birth to the point of performance. Rather, it is simply to assert a mode of address that utilizes the pronoun “I” for certain rhetorical and potentially political ends. Paul De Man argues that autobiographical texts “produce and determine the life” of the author, rather than the other way round (920). As such, autobiographical texts like the hipster persona produce and determine how audiences read the people to whom the spoken “I” refers. From this perspective, in which existence and identity are framed as performative and unstable, audiences begin to push at the boundaries of self, other, and society. This is the first step toward the inquiry, provocation, and play that will come to define satiric hipsters in the pages to come. Hip’s present tense implies life, but the performativity of life asserted by autobiographical texts raises immediate questions about just what life is: this questioning is one of the most basic and essential activities in which hipsters engage.

persona as a vibrant and living construction that draws for its humor and that humor's potential from the living self and its uncertain position in relation to both its own identity and that identity's place in the world. The hipster humor of the comedians examined here will employ the position of the autobiographical "I" to explore the assumptions, tensions, and paradoxes that complicate subjective experience with issues of mortality and morality, race and identity, sexuality and the construction of societies, to name a few. In each of these hipsters, the self in the present tense of the performance—whether live or recorded and played back in another present—encounters its presence within and without society and plays the humor of that complicated existence for its own hip ends.

John Leland elaborates Mailer's theory of the hipster and gives it a historical shape that further helps to outline the footprints of the comic hipster persona as I want to examine it. In *Hip: The History* (2004), Leland expands Mailer's explanation of hipsters as "white negroes" and traces hip's history in American popular culture as "a story of synthesis in the context of division, [the] origins [of which] lie in the unique structure of slavery in America, which pushed the two populations [black and white] together" (20). This convergence of African and European cultures in the context of slavery and systemic discrimination shapes the history of hip for Leland as a history of "hip convergences" in which certain themes play out in the popular imagination and move the country's perception forward toward embracing multiplicity in itself and its members. Leland argues that hipness is "an aesthetic of the hybrid" that "embraces difference and loves experiment" (51). Certain key elements make up this aesthetic: "a dance between black and white; a love of the outsider; a straddle of high and low culture; a grimy sense of nobility; language that means more than it says" (10). These traits could just as easily

be applied to American humor as I will examine it both in the next section of this chapter and throughout this project. Noting the similarities between hip culture and comedy is one of the threads that I'm attempting to trace as a partial explanation for stand-up comedy's rise in cultural capital of late. When any or all of these elements, and often others that are specific to their situations, reach points of great tension or experimentation (e.g., when races or cultures clash, or when technology advances in such a way as to provide new modes of expression) hipness emerges anew and reshapes the conversations that these convergences begin. For Leland such hip convergences begin with slavery and continue in the writing of Whitman and Thoreau, the jazz and poetry of the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance, the postwar malaise and experimentation of the Beats, the emergence of tech culture in the 1970s and 1980s, the grunge and gangsta rap of the 1990s, and the trucker hats of the post-9/11 early 2000s.

Leland's history sees hipness and its extreme embodiment, the hipster, as a progressively expanding cyclical force in American culture that emerges and re-emerges to move society forward not only aesthetically but also intellectually and, for better and worse, commercially. Leland claims that "hip is a process in cyclical rhythm" (242), adding historical perspective to Mailer's assertion that "Hip sees every answer as posing immediately a new alternative, a new question, its emphasis is on complexity rather than simplicity" (59). As the process of hip moves forward in space and time, it simultaneously enacts the cycle of constructing alternatives, questions, and complexity by positioning and repositioning itself in opposition to the parallel process of square. Mailer and Leland emphasize hipness and hipsters not as stable or stagnant attitudes and identities but as mobile and understood only in the context of motion, rhythm, and

process. Central to this process, and to the aesthetic choices of hipsters, is an emphasis on intellectual activity as a similarly unending and uncontainable process—an understanding of intellectual activity and identity that echoes the major philosophical and aesthetic thrusts of the mid-twentieth-century. The connection between hipsters and a mobile and hybrid intellectualism will be relevant to this study and help to further outline the hipster comedian as I wish to define it. Writing of the relationship between power, individual consciousness, and society in 1969, philosopher Stuart Hampshire defines an intellectual as

first, ... someone who takes it for granted that a strenuously developed and articulate intelligence constitutes a claim to be recognized, and an independent status in society ... Second, ... someone who refuses to be confined to one specialized, or professional, application of his power; he will be ready to inquire into almost anything ... and will find delight in the process of inquiry, quite independently of the result. ... Third, ... someone who never lowers his voice in piety, and who is not prepared to be solemn and restrained, in deference to anything other than the internal standards of the intellect and the imagination. (231)⁵

In this definition, intellectuals are those whose intellect and drive for knowledge confers on them outsider and rebellious status, who do not limit the focus of their intellectual activity but rather “embrace difference and ... experimentation,” and who hold nothing so sacrosanct as thought. In this definition of intellectualism, the intellectual is engaged in a constant and unending “process in cyclical rhythm” of thought for thought’s sake.

⁵ My use of this definition of an intellectual is highly indebted to Phil Ford who likewise finds Hampshire’s definition fitting to the subject at hand.

The hipster is engaged in a similar process that seeks to complicate rather than simplify existence by pushing at its boundaries and limitations. Leland ultimately sees hip as “the combination of freedom and intelligence” (343): as the opportunity and ability to be different and to experiment with the bounds—whether aesthetic, intellectual, racial, sexual, social, and many etceteras—that attempt to order and confine existence. In the hipster comedians that make up this study, “the combination of freedom” to express themselves and the “intelligence” to make that expression meaningful will take the form of the often controversial subject of their comedy, its ability to advance thought, and comedians’ unending attempts to find, master, and rethink the technologies that make their comedy possible.

Hip Performance

Anatole Broyard’s essay “A Portrait of the Hipster,” originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1948, predates Mailer’s “White Negro” by nearly a decade and both explicitly connects hipsters with comic performers while also further defining the language of hip and setting up the final outline of the footprint that I will follow.⁶ If Broyard’s essay is less widely known than Mailer’s “White Negro,” this is in part due to its more abstract nature and its focus on hipsters’ aesthetic rather than the socio-psycho-philosophical origins of hipness and hipsters. As Ford notes in his essay “Somewhere/Nowhere: Hipness as an Aesthetic” (2002), Broyard “think[s] of hipsters in terms less of sociology than of style,” particularly that style’s most basic elements:

⁶ Broyard’s essay, as Ann Charters points out in her introduction to it in *Beat Down to Your Soul: What was the Beat Generation?* (2001), is particularly “important if puzzling” (42) because of Broyard’s identity as a passing black man. Charters cites Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s claim that Broyard had “‘privileged access’ to blacks and black culture” that complicates both his analysis of hipness as a convergence of races as well as, implicitly, Mailer’s claims about the racial origins of hip.

“irony, surprise, ‘second-removism” (52). Broyard, like Ford and myself, sees the hipster, hip’s most extreme example, as a text to be read. Through bebop music, intellectual pretensions, and marijuana, Broyard sees “the hipster as performer” and likens his social behavior to that of the “jester, jongleur, or prestidigitator” (47).⁷ Such comparisons explicitly link the style of hipsters with specific types of performers and add depth to our footprint of the hipster by lending to it the literary and cultural weight of these characters as they have been created and theorized in the study of comedy.

The first of Broyard’s performers, the jester, has a rich cultural and literary tradition in Europe and plays a central role in the theory of comedy. Mikhail Bakhtin describes jesters under the umbrella of Rogues, Clowns, and Fools. In the essay “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel,” Bakhtin identifies an essential characteristic of such characters in novels saying they have “the right to be ‘other’ in this world” (159). In

⁷ Broyard, like Mailer and Leland who would follow him, also recognizes the performance of the hipster as inseparable from the racial and existential tensions of the time and identifies hipsters’ style with an autobiographical source when he claims that the language of the hipster is “*the personal idiom*” (48). In sketching the outline of the hipster here, I wish to emphasize the ways in which all attempts to perceive the hipster—whether as a cultural phenomenon and embodiment of modern American experience as Mailer and Leland do, or as a literary and aesthetic text to be studied as Broyard and Ford do—adds depth and nuance to the hipster label, but does little to nail it down as one specific figure. Mailer’s “White Negro” and Broyard’s performative “jester, jongleur, or prestidigitator” are not mutually exclusive identities, nor are they thesis and antithesis to be synthesized in some hip dialectic. They contain both similarities and differences that, together, are equally valid, useful, and necessary versions of the same idea. As Ford notes in *Dig*, “the form of hip culture is the rhizome, not the root ... it is better grasped through pattern recognition than linear logic” (18). This rhizomatic thinking, theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* will play an important role throughout this project as it is first closely related to the hybridity of hipsters and their humor as I will identify it in the next section of this chapter; second, it allows us to better understand the ways that hipster comedians perform their identities across multiple media as I will discuss at the end of this chapter and illustrate throughout the project; finally, it provides a model for the shape of my study in that this is a study of “pattern recognition,” not necessarily linear history.

the worlds of novels, this right affords these characters the ability to subvert dominant, official discourse and to challenge the social order; it allows them to exist within society, and yet to position themselves as individuals and outsiders that shift readers' perspective to that of the "other" in order to challenge the legitimacy of their social consensus and the official discourse of the society represented in the novel. These characters, "through the fool's time-honored privilege not to participate in life . . . portray the mode of existence of a man who is in life, but not of it, life's perpetual spy and reflector" (161). Later in this introduction, I will explore how this perspective of "spy and reflector" is satiric, but for now I want to examine it as hip. The hipster as jester or fool develops a paradoxical stance toward the world precisely by being in it, but not of it. Following Linda Hutcheon's assertion that "unlike paradox, irony is decidedly edgy" (37), I believe the term "paradoxical" better describes the hipsters stance than the more commonly applied "ironic," and I will privilege discussions of paradox over those of irony throughout this study. While hipsters often have edge—as Hutcheon describes it—they don't always. Part of the fun of hipster comedy as I will define it is that it doesn't have to obey any generic rules. Hipsters often use irony, but they aren't necessarily ironic. They are paradoxical: simultaneously deathly serious and flippantly playful and horrible and heroic and much more. Broyard's "Portrait" repeatedly uses the paradoxical concepts of *nowhere* and *somewhere* to explain the hipster's stylistic motives, first by asserting that "the hipster was really *nowhere*. And, just as amputees often seem to localize their strongest sensations in the *missing* limb, so the hipster longed, from the very beginning, to be *somewhere*" (43; emphasis in original). From this, Broyard explains the hipster's

performance as an attempt to create, from within a society to which he does not belong and feels outsider, a space in which to exist.

This space is the stage on which hipness is performed whether on the street corners of Greenwich Village, the stages of jazz and comedy clubs, the grooves of an LP, or the pages of a novel. The already paradoxical existence of the hipster as outsider-within is compounded, according to Broyard, because by creating “*actual somewhereness*” through the aesthetic of hip culture, the hipster becomes anything but hip (49). This paradoxical nature of the hipster in Broyard’s portrait is closely connected to Mailer’s conception of the hipster as existentialist.⁸ In performing hip as a style that creates a place for hipsters to exist within the society to which they oppose themselves, hipsters become part of the society. Broyard writes,

The hipster—once an unregenerate individualist, an underground poet, a guerrilla—had become a pretentious poet laureate. His old subversiveness, his ferocity, was now so manifestly rhetorical as to be obviously harmless. He was bought and placed in the zoo. He was *somewhere* at last ... he was back in the American womb. And it was just as unhygienic as ever. (49)

The prescience of this particular analysis of hipsters should not be underemphasized. Broyard’s vision of the hipster who finds a *somewhere* out of *nowhere* but ultimately finds himself *nowhere* once more is similar to Antonio Gramsci’s description of hegemony as a dominant group’s solicitation of consent from a subaltern to be governed. For Gramsci, the mass population (subaltern) gives consent for the rule of hegemony by

⁸ The connection between *somewhereness* and *nowhereness* and specific existential philosophy is the connection between Broyard’s terms and Sartre’s: *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

accepting its ideology through the manipulation of that ideology's "prestige" in the social and political spheres (1142). In this view, hegemony—the social control of a subaltern group through ideology—is mobile and able to adapt and change and to constantly solicit consent from new and emerging subversive groups in order to maintain a dominant status. As such, hegemony and Broyard's *somewhere* share both form and function in their relations with subalterns and hipsters alike. In 1948, Anatole Broyard painted "A Portrait of the Hipster" that goes a long way toward explaining the negative connotations of hipsters as poseurs and pretentious poets laureate today. This tension between *somewhere* and *nowhere* in the aesthetic of hipness is part of the hip cycle to which Leland refers in his *History*, and it is the basis of Thomas Frank's analysis of the rise of "hip consumerism" through manipulation of the "countercultural idea" in *The Conquest of Cool* (1997).

For Frank, the definition of hip that emerged in the postwar years as "a set of liberating practices fundamentally at odds with the dominant impulses of postwar American society" (18) represents a countercultural idea that would become romanticized in narratives of the 1960s as "revolutionary." Frank cautions against such readings, however, arguing rather that "what happened in the sixties is that hip became central to the way American capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public" (26). Frank's analysis of advertising and fashion trends illustrates his point and complicates the nature of hip by requiring that it be understood both as "fundamentally at odds with" dominant society *and* essential to that society's development and maintenance of its dominant position in the twentieth and twenty-first-centuries. By selling products through promises of individualism, liberation, and a chance to be part of the revolution,

advertisers and retailers created a society of hip consumers whose consumption was based on an idea that, on the surface, promised to subvert the system, but in actuality helped maintain and uphold the status quo through the proliferation of American capitalism as a major world power. Again, the paradoxical nature of hip rears its potentially ugly, and always laughing, head. In Frank's argument, anyone who has ever bought a Coke or a pair of Levi's did so because of the cultural impact of hip, and yet the nature of hip is to resist the very idea of this argument. This is the consumptive cycle of hip's "process in cyclical rhythm": hip crosses and consequently shifts the boundaries of what is acceptable by dominant culture until what was once hip is now square and hip must move forward causing society to follow in an endless cycle of consumption and obsolescence that leaves all the world a garbage heap and the men and women merely aging hipsters.

That hip is a driving force in American culture and consumption is undeniable, but Frank's analysis can be somewhat unsettling and paranoid because of its focus. As he puts it, it "is a study of co-optation rather than counterculture" (7), and as such must be read alongside those studies of counterculture that he calls into question in order to grasp the nuance of the full picture. This is, in part, my goal for this project. For now, I want to suggest that, while the development and rise of hip consumerism has played an essential role in the development of American culture since the postwar years, it has also played an important role in the prominence of stand-up comedy today because it provides hipster comedians (subversive agents of the countercultural *idea* as opposed to an actual counterculture) an ever-shifting and evolving society that matches their own hybridity and against which they can thus pit their humor.

In the context of this paradoxical and shifting understanding of American society and its underlying hipness, Broyard's associations of the hipster's performance with those of the jongleur and prestidigitator become increasingly important and further clarify how I want to use the hipster label to describe a certain type of performance. If I may be permitted my own hip malapropism: a juggler must be both well-rehearsed and able to adapt to the changing circumstances of his act. Like the hipster, the juggler's performance is studied and practiced. However, essential to a juggler's art is addition of multiple items for juggling. To juggle three balls is a skill, to add batons, torches, and even (forgive the anachronism here) chainsaws, perhaps while riding a unicycle, requires that the juggler be capable of adjusting for multiplicity of weight and rhythm while maintaining the appearance of calm and collected balance. Hipsters are jongleurs in that they embrace the many and often competing positions that hip occupies within a society while juggling the paradoxical nature of those positions and their own hipness. Drawing on Darwin, Leland argues that evolution "favors contradiction and disruption" and that "a society that can close itself off to contradictory ideas is stagnant. One that cultivates contradictions will evolve faster, develop more technologies and have more fun" (165). Society itself must juggle its multiple and contradictory relationships to its individual members. Those that close off multiplicity and contradiction, if history is any indicator, risk unrest and uprising, revolution both ideological and violent. Hipsters exist in contradiction and juggle with aplomb the competing notions of insider and outsider that make them forces for progress and development as well as consumption and control—this is part of the reason that hip is such an effective tool of capitalism: built in to the nature of hip consumerism is a mobility and attention deficit that lends itself to planned

obsolescence and the market's drive for consumption at all costs. The hipsters that I examine here are jongleurs whose performances both embrace and enact "contradiction and disruption" and to whom evolution and adaptation are essential.

When Broyard claims the hipster's performance as akin to that of the prestidigitator he makes explicit the association that informs this study: that of the hipster to the trickster. The prestidigitator uses sleight-of-hand and misdirection to perform tricks that amaze and entertain. In doing so, the prestidigitator challenges an audience's understanding of the world and asks them to see things in a new and unfamiliar way. When magicians find an audience member's card in a deck of 52 or pull a rabbit from a hat, they are engaging in a type of irony at its most basic level: subverting expectations about a particular system. In the context of a magic show, the system represented by a cut and shuffled deck of cards is that of the chaotic, random universe; when performers pulls the correct card out of that shuffled deck, they subvert logical expectations and call into question the very nature of the system: is the deck rigged? How'd he do that? And audiences know that a rabbit cannot really be in a hat, yet there that fluffy bastard is.⁹ Prestidigitators exist within the systems of logic and physics but position themselves as outsiders who do not have to obey the laws of those systems. The best seem capable of bending, if not outright undermining, the rules of the system. In doing so, they open up the imaginations of their audiences and expose contradictions and multiplicities by challenging the audience's basic assumptions and the belief that things are one way and not another (or another, *ad infinitum*). This essentially ironic position is precisely that of

⁹ This is assuming the ideal situation of an audience of innocents who find wonder in a little sleight-of-hand. Magicians, like hipsters, must contend with a constant and evolving audience that increasingly becomes aware of and cynical toward the magician's ploys.

the hipster and his literary counterpart the trickster. Broyard labels this position ““second-removism”” and claims that it “establishe[s] the hipster as keeper of enigmas, ironical pedagogue ... [who] discover[s] the world to the naïve, who still tilted with the windmills of one-level meaning” (46). Hipsters—existing at one end of a binary that is part of an evolving cyclical process of subversion, consumption, co-optation, and evolution—reject and undermine “one-level meaning” by first exposing these singular assumptions to the logic of the double. As they occur repeatedly in the history of hip and the cycles of human and social development, the double becomes the multiple and the hipster becomes a constant and hybrid force of play and disruption.

Leland’s history of hip in many ways doubles as a history of America, viewed from a certain angle—through sunglasses and a cloud of pot smoke; Mel Watkins’s *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (1999) is similarly both a history of comedy and of this country. At its core, it is a study of that “double-consciousness” that W. E. B. Du Bois describes as the “peculiar sensation” of African American existence in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (45). Watkins’s extensive history of black humor in America is in many ways a study of how African Americans responded through humor to this double-consciousness by exploiting the multiplicity of their own consciousness to create a humor that speaks with and to black identity in the context of slavery and oppression. Watkins notes the similarity between slaves and European fools in the early African comic figures found in colonial literature and accounts of early American life. As he begins to trace the development of an “authentic black humor” (67)—i.e., one that is

created out of African American experience for African American audiences by African Americans—he recognizes the ways in which slave humor adds another layer of ironic meaning to the traditional European fool. Where fools, as Bakhtin argues, claim the “right to be ‘other,’” slaves’ otherness is not a right, but a condition of their oppression and the marker of a social boundary that they cannot cross at risk of violence and death. In response to these conditions, African American humor develops into a humor dependent on multiple levels of meaning and ironic removal. To complete an outline of the hipster’s footprint and identify the character at which I want to look, it is essential to explore this development as it relates both to the development of hip in American society and to the development of American humor in the twentieth-century.

Hip Humor: A Beginning

For Leland, “tricksters are hip’s animating agents” (162). In his *History*, these figures play the essential role of “crossing and recrossing the lines that hem [hip] in” and “violating the boundary between [right and wrong]” (162-3). Such will be the case with the comedians I discuss, but to better understand how tricksters cross and violate these lines and to locate the aesthetic impulses that form the footprint I am looking at requires understanding the form that trickster tales took in the African American slave culture that Mailer and Leland, et al. identify as the origins of hip. In Watkins’s history, “trickster tales were among the most popular and commonly expressed varieties of slave folklore and, outside of physical resistance and rebellion, probably represented the most aggressive and cynical view of white America expressed by slaves” (70). This ability to create an “aggressive and cynical” vision of the dominant culture by its oppressed others represents an ability to subvert social structure and cross lines that is essential to the

hipster and the comedian alike. In the tales of animal and slave tricksters that Watkins analyzes, patterns develop that form the bases of black humor. In particular, misdirection (the tool of the prestidigitator), malapropism, and signifying “vaguely delineate the ironic playfulness or underlying surge of defiance and outright mockery that would be discovered later in black humor” (79). Misdirection in these tales comes either from the trickster character who uses it to fool his master or his master’s rival, or in the telling of the tale in such a way that it masks the slave’s cunning and “establish[es] a safe context in which the tales could be heard” (72) without eliciting retribution from white slave masters and, eventually, audiences. Malapropism provided black tricksters and storytellers an outlet for “*deliberate* linguistic misdirection [which] allowed slaves both to communicate surreptitiously with one another, and, without detection, express humorously some of the pent-up outrage resulting from their treatment as bondsmen” (66). Signifying, “verbally putting down or berating another person with witty remarks” (64), can be a subversive humorous force as it is in the famous tale of “The Signifying Monkey” in which the trickster Monkey berates a Lion and fools him into being beaten by an elephant, thus subverting the order of the jungle in which the Lion is king and metaphorically standing in for the subversion of white culture by blacks (470). Hipster comedians will employ these same tools and, through “ironic [or, rather, paradoxical] playfulness,” defy and outright mock the dominant culture and societal hypocrisies against which they position themselves.

The final elements of the hipster’s footprint as I will track it in the pages of this study emerge only by beginning to comprehend the fundamentally playful stance that hipsters take toward the world and how that playfulness manifests itself in their style and,

ultimately, their humor. For Phil Ford, the answer to the question “What is Hip?” is not found in any stable definition, but in the very asking of such a question. Ford draws on late 1950s and Beat fascination with Zen Buddhism to liken his question and the very essence of hip to Zen *koans* which “use language against itself, creating unsolvable puzzles” (31). For the Zen practitioner and the hipster alike, Ford argues, “veracity is not the point; imagination and play is” (33). By subjecting logic and language to their own inherent paradoxes and potential failings, the *koan* plays with meaning and imagines multiple perspectives from which to view all things. This is similarly the objective of the hipster in American society: to subject the order of the world at a given time and in a given context to its shortcomings by taking a paradoxical outsider stance and exploring that world with the intellectualism of the hip sensibility. Like the Zen Buddhist, the hipster is not after truth in any tangible sense—indeed, he’s highly suspicious of such words—but rather seeks thought itself as an end that merely becomes a new beginning. This cyclical and paradoxical nature is essential to hip and allows hipsters to occupy multiple stances on the ideological spectrum and to be always on the move. Hipsters play games, but not by any identifiable rules and rarely the same game twice. The hipster label is apt for my study because it implies the mobility and multiplicity that these comedians seek to promote through their comedy’s call for intellectual response and imaginative examination of the individual’s place in relation to itself and society.

Hipsters, as hip’s most extreme practitioners whether in postwar Greenwich Village or twenty-first-century Brooklyn, share the following characteristics, all of which will play into how I analyze the comedians in this study and argue for their role in stand-

up comedy's cultural capital today.¹⁰ First, they are existentialists living in a perpetual present tense from which they embrace hybridity, mobility, and multiplicity as an essential response to the absurdity and hypocrisy of human existence and society. Second, as mobile and hybrid individuals, hipsters live within society as self-exiled outsiders who repeatedly position themselves as opposed to various mainstream or square societies so that their very identity is a rejection of those societies' values, whatever they may be. From this position, hipsters both implicitly and explicitly subvert expectations and violate boundaries. Third, hipsters are performers who use their unique individual perspectives, their hybridity and adaptability, and their awareness of the double (and often more) levels of meaning and consciousness to call into question any attempts to order or explain existence singularly or solidly. Finally, though hipsters may occupy political space and become associated with certain ideologies, their goal in subverting and violating society's rules is not to correct but simply to play and to promote active, free thought. This final trait complicates my study by requiring that I explore its implications for the type of comedy that hipster comedians practice and how that comedy differs from other similar comic thrusts of the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries.

Hip Satirists and Satiric Hipsters

When Albert Goldman asserts that "Mort Sahl was hip; Lenny Bruce was a hipster" (194), he identifies both a personal style and a fundamental difference between

¹⁰ If the politics of postwar hipsters seems more revolutionary than those of the brunch-loving trust funders of today it is important to remember first that not all "hipsters" are hipsters, and second that in the post-hip twenty-first-century, after half a century of hip consumerism, the nature of social revolution may look quite different than it once did. This line of thought will be taken up again and explored explicitly in Chapter Four when I examine the post-hipster persona of Aziz Ansari.

the sort of ripped-from-the-headlines satire for which Sahl is best known and the often extreme individualism and defiance which made Bruce infamous. Now that I have offered a tentative sketch of the hipster, I want to delineate the type of humor that I will study in hipster comedians as a particular type of satire that is less a studied logical skewering of political hypocrisy—like Sahl’s or his twenty-first-century counterpart Jon Stewart’s—and more an attempt, through laughter, to expose the absurdity and folly of all social and political existence from the paradoxical inside/outsider perspective of the hipster. This difference is perhaps most easily grasped through the juxtaposition set up in the subtitle of this section: hip satirists and satiric hipsters. Mort Sahl and Jon Stewart (and many comedians in between and afterward) might be best described as hip satirists in that they are often hip and share many traits with hipsters, but do not occupy the extreme space of the hipster as outsider and individualist. Their hipness is a mode through which they communicate satire. On the contrary, Lenny Bruce and the other comedians studied here use the mode of satire to communicate their hipness and that hipness to interrogate social and individual existence; they are satirically hip, satiric hipsters. As hipsters, they often espouse the same ideological and political leanings of their hip counterparts (usually to the left of center), but they do not share the same goals: the hip satirist sees satire as an end and possibly social change while the satirical hipster’s goal is hipness, understood now by the footprints of hybridity, performance, play, and free thought—which is to say, the hipster’s ends are simply means. Whereas hip satirists primarily focus their humor on specific politics and politicians in order to promote specific political awareness at the least and positive change at the most, the satirically hip recognize the paradox of revolution and the cycles of co-optation that inhibit and restrict

extreme hipness and radical thought and instead focus their humor on ridiculing, not specific hypocrisies and logical failings, but the very nature of humanity's absurd need to impose and construct logical order upon itself and its individual members. The goal of the satiric hipster is not social correction in any ideological direction as it often is in the hip satirist, but simply the shifting of perspective from the singular to the multiple—from a focus on veracity to an exploration of imagination.

Stephen E. Kercher's *Revel With a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (2006) "aims to fill a large gap in the scholarship on twentieth-century American humor" by rethinking Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s assertion that "the decade of the fifties was 'the most humorless period in American history'" (4). Kercher's study spans the "long fifties" from the end of World War II to the early 1960s and a change in the comic *zeitgeist* that coincides with Lenny Bruce's 1964 conviction—after three years of trials and arrests in various cities—in New York.¹¹ Kercher's study offers a clear and concise starting point for understanding the satire of the hipster that I want to discuss here and advance through the analysis in the chapters that follow. Kercher offers the following succinct definition of satire as he sees and traces it, a definition from which I would like to begin my own exploration: "forms of humorous expression that ... deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness. Spurred often by anger or scorn and informed by serious moral concern, satire is humor with a social purpose" (1). This definition is rhetorical in its simplicity,

¹¹ Though Bruce had already been found guilty in Chicago in 1963, the New York verdict was an especially devastating blow both to Bruce and, as Kercher shows, to the entire comedy community. "What does it mean for a man to be found obscene in New York?" Bruce asked in his autobiography *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (1965) identifying the magnitude of this conviction while simultaneously taking a jab at it: "this is the most sophisticated city in the country. This is where they play Genet's *The Balcony*. If anyone is the first person to be found obscene in New York, he must feel utterly depraved" (154).

and in the pages that follow, Kercher qualifies it and addresses concerns for the ambiguities present in it: whose vice? What kind of awareness? Whose morality? What is morality? A social purpose to what end? Kercher's immediate response to these ambiguities is to add the modifier "liberal" to his term and identify the satire that he sees emerging and flourishing in the American long-fifties as liberal satire that "corroborated the outlook and agenda of mid-twentieth-century liberalism and of the left wing of the Democratic Party in particular" (1). This qualification, while necessary for Kercher, establishes the most important point of divergence between Kercher's study and my own and further helps to illuminate the distinction between hip satirists like those who make up the bulk of Kercher's subjects and the satiric hipsters that I am tracing. Hip satirists like Sahl or Stewart have a clear ideological stance toward society that is often consistent with hip's embrace of the liminal and the hybrid, but their hipness is secondary to their liberal leanings and their ultimate "social purpose." Satiric hipsters, on the other hand, often find humor by taking a liberal stance and it fits easily within their hipness, especially during times of dominant conservatism, but satiric hipsters do not share the same "social purpose" as hip satirists because they do not occupy the same rigid ideological stance nor possess the "serious moral concern" of the satirist. Rather than use hip for social and satirical ends, satiric hipsters use satire for hip ends, and thus practice a more ambiguous but potentially liberating satire than their hip satirist comrades.

Kercher's desire to place satire on an ideological spectrum is, of course, nothing new. Formal studies of satire in literature and art have often attempted to identify its "social purpose," speaking in terms of corrective and critique and borrowing those familiar binary poles: conservative and liberal. These are the ends of what Linda

Hutcheon describes as the “transideological” spectrum of irony that allows it to “function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests” (10). While the range of potential ideological positions is wide, most studies of satire—particularly those that emerged in the 1960s and which inform Kercher’s study of that time period—attempt to focus on the ends of the ideological spectrum, looking at satire that serves a conservative social purpose or a more subversive, progressive one.¹² In *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* (1994), Dustin Griffin claims that “conventional satiric theory—by which [he] mean[s] the consensus of those theorists who published their work around 1960—holds that the satirist operates in a world of clear standards and boundaries” (35). Griffin’s goal in rethinking and reintroducing satire as a subject of critical discourse is to question the clarity of satiric standards and boundaries and to articulate a theory of satire that transverses traditional notions of ideological stability in satire. To do so, Griffin argues that satire always potentially exists at many points along the “transideological” spectrum because it is not a closed form as earlier critics sought to define it, but an open rhetorical mode that depends on audience and context—or, we might insert, on the hip present tense—for its meaning.

Rather than consider satire a rigid polemical stance or a formal genre, Griffin defines it as a rhetorical mode that gains its potential social purpose from its use of inquiry, provocation, performance, and play. According to Griffin,

¹²As Kercher notes, “the study of satire ... experienced a renaissance during” the postwar years he studies (448 fn). Many journal articles and books on the subject appeared in the early 1960s and articulated many formal characteristics of satire as a literary genre. While these texts do much to advance the conversation of what satire may be and how it may function in specific texts, I will follow the more rhetorical thinking about satire that Dustin Griffin advances in *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*.

A rhetoric of inquiry and provocation enables us to see more clearly that satire is often an “open” rather than a “closed” form, that it is concerned rather to inquire, explore, or unsettle than to declare, sum up, or conclude. Elements of playfulness and performance likewise shift our attention from satire’s ostensible end to its means. (94)

While there is much to be learned from studying satire as a closed form that seeks certain specific social and political ends, thinking of satire in an open and hybrid way—as a performative stance that seeks less to argue and more to question and to play—helps to identify the satire of hipsters because it more clearly articulates the connection between satire and hipness itself. When I speak of hip satirists like Sahl or Stewart, I am speaking of humorists whose hipness is closed off by their adherence to a strict ideological position and serves the ends of their satire: to declare the fallacies of the opposing view, to sum up a political position, and to draw conclusions. On the contrary, when I study satirical hipsters, whose ends are not strictly socially functional humor but the constant mobility and hybridity of hip’s “process in cyclical rhythm,” I look for the satiric means by which hipsters question, explore, and unsettle all aspects of the society against which they position themselves (and along all parts of the ideological spectrum) to encourage play and thoughtfulness.

In *The Literature of Satire* (2004) Charles A. Knight follows Griffin’s rethinking of satire’s form and style to argue that, while satirists take moral stances, satire itself “is independent of moral purpose” and instead its purpose “is perception rather than changed behavior, although change in behavior may well result from change in perception” (5). Knight’s exploration of the satiric frame of mind that seeks a “change in perception”

informs my study of satiric hipsters inasmuch as it is precisely the satiric frame of mind that I am seeking to study in the hipster. Whereas studies like Kercher's of 1960s liberal satire or Amber Day's similar analysis of contemporary satirists in *Satire and Dissent* (2011) look at satirists who possess a hip frame of mind, those satirists occupy specific socio-political space and therefore practice more closed forms of satire that draw on a hip aesthetic. On the contrary, I am looking at hipsters who possess a satiric frame of mind that serves the intellectual purpose of hipness first, and society only secondarily. Knight associates this open satiric frame of mind with that of the trickster explicitly who exists as a laughing "agent as well as an observer" of the folly not just of particular issues or individuals but of all humanity (3). Hipsters' inside/outsiderness and the satiric frame of mind are compatible and mutually beneficial because both allow for agency and observation and therefore encourage a hybrid and adaptable perspective from which satiric hipsters can question any and potentially all human foolishness, regardless of ideology or morality.

The ambiguity of hipsters to fixed positions of any kind (whether social, physical, ideological, moral, etc.) requires their humor to be likewise ambiguous and mobile. The satiric frame of mind that Knight identifies is such a humor and thus helps to clarify the satiric mindset of the satirically hip. Knight argues that "insofar as satire is moral at all, it tends to create its own values" (5), values that exist in opposition to some perceived folly. This constant and fluctuating process of satiric opposition, "proposes sets of alternatives at different or even inconsistent levels, thereby creating multiple possibilities for uncomfortable awareness and allowing imaginative truth to emerge from real uncertainty" (31). Like the "process in cyclical rhythm" of hip that continually proposes

the alternative of hip to whatever it finds square—a cycle of opposition that over time operates “at different or even inconsistent levels”—the satiric frame of mind, open and active in its pursuit of human folly, serves hybrid and ambiguous functions. By studying the humor of hipsters as a humor of inquiry, provocation, performance, and play that is hybrid and mobile in its ambiguity to a fixed ideological or moral position, I will show that satiric hipsters’ small but significant role in the development of American humor and culture of the last half-century has been to promote thoughtful laughter that challenges norms and assumptions by challenging perception. As hipsters, these comedians utilize their existential and individual perspectives to question existence and identity from the position of the inside/outsider. As satiric hipsters, they mine the multiple levels of meaning and perception in the world to provoke playful laughter and shifts of perspective in their audiences. Satiric hipsters are always hip, often funny, and never static—as such they require equally hip and hybrid modes of expression through which they communicate and to which they can apply their aesthetic.

Hip Conduit: Hipsters and Media, a Shape for this Study

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries, satiric hipster comedians have taken up the microphone in strip bars, comedy clubs, performance halls, and sporting arenas to do the work of hip through the mode of satire. Simon Critchley describes this work, done in this mode, by describing satire as a genre that asks its audience to “look at [them]selves as if [they] were visitors from an alien environment, to examine terrestrial existence from a Martian point of view” (35). Hipsters, by their nature, are aliens in all environments, even those from which they come. Martians walking among us, hipsters interrogate earthly existence in all its weirdness. The

metaphor is apt, too, because it implies another essential element that hipsters might share with aliens from another planet: a language barrier. As outsiders seeking to investigate, provoke, and play with the very natures of existence and society while also remaining visibly present. Hipsters must be visible to be hip—i.e., hipsters aren't hip if you don't know they're there, unlike aliens in science fiction narratives who might inhabit the physical forms of humans to blend in and subvert from within. Because of this presence, hipsters often find themselves at odds with dominant ideologies and the ideological apparatuses that maintain the status quo: particularly political and religious institutions as well as the entertainment industry.

The next chapter will open my investigation of hipsters by looking at their emergence as a stand-up comic persona in Lenny Bruce. Bruce adapted the hipsters of his social circle into a stage persona and by doing so found himself not only suddenly famous but also infamous. Such is one of the many paradoxes of hip: to be simultaneously praised and villainized, loved and feared. As I examine Bruce's creation of his hipster persona and its satiric interrogation of postwar society, I will also briefly explore how that persona raised the ire of the church and the state to the tune of four trials and two convictions on charges of obscenity for Bruce. Amid this controversy and because of the inhibitions it placed on his ability to perform, Bruce sought multiple media as outlets for his persona. Chapter two will take up this thread and examine the three albums Bruce released during his lifetime and leading up to his arrests and convictions as well as some of his more notorious bits—performed and recorded during his life, but released posthumously. While Bruce was not the first comedian to put out an album by any means, examining his persona as it develops through the recorded material and the

images on his commercial album covers will further delineate aesthetic characteristics of the satiric hipster persona as well as argue for the importance of media to the performance of this persona. Chapter three will complete my examination of Bruce by looking at the failings of his final attempt to use new media as a vehicle for his persona, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*. This early attempt at a live performance film, I will argue, further identifies the nature of satiric hipsters and highlights their importance to the rise of comedy as a mode of intellectual thought in contemporary society. Hipsters are always on the cutting edge of technology and media, and it is because of hipster comedians that the performance film—eventually becoming known as the “special”—became such an important medium for comedy during its rise to popularity in the late 1970s and the waning years of the twentieth-century. This fact will be illustrated by showing how Richard Pryor changed the game by fixing Bruce’s mistakes in his performance films *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* and *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip*. In particular, Pryor succeeds most where Bruce most fails: as a hipster.

If, as Marshall McLuhan famously claimed, “the medium is the message,” then the unruly, inquisitive, and playful message of hip would find its most perfect medium yet in the Internet. “The medium for [hip] messages,” writes John Leland, “has been personal technology” (317). For Leland, “jazz begins with the advent of machines that allowed listeners to consume music as individuals, not just as part of a concert audience. Though the music came into being before its encounters with technology, it matured with them” (317-18). When listeners became able to take the performance home, to listen and re-listen and thus begin to understand, they became aware of its language, the hip aesthetic that Ford traces in his study of sound and music in the postwar years. Through

this process of hip education, technology and the media that it creates give not only hipsters but all individuals a medium through which they might join in the play of hip culture: “the printing press, radio, television, CDs, cell phones and the Internet all moved in the way of the telephone ... created in the image of the elite, they all gave the masses a medium for speaking back” (Leland 334). If comedy seems particularly capable of speaking to the state of the world today, then it is at least in part due to the fact that the Internet age has created a world in which many Americans have access to a medium through which they might speak back to the world. In this polyglossic existence, paradox is the norm and hybridity a necessity. Hipsters speak clearly to this situation because it is their nature and through them—and the media they inhabit—the masses receive a hip education, furthering the “process in cyclical motion” and increasing the level of thought in their audiences. Chapter four will explore this by examining the work of two satirical hipsters working today, Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari.

Because hipster comedians push boundaries through their hybridity and ambiguity, through inquiry and provocation of the performances that underlie all social existence, and because they actively participate in the hip consumerism through which “American capitalism underst[ands] itself and explain[s] itself to the public,” the audiences to which they play are as diverse as the range of thought they advocate. However, because hip is “a process in cyclical rhythm,” its audiences can be understood similarly as a procession of consumptive cycles. The audience of a hipster begins with the hip, then proceeds to the intellectuals and the interested who actively seek out diverse voices and ideas, then becomes—through the legitimization of the intellectual class—popular; having become popular it becomes square and if the comedian is still playing to

that audience he is no longer a hipster. A hipster would have long since moved on to what's newly hip. This study will primarily concern itself with the first three of these audiences because that is when hipster comedians actively participate in the shifting of cultural perspective. In the case of Lenny Bruce, this means considering his persona in the context of the jazz musicians to whom he aspired, the critics and scholars who eventually defended him in trial, and the audiences who would have heard of him and been intrigued enough to buy a Lenny Bruce record in both the early 1960s before his death and the late 1960s when he became a countercultural icon. In the case of Pryor, it is both the black audience with and for whom he speaks with what Mel Watkins would call an authentic or "real" black voice, and the white audiences (both critical and popular) to whom he speaks about the nature of racial inequality, but who also bought tickets to his stand-up shows and his movies. Both of these audiences are visually represented in the makeup of the audiences as shown in the films analyzed here and will play an important part in my analysis of them.

In the cases of Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari, the audiences to whom their hipster personas speak are perhaps harder to pin down because of the state of hip in the twenty-first-century as a dominant commercial and political stance as well as the nature of the very media that I seek to analyze. For this reason, chapter four will contain much talk of posts-. Postmodern, post-hip, and other such necessarily ambiguous labels will be tossed around with abandon to describe the situation of the twenty-first-century in which everything is new and nothing is, everything is hip and same, and so on. I borrow this notion of the post- from Angela McRobbie's description of postfeminism:

a field of transformation in which feminist values come to be engaged with, and to some extent incorporated across, civil society ... [yet] the active, sustained, and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism also marks its (still fearful) presence or even longevity (as afterlife). (30)

As McRobbie describes it, postfeminist society is one in which feminist values are visible and active within society, but consistently troubled and attacked from within and without the dominant culture. McRobbie offers this vision as a means of refocusing feminist attention on its own role in contemporary culture and gender construction and as a way of critiquing the flippant use of the “post-” prefix to simply mean “after” by asserting the danger of such usage’s potential to imply that feminism is no longer necessary. I will employ the prefix “post-” similarly to how McRobbie says we should, not as a temporal designation implying any fixed or terminated state, but as an interrogation of the culture in which ideas like modernity or hipness or even race are a matter of “Gramscian common sense” (McRobbie 28). Through it all, my goal will be to study the hybridity and playfulness of the satiric hipster as a stand-up persona and that persona’s potential, across multiple media and in multiple contexts, to encourage and provoke the kind of free thought that might help to explain the popularity and prominence of comedy in contemporary society.

To borrow this prefix from McRobbie highlights a potential gap in this study that must be addressed before I begin my analysis of these hipsters: the absence of women in this discussion. This absence should not be misread as an endorsement of Christopher Hitchen’s well-known but idiotic assertion that “women aren’t funny”; neither should it imply that female comedians are not hip. Throughout the history of both stand-up and

hip, women have played important roles. However, in discussions of the hipster as an extreme example of either persona or cultural figure, men tend to be the focus. Leland addresses this gender discrepancy by quoting Sonic Youth's bassist Kim Gordon's assertion that "Hip definitely seems like a male term ... I think of ... that whole rockster toddler male machismo thing" (241). This quotation leads Leland to argue that the hipster as hip's extreme embodiment is male, but a male whose gender defies singular understanding: "in gender as in race, hip thrives in the hybrid, the hyphen ... the female within the male" (257). Phil Ford follows another line of thinking to justify the absence of women in his study, asserting in a footnote that "in life, hipsters have always been male and female alike, but as a mythic abstraction 'the hipster' was always masculine" (228). Like Ford's this study focuses on persona rather than person and thus on abstraction rather than reality, so "the hipster" remains masculine. However, this should not suggest that there is no room for women in the study of hip's influence on comedy. Throughout stand-up's rise to cultural significance, women have always been present and influential, if not always afforded the same opportunities, and much scholarship devoted to female comedians and feminist comedy exist. The hipster persona under study here is a male one, but it is never that simple. From Lenny Bruce's Naval discharge for crossdressing to Aziz Ansari's critiques of traditional marriage and modern relationships, gender plays the same role in the hipster's comedy as any other social norm, serving mostly as a boundary to cross and as fodder for thought.

CHAPTER II

COMEDY ALBUMS: VERBAL AND VISUAL PERSONA ON FANTASY RECORDS'

LENNY BRUCE ALBUMS 1959-1961

Comedy, particularly comedy with any satiric slant, is inseparable from the world in which it is created and at which it laughs—a dependence on the present tense of its socio-historical context that strengthens the bonds of hip and humor. Perhaps the most influential work on comedy, its workings, and its effects in the twentieth century is Henri Bergson's "Laughter" (1901). Bergson's essay maintains its importance to the theory of comedy as it developed through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first in part because of its thorough articulation of the Incongruity Theory couched in the context of modern life. Bergson's theory and its central image of "*something mechanical encrusted on the living*" (84) was in its day and remains in this one relevant to the rapid technological development and increased mechanization of human life in the more than century since its publication. The tenuous boundary between machine and person in the twentieth and twenty-first-centuries offers myriad opportunities to laugh, as Bergson says we must, at the incongruities produced by slippage between human vitality and mechanical "*inelasticity*" (73), at "*a person [who] gives us the impression of being a thing*" (97).

Laughter's relation to the world and the society in which it exists is key both to Bergson's overall work and to one of its fundamental assertions: "laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a *social* significance" (65). This social significance can be as simple as being able to speak the language of a given audience and to use appropriate references to build jokes, or it can be as complex as the sorts of socially subversive or conservative satiric forms of humor that are the subject of most current scholarly works on comedy. Part of this study's purpose is to examine the potential social impact of the hipster persona and what, if any, role it may play in the intellectual progression of social discourse, including raising social awareness and advocating social justice, or at least opening up consideration of these things. However, it is also important to note that much, if not most, stand-up comedy serves either a more conservative ideological function or little to no specific ideological function at all. That does not undermine Bergson's argument or my own, though, because there is still a necessary "social significance" to even the most mundane comedy. The famous question amongst comics, "will it play in Peoria?" identifies an awareness that comedy only works within specific social situations. Linda Hutcheon articulates this concept eloquently in *A Theory of Parody* in which she identifies the importance of discursive communities to the reading of parodic texts. On a more personal level, I recently saw West Coast comedian Natasha Leggero at a western dance hall in Tulsa where she had a good five minutes of material on Costco that she had to scrap in the middle of the show when she found out that most of her audience had never been to or were completely unaware of Costco as a concept. Without the appropriate reference point, the jokes didn't land. In this sense, the significance of a social context cannot be overstated for stand-up comedians in particular

who, unlike their more literary counterparts (comic writers and filmmakers, for example), often find themselves strangers in strange and even hostile lands trying to get a laugh. Beyond this more mundane example, Mel Watkins's *On The Real Side* contains many explorations of the resistance and sometimes danger that black comedians have faced on the road in certain parts of the country, highlighting how the complex relationship between all comedy and society is made more complicated in the case of stand-up comedy.

Recognizing the importance of social and historical context to comedy helps us to understand the way that popular comedy developed in the mid-twentieth-century into stand-up comedy and the role that stand-up comedy has played in shaping American culture since. To understand the hipster as a comic persona that emerged in the mid-twentieth-century as a figure particularly capable of provoking American culture into intellectual response, it is first important to have a basic understanding of the hipster's social significance in his time. In particular, as I am tracing an aesthetic creation with some obvious political potential, I first want to discover how the hipster's aesthetic fits within that of the mid-twentieth-century and how it emerged in the persona of Lenny Bruce.

In his popular history of American comedy *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels and the History of American Comedy* (2015), Kliph Nesteroff identifies the mid-1950s and early 1960s as "stand-up's great change" (155). The change that Nesteroff points to is a simple aesthetic development with far-reaching consequences:

For the first half of the twentieth-century comedians performed without referencing their personal lives onstage ... The comedy was always about

some elusive guy: “Did you hear about the guy who ...” [or] “A fella was walking down the street when ...” In the mid-1950s no longer was it “a fella” walking down the street. For the first time comedians told the audience: “*I* was walking down the street.” (155)

With this simple change in subject, stand-up comedians, particularly satirists like Mort Sahl and hipsters like Lenny Bruce, made a change to the comic aesthetic that effectively expanded its scope and potential as a mode of social commentary and intellectual activity. Through the rhetorical potential of the autobiographical “I,” these comedians enhanced comedy’s social significance in ways that further help to define the comic hipster persona. First, the autobiographical persona offers comedians even more potential for multiple-level meanings and the encoding of potentially subversive meanings to various discourse communities, as I touched on in the first chapter. These potentials can serve both satiric and hip ends, but they are particularly effective for the hipster as a means of eliciting response and instigating intellectual thought defined by Stuart Hampshire because they seek to complicate rather than simplify existence and to push at boundaries and limitations. Second, the development of autobiographical personas in mid-century stand-up aesthetically links comedy to the artistic movements of its time and thereby begins to legitimate it as a mode of artistic and social discourse. From this position within culture, comedians challenge assumptions and provoke thoughtful reading and response from the world in which they exist and in which they perform—whether live or played back through various media. Finally, a stand-up who uses the personal pronoun infuses it with the subjective experience and the present tense of hip. While many comedians in the 1950s began using “I” in their acts, it was the hipster Lenny Bruce, whose

autobiographical persona aggressively pushed against the square boundaries of postwar America and revealed the potential of stand-up comedy as a mode of intellectual play and disruption that helps to explain its prominence in intellectual circles today. While continuing to explore the autobiographical persona as an aesthetic performance, this chapter will examine how Bruce's persona develops and becomes the hipster on the albums he released with Fantasy Records during the late 1950s and early 1960s before his death. This analysis will further delineate the outline of the hipster comedian and begin to articulate its role in the development of comedy as a mode of intellectual and social discourse in the twentieth-century by illustrating how Bruce's hipster embraces his autobiographical hybridity and the technology of his time to challenge and disrupt audiences through performances that potentially provoke intellectual response through paradoxical inquiry.

Autobiography and Confessional Poetry

The "great change" of comedy in the 1950s is perhaps a bit less "great" when given a larger historical context than Nesteroff is really interested in. This is not to discount his work in any way; however, his analysis is concerned solely with the industry of comic entertainment and thus importantly and correctly situates this change within the context of vaudeville's end, the rise of television, and the popularity of nightclubs and Las Vegas in the postwar years. Nesteroff argues that "stand-up was impersonal" prior to the mid-1950s "because few comedians wrote what they said" (155), but as stand-up became an increasingly viable way to make a living because of TV, Vegas, and various touring circuits, writers increasingly left the thankless work of writing jokes for others and began taking the stage themselves. While this is certainly part of the story, there is

more to it when we consider the larger social situation of 1950s literature and art. Add to Nesteroff's portrait of the comedy industry what Stephen Kercher describes as "the sense of alienation liberal satirists felt toward mainstream American life [which] fed their late modernist passions for truth and authenticity" (3), and an image begins to emerge of mid-century comedy as a mode through which stand-ups began to assert both their own comic identities and those identities' potential for social significance beyond simply communicating a joke. During this time, some comedians made stand-up comedy a mode of social communication that used the rhetorical potential of the autobiographical self to engage the follies of American society in various ways and at all points of the ideological spectrum. Leading the charge for this change in comedy and American culture was the hipster. However, before looking specifically at the comic hipster persona as it originates in Lenny Bruce I want to first more specifically identify the hipster's potential to speak to this society at this time. Through the autobiographical "I" and the development of a confessional comic aesthetic as a hip aesthetic, Bruce's hipster not only positions himself as inside/outsider capable of possibly subverting—and at least playing with—social norms from within but also legitimates himself as a cultural force and public intellectual through his association with the literary and artistic developments of the time. It is this legitimacy that opens the door for all such hipsters to follow.

Because autobiographical performance takes for its subject the self, it engages in a discursive act that, as Emma Govan argues, "frames the everyday in a manner which reflects upon the constitution of identity itself" (60). As such, autobiographical performance is able to reflect upon the world within which it exists and to communicate with that world's inhabitants in the present moment of the performance. Because it

“reflects upon the constitution of identity,” autobiographical performance provides the performer with an opportunity to challenge the most fundamental boundaries of human existence—the self and its relation to others and/or society. Through this exploration, autobiographical performers may highlight the performative nature of identities and invite their audiences to consider the performative natures of their own identities. In doing so, autobiographical performers instigate intellectual activity in their audiences that challenges them to consider the performative nature of both identity and society. By utilizing this potential for laughs, autobiographical comics can explore the ironies and incongruities that underlie such performative identities and potentially mine these for laughs that serve a number of ideological ends.

Further, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in *Getting a Life*, presenting oneself as the subject of analysis and the site of meaning allows autobiographical writers and performers to communicate with and within certain groups, and to not only identify with, but also create communities and potential sites of resistance within larger social systems. By using the self as subject autobiographical performers are able to infiltrate and create these “communit[ies] of secret knowers” and to “convey the unspeakable” as an “authentic” member of the group (15). They are capable of operating on several discursive levels: at once within the dominant discourse of society and the discourse of those secret communities which they belong to and speak to through the autobiographical act. For this reason, hipster comedians perform specific autobiographical selves that allow them to enter specific communities and become the agents of awareness, resistance, and dissent—they encode their selves as sites of personal *and* social consciousness within their communities. The self that in autobiography—as Smith and Watson’s title *Getting a*

Life implies—allows audiences and readers to “get” the life, here allows us to “get” the joke. Beyond mere identification, the use of an autobiographical persona—an “I” that is coterminous with the physical performer who utters it—allows comedians to communicate and subvert, to build communities and to tear them asunder. By embracing the hybridity and paradox essential to this understanding of identity, hipster comedians laugh at pretensions to the “truth and authenticity” that their satiric counterparts—Kercher’s subject—might desire, and instead disrupt all such claims as a square perspective.

Rebecca Krefting further explores the comic potential of autobiographical stand-up personas in *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (2014) in order to help define her neologism “charged humor”: humor that enacts “cultural citizenship ... [and] seeks to represent the underrepresented, to empower and affirm marginalized communities and identities, and to edify and mobilize their audiences” (21). Part of Krefting’s definition hinges on the degree to which comedians’ onstage personas differ from their “off-stage personalities” (4), and she finds that charged comedians’ personas are generally more autobiographical in that this difference is often slight or nonexistent. For Krefting, this close association of onstage persona and off-stage person allows audiences to identify with charged comedians: audiences are prompted “to identify with the comics as people; ... [and feel] like they kn[o]w the comic personally” (40) which makes audiences more receptive to the charged nature of the comedy and its potential call for action. This identification is central to the “cultural citizenship” enacted by charged humor as Krefting defines it because charged comedians are members of marginalized groups who seek to “create community and validate identities among the culturally and

legally disenfranchised” (25). Krefting’s important work explores the truly countercultural in stand-up comedy, as opposed to the hip comedy under study here. Her “charged humor” is one that exists outside of the mainstream completely and creates codes and communities that provide its participants with cultural capital denied them by dominant society. While her thoughts have heavily influenced my own, her subject is essentially different than mine here as the comedians she studies exist only in subculture and the hipster is a comedian that crosses boundaries between sub and pop culture and is thus necessarily connected to the rise of comedy’s status in the contemporary imagination. Charged comedians are countercultural performers; hipsters are, in the words of Thomas Frank and Phil Ford, performances of a “countercultural idea”.

Beyond its potential as a mode of comic address that provokes intellectual play by examining the construction of identities and communities within and without society, the autobiographical persona that comedians began to utilize in the mid-1950s and which is the first and perhaps most important trait of the hipster also ties mid-century stand-up to the larger aesthetic movements of its time and begins to mark it as potentially both pop entertainment and socially significant art. Here again, the paradox of hip: at the same time that the autobiographical “I” allows comic performers to subvert and disrupt official boundaries and notions of society it also legitimates those performances by adding the cultural capital of the literary and artistic establishment through its connection to the confessional aesthetic of postwar literature and the subjective thrust of mid-century art in general. If, as I argue, hipster comedians helped to legitimize comedy as a public intellectual forum in the latter half of the twentieth-century that explains its importance today, then they did so by first borrowing from their hip predecessors.

Essential to the binary conflicts that so often define postwar American culture—black vs. white, liberal vs. conservative, communist vs. capitalist, hip vs. square, and more—are the struggles of individuals against societies and the interests of people against those of systems. While this is an oversimplification of the complicated process through which culture makes and remakes itself through the processes and cycles of history, it goes a long way toward explaining the emergence of the personal in the art and literature of the time. Citing Diane Wood Middlebrook’s essay “What Was Confessional Poetry?” Edward Shannon notes that

confessional poetry spoke to mid-century America, with timely themes including “psychoanalysis as a mode of address to postwar existential misery, anticommunism as a pressure on American artists and intellectuals, and television as a solvent of boundaries between public and domestic life.” (628)

Middlebrook further claims that, while confessional poetry is often politicized, it “was not overtly political” (qtd. in Shannon 628). Shannon’s project is an attempt to politicize the confessional mode by showing how the autobiographical subject matter of Plath, Berryman, and underground comix author/illustrator R. Crumb “urge the reader to consider the artist as a survivor not just of his personal demons but of a culture crippled by its own materialism, racism, bigotry, and neuroses” (647). Through the confession of their own demons, according to Shannon, confessional artists expose the demons of society at large, lending their work an overt political edge. This analysis goes a long way toward explaining the politicization of the personal that occurs over and over again in historiographies of the postwar years and the revolutions of the 1960s. But, again, this is

not a study of revolutions—indeed, like other scholars of hip before me, I question whether such things exist at all. Rather, this is the study of hipsters—of specific aesthetic and performative qualities that define a persona and allow that persona to disrupt and to play with audiences’ assumptions and beliefs as an intellectual exercise. While hipsters often end up being politicized and sometimes are even outright political, they are first and foremost hip. As such, their confessional qualities are “not overtly political” but are instead overtly disruptive and inquisitive—seeking thought over revolution, question over answer.

Gillian White makes a point about confessional poetry in *Lyric Shame: The Lyric Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* that is similar to the point I wish to make about hipsters:

much of the work identified as Confessional ... seemed new and noteworthy for the fact that, in its apparent willingness to air “shameful” details of the author’s personal life, it seemed to *challenge* certain modernist inheritances of Romantic ideas about lyric decorum. Chiefly, the Confessional seemed to challenge the widely held assumption that what makes a lyric poem effective is its universal, impersonal, transcendent subject, an “I” whose expression of feeling is more than a discrete self and that we take to heart as “our own.” (32; emphasis in original)

For White, confessional poetry’s primary contribution to its time was not the politicization of the subject, but simply the interrogation of the Romantic notion that a subject can be “universal, impersonal, [or] transcendent.” By asserting their individuality

through the confession of their “shameful” personal lives, confessional poets question the very nature of shame and the personal, and while such questions often lead to political and ideological positioning or critique, it is the questioning that is most important. At their core, hipsters share this impulse to challenge “widely held assumption[s].”

Lenny Bruce and the Hipster Comedian

The correlation between “stand-up’s great change” and the confessional art of mid-century America echoes the various nascent post-war Civil Rights movements’ increasing awareness of the inequalities and hypocrisies lying under the surface of American democratic capitalism and their assertion of human rights in the face of systemic oppression. Politically, the forces of the dominant culture perpetuated the same notion of humanity that Confessional poetry challenged aesthetically: that American capitalism stood for the “universal, impersonal, transcendent” essence of humanity. The artists who asserted their individuality as a challenge to this hegemonic force necessarily made their persons political in some ways, and that has been a point of great interest in most explorations of Lenny Bruce. These cultural forces impacted the art of the time too and the correlation identified here reinforces common conceptions of postwar American art as a reaction to the crises of existence, control, and conformity that also, in Mailer’s view, spawned the hipster. This and the chapters that follow will analyze the aesthetic and rhetorical elements of the hipster persona both as a comic character type and as a cultural force whose performance participates in the “process in cyclical rhythm” (Leland 242) of American cultural development in the latter half of the twentieth-century. In the hipster comedians I will examine, comedy and the hip aesthetic push at the boundaries of hip and square—and by extension challenge whatever sense of order and decorum is

dominant in their time—through inquiry and disruption. By engaging and encouraging the intellectual ideals of thought, paradox, and experimentation from their position as outsiders existing within society, these hipsters have both shifted the status quo, helping to make America a little more hip, and consistently called on their audiences to question everything—to think and rethink their own identities and their paradoxical positions within the world. The first of these hipsters is Lenny Bruce. Bruce perhaps had the greatest impact on American culture of any of these hipsters—and, strictly from a legal standpoint, probably of any stand-up comedian—and by doing so established a “process in cyclical rhythm” through which hip comedians would continue to disrupt social boundaries and encourage playful inquiry.

If the adjective “playful” seems out of place describing Bruce, that is perhaps due in part to a general cultural awareness of his legal battles in the early 1960s and grisly death in 1966. While the comedy for which he got in such trouble and for which he is best known and remembered today cannot escape the shadow of these dark times, I believe that looking more closely at Bruce specifically as a hipster through the persona’s aesthetic and rhetorical footprints as they appear in auto/biographical material and on the albums he released at the height of his fame will reveal the playful side of Bruce’s comic hipster and further help to identify both the nature and the function of this persona. Play here carries the connotations of philosophy and art under discussion, including Sartre’s belief that “the function of [play] is to make manifest and to present to *itself* the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person” (310) and Richard Schechner’s use of the term “play” in performance theory to describe “a mood, an attitude, a force” for disruption and a “categorically antistructural” act (qtd. in Weitz 7). In this context, play is

both an existential and a performative practice closely linked to the hipster as a cultural figure and as a stand-up persona.

Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover open their legal study of Bruce's trials and legacy *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (2002) by reminding readers that

Lenny Bruce wasn't always a social critic-comic [a label with which I will quibble anyway] ... When he appeared on *The Arthur Godfrey Show* in 1948 (a year after he changed his name from Leonard Schneider and three years after he was discharged from the Navy for wearing women's clothing), Lenny and his act were hokey. (14-15)

In those early days of his comedy career, Bruce's act was highly indebted to the influence of his burlesque comedienne mother Sally Marr and consisted of the stylized exaggerations and over-the-top impressions characteristic of vaudeville and the USO. In the decade between 1948 and the release of his first album with Fantasy Records in 1958, Bruce's act would change in two distinct ways. First, he would drop the hokey style and "zany impressions" (Collins and Skover 15) in favor of an autobiographical and intellectual style influenced by his social circle in Brooklyn in the early 1950s. Second, he would, through constant work and the development of a working comic's craft, create original material drawn from his own life—material that, by 1961, would make Lenny Bruce one of the most well-known names in comedy, for better and worse. What these changes amount to, essentially: Lenny Bruce became a hipster in the years between 1948 and 1961. Throughout these changes, Bruce's humor develops and evolves, but its basis in the autobiographical and use of the hip sensibilities of paradox and contradiction

remain consistent and point to both the aesthetic nature and the rhetorical function of hipster comedians.

In his autobiography *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* (1965), Bruce describes his earliest awareness of a comic sensibility: “as a child I loved confusion ... Confusion was entertainment for me” (21). This sense of confusion as entertainment is essential to the hipster’s paradoxical stance toward society and his desire to disrupt boundaries and social norms. Later in life, in the early 1950s, returning to Brooklyn after a failed attempt at being a California filmmaker, Bruce would learn to harness this sense of humor and couple it with the inquisitive intellectual play that will characterize my analysis of his work. As biographer Albert Goldman puts it,

Lenny learned in Brooklyn, from Jewish street-corner intellectuals and jazz fiends, that being a hipster meant being smart, being knowledgeable, even being erudite. Far from being a cult of the “soul”—like the hippies’ “beautiful person”—the hipster ideal was vast knowledge and refined taste. The hipster was the street intellectual ... Philosopher, poet, satirist, film maker [*sic.*]—these were the titles [Bruce] coveted. (115)

This hip education would give Bruce the means through which to couple his love of confusion with the activity of intellectual pursuit and to create from this coupling a persona that delights in paradox in words and actions.

Having landed on a style, Bruce required a substance for his act that fit the performance of the hipster: virile and hybrid, intellectual but still bodily. In 1953, after returning to the west coast, Bruce began to work regularly in the strip clubs of Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley. Bruce says of this time in *How to Talk Dirty*, “four years

of working in clubs—that’s what really made it for me—every night: doing it, doing it, doing it, getting bored and doing it different ways ... and I really started to become a craftsman, where I could just about structure anything into humor” (93). In these clubs, Bruce learned to be funny, and he developed that humor out of his own life and the present tense of his performance and its setting. As documentarian Fred Baker says of Bruce’s time in these clubs, “he started to do routines about sex and his own soul. He’d stand up and explore himself for laughs.” Goldman goes into more detail describing how, in those strip clubs, Bruce began to develop the persona for which he would become first famous, then infamous. Here, in what Goldman calls the “new racket” of the strip bar, a site of unofficial discourse that “began to take hold during and after the war” (123), Bruce found the freedom to explore his comic identity in exotic ways and to couple his comedy’s substance and form with his newly articulated hip aesthetic. Here, he hung out with jazzmen and began his relationship with illicit drugs. Here, he picked up the parlance and the cadence of the hip and was often accused of “working to the band” (Goldman 133). Lenny had learned in New York that “being a hipster meant being smart, being knowledgeable, even being erudite,” but here, in Strip City, Los Angeles, he learned to couple his intelligence with his humanity—the source of the grotesque and of the carnivalesque—his material body and extreme desires. And here, he earned the nickname Dirty Lenny, miming fellatio behind a curtain, taking the stage in the nude, and, as Goldman describes it, “defin[ing] a special role for himself as a comedian, ... chip[ping] away at the decorum of show biz, ... ridicul[ing] the people around him and ... mak[ing] fun of the part in which he was cast” (127). Bruce’s work ethic in these clubs and the persona that he developed paid off and led first to success, then to

prosecution, and ultimately to his beatification as the patron saint of the unholy, hip, and countercultural.

In 1953, Bruce earned \$75 a week emceeing at Strip City. Between 1957 and 1962, he commanded \$4,000 a week headlining Sunset Boulevard clubs like The Crescendo and The Interlude (Collins and Skover 83-9). In the late 1950s, as the social tensions that would lead to the “revolutionary” 1960s percolated, a comedian whose unabashed individuality and embodiment of the countercultural idea of hip set him apart from the pack was a hot commodity, and Lenny Bruce, who understood the paradoxical relationship of the hipster to capitalism and the value of the con, was happy to be that comedian.¹³ He released his first LP in 1958. As Collins and Skover describe it, “it was the debut album in Fantasy’s Social Studies Series (that would later include poetry readings by the likes of Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg)” (91). It is a short record, and a tame one that does not do justice to the persona that Bruce had worked to create and that would, I argue, heavily influence the course of American comedy. It is not a Lenny Bruce record either in name or content. It was not until the next year that Fantasy would put out the first of three specifically Lenny Bruce albums—not parts of a series, but embodiments of the comedian who, according to his most devoted fans and defenders like Nat Hentoff and Paul Krassner, had to be heard and seen to be understood (Collins and Skover 17). By analyzing the development of Bruce’s hipster persona both visually and verbally on these three albums—*The Sick Humor of Lenny*

¹³ The association of hipsters with conmen is clear as early as Anatole Broyard’s 1948 “Portrait of the Hipster.” Further, Bruce was an actual conman, recounting at length in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* a particular con in which he dressed as a Catholic priest in Florida and solicited money for a fake charity before being almost arrested and suffering from horrible guilt—at least according to him.

Bruce (1959), *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* (1960), and *American* (1961)—I will further trace the footprints of the hipster by tracing Bruce’s process of visually becoming a hipster on these records, identifying his hip visual and comic aesthetic, illustrating how the satiric hipster playfully disrupts the society to which he opposes himself, and arguing for the importance of this persona’s emergent popularity in the late 1950s and early 1960s to the development of both American comedy and culture in this time. In what follows, I want to look at Bruce at his most popular and commercial and by doing so to interrogate the hipster persona as an essential part of American culture’s hip development and comedy’s role as a public sight of intellectual pursuit in contemporary society.

Visual Rhetoric/Visual Persona: *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* (1959)

The first official Lenny Bruce album is a difficult text for the twenty-first-century analyst who comes to it with preconceptions of both who Bruce is and what kind of comedy he performs. On the cover of the album, Bruce reclines on a picnic blanket in a cemetery, dressed in the sweater-vest, slacks, and loafers that suggest a certain type of Jewish comic in the late 1950s. Compare this image of Bruce to an image of Mort Sahl from the same time, and it seems these men share a comic persona. However, as Goldman reminds us, there is, from the perspective of Goldman’s biography and today’s audience, a difference between the two comedians: “you could say Mort Sahl was hip; Lenny Bruce was a hipster” (194). The cover of *Sick Humor*, like the comedy it contains, represents the first attempt to package Bruce for the masses and one that relies on both ethnic and comic stereotypes that Bruce would abandon in later albums as he fully becomes a hipster by disrupting these stereotypes both visually and verbally. On *Sick Humor*, Bruce’s hipness is overshadowed by both his Jewishness and the “sick humor”

label, yet this album contains several clues to the type of comedian he was becoming and traces of the hipster persona that emerge through careful analysis. In what follows, I will examine the album cover and its rhetorical function in order to identify how this cover displays for its audiences the comedian's persona. On *Sick Humor*, Bruce's persona is not quite a hipster, but the ways in which his hipness is concealed by the rhetorical construction of this cover will help to reveal important aspects of the visual hipster that will begin to appear on the next two album covers: in particular, Bruce's disruptive eye contact as an assertion of his individual identity. Next, I will explore the bits on this album and similarly use them to begin to color in our sketch of the hipster comedian through the type of comedy he performs. Having done this, I will move on to the next albums, *I am Not a Nut*, *Elect Me!* and *American*, to illustrate how Bruce's hipster emerges as a force of disruption and intellectual challenge on those albums as he moves toward his impending conflicts with mainstream America and the Christian (particularly Catholic) Right.

When Alex Steinweiss invented the modern album cover for Columbia Records in 1940, the motivation was primarily commercial: to catch the eyes of potential buyers. However, as Carissa Kowalski Dougherty argues in her study of racial identity and jazz album covers, this soon changed and album covers became a distinct art form that contributed to the overall meaning of the album. In Dougherty's analysis,

Album design was important for the marketing of jazz music because it typically lacked lyrics; one had to "read" the cover in order to gain some insight about the mood, tone, and style of the music inside. Record covers as commercial art ... may be likened to product packaging in their need

for catching the consumer's eye and conveying a sense of their contents, but record covers were conceived as more durable and useful than a throw-away cereal box. (48-9)

Record covers thus serve both a commercial and an aesthetic purpose, and are important artifacts of hip because of this interesting paradox. In a similar way to jazz albums (and this is an important connection), album design can be essential to stand-up comedy albums as it helps listeners “read” the comedy by reuniting the physical, visual comedian with the audio reproduction of the performance. Most stand-up comedy album covers feature the comedian.¹⁴ In this way, the album cover helps to create the comedian's persona by substituting for the visual component of the live performance. As a visual persona, the comedian created on an album cover functions as a “‘showing forth’ and ‘making known’” akin to the “‘rhetorically manifested displays’” identified by Lawrence J. Prelli in the introduction to *Rhetorics of Display* (8). For Prelli and his fellow contributors, rhetorical display is not limited to the classical notion of the *epideictic* in oration and argument, but occurs in myriad ways in modern life:

¹⁴ A Google Image search of the terms “stand-up comedy album covers” yields thousands of results from Woody Allen to Joan Rivers to George Carlin to Aziz Ansari, all of which contain images of the comedian. Further research into early albums by Bob Hope, Dick Gregory, Mort Sahl, Moms Mabley, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, and Bill Cosby, as well as more recent efforts by Chris Rock, Louis C. K., Patton Oswalt, Sarah Silverman, and Amy Schumer reveal this to be a long-standing tradition in the comedy world. These depictions range from standard shots of the comedian performing as in Moms Mabley's *The Funniest Woman in the World* (1960) and Mort Sahl's *The Future Lies Ahead* (1958), to glamor shots like Joan Rivers' *What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most?* (1983) and Eddie Murphy's *Eddie Murphy* (1982), to the more common funny cover seen on George Carlin's *Class Clown* (1972) and Steve Martin's *Let's Get Small* (1977). In recent decades parody covers like any number of “Weird Al” Yankovic albums and Michael Ian Black's *Very Famous* (2011)—which superimposes Black's face where Dr. Dre's used to be in a parody of *The Chronic* (1992)—have become increasingly popular. In most examples of each of these types of album cover, the comedian's image remains a key component of the overall composition.

The places we visit or inhabit embody in their physical structures and material ornaments symbolic inducements that work to dispose our attitudes, emotions, or sentiments. Our encounters with others enact displays of self and of others that imply who we desire or otherwise take ourselves to be ... the general conclusion to be drawn is that whatever is ‘displayed’ or ‘made manifest’ ... addresses a claim about value and attitude to those who somehow become audience to it. In view of the nearly ubiquitous nature of display in contemporary communication and culture, it is tempting to conclude that the rhetoric of ‘manifestation’ and ‘showing’—the rhetoric of display—is the dominant rhetoric of our times.

(9)

For Prelli and company, all acts of display are potentially rhetorical, and almost all actions might be considered acts of display: conscious (or, perhaps, not) decisions to reveal certain things and to conceal others within the context of communication both intentional and otherwise. When encountered by an audience, these displays become sites of argumentation, interpretation, and interaction for that audience.

However, it is precisely the nature of rhetorics of display that they are not simply open to any interpretation, but are constructed and thereby intentional arguments.

According to Prelli,

Displays manifest through verbal and visual depiction ... specific, situated, rhetorical resolutions of the dynamic between concealing and revealing. And such rhetorical resolutions exhibit partial perspectives—an

orientation, a point of view, a way of seeing—that both open and restrict possibilities for meaning for those who become audience to them. (15)

In the case of Lenny Bruce, considering the ways in which the visual display of his persona “both open[s] and restrict[s] possibilities for meaning” for the album audience illustrates how displays of the autobiographical body—of the Lenny Bruce persona, such as it is—persuade audiences to approach Bruce’s comedy in specific ways and to understand his humor. This consideration will also illustrate the ways in which a visual persona can function simultaneously as both *epideictic* display of a particular proposition *and* as a rhetorical force that compels audiences toward reception of that proposition—a dynamic that plays out as Bruce develops his visual persona on the covers of the Fantasy albums.

In the case of *Sick Humor*, the image on the album cover opens up the meanings of the hip satirist through its association with stereotypes of Jewish men and Jewish comedian Mort Sahl, but often restricts those of the hipster. This happens in two important ways visually on the album’s cover and highlights this album as an anomaly in the Bruce canon for its concealment of the persona for which Bruce would become notorious in just a few short months after its release. The first way in which the cover of *Sick Humor* conceals the hipster persona visually is in Bruce’s costume; the second is in the visual emphasis on labeling Bruce’s comedy as a particular type of humor—“sick”—and thereby attempting to limit his ability to fully embrace the hybridity and play of the hipster for his audience. Both of these visual displays influence how audiences engage Bruce’s persona as they listen to the material of the album, and what may emerge from this record is a version of Lenny Bruce who fits into a commercial niche: the Jewish

satirist and “sicknick” (a label often applied to Bruce that, as I will discuss, fails to account for the mobility, hybridity, and liminality of the hipster). This album, both in its cover and its comedy, attempts to package Bruce for mass consumption and by doing so conceals what is most essential to his persona and its comedy: his hipness. As such, it represents an important starting point in my attempts to trace the aesthetic footprints of the hipster comedian because it becomes the point of departure from which Bruce will set off as he becomes the quintessential hipster and makes his mark on both American comedy and society in the 1960s and beyond.

Who Wore it Best?: Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Jewish Masculinity

Bruce’s image first appears on an album cover in 1959 with the release of his second comedy album *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce* (figure 1). The full-color image shows Bruce—clad in slacks, sweater-vest, and flip-flops—lounging on his side before a picnic blanket complete with watermelon, grapes, shallots, condiments, and a large bottle of something. There’s nothing particularly humorous about the persona displayed here until the viewer recognizes the setting of this casual picnic: a cemetery. This is the visual comedy of incongruity: the basis of irony, and the most essential of the comedian’s tools. It might get a laugh because the leering and potentially lascivious Bruce, embodying less a hipster than a stereotype of male Jewish sexuality, does not belong in this setting. The reclining Bruce is dressed in a sweater vest and slacks and looks much like another Mort Sahl, a Jewish comedian making light of something serious. This comparison points to one way in which the *Sick Humor* cover conceals the hipster in favor of the hip satirist persona: Lenny Bruce is not Mort Sahl. This is an important distinction that has already been made several times in this study and will continue to be explored because it is a

distinction essential to understanding what a hipster is and why it is inextricable from comedy's place in American society as I am attempting to define it. Bruce and Sahl developed contemporaneously, and it was an easy comparison for those attempting to understand the new style of comedy and its sudden political interest, but it was unfair to both comedians.



Figure 1. *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*. Fantasy, 1958. Discogs. Web. 15 April 2014.

By the time Bruce released *Sick Humor*, he was already under the shadow of Sahl whose 1955 recording *At Sunset* was placed on the National Recording Registry in 2011 and labeled the first stand-up comedy album by the Library of Congress.¹⁵ In an essay commemorating that event, archivist and librarian Daniel Blazek touches on many of Sahl's contributions to modern comedy, not the least of which being his choice of attire (Figure 2):

¹⁵ It wasn't the first, by the way. That honor belongs to Red Foxx.

It had been the standard for comedians to don a suit and tie, stick to formulas, and try not to provoke the audience. “You couldn’t get on stage without a chorus of showgirls and a singer behind you,” Sahl once said. But Sahl defied the norm, wore casual sweaters, and addressed the audience as if they were a close acquaintance. (1)

Along with the confessional style and intimate identification with an audience that became customary for stand-up comedy in the 1950s, Sahl helped to redefine the style of the comedian by breaking with the traditional comic’s garb and appearing in sweaters and shirts with unbuttoned collars: a look that he continues today, and even dons in his Twitter profile pic.

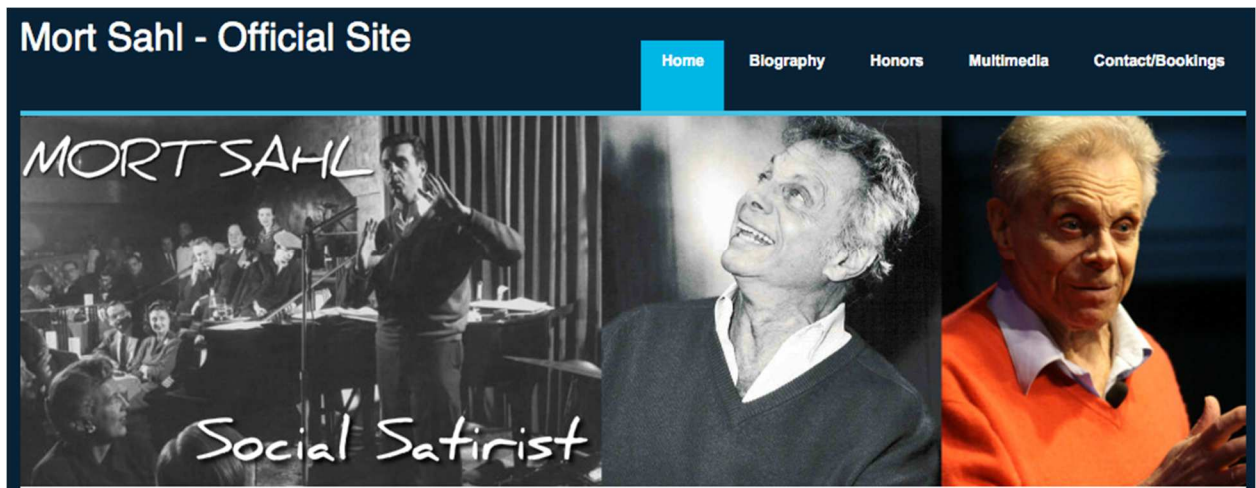


Figure 2. The Banner of Sahl's official webpage featuring images of his sweater-clad persona through the years. When Lenny Bruce appears on the cover of *Sick Humor*, gracing an album cover for the first time himself, that he appears in an outfit similar to Sahl's is worth noting and worth teasing in the context of this study because it begins to establish a clearer delineation between the liberal satirists like Sahl who used hip style as a means of social commentary and the sometime satirical hipsters like Bruce whose intentions are perhaps less

politically focused but whose importance to the rise of comedians as a public intellectuals is no less worthy of note.

The distinction I am making here between Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce is a distinction that must be made. Goldman is worth quoting at length on the subject:

It always enraged Lenny Bruce when people compared him with Mort Sahl. No two men in the same profession could have been further apart from either the standpoint of their work or their personalities. Mort was so puritanical, for example, that he neither smoked nor drank. A dirty word never passed his lips, and he would have been horrified at the thought of sticking a needle in his arm. When Mort would come into a club where Lenny was working, the moral shock was so great that Lenny would end up doing a perfectly clean show. (193)

While Bruce no doubt respected Sahl, he simply did not understand the comparison. No doubt, it was at least in part an identification of their common ancestry, a Jewish comic identity that plays a central role in Nesteroff's history of American comedy. The Borscht Belt helped to launch the careers of many of the comedians who dominated the business in the 1940s and early 1950s, and the Jewish comedian was a pre-packaged persona that record companies could count on to appeal to audiences across the country.¹⁶ That Bruce

¹⁶ Carl Hill's *The Soul of Wit: Joke Theory from Grimm to Freud* (1993) traces the development of *witz* from the Enlightenment through modernity. Along the way, Hill uncovers the important link between wit and Jewish identity in the Enlightenment and beyond. This link is born of "Enlightenment ideals of emancipation" (135) through which *Witz* and the jokes that encapsulate it provoke and challenge the principles of rationality that threaten to constrain enlightened thought: *Witz* represents "a mode of thought irreducible to narrowly rational concepts. *Witz*, positioned at the limits of rationality, makes us aware of the latter's limitations" (136). This position and its use as "a perfect tool for the 'cultural strategist' pursuing an enlightenment agenda" (19), mark wit as a

appears here in the garb of the Jewish comedian is most likely a result of Sahl's popularity and Fantasy Records' desire to market Bruce as one of a type for the ease of consumption. That he does so posed with a "come hither" look and playing on another Jewish stereotype—the lustful, lascivious male—attempts to possibly offer a point of departure from Sahl, but it is not the point of departure that best fits Bruce, as I will show in my analysis of the album title shortly.

Sahl's fashion aesthetic comes from a hip impulse to subvert the status quo of the Jewish comedian persona who would "don a suit and tie" and lightly tease the Catskill audiences of the Borscht Belt. But Sahl was no hipster. "Lenny was different," says Goldman, "Lenny aimed to be a real hipster" (195). Part of what the cover of *Sick Humor* displays is a visual persona that is inconsistent with this hip desire—it is a borrowing of Sahl's style used to conceal what is most original and confrontational in Bruce and what would eventually be revealed on later albums and reviled by authority: his hipness. Real hipsters do not lie passively in the grass, and they do not wear sweater vests, and they are not Jewish in the sense that, as I will examine further in this chapter and beyond, they are not any one race or gender or anything else: they are the "white negroes" of the postwar era, the androgynes of the 1970s and 1980s, and the juggalos gathering at the dawn of the new millennium.¹⁷ In "The (Jewish) White Negro: Norman Mailer's Racial Bodies" (2003), Andrea Levine "interrogat[es] what is repressed in Mailer's representation of

tool for free thinking, intellectualizing, and play that in Hill's analysis of Freud's joke books makes it particularly appealing to Jewish communities and in my analysis clearly associates this Jewish comic sensibility with what would emerge as an American hip sensibility in the twentieth-century.

¹⁷ The connection between juggalos (fans of the hardcore hip hop group Insane Clown Posse) and hipsters was suggested to me by Dillon Hawkins, Ph.D student at Oklahoma State University.

whiteness—“anxiety about Jewishness and the Jewish male body” (75). Through careful analysis of “The White Negro,” Levine shows that Mailer’s “hipster must evacuate all traces of his prior self before he can truly embrace blackness” (63) and argues that this “prior self” is a specifically Jewish one, replete with the cultural past of that identity. Specifically, Levine points to Mailer’s “celebration of an aggressive masculine response to a physical threat [the Holocaust and the atomic bomb to which Mailer refers in the essay’s opening] and its relentless effort to position both history and the feminine at an impossible remove from the hipster” as an indication of “anxieties about the vulnerable Jewish body, that in the popular imagination, went meekly to its death” (65). Using Levine’s lens to read Bruce’s image on this album and the subsequent ones upon which it appears will show that, as Bruce continues to grow in popularity and notoriety in the years between 1959 and 1961, he begins to assert more control over his image and visually to become the hipster—marked less by race or gendered vitality, and more by first a playful and provocative satiric stance and finally a disruptive and provocative challenge to audiences’ perception. In doing so, he conceals the racial marker of his Jewishness, while constructing a hip image that emphasizes his individuality and paradoxical stance toward identity, culture, and celebrity.

Whether we view Bruce’s image on the cover of *Sick Humor* as a consumer-friendly recreation of Sahl’s persona, a representation of Jewish masculinity and its various stereotypes in postwar society, or as a relatively innocuous attempt at some visual humor taken out of the context of racialized and politicized bodies, this image rhetorically conceals the aesthetic of the hipster as I have established it so far. On this first Lenny Bruce album, the hipster remains hidden by the limitations imposed upon the

image's composition and its correlation with the words to which it is joined through the album's title. By marking Bruce's body as both Jewish and Sahl-ish, *Sick Humor* limits its hip potential by suffocating the hipster's essential mobility with a sweater vest. This album further conceals the hipster in its linguistic attempt to label Bruce's humor as a certain type—"sick"—a label to which I will now turn my attention in an attempt to further identify this first Fantasy album as a point of departure from which the hipster will more fully develop in future albums and which will play an important role both in Bruce's legal persecutions and his subsequent, posthumous rise to prominence as an icon of the countercultural idea.

What's So Sick about Peace, Love, and Understanding?

In "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes identifies the function of "linguistic message[s]" within images—text that appears in an image—and the ways in which they contribute to "the function of the mass image" (36-7). Barthes articulates two functions of the linguistic message in an image: "*anchorage* and *relay*" (38). In the first, the alphabetic text in an image anchors the meaning of the image and the ways of reading the "iconic message" (the image of Bruce in the cemetery, here): it works to fix the meaning of a picture by helping viewers to "choose *the correct level of perception*" (38-9). On the other hand, if an image's text enacts a relay function, it interacts with the rest of the image "in a complementary relationship" to produce meaning (41). In the case of Bruce's album covers, the text of the image functions in this latter manner to further construct, and in this case constrict, Bruce's persona for the audience.

On the cover of *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, the word "sick" is simultaneously disguised and emphasized by its color. While the rest of the text is red,

this word is green. This coloration works in two seemingly contradictory ways. Because it is green like much of the background, from a distance or at a quick glance, “sick” almost disappears and the title might appear to be simply *The Humor of Lenny Bruce*. Reading the image as incongruous picture of a picnic in a cemetery and Bruce as simply a Jewish comedian, the text would anchor the image and describe the type of humor one could expect—ironic, and possibly a little dark, but nothing to get too heated about. Similarly, reading Bruce’s body as a representation of Jewish passivity or sexual lasciviousness combined with this title would indicate a specific type of humor that may be below the standards of some taste, but hardly so provocative as to necessitate censorship and legal action. However, this is not the title; anchorage is not the function of this text. Rather, once viewers notice the word “sick” they cannot un-notice it. Its discoloration, then, becomes not camouflage but emphasis and the “mass image”—the album cover and its persona—takes on new meaning. Here, the relaying text complements the image and adds to it a more specific meaning that, like the content of the image, is *epideictic*, and helps to identify this visual Bruce as opposed to the hipster that he would become and be remembered as by its association with the “sick” label: an essential first step in understanding Bruce’s hipster and the hipster persona in general because it provides an illustrative point of contrast.

From this text, a question arises, and it is a question that caused much confusion and controversy in Bruce’s lifetime: what is “sick comedy”? Put another way, and one more appropriate to this study: who is the “sick” comedian persona that Bruce seems to play here and how does it relate to the hipster that is his legacy according to the argument of this study?

The “sick” label was one that Bruce fought with until his death in 1966. Like Lenny himself, “sick” must be understood as a multiplicity. It was an easy way to label him—a label that could help to identify him as a problem to the conservative forces that sought his censure and silence, and that could appeal to the rebellious generation for whom Lenny Bruce would become a symbol of defiance and freedom. This latter perspective would see the “sick” label similarly to the way that Don Friedman defines it in his introduction to Bruce’s 1961 Carnegie Hall performance, a connection that links it to hip in some ways but importantly distinguishes it in others:

I think [‘sick comedian’] is a misnomer. What Lenny does—perhaps as a short explanation to the people that don’t understand what he does—it is not that Lenny Bruce, *per se*, is a ‘sick comedian,’ but that Lenny Bruce comments, reflects, holds up the mirror, so to speak, to the sick elements in our society that should be reflected upon and that should be spoken about. (qtd. in Bruce, *Carnegie Hall*)

This is a nice idea—one that associates Bruce with a long tradition of humor and satire from Aristophanes to Twain and beyond. And it should come as no surprise that such humor takes the form of the grotesque, the obscene, and the sick: this is the stuff of the *carnavalesque*, the “material body principle,” and the liminal that laughs at humanity and its most foolish creation, society (Bakhtin 19).¹⁸ And this would seem at first to fit right

¹⁸ To associate Bruce’s work with Bakhtin’s conception of the *carnavalesque* and the “material body principle”—a transfer through public laughter of “all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” to “the material level, to the sphere of the earth and body” (19)—is to tread very familiar ground. Such associations were clearly made in his first obscenity trial in San Francisco by witnesses like critic Ralph J. Gleason, Professor Don Geiger, and other leading artists and intellectuals. For accounts of the trials, including transcripts of select testimony, see Bruce’s autobiography *How to Talk Dirty and*

into the playful, provocative impulses of the hipster, but it importantly departs from the role of humor to the hipster as identified in this study because the label “sick” seems in this definition closely related to satire and thus potentially presumes a fixed and critical ideological position.

Further, much as this understanding of Bruce’s “sick” humor might align with Friedman’s 1961 and most twenty-first-century understanding of Bruce, it does not necessarily illuminate the album title in 1959. As Bruce put it on *The Steve Allen Show*: “there’s a lot of truth on the album, but nothing sick” (*Without Tears*). In fact, Bruce had a problem with this label. Plugging the album on *Steve Allen*, he balks at the title and launches into a justification of what he calls “another problem with semantics” (*Without Tears*). Bruce takes up this problem in many ways, including in his autobiography *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, claiming the falseness of any classification of him or his humor: “it is impossible to label me. I develop, on the average, four minutes of new material a night, constantly growing and changing my point of view” (97). As we have seen, the slipperiness of Bruce’s constant growth and change is essential to the hipster persona. Further, in a 1960 interview with *The Realist*, Bruce would claim that “there are no sicknicks,” and that the “sick” label was no different than the “beatnik” or “Psycho” labels before them: something constructed by the powers-that-be to categorize the fringe and the slippery elements of society (5). Lenny Bruce, hipster champion of the liminal, would resist such labels openly by 1960, claiming in the same interview that “you can’t

Influence People or, for a more objective account, Collins and Skover’s *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon*. For more thorough discussions of the carnivalesque in stand-up comedy, see Kathleen Rowe’s *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Linda Mizejewski’s *Pretty / Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, both of which explore grotesque, “sick,” comedy’s ability to create liminal spaces in which comedians perform important social work.

classify me” (4), but in 1959, the Lenny Bruce who lounges on the cover of this album is not yet the Lenny Bruce of legend. Here, he is simply a Jewish comedian on display: passive if sexual, incongruous if dark. And “sick” is simply a way of labeling his comedy: a product to be recognized, bought and sold.

So the “mass image” here is one fit for mass consumption, one easily consumed. This is the first Lenny Bruce album, this is Dirty Lenny packaged by Fantasy Records and television-ready. And this is the only album that Bruce plugged on television, for, as Fred Baker points out, “Lenny didn’t belong on television” (*Without Tears*). Soon after *Sick Humor*’s release, Bruce’s persona would become less market-friendly, less packaged, more provocative. The hip aesthetic he learned in New York and honed in Strip City, Los Angeles would reveal itself. As Baker puts it, “he started to do routines about sex and his own soul. He’d stand up and explore himself for laughs” (*Without Tears*). And as his persona becomes hipper, it also becomes more polarizing and politicized, his persona becoming for some more the icon of free speech and expression that twenty-first-century audiences would think of as Lenny Bruce and for others the symbol of everything wrong with the fringe elements at the dawn of the 1960s. As Bruce attempts to break free of the confines of social and commercial labels and limits—as he breaks the rules and becomes the hipster icon that he is remembered as today—his visual persona, acting from the covers of his subsequent two albums, slips in and out of those easily definable roles (funny, Jewish, “sick”) established on the cover of *Sick Humor* and becomes more complex and more disruptive.

The Humor of *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*

Unlike the image on the cover of *Sick Humor*, the comedy contained therein provides, not a point of contrast to the hipster that Bruce is known for today, but a prototype for it—he had, after all, been working this persona on stage for some time by this point, even if its raw form was not entirely consumer-friendly. The commercial needs of Bruce and the label to package Bruce’s visual persona in a consumable way limit the hipster visually, but the comedy on this record is comparable to—if on the surface a bit more tame than—the controversial humor that would become synonymous with Bruce and come to define his persona and its legacy; as such, it serves as a blueprint for how hipsters would make people laugh for the next half century. In particular, a bit that pushes at social boundaries of sexuality and morality begins to establish both an aesthetic style and a paradoxical position toward social mores that sets the tone for how Bruce’s comic hipster and those that follow could tease some of society’s most closely guarded borders to challenge an audience’s perspective. This album contains an early “Poetry and Jazz” routine entitled “*Psychopathia Sexualis*” which takes a satirical view of psychology and sexuality that ultimately makes a hip argument about its arbitrary nature. This routine marks an early move toward some of the style and substance—the hipster’s aesthetic and his intellectual subjects—that would eventually scandalize authoritative audiences in Chicago and New York in the form of the bit “To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb”—a routine that would lead to arrests and successful prosecutions in both of those cities between 1961 and 1964.

The title of Bruce’s bit, “*Psychopathia Sexualis*,” comes from Richard Von Kreft-Ebing’s book of the same name. Bruce admits to owning and reading this work while in the Navy—a sailor with no formal education reading a collection of psychological case

studies with an intentionally erudite Latin title may certainly be read as the intellectual leaning, or perhaps posturing, of a proto-hipster. In his autobiography, Bruce credits this book with inspiring his plan to get out of the service by posing as a transvestite and “promenading forward at the fo’c’sle [of the U.S.S Brooklyn] during midnight watch” dressed in a WAVES uniform (*How to Talk Dirty* 23).¹⁹ As a comedy routine, “*Psychopathia Sexualis*” represents Bruce’s hip impulse in its allusion and parody of psychological theory while also challenging audiences’ perception of the boundaries that such works erect between normal, acceptable behavior and abnormal, transgressive, and perverse sexual behavior. By the bit’s end, Bruce turns audience expectations on themselves and playfully provokes them to adjust their perspective to one less interested in the single-level meaning of binary opposition that Kreft-Ebing’s theories uphold and more interested in the exploration of the validity of multiple positions on the spectrum of human sexuality.

The bit begins with Bruce declaring it “poetry and jazz” and the hep sounds of a band: bass, drums, piano, and horn. This is followed by Bruce affecting a slight southern accent and delivering the opening couplet of his comic poem: “*Psychopathia Sexualis* / I’m in love with a horse that comes from Dallas,” introducing the lurid subject of the poem while also embodying a character about whom the audience might already have assumptions and lewd ideas. As poetry, the bit maintains some semblance of rhyme scheme, but no real or concrete form. Bruce’s prosody, like everything else, is hip—

¹⁹ WAVES is the acronym for the U.S. Naval Women’s Reserve force: Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. Bruce recounts obtaining the WAVES uniform in exchange for his beer chits, and describes his performance as his “nautical Lady Macbeth” (23). This resulted in his discharge from the Navy and highlights both his willingness and ability to play with sexual and ethical boundaries as well as his own version of intellectualism.

beginning with an *aabccbdd* rhyme that seems like it should be followed by another *b*, but is instead given another couplet before completing the established rhyme scheme:

Psychopathia Sexualis

I'm in love with a horse that comes from Dallas,

Poor neurotica me.

When my family found out they raised the roof,

'cause I bought a ring to fit her hoof.

Poor brain the size of a pea,

She looks so nice against the rail

With her pretty long legs and her pony tail.

I guess against convention I'll never win

I'll probably end up in the loony bin,

But in my heart I'll always be free.

In several ways, this formal disruption is hip and identifies important characteristics of Bruce's hipster as a comic character with a particular linguistic and comic aesthetic that I wish to explore further here. The subversion of expected rhyme scheme marks this as hip speech—language that follows its own rules. It also emphasizes the opposition between sexual convention and sexual expression, an opposition that is essential to the hipster's understanding and exploration of sexuality. Finally, by breaking from established rhyme, it sets the scene for the upending of all convention and assumption that is to come in the rest of the bit and that ultimately marks this “jazz poem” as hip comedy.

In his discussion of Norman Mailer's linguistic sound as hip speech, Phil Ford argues that such speech “verbalize[s] the same relationship to life that jazz wordlessly

embodies”: namely, that “the fluid rather than the stationary, energetic process rather than any fixed and atemporal patten of logical relations, grants new forms of expression, politics, and life” (165). What hip language emphasizes is the fluidity and energy of process rather than the organization of formal music, poetry, ideology, or existence. When Bruce sets up a rhyme scheme only to first complicate it with an extra couplet and then abandon it altogether as his “poetry and jazz” routine continues, he does so as hip parody. Following Linda Hutcheon’s assertion that “parody’s ‘target’ is ... another form of coded discourse” (16) and that parody ultimately “teaches that dualisms are not enough” (86), Bruce’s bit opens up as a parody of the codified discourses of poetry, music, and most importantly psychology. Notably, it is in the moment of formal disruption to the established rhyme scheme that Bruce’s words emphasize the conflict that drives the rest of the routine and, arguably, Bruce’s entire comic oeuvre: the struggle between the self and convention, between hip and square. However, not content to construct and explore this simple dualism, Bruce complicates his subject further as the poem continues just as he complicates its formal structure in the unbalanced rhyme and rhythm that follows.

“*Psychopathia Sexualis*” offers a somewhat stranger version of Bruce’s penchant for “poetry and jazz” than the later and perhaps better known bit “To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb” which would eventually play a significant role in his arrests and trials, but both of these routines point to essential aspects of Bruce’s hipster persona and its comic potential.²⁰ In both routines, poetic and grammatical constructions are set up only

²⁰ “To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb” was among the first bits for which Bruce was arrested on obscenity charges. He performed it at The Jazz Workshop in North Beach on October 3, 1961 and was afterward arrested.

to be subverted and eventually abandoned and allow Bruce's parody to target not simply the coded discourses of poetry or grammar, but the larger coded discourse of sexuality and sexual expression. In "To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb" what begins as a grammar lesson—albeit one that fails to recognize the infinitive form of a verb—becomes an enactment of sexuality as Bruce embodies the voices of two lovers quarreling about ejaculation and impotence before delivering the final argument of the bit:

Now, if anyone in this room or the world finds those two words decadent, obscene, immoral, amoral, asexual—the words "to come" really make you feel uncomfortable—if you think I'm rank for saying it to you, (beat) you probably can't come. And then you're of no use because that's the purpose of life, to recreate it.

Through the process of the bit, its hip construction, Bruce ultimately lands a blow against those who would oppose themselves to frank discussion of sexuality and, potentially, to its practice by ultimately aligning the square sensibility that wishes to stifle language usage with a much more nefarious sensibility that would stifle the creation and expression of life itself. In doing so, "To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb" aligns hip with life in all its multifarious complexity and dismisses square as "of no use"—disrupting the binary completely by destabilizing it and casting off its more useless half. To divorce square from the hip-square dualism, then, prioritizes the hip as useful and thereby goes beyond duality by embracing the complexity of the hip sensibility and its playful, paradoxical stance toward all. The great irony of this is that "To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb" lives as one of the more notorious Bruce bits when, in fact, its argument is ultimately a conservative one. If the joke is on the square who does not wish to discuss

sexuality, it is also on the practitioner of non-traditional and non-heteronormative sexualities who would also be dismissed by this bit as “of no use.” On the contrary, while potentially “deviant” sexualities are the source of humor and potentially the butt of the joke in “*Psychopathia Sexualis*,” that bit complicates our consideration of sexual morality by not explicitly ridiculing its practice or proselytizing about the purpose of life. Rather, this earlier bit plays the complexity and paradoxes that surround human sexuality and morality for comedic ends that both mock conservative moralizing and forgo any pretentious attempts at defining life’s purpose. In short, it is hip.

“*Psychopathia Sexualis*” ultimately emphasizes the playful position of hip’s multiplicity by removing the square end of the binary and celebrating the freedom of the hip sensibility. Having recounted his love for the “horse that comes from Dallas,” Bruce’s speaker reaches the climax of his poetic narrative:

We finally got adjusted and I was boss,
When I woke one morning and on our lawn I found a fiery cross.
The Ku Klux Klan said we had to get out that day,
Move everything: lock, stock, horse, and carriage.
The Klan wouldn't stan' for no mixed marriage.
So I'm feelin' blue, ain't got a penny in my pocket,
We're gonna volunteer for a satellite rocket,
So me and her can sit and spoon,
And visit my first wife who jumped over the moon.

Here, Bruce conjures the KKK as the binary to which his speaker is opposed, a speaker whose accent might originally place him on the side of Southern racism and Jim Crow

hostility in the minds of Bruce's audience. When the Klan runs this speaker out of town for "mixed marriage," Bruce complicates his audience's reaction to the routine by requiring that, if they wish to judge the sexuality of others, they pick sides: either they support racism or bestiality. Of course, there is another option, the hip option: it's not so simple as this or that, right or wrong, hip or square. And this is ultimately Bruce's argument and the argument of all hip comedy to which I will return throughout this study. Where talking heads and satirists attempt to provide answers, ends, solutions, and arguments from, for, and against definable positions, hipsters as intellectual jongleurs strive more for questions, confusion, and thought that attempts to see the complications of existence as their own ends. The play here is clear, perhaps more so than in "To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb" because of the allusion in the final line of this poetic bit to the nursery rhyme cow who jumped over the moon. Whereas the latter bit attempts to bring the weight of "the purpose of life" to bear on Bruce's audience, this one ends with a reference that recalls an audience's childhood as a means toward a final punchline about bestiality. This contrast in overall subject in these otherwise very similar bits points to two important aspects of Bruce's hipster that still need to be discussed at length in order to understand this comic persona and its potential role in the rise of comedy as an intellectual forum in modern American life. First, that the hipster persona, like the hipster in society, is a mobile and fluid identity that changes and develops over time, across space, and from one iteration to the next. In other words, while we are no doubt meant to laugh at Bruce's rendering of bestiality—particularly as a stereotype of Southern America and as morally superior to the Ku Klux Klan—that should not undermine the notion that the same comedian might also have something meaningful to say about

human sexuality and society's relation to it. Second and closely related, these bits illustrate that the hipster does not occupy fixed nor even definable ideological positions. Bruce and the hipsters that follow him subvert attempts to pin them down. While their comedy often deals with serious aspects of the human condition like race, politics, sexuality, and general existential despair, the hipster's intellectual pursuit is born out of and primarily seeks paradox and confusion of any fixed position. In turning my attention now to Bruce's final two Fantasy albums, I will further explore these aspects of the hipster.

Audaciously Paradoxical: *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* (1960)

According to Collins and Skover, *Sick Humor*

Revealed a ruthless attitude toward everything "decent" in American culture, from the unmentionables of sex to the unmentionables of the sacred. It was a *peek* at the rotting backside of life's prim white siding, a sordid view of human and holy things. (95; emphasis mine)

This peek would soon become a stare in the content and on the covers of Bruce's next two albums and, ultimately, in the material that came to define him in posthumous releases. The cover of Bruce's next album, *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* begins to confront viewers with a hip persona and a more political message. The material on this album immediately confronts listeners with a declaration of Bruce's individuality and unique perspective on comedy and the world. The first bit, "White Collar Drunks," offers Bruce's take on the old figure of the drunk by contrasting it with the sorts of drunks that other comedians do. Bruce's assertion here—that other comedians' drunks are just tired imitations of Red Skelton's original and that his "White Collar Drunk" is a unique comic

innovation—quickly identifies the persona on this record as a hipster who explicitly attempts to position himself in opposition to others as a performer of difference. And this persona is itself an innovation, one that moves Bruce outside of the herd of comedians performing during his time and sets him apart as a unique, vibrant individual.²¹ In the liner notes to *I am Not a Nut...*, Ralph J. Gleason claims that

It is not only Lenny Bruce's audacity that is admirable (this audacity is just another of the areas in which his art is akin to that of the jazz musician), it is his determination to examine all of our mores, all of our day-to-day actions and reactions as related on radio, TV and in the newspapers (billboards, placards and street conversation, too) and spotlight mercilessly the difference between what we say and what we do.

From the perspective of the hipster performing audacious opposition, Bruce can focus his humor on all aspects of the world around him. In part, this helps to explain how and why Bruce became the favorite target of early 1960s morality and its institutions: as a performer who vehemently opposes himself to all others, Bruce makes himself a target. It also helps to explain his influence on comedy and culture: as a performer of hip and ultimately a martyr to it, Bruce becomes a sign of his times.

As Stephen E. Kercher points out, “unlike Mort Sahl or liberal cartoonists such as Herblock, Bruce had little interest in satirizing American politics directly” (403). Rather than working the headlines directly, as Sahl did for decades and *The Daily Show* has perfected in the 24-hour news cycle, Bruce's comedy is trained on ideas and institutions. The epitome of the hipster, Bruce is in opposition, not just to other men, but to the

²¹ This is what makes him both so important and iconic a symbol for subversion as well as what makes him the target of so much controversy.

entirety of human existence. As friend and fan Paul Krassner points out in the liner notes to a posthumous release of Bruce's Carnegie Hall performance, Lenny Bruce is the adult version of the little boy who points out that the emperor's new clothes don't really exist. But Bruce would make that point in the nude himself: he observes in *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* that he is, in fact, "heinously guilty of the paradoxes I assail in our society" (97). This critical perspective, so necessary to comedy and to hip, allows Bruce to place himself not just at odds with politicians or political parties or specific religions and their practices, but potentially at odds with all that exists outside of the moment of his comedy: societies and politics and religions as institutions behind which individuals hide and through which they inflict their flawed morality onto others.

Visually, *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* is a clear step toward creating a more autobiographical and overtly hip persona, and represents a visual bridge between the Jewish stereotypes of *Sick Humor* and the disruptive hipster that would become the iconic Lenny Bruce in the years leading up to his death (Figure 2). Like the comedy contained within the album, the image of Bruce on the cover is overtly autobiographical and overtly political. Where the cover of *Sick Humor* played on stereotypes of lascivious and leering Jewish masculinity and the visual signifiers of the Jewish satirist Mort Sahl, here Bruce's masculinity is powerful and overt as he looms in the foreground with arms around two multiracial women. If, as Andrea Levine claims, the hipster is a Jewish reclamation of masculinity through, in part, aggressive sexuality, then this image shows Bruce becoming hipster. The color palette is more monochromatic, more menacing, and Lenny Bruce, now with black suit and fully raised eyebrow, looks at the viewer while embracing the women—one black and the other of Asian descent and clad in a kimono—and holding a

sign that reads “TOGETHERNESS.” Behind him a group of black men holding the tools of minstrelsy—canes and bowler hats—stand below a statue of Abraham Lincoln while wearing the robes and masks of the Ku Klux Klan. The message here, created by the interplay of text and image is clearly a political one, and an autobiographical one employing the “I” that is linked to Lenny Bruce’s name and his image on the cover as well as to the political process of election. Bruce’s irony here is aggressive and overtly socio-politically charged. Here is something truly “sick”—something unpleasant and better kept in the dark—that Bruce wishes to expose in 1960 America: historical and systemic racism, and humanity’s inhumanity toward the human race. Visually here, Bruce is audaciously hip as he and the other bodies in this image all perform a clear act of defiance and disruption meant to grab an audience’s attention.²²

²² Perhaps the best bit in all of John Leland’s *Hip: The History* describes the performative aspect of hip: “hip requires a transaction, an acknowledgement. If a tree falls in the forest and no one notices its fundamental dopeness, it is not hip” (8). Hipsters must be seen to be hip, and this cover is a direct assault on passive viewership because it requires onlookers to keep looking and look closer in order to understand it.



Figure 2. *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* Fantasy, 1960. Discogs. Web. 15 April 2014.

Who is this Lenny Bruce on the cover of *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!*? Aside from the change of clothes, this Lenny is changed in several other important ways from his counterpart on *Sick Humor*. First, he no longer lies passively in the frame. Rather, he stands slightly hunched but still taller than the women in his arms, implying a formidable figure—someone, perhaps, to be reckoned with. Second, the angle of his lean and the position of his arms mirror the pose of Honest Abe in the background, associating the intent of Bruce’s humor with the best intentions of America’s forefathers and—by his embrace and the word “TOGETHERNESS”—associating his ideology with that of Abraham Lincoln. Finally, as audiences look at Bruce on the cover of *I am Not a Nut*, he looks back. Where there was but one eye and a potentially lascivious look on the cover of *Sick Humor*, there are now two eyes; an eyebrow cocked either out of incredulity or

anger; and a stern, serious, closed mouth. The display here conceals the stereotypically Jewish, whether satirist or sexual predator, and reveals a slightly different persona, not simply a “sick” comedian but a comedian of what David Marc labels “social consciousness” and defines by the example of none other than Lenny Bruce (38).²³ This Lenny looks viewers in the eyes and by doing so engages them as an autobiographical “I,” a person not just a stereotype, who dares audiences to engage him and his ideas. His eyes become synonymous with his “I”—the persona of his comedy—and by engaging viewers with these eyes/“I”s he enacts a social relationship with those who dare to meet his stare: he disrupts their passive viewing habits and potentially forces them to reckon with his presence here.

When viewers engage Lenny Bruce’s stare here, they are acted on by its eye contact and the ensuing “I” contact—contact with the hip persona that stares out at them. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s *Staring: How we Look* traces the history and philosophy of staring throughout western culture in order to interrogate the act of looking and its various motivations. She argues that “staring is a profoundly social act” (39) that communicates a wide range of meanings in a wide range of social situations and that looking in general and staring in particular are a means to the accumulation of knowledge about the world around us: “the goal of observation—of staring for the sake of knowing—is to make the unknown intelligible, to incorporate the unusual into our understanding of the usual” (48). Put another way, staring is a response to multiplicity that multiplies starers’ and starees’ levels of perception in that it is born out of an act that forces both parties to reckon with each other and thereby to encounter more than one

²³ This label does not imply a fixed ideological position, but merely a desire to engage in intellectual thought.

subjectivity. As Garland-Thomson demonstrates, the social act of staring—because of its intensity and its implication that the subject of the stare (staree) is unusual—is, more often than not, uncomfortable and socially taboo. Staring can move beyond a communicative, knowledge-gathering act and exert disruptive forces with myriad potential. Garland-Thomson shows that “what we think of as manners . . . attempt to protect us from being either starers or starees” in order not to offend or incite any uncomfortable social situations (71). So, when a person stares or invites a stare, it is always a potentially rhetorical move that disrupts social norms and challenges normal understanding—that acts on an audience and persuades them through its disruption to accept the potential of new meanings. In other words, staring and eye contact disrupt normal viewing habits and cause viewers to step outside of themselves, thereby raising their consciousness and receptiveness through exposure to multiplicity.

Eye comportment is one way that a person might invite a stare according to Garland-Thomson, particularly in a picture or otherwise reproduced image: “intense eye-to-eye engagement with the viewer can make a subject seem to reach out of the picture to stare down the viewer” (85). By staring back at potential starers, images like that of Lenny Bruce on the cover of *I am Not a Nut* engage audiences intensely and force them to react to the stare, and by doing so to become conscious of and receptive to a potential act of communication. In the case of Lenny Bruce’s *I am Not a Nut*, the content of the image and its social implications color the knowledge gained through the stare. But this knowledge is also colored by the persona who stares onlookers down, who engages viewers in an uncomfortable and aggressive way to disrupt their normal viewing habits and to engage them in a virtual act of communication rather than a passive act of

consumption or entertainment. From the cover of *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!* Lenny Bruce's hipster persona catches viewers' eyes and challenges them to "get" him—"to swing" in the language of hip, or simply to get hip.²⁴

The visual pairing of Bruce with the spirit of Abraham Lincoln on the cover associates Bruce's hip message of equality, understanding, and compassion with Lincoln's, but the material is less political oratory and more intellectual exploration of systemic hypocrisy that invites audiences to laugh at everything from the Madison Avenue drunks of his first bit to the phone company to the censorial, educational, judicial, religious, and political institutions that lurk behind even the most mundane of modern human activities. The hipster persona here shares personal stories that reveal institutional follies and, in some cases, true sickness. By fully positioning himself as hipster in conflict with all institutions and identities, Bruce creates a persona capable of exposing the follies of institutional thinking on multiple levels. A typically complex bit from *I am Not a Nut* finds Bruce recounting to the audience his experiences on the *The Steve Allen Show*. From this simple autobiographical set-up, Bruce manages to have a laugh at the absurdity of religious practices and broadcast TV alike by creating himself as the rebellious outsider who speaks back to power whether in the form of a Jewish matriarch or a network executive. The conflation of these two character types into equally ridiculous figures against which Bruce's persona positions itself is a typical move in Bruce's comedy, and looking at this example will illuminate much of what he does in other bits. In a word, Bruce juxtaposes images from religious, domestic, political,

²⁴ Leland and Ford both point to the potential origin of the word "hip" in the Wolof verb "hepi" or "hipi," meaning "to see." This is particularly relevant as I begin to pay particular attention to the presence of eyes in images of Bruce's hipster. However, the argument that this is the actual origin of the word is dubious.

corporate, and other spheres to point out the hypocrisies that become clear when looked at from the outside (hip) perspective and that link all of these institutions together as ridiculous.

In the recorded routine, Bruce wants to do a bit on *Steve Allen* about his tattoo. The joke that he wants to tell on TV lies somewhere in the impression of Bruce's grandmother's anger and fear that Lenny won't be buried in the Jewish cemetery. The Bruce in the bit-within-the-bit tells the matriarch that he'll be fine in the gentile cemetery. Here, Bruce returns to himself in the present: telling the story on a stage to a crowd or on a record to a listener. In doing so, he positions himself outside of Judaism—as hipster, he is the self-exiled outsider with insider knowledge. The executives on the show, says Bruce, wanted him to cut that bit out because “it's definitely offensive to the Jewish people.” Playing the hipster, contrary and obstinate, Bruce refuses and says that he'd rather not do the show than censor himself. And here he positions himself as not only outside of Judaism because of his tattoo, but also outside of the machinery of corporate entertainment. The executive persists and Bruce gets a big laugh when he quotes the exec as telling him not to “be a baby, be a man: sell out!”—a move that highlights the nefarious nature of corporate execs who would co-opt the language of hip for square ends and may be read as a jab at the emerging hip culture of the early 1960s. Finally, after consulting with his people, the executive returns and delivers the final word on Lenny's tattoo bit-within-the-bit and the punch line of the larger *Steve Allen* bit: not only is it offensive to the Jewish people, it's also offensive to gentiles because it implies that “the gentiles don't care what they bury.” With the final punchline, Bruce identifies his humor as offensive to everyone and unfit for any popular consumption, and this is a

fundamentally hip act. Just as Anatole Broyard defines the hipster, Bruce here finds himself completely “opposed in race or feeling to those who own the machinery of recognition” whether Jewish mother, corporate executive, or white gentile America (43).

The multiple levels of autobiographical narrative and social satire in this bit reflect the hip audacity of Bruce’s persona as it comes into being on *I am Not a Nut, Elect Me!*. At every turn, Bruce constructs for his audience a self that is critical and cool, unable to play by rules and unwilling to sacrifice his own hip integrity as an artist and intellectual—in this bit he also explicitly associates himself with Tennessee Williams and William Shakespeare. This hipster, crafted as a living, evolving, autobiographical figure—“I create everything myself” Bruce tells his audience while explaining the importance of improvisation to his “fertile” style of comedy—exposes through his opposition the comic potential underlying the entertainment industry and religious institutions alike by showing them as stiff, cut off, and opposed to the vitality of a man who has a tattoo and likes to talk off the cuff.

This light lampooning of the entertainment industry is brought to its potentially heavier and more satirical ends later in the album when Bruce begins to reflect on himself and the institution to which he belongs, and envisions a world in which celebrities and others like himself who have wealth and power for silly reasons behave morally. The bit, entitled “The Tribunal,” begins with Bruce reflecting on how little teachers are paid in comparison to entertainers and ends with entertainers getting their just desserts in the afterlife as they face a tribunal that punishes them for taking advantage of capitalism and its resultant culture industry. Arguably, the funniest part of this bit to twenty-first-century listeners who may have a more limited knowledge of the mid-century entertainers Bruce

mocks and sends to their doom comes early on when Bruce again identifies himself in opposition to these other entertainers because he is “not much of a moralist.” If he were, claims Bruce, he would “be donating his salary to schoolteachers.” Further, Bruce claims that “at least [he] admit[s] that” and assures the audience that he is “saving some money to give back” because he “know[s he] was stealing.” Again, the essential nature of the persona in this bit is hip. As Norman Mailer puts it, “the only Hip morality ... is to do what one feels whenever and wherever it is possible, and—this is how the war of the Hip and the Square begins—to be engaged in one primal battle: to open the limits of the possible for oneself, for oneself alone because that is one’s need” (61). On this album, Bruce’s hipster is fully developed both in image and in content, and on his next album, Bruce would cement that role and so conclusively associate his persona with his self in opposition to all of Square society that he would never be able to release another album in his lifetime and he would spend the next five years fighting for his freedom to do comedy in courtrooms across the country. Significantly, it is during this time, 1960-61, that authorities begin to take notice of Bruce and that his arrests begin, or, in Mailer’s words, that “the war of the Hip and the Square begins.”

American (1961)

By the end of 1961, Bruce would be arrested in San Francisco on drug and obscenity charges, beginning a battle with the law and the needle that would last the next five years. Before all that, however, Bruce would release one more album upon which he would cement his persona as hipster comic and eventual comic martyr of the 1960s countercultural idea. With *Lenny Bruce—American* (figure 3), Bruce’s persona leaves all playful joking behind and becomes the enraged hipster that he is known as today. This

persona, the turmoil in which it became embroiled, and its legacy are perhaps best summed up by Albert Goldman:

Lenny Bruce *was* a civil rights case. He wasn't really being busted for obscenity ... He was being busted for the Truth! *Lenny Bruce—American*. That was the title of his last album. The best he ever had. Lenny Bruce was a fuckin' American hero, man. Fighting for the same shit that heroes always fought for in this country. If he was a martyr, it was only because the people of prejudice and limited education didn't understand what he was trying to do. (507)

Goldman's colorful polemic does well to identify the persona that he and others would craft out of Lenny Bruce after Bruce's death, but perhaps ignores its origins in the playful irony of the hipster. Either way, the hipster persona is on full display on the cover of *American*.



Figure 4 *Lenny Bruce--American*. Fantasy, 1961. Discogs. Web. 15 April 2014.

Here, all the distractions of the previous two albums have been removed: color, setting, supporting cast, ironies, and allusions. Here is simply Lenny, black and white, staring at us, a look of disgust, disappointment, and exasperation on his face. And here, through the interplay of image and text, Bruce embodies the “fuckin’ American hero” that Goldman describes—an individual asserting himself and completely alone, opposed to everything—the only true American if we follow John Leland’s argument that the history of hip is the history of America. He is no longer “sick,” no longer an ambassador for racial tolerance, nor Lincoln’s successor. Rather, he is Lenny Bruce, American and person with all the inherent multiplicities and contradictions that come with that, and

challenging audiences with his stare to see themselves and their society, and all that that entails. From the cover of *American*, Bruce looks out in disgust and challenges those who see him to look at what might be disgusting about themselves.

On the cover of *American*, Lenny Bruce's hipster meets his audience and asserts his presence through an even more aggressive and disruptive stare. As the title of this album implies, Bruce's eyes are focused on American society and the hip act of seeing it anew. The content of the album points out the larger issues inherent in all walks of American life. Whether exposing the homophobia of small town middle America in "Lima, Ohio," or the racism of the hip urban intellectuals with whom Bruce identifies in the famous bit "How to Relax Your Colored Friends at Parties," Bruce here draws on his experience and his hip sensibility as self-exiled outsider to challenge listeners to follow him down the intellectual rabbit holes of mid-century American existence. In a bit entitled "Marriage, Divorce and Motels" Bruce mines the dissolution of his marriage for laughs and reveals the dark side of the myth of the traditional American family: that when the marriage breaks up, as so many marriages would in the 1960s and the years that followed, the former partners are left in a world that sees them as "losers" and that drives them, as "losers," into behaviors that further compound their outsider status and exclude them from everyday American life. Ultimately, each of the bits on *American* asks listeners to encounter Lenny Bruce as an outsider in order to realize their own relation and connection to that identity, thereby asking the question: if everyone is a loser in some way, and all the winners are just losers who live under the illusion that they are somehow better than they are, who would want to be a winner? Or, more simply put: if mainstream America is homophobic, racist, judgmental, and hypocritical, then wouldn't you rather be

an outsider, a “loser,” and a hipster? Bruce potentially leads his audiences to a perspective from which they become able to recognize the ultimate folly of American society: that it relies on and perpetuates the belief that any human is capable of being better or more important than any other, that right and wrong have absolute meanings and imply an absolute order. This why Albert Goldman calls *American* “the best [album] he ever had” (507). Ultimately, it asks that we engage the hip act of seeing, of opening our eyes to ourselves and those around us.

But it was also the last album that Bruce would release before his death in 1966. In the years between, Bruce would attempt to self-release material—much of which would be released posthumously by Phil Spector as *Lenny Bruce is Out Again* (1966)—but from his first bust in 1961 until his penultimate show was recorded for *Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, the only way for willing audiences to encounter Bruce and his satire was through these albums or at the live performances that kept getting him in so much trouble. And by 1963, those had dried up too as venue owners and agents refused to risk the fines and prosecution that working with Lenny would earn them and as Bruce became increasingly embroiled in his legal defense and incomprehensible from his overindulgence with the needle. The performances that Bruce put on and for which he was arrested served to create him in the public imagination of the early 1960s as a countercultural messiah and, because of the inextricable connection between the material on trial in the courts and the man who uttered it onstage, Bruce’s persona became forever inseparable from his person. The ongoing legal troubles that embroiled Bruce’s life from 1961 onward caused him always to be ready to defend himself, and for this, Bruce turned again to media as the forensic evidence of his persona, its comedy, and that comedy’s

social import—an essential part of any defense against obscenity charges. He recorded everything, his shows, conversations with friends, and even the proceedings of his trials, and through these recordings, modern audiences have access to the material that got him in so much trouble and the persona that so terrified the status quo of post-war America. In the next chapter, I will analyze an example of this recorded material that deals explicitly with his arrests and trials in order to put the final touches on my outline of Bruce's hipster before moving my discussion to others through the conduit of technology. In dealing with his legal troubles, Bruce became forced to take clear and fixed positions, both ideologically and chemically that led to obsession and addiction and his ultimate demise. However, pairing his late attempts to remain relevant and to mine comedy from his life will provide a clear transition from Bruce's hipster to its immediate hip successor, Richard Pryor, and open up a discussion of the technological advances of film that better suited the adaptable and expansive presence of the hipster, led to hipster comedians' rise in popularity, and contributed to the popularity of comedy in its Golden Age during the 1970s and 1980s.

CHAPTER III

HIPSTERS ON FILM: LENNY BRUCE, RICHARD PRYOR, AND STAND-UP'S NEXT MEDIUM

Throughout this study so far, I have attempted to sketch an outline of the hipster persona's visual and comic aesthetic through the example of Lenny Bruce and the albums he released with Fantasy Records. Bruce was the first successful hipster comic, and as such famously became a favorite target of square America in the early 1960s, as various cultural tensions percolated in the country at large. The charges brought against Bruce were by no means unique. As Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover's exhaustive study of Bruce's legal battles and their legacy in American law and culture reminds us: "In the beginning, there was Ginsberg" (39). Collins and Skover's attention to the legal story of Bruce's life and comedy requires them to step back and begin to understand Bruce's trials by first understanding the legal conflict over Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* as it played out in the 1957 trial *People v Ferlinghetti*. Collins and Skover continue,

Before comedy, there was poetry. Before comic "obscenity," there was poetic "obscenity." Before Lenny's "To Is a Preposition, Come Is a Verb," there was Allen's "Howl." Before Bruce's words collided with the law, there were Ginsberg's words. (39)

It was exactly this association that kept Bruce from being convicted in the first obscenity case brought against him in San Francisco in 1961. Although it would take a second trial and team of lawyers, Bruce would eventually be found not guilty in 1962 by a jury of his peers based in large part on expert testimony from witnesses like cultural critic and commentator Ralph Gleason, Berkeley English professor Robert Tracy, and local musician/Ph.D Louis Gottlieb who associated Bruce's work with that of Chaucer, Joyce, and a number of other social critics and artistic innovators from literary history. These testimonies spoke to the "redeeming social importance" of Bruce's material—a standard for judging obscenity passed down in the 1957 case *People v Roth* which set the legal precedent for such cases until the 1970s (qtd. in Collins and Skover 76). In order to be obscene, under *Roth*, a text or performance must arouse prurient desire and be without social merit. As Justice William Brennan put it in the decision:

A performance cannot be considered utterly without redeeming social importance if it has literary, artistic, or aesthetic merit, or if it contains ideas, regardless of whether they are unorthodox, controversial, or hateful, of redeeming social importance. (qtd. in Collins and Skover 76)

In the 1962 ruling in the first of what would become many cases labeled *People v Bruce*, the San Francisco jury found Bruce's words to have "redeeming social importance" because of their literary precedent and their satirical pitch, according to expert witnesses.

When the Roth Test, as it came to be known, was applied to Ginsberg's poem and *Howl* found not to be obscene, that was the last that the writer had to hear of it from the courts. Not so Lenny Bruce. There are many potential reasons for the authorities' obsession with Bruce and Collins and Skover do well to explore them in great detail as

they follow Bruce's various arrests from San Francisco to Los Angeles to Chicago and New York (See Appendix A). Bruce would be found guilty of obscenity in the final two cities, ultimately dealing the deathblow to both his career and his life. While it is not my intention to offer here an analysis of these events, if we are to understand the hipster persona as inextricable from the life of the comedian, we must have a basic grasp of that life. In the years between his first arrest and final resting, Bruce spent most of his time and money in and out of courts across the country trying to defend himself against what he saw as his unjust persecution. When he was not in court, he continued to attempt to do comedy, often using his run-ins with the law as material, for better and worse. In the early days, he maintained his optimism—his cool—performing some of his best comedy in response to legal harassment. However, as the years and trials dragged on, his money dried up and his infamy made it nearly impossible to continue working, Bruce's dependence on narcotics increased and eventually overcame him.

In this chapter, I want to partially explore these final years of Bruce's life in the context of the hipster by first analyzing one of the routines he performed early in the saga of his legal trouble, "Blah Blah Blah." This routine shows the hipster at the height of his satiric and disruptive game and will further define the hipster's comic persona by illustrating hip's verbal aesthetic. Through this analysis, I will draw a relatively common line from Bruce to the next satirically hip comedian I wish to discuss, Richard Pryor. Bruce and Pryor are linked by their hip sensibilities, as well as by their role in moving stand-up comedy from the club and the LP album into the medium that would come to define it and help to usher in (alongside television) the Golden Age of stand-up comedy: the concert/performance film or special. Having identified connections between these two

hipsters through their verbal hip aesthetic, I will examine the demise of Bruce’s hipster through a brief analysis of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1967) in order to begin to understand film’s potential for comic hipsters. Bruce’s failings in this film stem from his trials and addictions, and he finds himself unable to be either funny or hip in this penultimate performance of his life. From there, I will move to three of Pryor’s appearances on film in the 1970s and 1980s—in the documentary *Wattstax* and two stand-up concert films—and view them through the lens of hip in order to illustrate how Pryor’s comedy and his evolution on film succeeds where Bruce’s fails and demonstrates the potential of this medium for hip comedy. As hipsters, Bruce and Pryor share a poetics of cursing and an aesthetic that through the medium of film—more readily available for people outside of the Hollywood studio system in the 1960s and beyond—places the hipster at the forefront of the American comedic imagination and helps to define the influence that these comedians have had on the state of comedy and American culture today.

People v. Hipster: Lenny’s “Blah Blah Blah” (1961)

Shortly after his first arrest at the Jazz Workshop in San Francisco on October 4, 1961, Bruce began doing a routine based on those events in which he substituted the phrase “blah blah blah” for the word “cocksucker” in his recounting of his first trial.²⁵

The routine finds Bruce recounting his arrest and trial and subjecting the authorities involved to a satiric *reduction ad absurdum* that, like the routines captured on his Fantasy

²⁵ Bruce would go to trial twice for this first obscenity charge. The first trial was thrown out at the request of Bruce’s new lawyer Albert Bendich who successfully argued that Bruce’s first judge Albert Axelrod had failed to advise Bruce of his right to counsel. For further details of the intricacies of this and all of Bruce’s legal battles, see Collins and Skover. A basic timeline of Bruce’s trials adapted from Collins and Skover’s more detailed “Chronology of Free Speech” can be found in Appendix A.

albums at the height of his fame comes from the hipster's constant mobility and positioning as disruptive inside/outsider. The bit begins with Bruce giving his audience context and then, ever present in the moment of the bit's delivery, explaining what will become the basis of the joke's punch line and point: the absurdity of attempting to regulate and prosecute language. "In San Francisco," says Bruce, "I got arrested for uh ... I'm not gonna repeat the word, 'cause I wanna finish the gig here tonight." This aside to the audience and acknowledgment of any potential authorities therein gets a little chuckle on most all recorded versions. The acknowledgement of the present tense and the potential for arrest and prosecution lends tension to the bit that will ultimately be relieved by the joke as it continues and places Bruce, the stand-up telling this story, firmly in the present tense as one who is aware of and adaptable to his surroundings. From this position, he does his comic work.

The narrative continues as Bruce attempts to clarify the word without saying it, describing it in the authorities' words as "vernacular for a favorite homosexual practice—a ten letter word" before entering into another aside in which he comments on his use of such a word: "it's really chic, that's two four letter words and a preposition." Like his first aside, telling the audience that he wants to finish the gig, this one acts as an interruption to the story, but one that adds humor and depth to it. This riffing—to borrow the jazz term—is part of the delivery for which Bruce is famous, borrowing the rhythm and improvisational form of jazz and often providing his best jokes as shifts in perspective or tone. During "Blah Blah Blah," Bruce interrupts the telling of his story several times and each time he does so, it is to provide some humorous commentary on the events that occurred. When he interjects that a ten-letter word is "two four-letter

words and a preposition,” he is commenting on his inability to say the word that is at the center of the story. In a sense, this is an interruption of an interruption, adding multiple levels to the audience’s perception of the events that occurred at the Jazz Workshop. Returning to the first interruption, Bruce continues, “I can’t, I wish I could tell you the word, it starts with a ‘c’—well you know what the word is,” before once again interrupting himself with what seems a complete shift that delivers the biggest laugh so far: “Now it’s weird how they manifested that word as ‘homosexual,’ because I don’t, that relates to any contemporary chick I know, or would know, or would love, or would marry.” This disruption works in specifically hip ways to deliver the laugh that Bruce gets.

On one level, it is yet another positioning of the self in opposition to the authorities and an unrepentant posture. On another, and more importantly, from this position of opposition, Bruce then moves to question the definition of a word and by doing so shows that words—even supposedly obscene ones—have multiple meanings. Playing on words with multiple meanings is a common move in comedy, yet Bruce’s exposure of multiple meanings to “cocksucker” here goes beyond the verbal incongruity of a pun or other types of common comic wordplay. It is at once satiric and hip in its positioning of Bruce’s definition and sexuality as both opposed to the simpler binary of the authorities and dependent on his own individual desires and expression. The word “cocksucker,” Bruce claims here, means more than “a favorite homosexual practice.” Rather, it means whatever it means to the speaker or listener—fellatio, for Bruce, being a practice of any hip sexuality whether homo-, hetero-, or non-binary. The obscenity of the word, then, lies not in the ten-letters but in the minds of the people who speak and hear

them. This is a fundamental point of Bruce's comedy and struggle with the law, and it is a fundamental trait of the hipster: that subjectivity always colors any attempt at objectivity and notions of "obscenity" or "truth" or any such concrete ideas should always be questioned.

This exploration of meaning then moves to the courtroom and Bruce's first trial. Throughout the rest of the routine, Bruce will continue to position himself as outsider, this time making a familiar move to claim the hipster's status as insider/outsider with the Jewish judge and lawyers that presided over this first proceeding. From this perspective, Bruce reduces language to nonsense through verbal reductions that further identify the hipster's linguistic aesthetic. Bruce recounts the trial moving deftly from judge, to prosecutor, with occasional intrusion of the stand-up telling the story. The primary differentiation between the voices of the two authorities and Bruce: an exaggerated Jewish affectation.

BRUCE: Now we get into court. The chambers. The judge--Aram Avermitz [Albert Axelrod was his real name], a red headed junkyard Jew, a real farbissiner with thick fingers and a homemade glass eye. Tough-o, right? He comes in...

Bruce's identification of Judge Axelrod by the Yiddish "farbissener" at once identifies Bruce's Jewishness through his use of Yiddish and positions himself in opposition to a particular type of Jewishness, particularly an embittered and rigid authority—the paradoxical stance of the hipster. The bit continues:

JUDGE: What'd he say?

PROSECUTOR: Your Honor. He said "blah-blah-blah."

JUDGE: He said “blah-blah-blah”?!

BRUCE: Then the guy really yenta-ed it up:

PROSECUTOR: That's right, I didn't believe it. There's a guy up on the stage, in front of women and a mixed audience, saying “blah-blah blah.”

JUDGE: This I never heard, “blah-blah-blah.” ...

PROSECUTOR: The guy said “blah blah blah.” Look at him. He's smug. He's not going to repent.

BRUCE: Then I dug something. They sorta liked saying “blah blah blah.” 'Cause they said it a few extra times. ... it really got so involved, the bailiff is yelling, “What'd he say?” “Shut up, you ‘blah-blah-blah.’” They were yelling it in all the courts: “What 'd he say?” “He said ‘blah blah blah.’” Goddamn, it's good to say “blah blah blah.” That “blah blah blah.” That “blah blah blah.” That “blah blah blah.”

Here, Bruce the hipster, the individual positioned as outsider by his prosecution, yet intellectually engaged through his race and hip sensibility plays on the absurdity of his situation to draw attention to the nonsense of institutions that attempt to govern linguistic usage with no regard for context or connotation. Further, from his position as outsider with inside knowledge, he exposes the authorities' unwillingness to admit their own culpability and participation in the obscene—the inherent human hypocrisy which Bruce admits in himself and wants to laugh at in his comedy.

Beyond the hip stance that Bruce's persona takes in this bit, the verbal play here functions in specific satiric and hip ways to communicate its humor and the humor's resultant intellectual engagement. Recalling Stuart Hampshire's description of an

intellectual as “someone who never lowers his voice in piety, and who is not prepared to be solemn and restrained, in deference to anything other than the internal standards of the intellect and the imagination,” the potentially obscene content of Bruce’s bits works on his audience in specific ways that would be repeated throughout the history of hip comedy. Intellectuals and hipsters alike scoff at any sense of propriety and convention, chasing thought in all contexts. Kate E. Brown’s study of “Richard Pryor and the Poetics of Cursing” necessarily draws on the influence of Bruce to what would become Pryor’s aesthetic. Brown argues that Bruce’s cursing illustrates that “words become curses only as a matter of convention as it takes shape over time, and every instance of cursing therefore invokes convention, even as it violates the conventions of linguistic decorum” (69). Cursing as a poetics, then, requires awareness of a social order and its conventions and a violation of that order as a move to expose the artifice of the order itself.

Musicologist Philip Ford makes a similar claim in his establishment of hip as a musical aesthetic. Ford argues that “hipness is a kind of poetics of gesture informed by a poetics of self, which is in turn informed by a certain way of looking at society” (72). It is the poetics of the subversive individual in the context of a known convention; the poetics of hip is much the poetics of cursing. Following the lead of Anatole Broyard’s “Portrait of a Hipster,” Ford identifies hipness as a gesture or attitude that manifests itself in “ironic reduction” of expressive conventions (53). The purest example of this reduction for both Ford and Broyard is the “hip greeting: ‘brushing the palms for handshaking, extending an index finger, without raising the arm, as a form of greeting’” (53). This gesture represents the hip reduction of the formal handshake or wave as a subversive act of the hip individual in the context of a social convention—one that draws on prior knowledge to

create new meaning. Ford then extends this principle of hipness to the music of Thelonious Monk and illustrates hip music as a music that explores and exploits “ironic reduction” as an aesthetic.

Bruce’s “Blah Blah Blah” routine follows this aesthetic in its ironic reduction and compounds it by reducing first the conventions of normal discourse to the alliterative staccato sounds of slang, the word “cocksucker” itself a bit of hip lingo. When he is forced by his arrests to then reduce the slang to the total nonsense of “blah blah blah,” he does so with a full awareness of the multiple levels of meaning he is engaging and with the intention of inspiring his listeners to recognize the absurdity of the entire situation and thereby to achieve the hip expression of his “way of looking at society.” This joke ironically reduces all language to mere grunts that only carry the weight of their specific utterance: dirty words are only dirty to dirty minds, Dirty Lenny tells us. In this routine, Bruce is still very hip, still very hybrid and actively provocative. As the years and trials continued, he began to lose this sensibility, and it is this loss to which I want to turn now as a means of continuing my exploration of the hipster’s role in stand-up comedy.

Old v. Aging Hipsters: Performance Films and Rhizomatic Persona

This poetics of cursing is not all that links the hipster personas of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor. Beyond the two comics’ shared verbal aesthetic, they both share the hipster’s fascination with and embrace of new technology as a means of making their comedy available to their audiences. In a 2014 entry of their weekly staff recommendation feature “Watch This,” prominent pop culture criticism site The A.V. Club ran the headline “The First Stand-up Movie is Also the Best.” Staff writer Ignatiy Vishnevetsky’s focus in this piece: the 1979 feature film *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*.

Vishnevetsky's evaluation does well to explain in relatively few words the quality of this particular text and to make the case for its place atop the stand-up comedy canon, particularly as it represents Pryor at his finest, just before addiction would send him to the burn ward and multiple sclerosis would force him out of the public eye. However, Vishnevetsky's headline and most accounts of the history of the stand-up feature film overlook one crucial detail in the development of the feature-length stand-up special into the most recognized sign of success for comedians and the primary mode through which they reach their audiences: Pryor was not the first. Rather, that honor belongs to Bruce and the *Lenny Bruce Performance Film* (1966). Using this medium—the stand-up concert/performance film—as the site of focus for continuing my sketch of the hipster persona, I wish to illustrate both the evolution of the hipster and film's role in that evolution. This illustration is best undertaken by looking at the ways in which Bruce's attempt to use this new medium fails and Pryor's subsequent films succeed both as comedy and as hip manifesto.

Writing and performing “Blah Blah Blah” soon after his first arrest in 1961 and 1962, Bruce is able to mine the absurdity of his prosecution for comedy by taking a hip stance of opposition and disruption to comment on the events. From the playful distance of the hipster, Bruce can turn his trials into comedy and that comedy into a reflection on language, obscenity, and conformity, among other things. However, as time passes and Bruce's prosecution becomes, at least in his mind, more akin to persecution, he becomes increasingly unable to situate himself and his persona—now inextricably linked—at a critical distance from the events in his life. The arrests and trials that followed Bruce around the country in the early 1960s took their toll on the man and the persona in the

forms of financial difficulty, drug addiction, and the interruption of hip's "process in cyclical rhythm." As I have defined it, the hipster thrives on process, change, contradiction, and movement. As Bruce becomes increasingly embroiled in his legal trouble and his addiction, his hipster persona becomes overshadowed by something else entirely: an angry, strung out, and obsessed old man. It is perhaps fitting that one of the quotations most often attributed to Lenny Bruce and perhaps better known than many of his jokes is actually a misquotation. Many sources, including *The New York Times*, credit to Bruce the catchy line: "there's nothing sadder than an aging hipster." In fact, Bruce writes in his autobiography that "there's nothing sadder than an old hipster" (35), and it is perhaps the most authentic moment in the entire book. The difference of a word here is gargantuan and I would like to explore it as the lens through which I view the performances of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor in the concert/performance films under analysis here.

The difference between Bruce in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*—his penultimate performance filmed just months before his death—and Pryor as he appears in multiple versions of his hipster persona throughout his career is precisely the difference between "old" and "aging": between inhabiting a fixed position (old) and existing in process (aging). In this context, these words have little to do with actual physical or historical age, and everything to do with the performance of an identity in a discursive act between hipster and audience. Hip privileges youth. As Leland explains: "Hip is a culture of the young because they have the least investment in the status quo" (22). However, there is no age limit on the hipster. Rather, what marks a hipster's youth is not the number of years spent walking the earth but the perspective from which one sees and

performs the knowledge and experiences of those years. The hipster ages, takes part in the processes and cycles of life, becoming newly hip through new experiences and interactions that inform new performances of the hipster's identity. In many ways, the hipster—both as a person living in the world and as a persona—can best be understood as what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term an “assemblage” in their rethinking of social and psychoanalytic theory: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. For Deleuze and Guattari, the self and society must be rethought of as larger assemblages of rhizomes rather than roots: experiences, events, etc., that are parts of the larger assemblage of a human psyche or a society. Each of these rhizomes is part of the larger whole, yet uniquely separate—repetitions that are similar, yet different. As I noted in the introduction to this study, citing Phil Ford, hip is an aesthetic of rhizomes rather than roots, and the hipster must be capable of what Deleuze and Guattari term “all manner of becomings” (21).

This model of the rhizome has no shortage of applications. Such is the sort of rhetorical thinking that Byron Hawk engages in “Stitching Together Events: Of Joints, Folds, and Assemblages,” ultimately arguing for a rhetorical approach to historiography based on the principles of jazz improvisation that seems relevant to our study of the hipster here. Hawk follows Sande Cohen's following of Deleuze to determine that the historian's rhetorical goal is not to represent “history,” but to perform repetitions which are “additive” (112-13). For Hawk, “historiography requires not mourning, memory, or nostalgia but continual production” (112). Historiography becomes not a tracing of the past in any structured or linear sense and a faithful recounting of “facts,” but a repetition of histories that continually adds the perspectives of new analyses to create a larger, more

complex, and additive history precisely because of its rhetorical nature. That is, each historical moment—each person, place, thing, or, to simplify, text—represents not only that text, but also its potential to produce multiple meanings and multiple histories with each repetition. Here, then, is the difference between an “old” and an “aging” hipster and the persona I would like to explore in the rest of this chapter: the old hipster is no longer a hipster at all, but a once-hip being tethered to a singular idea and unable to adapt or “become,” and the aging hipster is older, perhaps wiser perhaps not, but still engaged in the process of becoming and seeking change, contradiction, and growth. In their performances on film, Lenny Bruce is an old hipster, and it is sad, while Richard Pryor is an aging hipster who continues to push at his audience’s boundaries and to explore his own identity as a means toward intellectual activity.

Old and Obsessed: *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*

By the time he committed his thoughts on the sadness of old hipsters to the pages of his autobiography, Bruce was barely clinging to his own hipness, the persona that he’d worked so hard to create having become so weighted down by legal struggles and addiction that he could no longer move within it. He became stagnant, lame, critically un-hip. Two pathologies hampered Bruce’s hipness, and they are on full display in the recorded version of his penultimate performance in 1965 at the Basin Street West in San Francisco. Those two pathologies: obsession and addiction, anathema of hip. On the subject, John Leland has this to say: “Hip’s relationship to drugs, as to any single-minded obsession, requires that we know enough to know better” (280). This linking of knowledge and the ability to evolve and grow lies at the heart of hip and the personas under study here, and it points to obsession and addiction’s place within the story of hip

in which this study participates. The rest of this chapter will identify that place through the examples of Bruce and Pryor.

The latter half of *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* takes up Bruce's legal battles. Sometimes directly quoting trial transcripts, sometimes recalling the courtroom scene in his own words, Bruce obsesses over the details of his legal battles and attempts to make readers see his side. He presents in these pages a defense of himself that he would never be allowed to present in court. It is a complete shift from the fanciful and funny memoir of the first half of the book, and it represents the stagnation of the Lenny Bruce persona. "I have really become *possessed* with winning—vindicating myself rather than being vindictive," Bruce writes, "and my room is always cluttered with reels of tape and Photostats of transcripts" (181; emphasis in original). Bruce's language here is crucial, for by identifying himself as "*possessed*" he uses the very language of the religious fanaticism against which he so often railed to describe his own fanatical fight to vindicate himself. The possession of which he speaks is born of a deep-seated obsession, with being right, with being heard, with being on stage, or any number of other desires.²⁶ The root of the obsession is less important here than the simple fact of it. Obsession, like possession, is anti-hip. As John Leland's history illustrates repeatedly, hip is inextricably tied to motion and progression: from Twain's Mississippi to The Great Migration, from jazz's improvisation to hip-hop's digital sampling, from the Beats' Road to the Geeks' Cyberspace, hipness relies on movement, growth, and change to exist, and we have seen this illustrated in the Bruce persona so far. But just as possessions may anchor a person or

²⁶ In perhaps my favorite moment from the recent Lenny Bruce Conference at Brandeis, Bruce's daughter Kitty was asked to describe her father. Her summation of his personality goes a long way toward explaining both his hipness and his descent into obsession with being right: "my father was a generous, complicated, loving, funny *diva*."

weigh them down until, as the saying goes, the things we own end up owning us, obsession is stagnation. To be hip is to defy possession and obsession. Lenny Bruce ceased to be a hipster when he became obsessed not just with winning his case but with being right.

Bruce's obsession is evident in the recording of his penultimate performance, released posthumously in 1966 as *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*. As in *How to Talk Dirty*, Bruce is clearly obsessed with his trial, possessed by a need to vindicate himself. He spends most of the hour-long performance reading directly from a copy of the trial transcript and obsessing with the mistakes and misattributions contained therein. At times this is somewhat funny, it is, after all, Lenny Bruce doing what he does best: talking about himself and the incongruities he sees between what people say and the reality their words obfuscate. At other times it is incoherent and bizarre, as when he attempts to find his place after a bit and reads aloud, "[Charge] three: Saint Paul giving up fucking," and then struggles to remember what that might refer to for a minute or so, every excruciating "umm" and twitch recorded by the camera. In these moments one can still see the spark of Lenny the hipster as he shuffles through his addled brain and eventually lands on a joke about Catholicism that may be loosely related to the "Saint Paul" charge he referenced earlier, but also may not be. Kevin Casper attributes to these flashes of Bruce in his element an ability to rhetorically influence his audience through "the asignifying force of laughter [which] *lubricates*" (344) Bruce's movement between various contexts. Following Derrida, Casper argues that Bruce's bits are not the focus of this film, but rather a rhetorical force that puts the audience at ease and primes them for his real proposition: the assertion of his innocence. Through this analysis Casper argues

that the film is “as close as [Bruce] ever comes to the forensic defense he wanted to make before the courts” (359). By this point in 1965, as the opening titles of the film remind us, Bruce was bankrupt and could only work in San Francisco. *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* is important for many reasons, not the least of them being that it is one of only a handful of video recordings of Bruce, but for this study its primary importance lies in its status as the last, and ultimately sad, act of “an old hipster.” Here is Lenny Bruce, wanting to be disruptive, attempting to improvise and engaging the new media of the time. However, in each of his moves toward hipness, toward once again becoming an evolving persona engaged in the process, Bruce recoils under the weight of his obsession and returns to the trial transcript that he keeps safely stored upstage right.

This weight keeps the mood of the entire performance heavy, and heavy ain't hip. Bruce's improvisations here seem bizarre and especially disjointed. At one point about forty minutes in he seems to lose his track, scratches his chin, then turns his back to the audience and stands for a moment in silence looking at the stone wall behind him. He hesitates just long enough for the audience to wonder if they've lost him, then touches the wall and says, “that's class rock.” It is a jarring moment, but elicits laughter from the Basin Street West audience and this viewer for its strangeness. However, the small reflection on masonry that follows begins to lose any sense of humor until it is cut off by Bruce exclaiming “Chicago!” returning to the microphone stand and beginning a bit about nightclub gangsters. The digression into rock quality and masonry seems a clear case of a performer vamping until he remembers his place. Because it's Lenny Bruce, we are willing to follow where he goes because he's followed stranger paths to better comedy in the past, but in this performance the path leads to little more than frustration

and a clumsy switch to a tired joke about criminals. The final ten minutes of the performance are filled with disappointing rehashes of old bits that go nowhere: characters familiar to Bruce's fans appear and disappear with no real reason; Bruce walks to the drum set and begins "To is a Preposition, Come is a Verb" but loses either interest or his place as quickly as it begins. The disappointment here does not lie in his free-flowing performance or an inability to finish the bit the way it was on the record. Quite the opposite, the disappointment lies in knowing that Bruce could improvise something great, that what made Bruce famous was his ability to improvise and to move with rhythm through his sets. But here, he just fades away, returning time and again to the albatross upstage right, the trial transcript.

Even when Bruce occasionally leaves the transcript alone for a while, its presence is still palpable. Every time he struggles for the next word or the next bit, audiences can sense him being lured to the transcript like the sailor he once was being called by his personal Siren. His obsession prevents Bruce from moving forward, from maneuvering through comedy and making the points he no doubt wanted to make when he first realized the potential of filmmaking for stand-up comedy and conspired with director John Magnuson to make the *Performance Film*. Another source of disappointment may suggest itself from a twenty-first-century perspective: addiction. While Bruce tended to maintain that he was not a drug addict and even spends chapters twenty-one and twenty-two of *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People* explaining his various ailments and the prescriptions that he possessed for them in order to dispel rumors of his addiction, with the dubious benefit of hindsight, we know that Bruce was heavily addicted to drugs at

this point. This denial of the self as addict is a move that limited Bruce's ability to develop and that cut him off from the hipster persona.

While the history of hip, as anyone with even a cursory knowledge would quickly admit, is littered with the corpses of addicts, addiction itself is not hip precisely because of its connection to obsession. The truly hip dooper is a hybrid of addict and teetotaler, seeking the altered state of intoxication in order to better understand the paradoxes of sobriety, not to escape reality, but to add to it. As Leland puts it, "the aesthetic of the hybrid is fulfilled only when it includes dissonance, and only when it moves toward learning and enlightenment" (281). For Lenny Bruce to insist in *How to Talk Dirty* that he is not a drug addict, that he doesn't even smoke marijuana because he's "got enough shit flying through [his] head without smoking pot" (129), is a move toward concealment not enlightenment, toward limitation not learning. For all his autobiographical material, Bruce never discussed drugs or addiction on the stage, and watching his penultimate performance from the twenty-first-century, when the image of his bloated corpse lying on a bathroom floor with a tourniquet around his arm is readily available with a simple Google search, one can't help but see the role that addiction plays in the disappointment of this first stand-up concert film. In the final moments of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, Bruce wanders to the door of Basin Street West and haphazardly comments on the people passing by in the street, informing them at one point that "Dirty Lenny's about to go on," and then in what seems an afterthought he ends his show: "I really dug working with you," he says, halfway out the door, "and good night. And as Will Rogers said, I never met a dyke I didn't like, and, good night." And then he ducks out the door and the screen goes black, a title informing us that this was the second to last time he ever took or

left the stage. That's it. Where is he going? What's out there in the black San Francisco night? It is an odd farewell, deeply unsettling and wildly disappointing. There goes, in Ginsberg's words, another of

the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical
naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an
angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night (*Howl* lines 1-3).

Exit Bruce. Enter Richard Pryor: A Portrait of the Hipster on Film

The shift from Lenny Bruce to Richard Pryor as the embodiment of the hipster comedian as it evolved in the decades after Bruce's death is a fairly easy one to make. Pryor's persona and Bruce's are closely related and the influence of Bruce on Pryor is well documented by critics and friends of Pryor's alike.²⁷ In an interview with scholar Audrey Thomas McCluskey, producer, filmmaker, and friend of Pryor's Michael Schultz associates Bruce and Pryor's autobiographical style, saying "nobody was really being that honest except for Lenny Bruce in his comic world" (180). This honesty, as this study has in part shown, is hip. But Pryor, like Bruce, was also hip to the times and the changing mediascape as a means of delivering his persona to the people and allowing his persona to do its work. As a hipster, Pryor fits well into the history laid out by Leland, who

²⁷ See Kate E. Brown's "Richard Pryor and the Poetics of Cursing" discussed above; Pauline Kael's 1985 review of *Superman III* points to Pryor's "Supernigger" character as directly influenced by Bruce's "Superjew"; See Hilton Als's "A Pryor Love: The Life and Times of America's Comic Prophet of Race" for further assertions of Bruce's hip influence on Pryor (256).

mentions in passing the lineage I am tracing here: “Richard Pryor built on Lenny Bruce’s outrageousness” (206). If Bruce is the “White Negro” who brings hip into the forefront of American comedy in the postwar years, Pryor is the Black Hipster of the Civil Rights years who responds to Bruce and builds on and expands the hipster persona as an aesthetic and intellectual force in American comedy and society. As Leland’s far-reaching history shows, the racial interplay that marks hip culture and its influence on American society is not one-way, but is best considered as a processional feedback loop: an infinite jam session.

Central to this interplay and the development of hip as an aesthetic capable of impacting larger swaths of culture is the development of technology. As media advanced in the middle of the twentieth-century, television took over and the Hollywood studio era ended, ushering in a period of upheaval for film commonly referred to as New Hollywood. It was an era of auteurs and avant-garde experimentation. The increasing availability of filmmaking equipment and the artistic climate being increasingly concerned with the individual and the personal as potential sites of meaning, allowed new genres of film to be born and led to new applications of film to other artistic endeavors. Leading the charge to bring film into the world of stand-up comedy were hipsters. For various reasons, hipsters were not suited to television in its early years, and film, as Bruce no doubt realized in his desire to make the *Performance Film*, offered a medium in which the comedian’s act could be recorded and replayed exactly as it happened, not as some unfunny cop remembered it in a courtroom the next morning. Film could have been the medium that vindicated Bruce. Unfortunately, by the time he tried, he was an old hipster, obsessed, addicted, and unable to fully realize the potential of the medium. Pryor, on the

other hand, put this newly available technology to work and through it created a body of work that illustrates his contribution to the hipster persona as a hip interpreter for the square world and as a growing, changing, and hybrid persona that evolves and ages rather than simply growing old.

Keenan Ivory Wayans describes Pryor's legacy by calling him "the groundbreaker...he was the inspiration to get into comedy and also showed us that you can be black and have a *black voice* and be successful" (qtd. in Watkins 527; emphasis in original). And *Time* magazine describes his comedy thusly: "Pryor is certain of one thing. He is proudly, assertively a nigger, the first comedian to speak in the raw, brutal, but often wildly hilarious language of the streets" (*ibid.*). These descriptions place Richard Pryor at the forefront of his comedy: a comedy born out of racial identity and the language of real life. Importantly, these descriptions also refer to a specific Richard Pryor persona, what Keith M. Harris identifies as "the second incarnation of himself" (25). Like Bruce, who began as a schtick Jewish comedian, Pryor was a second-hand Bill Cosby in the 1960s when he first began doing stand-up. It was only after "an alleged 'breakdown,'" as Harris puts it (25), that Pryor became the hipster persona that I wish to explore here and for which he is best remembered and celebrated.²⁸

Harris explores this incarnation of Pryor through the lenses of Judith Butler's work on performativity and Henry Louis Gates's work on signifying to argue that Pryor's persona is one of racial performativity that carries with it the rhetorical function of enacting the *ethos* of blackness's aggressive difference from white culture and the *pathos*

²⁸ By the early 1980s, as we'll see, Pryor was something else entirely, and it is precisely this evolution, this movement, multiplicity, and hybridity that marks his hipness and his ability to maintain an important role as a comedian both during his career and after disease and eventually death ended it.

of blackness as an identity that one wishes to escape (25-27). From this rhetorical position, Harris argues, Pryor achieves “a double-voiced address, simultaneously direct and indirect, to the white audience and the ... black audience” of his various performances (26). Harris’s and my own argument share similar interests in Pryor’s performativity and use of double and multiple meanings through signifying and paradoxical identity formation. What Harris sees as the rhetorical foundation of Pryor’s black persona—its opposition to the dominant culture and the resultant emotional appeal—I see as essentially hip. Anatole Broyard’s “Portrait of the Hipster” describes hipsters in similar terms to Harris’s description of Pryor, and it is important to remember that Broyard’s subject in 1948 was not the white hipsters of Mailer’s era or our own, but a specifically black, male figure who existed in the urban landscape of New York and was “opposed in race or feeling to those who owned the machinery of recognition” (43). For Broyard’s hipster, this opposition results in the feeling of being nowhere and the creation of a somewhere in the performance of his hip identity, as I have discussed. However, Broyard takes this a step further and asserts that through this performance, the hipster “discover[s] the world to the naïve, who still tilted with the windmills of one-level meaning” (46), and serves as “an interpreter for the blind, the deaf, the dumb, the insensible, the impotent” (48). In Broyard’s essay, the naïve, the blind, the deaf, et al. are a particular crowd of white urban intellectuals for whom the hipster becomes the symbol of vitality and a new mode of both intellectual and physical existence.²⁹

In order to continue tracing the hipster as a stand-up comic persona with a significant role in shaping comic and intellectual discourse in American society, I wish to

²⁹ These intellectuals would become Mailer’s “White Negroes” in 1957.

view Pryor's contribution to the aesthetic of this persona by looking at three of his filmed appearances from the 1970s and early 1980s. In each of these appearances, Pryor performs the hipster as a persona who opens up the potential for multiple meanings, translates and interprets the multiplicity of his own racial identity for those who may be naïve or blind or deaf to the realities of life beyond their own, and who utilizes the medium of film to produce a vibrant, hybrid, and evolving portrait of the hipster as living being. Through my analysis of these appearances I wish to show the hipster's wide-ranging potential for intellectual provocation and potential satire as well as film's potential as a medium for satirically hip comedy through its ability to both disrupt viewers' perception and capture across time and space the necessary vitality of the hipster persona.

***Wattstax*, Documentary Film, and the Signifying Hipster**

Beyond the stand-up performances through which he made his name, Pryor loomed large over entertainment in the 1970s and 1980s starring in movies, appearing on some television, and releasing acclaimed albums and video recordings of his material. And while some of his character roles—particularly, in my mind, those played alongside Gene Wilder—are iconic in their own right, Pryor is primarily remembered for being Richard Pryor. In 1973, Pryor had not yet achieved nationwide fame, but his star was on the rise and he would soon become legend with the release of his album *That Nigger's Crazy* in 1974—it won the Grammy in 1975. Just prior to this, Pryor appeared as a sort-of MC in the 1973 concert documentary *Wattstax*, which presents the Wattstax music festival held that year to commemorate the 1965 Watts riots. This film is notable both as an example of the sorts of independent films that artists of the time were now able to

make, and as a poignant bit of socially conscious art. Throughout the film, the narrative shifts from the concert to previously recorded music to street interviews of the local black community all tied together by the comic musings of Pryor talking to an audience, both those present at the recording in what appears to be a bar and watching from other spaces and times. *Wattstax* opens with Pryor alone, surrounded by a black void. He says: “All of us have something to say, but some are never heard.” What follows is an attempt to give voice to those voiceless and unheard. *Wattstax* the film is social commentary and political art. Pryor’s presence though adds another level to it. As MC, not of the concert, but of the film itself, Pryor is meant to serve as interpreter for audiences beyond the black community and through his humor adds multiple levels of meaning to the utterances voiced by the other black people who appear in the film. As such, Pryor’s hipster becomes essential to the overall message of *Wattstax* and further reveals the dimensions of this persona as they begin to play out in audiovisual media.

Pryor’s early catchphrase, “that nigger’s crazy,” appears in *Wattstax* and offers insight into the role of the hipster as interpreter and signifier. The phrase itself, like Bruce’s use of Yiddish and Jewish stereotype in his comedy, allows Pryor to establish himself in the hip position of inside/outsider from which he can comment on and complicate black identity. In the film, this is played to satiric effect and forces audiences to engage the film intellectually. After a documentary segment in which several black people discuss their aspirations for the future of their race, their political leanings, and more, the camera cuts to a woman who says with a smile, “black is beautiful because it feels so good” (approx. 36:40). Then, the film cuts to a seated black man on the street who says in seeming response, “if black is beautiful, white is divine.” Quickly, the film

cuts to Pryor, looking directly at the camera and engaging viewers in direct eye contact, who quips, “now that nigger’s crazy.”

The filmmaking in this sequence draws us into the conversation happening about blackness and forces us to rethink our understanding of race through what I want to pose as a hip dialectic. First the woman, then the man, then Pryor each engage us, the film’s audience, by looking directly into the camera. Like Bruce’s stare from the cover of *American*, the eye contact of these individuals engages us and forces us to pay attention. When the woman sincerely praises blackness for its sensuousness, she offers a thesis on blackness. When the man attempts to be funny by identifying America’s racial inequality (subjugating blackness to humanity and elevating whiteness to divinity), he offers an antithesis that seems to chastise the naivety of the former. When, through careful editing, Pryor calls him crazy for buying into the myth that “white is divine,” that skin color is a mark of worth, he disrupts the conversation through insult (“the dozens”) and turns it back on itself. By calling the man, essentially, a “crazy nigger,” Pryor at once satirically chastises black audiences who would buy into the myths that perpetuate racial bias based on skin color and poses the hip alternative to this mindset. The “crazy nigger” label here is multifaceted and should not be read as a dismissal of the man’s assertion that “if black is beautiful, white is divine.” Indeed, this assertion is born out of a very real understanding of cultural attitudes and racial thinking at the highest institutional levels of American life, and Pryor (as well as the filmmakers) no doubt recognizes the truth buried in the ironic assertion. So, when Pryor says, “now that nigger’s crazy” he is not only chastising a self-hatred that might exist in the minds of black audiences but he is also offering a hip synthesis to the dialectic here by offering African Americans an identity

that is capable of speaking back to society through a recognition of the paradoxical nature of being black in the 1970s: being simultaneously fetishized as beautiful and marginalized as other from “divine” white society.

If, as Leland asserts, hip is “synthesis in the context of separation” (7), the synthesis here lies in the label of the “crazy nigger,” a label that Pryor applies to himself on the album of that name. For Mailer, what the hipster celebrates and appropriates in blackness is its connection to psychopathy. Importantly, however, Mailer asserts this connection not as a criticism, but as a theory that would allow for African Americans to become a dominant group within American culture. Mailer argues that “since the Negro knows more about the ugliness and danger of life than the White, it is probable that if the Negro can win his equality, he will possess a potential superiority” (62). In the final moments of his essay, Mailer reflects on the potential social revolutions that would accompany this shift in the cultural landscape. By 1973—in the wake of the successes and failures of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, including the Watts riots—Mailer’s vision was already proven false. However, in Pryor’s re-appropriation of the “crazy nigger” as both a label and a character that speaks back to institutional racism and complicates the simplicity of the binary “black is beautiful, but white is divine,” he asserts the fundamental humanity of blackness and provokes audiences to consider the complications contained therein. The “crazy nigger” embodies all that white culture both despises and envies in blackness; the hipster points out this paradox and through the careful editing in *Wattstax* challenges audiences of every race to complicate their understanding of racial identity and hierarchy. In this filmed appearance, Pryor’s hipster emphasizes multiple-level meaning and serves as interpreter for audiences. In the concert

films that he would release in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he would continue this project while exploring the potential of film as a hip medium.

Hip Interpreter: *Richard Pryor Live in Concert*

Pryor's appearance in *Wattstax* helps to illustrate how film, particularly as it came to be used by documentarians and independent artists in the latter half of the twentieth-century can be a powerful medium of delivery for both a comedian's persona and a filmmaker's political message. In 1979, Pryor harnessed the potential of this medium for stand-up comedy by releasing the concert film *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*.³⁰

Recorded in Long Beach, California, this film is often billed as the first of its kind. While this may not be strictly true, it is undoubtedly the first *good* film devoted to a single stand-up performance. The performance is Pryor at his most electric and hilarious: he moves deftly from crowd work to the silly pretensions of race to pantomime study of his pets to the poignant truths about race and being black in America that mark his comedy as so relevant and influential today.³¹

³⁰ Interestingly, he recorded an earlier concert film called *Live and Smokin'* in 1971, but as Keith M. Harris points out, there is no evidence it was released at that time. It exists today in home video as a 1986 release. For an analysis of this performance, see Harris's "'That Nigger's Crazy': Richard Pryor, Racial Performativity, Cultural Critique" (2008).

³¹ This is a much written-about performance, and much has been made of Pryor's fluidity and rhythm here. For an analysis of Pryor's performance and persona couched in the context of the history of African American comedy, see Mel Watkins's *On the Real Side*, which culminates in the assertion of Pryor as the epitome of the "Real" black comedian. For a look at the many animal embodiments contained within this performance and their relation to tricksters and African folklore, see Maxine A. LeGall's "Br'er Richard: Fascinating Storyteller" which situates Pryor's comedy within the folklore of Br'er Rabbit. Many more works on Pryor exist, and a full bibliography is available in the edited collection *Richard Pryor: The Life and Legacy of a "Crazy" Black Man* (2008). While the arguments contained within these and other sources have influenced my understanding of Pryor and are tangentially related to the subject of this study, I am attempting to trace in Pryor a trajectory of hip through film, and am thus focusing my

Live in Concert opens with Pryor's limousine arrival at the Terrace Theatre in Long Beach, California. In what would become over the next few decades a common trope of stand-up special openings, the camera greets Pryor and his soon-to-be wife Jennifer Lee and follows them from the parking lot through the backstage area and to Pryor's dressing room. During this journey, viewers are informed of Patti Labelle's role as opening act for the concert but told that her contribution will not be included in the film due to time constraints. The effect of this moment, of greeting Pryor the man before he has donned his costume and become the persona that will take the stage shortly, is one of drawing the film audience in and pointing to the performativity of the entire act. By showing viewers the behind-the-scenes, Pryor invites us to take part in something that the theatre audience does not get to see, pointing to the potential for intimacy and identification of which film is capable. After the dressing room door closes, the film cuts to the backdrop of the stage—a large line drawing of the comedian's face—and Pryor unceremoniously takes the stage. Suddenly, people seem to realize what is happening and a slight applause begins to build. The camera angle then shifts to a long shot of the stage from the back of the auditorium and reveals a room in turmoil. People are not back yet from the intermission between LaBelle's set and Pryor's. The house lights are on, and no one seems to really know that the main event has started. It is a strange way to begin a show, and it is precisely this strangeness that I want to examine as it functions within the hip aesthetic that I have been tracing to position both the audience in Long Beach and those watching the film in such a way as to be receptive to Pryor's persona: the hipster

analysis on three specific moments across three autobiographical film appearances rather than attempting to provide a complete analysis of Pryor's comedy and influence.

who disrupts passive viewing and engages us in a performative act of discovery and interpretation.

Through the camera that first follows Pryor from parking lot to dressing room and then shifts suddenly to the audience's perspective at the back of the theatre, director Jeff Margolis sutures audiences into the filmed event, bringing it to life and visually exploring the multiple subject positions at work in a performance. As Kaja Silverman explains, "‘suture’ is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers" (195). Through suturing, audiences inhabit the subject positions of characters and become capable of seeing the world through their eyes. For the hipster, this medium-specific procedure allows the autobiographical nature of the comedian's persona to take on new life and to add multiple layers of meaning to his or her comedy by forcing viewers to consider their own subjectivities through the subjectivity of the performer and further consider those ultimately flimsy boundaries like race, religion, and sexuality that they use to construct borders between themselves and others. It also allows audiences viewing the film at other times and locales to experience the live event in a way previously unavailable to comedy fans and audiences.

The effect of allowing the film audience a glimpse into Pryor's life before he takes the stage and then suddenly suturing them into the chaos of the theatre audience as Pryor the performer—now clad in red shirt and flashy gold shoes—takes the stage with no introduction is both to highlight the performativity of the event and to throw audiences into the chaos from which Pryor's hipster will "discover the world to the naïve." Subverting any assumptions about how a comedy show should start, there is no formal introduction given here and while audience members hurry to their seats as the applause

slowly builds, a spotlight clumsily finds the waving Pryor downstage right. The camera then shifts to an onstage perspective and just as the spotlight identifies for the theatre audience where their focus should be, this shift in camera perspective moves film viewers' focus to Pryor as he begins to thank his audience. From this perspective, viewers are provided with a dual subjectivity: we are half in the seats and half on the stage. We can see Pryor, but we can also see the first several rows of the audience—what he sees. Here, the camera establishes Pryor as unique in this collaborative event: he is the one who speaks and on whom we should focus, the hipster occupying a space of difference. However, by suturing viewers into these multiple subjectivities—Pryor, audience, both—film viewers also begin to recognize the differences and performative possibilities between all of these perspectives. Through this recognition, the simplicity of the single-level understanding of a performance as a simple interaction between performer and audience is complicated by the almost infinite possibilities of film's subjectivity.

In these first two minutes of *Live in Concert*, before Pryor even utters a word, the hip potential of film to engage multiple levels of meaning and to not only capture the complexities of a live performance but to add to them are revealed and color the viewers' response to what is to come. Having seen the transformation from Pryor the man arriving to Pryor the persona taking stage, the film audience is privy to an element of this opening that the live audience is not: namely that what seems like chaos is actually quite the opposite and is instead merely the performed chaos of the hipster from which he will construct new meanings. It is the nowhere from which Pryor creates a somewhere: a performative space from which the order of the outside world is seen anew, comically. In

what follows, Pryor establishes the racial conflict that is the source of so much of his humor as he comments on people returning to their seats.

Thank you. Good evenin'. Wait for the people to get back from the bathroom. People in there pissin' like "wait, the shit done started." Damn ... Jesus Christ, look at these white people. Rushin' back. White people don't care, Jack, just come out anyways. Say [adopting his famous white voice] "Fuck it we're going. I don't give a shit." You niggers taking a chance being in Long Beach though, Jack. I saw the police had some brother jacked up when we was comin' in here. Nigger had his hands way up here, talkin' bout "huh? What?" And they was searching and shit. Bet they take him away to jail. Go to jail in Long Beach is a motherfucker...

Here, the camera cuts back to about halfway up the auditorium and we see people continuing to find their seats as Pryor continues.

White people—this is the fun part of the show for me. When the white people come back from intermission and find out niggers done stole they seats. [laughs and adopts white voice again] "Uh, weren't we sitting here, dear? Weren't we? I believe... weren't we, uh, we were sitting here." ... [now adopting the deep voice of a black man] "Well, you ain't sittin' here now, motherfucker." [uproarious laughter]

In these opening moments, Pryor exposes the black/white binary in a hip way by first identifying both races as out of place. The white people are out of place at this "black" show ("White people don't care, Jack, just come out anyways"), and the black

audience is risking freedom and life being in predominantly white Long Beach.³² Once he has established the potential inside/outsiderness of the audience, both for them and for those watching the film, he engages them satirically by mocking the racial stereotypes of white meekness and black aggression in order to convey his ultimately hip message of racial fluidity and intercultural maturity. As hipster separate from the hip audience and the stereotypes he points to both physically as performer on stage and ideologically as seer and interpreter rather than participant, Pryor plays with this binary. Through the suturing of the camera work, the viewing audience becomes aware of the same reality that the theatre audience understands and ultimately finds a hip synthesis in the context of their racial separation: despite the color lines and cultural boundaries (and even, in the case of the twenty-first-century viewer, the boundaries of space and time), all of us are here for the Richard Pryor show.

Having established the audience as a hip cohort, Pryor then uses his role as hipster to move from community building to enlightenment as he becomes the interpreter of life for the audience: in particular as he moves from gentle mockery of the racial divide in his audience to explicit exposure of the dangers of being black in white America. This move comes from an exploration of his own life and personal crises.³³

³² According to the Census Bureau in 1970, Long Beach's population was 91.8% white.

³³ Between the opening quoted above and the bit about police that I am moving to, a couple of things happen that are worthy of note, but not necessary to my overall point. First, Pryor continues his exploration of race by mocking white politeness in black spaces and rudeness in white ones as well as the difference between white and black cursing. Second, during this, Pryor is interrupted by a white audience member trying to take his picture whom he first mocks by mocking himself: "who gives a fuck" about a picture of Richard Pryor? He asks. Then he dismisses the man outright, albeit good-naturedly: "sit your ugly ass down." It is on one level a perfect and somewhat disturbing visual illustration of his point: a white man asserting his control over a black man's space and body. On another it is simply an example of the community that Pryor's comedy

I am really personally happy to see anybody come out to see me, right?
Especially after as much as I done fucked up this year. [laughter and
applause] I don't wanna never see no more police in my life. At my house.
Taking my ass to jail. For killing my car.

Pryor refers here to an incident in which he shot his car with .357, and continues to tell his version of the story at times embodying the car, himself, and the vodka that egged him on before coming to the police's arrival at his home and a shift from self-mockery to hip enlightenment, emphasized by the film's editing and direction.

Then the police came and I went in the house. 'Cause they got Magnums too. And they don't kill cars. They kill nig-gars. [laughter and applause]
Police got a chokehold they use out here though, man. They choke niggers—to death. That mean you be dead when they through.

The camera shifts here to an upstage perspective, suturing viewers into Pryor's subjectivity and we see the sea of white faces in the front of the auditorium. At this moment, the frame contains no less than fifteen white people occupying the first two rows of the audience and about five black people. Pryor is interpreting for white audiences who are hip enough to be here the reality of racial existence: he is hipping them to the situation, and it is poignantly captured in the workings of the film medium. Film's potential as a medium for hip comedy allows these multiple shifts in subjectivity through which comedians can disrupt passive viewing and challenge perception, and Pryor understands and exploits this potential in the final act of interpretation of this bit:

establishes with his audiences. Neither he nor anyone else gets truly upset by this interruption and it is merely another thing to laugh at. The *modus operandi* of hip is to go with the flow, to swing and be cool, and Pryor is that.

“did you know that?” he asks his audience rhetorically about the chokehold before answering, “Niggers goin’ ‘yeah, we know that,’ and white folks, ‘no, I had no idea.’”

In this example, Pryor plays the hipster to enlighten and challenge his audiences. Through the medium of film and its ability to add layers of subjectivity and meaning to audiences separate from the live event, this moment and others like it in *Live in Concert* not only allow Pryor to explore the boundaries and commonalities that paradoxically exist in his audiences both live and viewing the film, he also captures his persona as a living and vibrant text in a way no medium could before. Where LPs tried, film succeeds, and this is most evident as film takes over as the primary mode of comedy—especially hip comedy during stand-up’s rise in popularity in the seventies and eighties. Pryor’s films in particular point to this medium’s ability to capture the evolution and hybridity of a hipster as he develops over time. In this chapter so far I have examined Pryor’s use of the “crazy nigger” label as a hip utterance and his use of his own substance-related mishaps as a comic subject that leads him to larger satirical points and hip enlightenment about race. I now want to turn my attention to Pryor’s next concert film *Live on the Sunset Strip* in order to illustrate film’s potential as the hipster’s medium by showing how Pryor becomes, in this later film, a hybrid and growing persona capable of applying the paradoxical perspective of the hipster to his own life and comedy. In this next film, Pryor takes audiences on a journey that explores the very aspects of his private life and public persona as inner failings—his use of the word “nigger” and his addictions—and by coming out laughing on the other end, proves himself a being in process and development, not an old, but an aging hipster—not sad, but hopeful and celebratory.

The Hipster’s Evolution: *Richard Pryor Live on the Sunset Strip*

Along with providing hip comics the outlet to say and do what they needed to do without fear of undue censorship and introducing cinematic practice into the construction of comic routines, film provided a means of documenting a comedian's life and work and allowing it to last and to potentially enact its comic persona long after the live event. Film's capacity to become the persona in each individual viewing pairs with its ability to capture and create the movement and progress of a comedian's persona for audiences in such a way that it allows the comedian to grow and to learn in each new iteration while still maintaining an essential connection to the overall persona. Unlike the album which requires the visual and auditory persona to be separated and then joined in the imagination of the listener through the relay between cover image and content, the comedy film presents a whole person for the viewer to interact with and experience with each new viewing of each new film. For this reason, early stand-up films and the specials that are so widely popular now offer comedians unique opportunities to explore themselves as changing and evolving texts: as "multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single assemblage." Through this exploration, not only can hipster comedians enact important social and intellectual performances that potentially advance the discourse around contemporary social issues, they can also provide living examples of progress and individual change. Richard Pryor's second film *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982) does just this by serving as both an important development in Pryor's own understanding and discussion of race and as an autobiography of addiction and recovery that serves as both cautionary example and assertion of the transitory power of aging hip—a counterpoint to Bruce's "old hipster."

Much occurred in Pryor's life between the filming of *Live in Concert* and *Live on the Sunset Strip*. It is visually clear from his outfit, here a snappy red suit in contrast to the more casual silk shirt of the first film, that he has matured, and his material reflects that as he deals separately with these events and uses them to take his comedy to new heights of both social commentary and personal exploration. The two moments that I would like to focus on in this film center around two important events that took place in his life between filming these concerts. In *Sunset Strip*, Pryor describes his 1979 visit to Africa, and he tackles the 1980 incident in which, while free-basing cocaine, he set himself on fire. Each of these events play an important role in the film and forever change Pryor's persona and cement his status as a satirical hipster engaged in a process of becoming through his comedy. About the first of these events, the trip to Africa, Pryor says the following:

Everybody should go home to the Motherland. Especially black people. Really, man, there is so much to see there for the eye and the heart of black people ... I went there to find my roots. 7 million black people, not one of them motherfuckers knew me. I looked in every phone book in Africa, and I didn't find not one goddamn Pryor ... But there's nothing like going and seeing nothing but black. Black people, I mean from the wino to the president it's black people, and it's like *fair* ... it's black people, and I mean black. Original black ... And it's exciting when you land and you look out the plane and it's black people and it's nice 'cause you realize people are the same. People in Africa fuck up your luggage same as New York.

In Africa, Pryor finds an awareness of humanity's nature that is essential to comedy: that everyone everywhere is a fuck up of sorts. But he also finds an appreciation for this that inspires him with awe and identifies this community of fuck ups as something to be aspired to. In his conveyance of this awe, clear in his wide-eyed expression and vocal tone, Pryor makes sure to poke fun at the primitivism of white people, and the illogical essence of any social system that recognizes racial segregation. This is all pretty standard fare for Pryor, but it gains added poignancy as he reveals the personal enlightenment that he experienced through his trip.

After several minutes riffing on and physically channeling the wildlife of the African bush, Pryor's tone changes. He holds the microphone stand, the camera focused on his upper half, and says,

One thing I got out of it was magic I'd like to share with you. I was leaving and I was sitting in the hotel and a voice said to me, it said, "look around, what do you see?" And I said, "I see all colors of people doing everything." And the voice said, "do you see any niggers?" And I said, "no." And it said, "you know why, 'cause there are none."

At this point, Pryor is visibly moved. His eyes appear to be straining to hold back tears and he begins to move as he delivers the next pivotal lines

I started crying and shit I was so ... It's just I been out here three weeks and I haven't even said it. I haven't even thought it. And it made me say, "oh my god, I've been wrong. I been wrong, I got to regroup my shit," I mean, I said, "I ain't never gonna call another black man a nigger."

At this, the audience applauds and the camera cuts to a shot from upstage, behind Pryor, staring into the black void of the darkened amphitheater where the audience sits. It is a visual approximation of the experience he has just described and the suturing here puts viewers of any race in the position of looking out as Pryor does and seeing nothing but black. Of realizing, once again, that people are joined by their very humanity. As he continues by reflecting on the awful history of the word that, in many ways, made him famous, the camera returns to the position of the spectator and we see Pryor recognizing his own role in perpetuating racism through the use of a word that, as he puts it, “is meant to describe our own wretchedness.”

It is a powerful moment and as Pryor continues his rebuke of that word and his exploration of both its roots and the roots of all humanity in Africa, his person lights up and becomes the nimble comedian once again.³⁴ Pryor’s hipster persona, rooted in his own life and reflective of that life’s potential for growth and change, becomes both a visual and intellectual agent of enlightenment for his audience. He admits to being wrong and moves to change and to grow in his dealings with and jokes about race. He is hip; he is socially aware; he is a force for positive growth in the relations between the races and the racial discourse of both black and white America. This change in vocabulary that represents a much deeper spiritual and intellectual change for Pryor and his comic persona does not discount nor discredit Pryor’s previous incarnations—quite the opposite, in fact. Because Pryor’s business is comedy, and his persona has always been rooted in the autobiographical and the hip, he has always been an agent of change, movement, and multiplicity. In this world there is no negation, only addition and Pryor

³⁴ Importantly, he also pauses to warn “hip white people” against telling him any “nigger jokes” because he doesn’t like that at all.

on the *Sunset Strip* is as authentic as Pryor in *Wattstax* or on the album *That Nigger's Crazy*. Taken separately, each of these Pryors becomes the hipster working toward enlightenment. Taken together, they become a visual approximation of hip itself and a more complete portrait of the hipster: not a single person or thought, but the multiplicity and evolution of a living person and that person's thought. Such is the nature of the comedian on film: when the full persona is joined with the material and given the tools of cinematic rhetoric (which is simultaneously visual and verbal) in a medium capable of being repeated, the hip comedian becomes capable of creating a persona that speaks, as comedy should, to a vast array of competing and even contradictory ideologies. This is the essence of hip.

It would be easy to imagine Pryor ending his *Sunset Strip* performance with these weighty ideas. However, the hipster comedian is not solely a social commentator, as we have seen. Because the hipster gains much of his persona's insight from the autobiographical, there is always more to explore in the dark corners of the individual psyche. Coming out of his reverie on race and humanity's common origins, Pryor is interrupted by a fan's request that he do his famous character Mudbone, the old black man from Tupelo. Pryor is visibly hesitant, but, perhaps being caught in a vulnerable moment,³⁵ obliges, saying that this will be "Mudbone's last show." This Pryor does not want to do tired old characters, caricatures and stereotypes which might be just as guilty of perpetuating some of his white audience's latent racism as that awful word he's just left behind. The Mudbone sequence that follows is most notable for how hollow and fake it feels, how unlike what we've just seen, and how impotent in comparison. Even the

³⁵ Or, more likely, taking part in a heavily rehearsed bit of pandering.

camera seems to realize that this is not part of the real show and we suddenly see Pryor doing Mudbone from in the seats, as the camera pans left, the silhouettes of the audience members in front of us partially obscuring the lower part of the stage. It is a very cinematic moment, in the sense that it feels fake and lacks any of the vitality or semiotic significance of the camera's behavior thus far.

What's left is for Pryor to deal with himself. Doing so is perhaps the hardest, and definitely the hippest, thing that anyone can do. Through Pryor's reckoning with his own addiction and his final acknowledgement that the comedian himself may be the best joke he's ever told, *Sunset Strip* takes the stand-up performance film to a new level of hip by ending with a joke that highlights Pryor's hybridity as a person, a persona, and as not only joke teller but also joke itself. After the regrettable Mudbone interruption, Pryor returns to himself and begins talking about his friendships, a brief and sentimental if not altogether funny segue into his famous combustion that begins with having a realization during a conversation with Jim Brown that he had "been burnt up." This performance highlights a clear mental disconnect between Pryor and the man who was "burnt up," a recognition of the multiple selves contained within his person and persona. After milking this recognition of an incongruity between his own perception of himself and that of the people around him for a few laughs, Pryor promises, "I'm gonna tell y'all the truth tonight." Here is that truth:

Alright, now all my friends know this to be true ... usually, before I go to bed, I have milk and cookies. [laughter] And one night I had some lowfat milk and some, uh, pasteurized, and I mixed 'em together, and I dipped my cookie in there, and the shit blew up! [uproarious laughter]

The joke here is that everyone knows that this is not true, but it is both nowhere near as dark and every bit as silly as the actual, cocaine-fueled facts. With this opening joke, Pryor sets the scene for the type of autobiographical exploration that he is about to engage in, one that must deal not only with the self, but also with the self as a celebrity and public figure.

A common way of reading autobiographical narratives of addiction and recovery follows Robyn Warhol's association of AA narratives with the trajectories of drunkards in Victorian novels and their origins in Evangelical conversion stories.³⁶ However, Oliver Lovesey argues in his study of "Rock 'n' Recovery Autobiographies" that recovery narratives written from the lives of celebrities—in Lovesey's case, rock stars—differ from the recovery narratives of the common and not famous. As is common in addiction narratives, these autobiographies first of all treat addiction as a disability that establishes a new normal with which the life writer must reckon if not altogether reconcile or overcome: "the creation of a stable addict identity demands the radical reconstruction of the individual's life story in terms of the later addictive behavior" (298). However, Lovesey's articulation of the "Rock 'n' Recovery Autobiography" strays from the standard model in that rock stars, unlike their non-famous counterparts, must attempt to "reclaim their writers' lives from addiction *and* from the illness of fame" (298; emphasis added). Lovesey draws on the work of Jean Baudrillard to argue that "Rock 'n' recovery autobiographies are attempts, however conflicted, to acknowledge mortality and

³⁶ That this is the common way of reading such narratives is illustrated by its being the only way mentioned in Smith and Watson's introductory text *Reading Autobiography*.

fallibility and to escape [a] kind of ‘disembodied ideality’” (313).³⁷ In these narratives, rock stars attempt to assert their capacity for change and growth in the context of an extant image of themselves that is always already widely accepted by the public. In doing so, they must inject their personas with a living self, a multiplicity capable of evolution and intellectual becoming. They must become hip—reconnected with the living and divorced from the iconography of celebrity.

The final segment of *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* is the comedian’s “rock ‘n’ recovery” narrative: quicker, dirtier, funnier, and hipper than the rock star’s self-important *bildungs*.³⁸ In twenty minutes, Pryor lays out the life of the addict by becoming at times pusher, dope fiend, and pipe and thus establishes the disability of addiction that his genre requires. This at times equally hilarious and heartbreaking performance leads to the final joke, which begins with Pryor bumming a light from the audience. He puts a cigarette in his mouth and lights it and quickly thanks the audience: “I wanna say y’all gave me a lot of love when I was not feeling well and I appreciate it.” He then continues,

³⁷ The “disembodied ideality” cited here is a reference to Baudrillard’s belief that modern existence, permeated by too many screens and selves, forces us to construct a disembodied ideal self up to whom we will never be able to live. Baudrillard and Lovesey are a bit darker (and perhaps a bit more conservative) than myself or, to their credit, Deleuze and Guattari, whose understanding of the fractured postmodern self consists not of negation—of being unable to live up to some artificial ideal of self—but of addition—of each self adding to and being part of the becoming of the assembled self. Perhaps the biggest difference is that Lovesey’s subject is the pretension and self-seriousness of rock stars, and mine is comedy. One of these is easier to stay positive about. These issues of fractured identity and postmodern selves will be taken up in more detail in my discussion of Bo Burnham in the next chapter.

³⁸ Several conversations with rock stars on Marc Maron’s podcast *WTF* have revealed that most comedians want to be rock stars and most rock stars want to be comedians which implies an intriguing connection between the two identities.

also, you all did some nasty-ass jokes on my ass too. Oh yeah [taking another match from the book he just received] y'all didn't think I saw some of these motherfuckers. I remember this one, strike the match like that [mumbling as he lights a match]. "What's this?" [moving the match from stage right to left in a hopping motion] "Richard Pryor running down the street."

With that, the show ends and Pryor raises his hand in salute of his audience. Roll credits. On a record, all of these moving parts—the audience member who gives him the matches, the cigarette, the lighting of the match, and the wild look in Pryor's eye when he delivers the punchline—would not work. However, being able to see this moment, hear Pryor's voice, and then to stop, rewind, and rewatch at any point in our lives as whatever people we happen to be at that time and with whatever knowledge, is what makes the joke work over and over again on deeper and more enlightening levels each time.

Pryor's final joke here is at his own expense and not of his own creation. He moves beyond the simple binary of performer and audience and pushes the boundaries of what a comedy show can and should be. The joke relies on the gift of fire from the audience (a symbolic moment if ever there was one), and the comedian's acknowledgement of his own "mortality and fallibility" to succeed. As such, it relies both on the construction of a filmic reality (surely he wasn't going to go without a light) and the autobiographical to succeed. And when it succeeds, it indicts everyone involved—comedian, audience, director, editor, viewer, et al.—in the crime of "mortality and fallibility" and sentences each to the scrutiny of the multiple perspectives and points of interpretation that Pryor's comedy reveals.

Conclusion

Through this analysis of Lenny Bruce's *Performance Film* and several filmed appearances of Richard Pryor, I have sought to identify both the hipster's aesthetic as it relates to personal crisis and development and film's capacity as the medium through which hipsters could best enact their personas and become hybrid texts that add complexity to both viewing practices and the ways in which we understand their comedy. While Bruce's initial response to his arrests and trials maintained the playful satire of the hipster, his obsession and addiction ultimately caused his comedy to stagnate and took his physical life. In the case of Pryor, we see the hipster as hybrid and mobile persona—closely linked to his racial identity and role as hip interpreter—whose ability to escape and recover from both historical and personal crises allows him to become teacher and translator for the hip world that rose to prominence in the wake of the 1960s.

Pryor's hipster sets the standard for what comedians are capable of and how they can use the emergent technology of their time. As the hipster, he is at the forefront of the move toward this newly available medium of film. The "process in cyclical rhythm" of hip follows Pryor's lead and in the 1980s, the concert film and hour special became a staple and proving ground for comedians that helps to usher in what is commonly known as stand-up's Golden Age in the eighties and early nineties. With a few exceptions, hipsters were rare during this Golden Age, and it is a time in which mainstream, accessible comedy rises in prominence following in the wake of the hipsters that paved the way. By the end of the twentieth-century, every comic would be filming a special to fill the wee hours of cable's 24-hour programming schedule. Alternative comedy would emerge alongside alternative music in the nineties, but often took the form of sketch

comedy and improv that challenged mainstream ensemble comedy in their own hip ways. For the most part, the hipster would lie dormant for several years until its reemergence both culturally and comically in post-9/11 America and the hippest technological advancement yet: personal computing and the Internet. The next chapter will explore this reemergence in twenty-first century hipster comedians: the postmodern existentialism and media convergence of Bo Burnham and the paradoxical Brown White Negro of Aziz Ansari.

CHAPTER IV

NEW AND CONVERGENT MEDIA: POST-HIPSTERS BO BURNHAM AND AZIZ ANSARI

So far, this study has traced the hip sensibility that developed in American popular culture in the post-war years as it became an aesthetic trait in stand-up comedians Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor. Central to this analysis has been an understanding of the hipster as a cultural figure closely related to the traditional trickster and an examination of the ways in which developing technologies and new media provided outlets for hip comedy's ability to challenge more traditional modes of comic performance and allow hipsters to position themselves as outsiders in various ways. In both Bruce's and Pryor's time, hipness was easily associated with subversion and the countercultural idea that came to define the 1960s and its various social movements. As the "cyclical rhythm" of hip's development proceeded in the decades that followed, what was hip became mainstream: stand-up comedy became wildly popular and experienced its Golden Age in the 1980s, in part due to the availability and popularity of concert specials released on HBO, VHS tape, and eventually Comedy Central. Similarly, hip too became mainstream through the concerted efforts of advertisers and fashion houses, as Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* famously points out. In this environment, the "hipster" label

transitioned from an identifier of rebellion and the countercultural idea to a marker of taste and consumption in its twenty-first-century rebirth as a label for a new social phenomenon. The hipsters of the new millennium seem at first glance far removed from their predecessors, and the question must be asked: do hipsters even exist anymore?

It's a fair question. One born out of hip's already nebulous nature and the trajectory of hip consumerism as the dominant mode of late capitalist culture. Hipsters do exist in 2016, but they are not like the hipsters of 1940, 1960 or any other time. As the final chapter of John Leland's *Hip: The History* begins to articulate, the twenty-first-century hipster is as hip as ever, but part of that hipness is necessarily a reflection of culture's hipness. The hip-square binary, like most binaries at this point in human endeavor, has proven inadequate and veered off in new directions: creating a new hip that, like its predecessor positions itself in opposition, but must now oppose not only the dominant square positions of culture (religion, white affluence, show business), but also with the mainstreamed and equally dominant hip culture that drives contemporary markets. This is the post-hip sensibility that informs the comedians to whom I now wish to turn my attention. Leland situates the early attitude of the post-hipster in the days following 9/11 and the bursting of the 1990s dot-com bubble:

post-hip flaunts downward mobility and small town security as fashion accessories. ... And as American political power moves toward Christian evangelicals, who take a very orthodox view of enlightenment, post-hip mocks the boundaries of orthodoxy itself. Its first targets, appropriately, are the orthodoxies that call themselves hip. When hipsters start dancing to old Journey records, it is on the graves of hip pieties past. (350)

For Leland, the hipster of the 2000s must navigate a complicated terrain of orthodoxies both hip and square and everything in between, and this hipster exists to oppose all such orthodoxies as inauthentic and therefore worthy at different times of mockery or ironic appropriation. Similarly, in a 2010 rumination on the question “What Was the Hipster?” for *New York Magazine*, Mark Greif identifies two essential traits of the contemporary hipster: “an obsessive interest in the conflict between knowingness and naiveté, guilty self-awareness and absolved self-absorption,” (4) and a “relationship to consumption” (7). For Greif, the post-hipster continues to be concerned with enlightenment like his twentieth-century counterpart, but it is an enlightenment that can be obtained through ironic self-definition and the right clothes, records, or taste in coffee. It is a performance as dependent on props as character. In contrast to this hipster are the groundbreakers and rump-shakers that move hip forward both as a style and social identity, and it is these hipsters on whom I will focus. For the sake of clarity, I will borrow from Leland and label as “post-hipster” those contemporary comedians whose sensibility follows and builds upon the hipster persona so far discussed in this study, and use the “hipster” label to identify the poseurs and trust-funders to whom that name has so commonly and derogatorily been applied in recent years.

Both of these analyses point to the twenty-first-century hipster’s continued awareness of the self as a position of marked opposition and paradox while also emphasizing the twenty-first-century hipster’s relationship to consumer culture. In this chapter, I wish to build upon these notions of contemporary hipsters and explore the post-hipster as a comedic persona through the analysis of two contemporary hipsters who repeat much of the aesthetic of the twentieth-century hipster, but with twenty-first-

century difference: Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari. In each of these comedians' personas, the aesthetic of the hipster as American existentialist and inside/outsider finds a twenty-first-century outlet for its intellectual play and disruption. Like the hipsters before them, the post-hipsters here are intellectuals whose intellect and drive for knowledge confer on them outsider and rebellious status, who do not limit the focus of their intellectual activity but rather "embrace difference and ... experimentation," and who hold nothing so sacrosanct as thought. These post-hipsters' positions of opposition and inquiry necessarily draw on and respond to not only the traditional binary of the hip and the square but also to the far more complicated post-hip situation of a dominant society that is both hip and square simultaneously. The contradictions inherent in such positioning require hipsters to be increasingly mobile and multifarious both in subject and in style, leading these hipsters to embrace the rapid movement of technological advancement and the convergence of new and old media in the performance of their personas and the overall intellectual thrust of their comedy. In the first example, Bo Burnham subjects the traditional hipster as youthful existentialist to the various media available to him. Doing so, he explores and explodes the boundaries of both postmodern identity and the traditional form of stand-up comedy. Through parody, a paradoxical stance toward celebrity, and a remixing of the self as autonomous subject through the manipulation of media, Burnham explores the self as simultaneously mediated object and autonomous subject. This allows Burnham to mine his inside/outsider status for meaning by remixing and reassembling his fractured celebrity identity according to his own hip aesthetic. In the second example, Aziz Ansari creates a hipster as Brown White Negro whose performance responds to the incongruities of "post-racial" America and embraces

multiple uses of new and old media. His goal is to question the very essence of both his own and his twenty-first-century audience's hipness. By performing a white hipster in a brown body, Ansari challenges audiences' perceptions of race and society. From this position of paradoxical insider/outsiderness, Ansari also satirizes the contemporary hipster's obsession with superficial hipness in order to forward an aesthetic of thought and empathy. Through this aesthetic, Ansari seeks to undermine the interpersonal boundaries imposed by technology and twenty-first-century hip consumption. In both of these examples, hipster comedians provoke audiences out of passive viewing, listening, and reading habits and further delineate the influence of hip comedy on stand-up's intellectual capital today.

Becoming Bo Burnham

Bo Burnham has been a hipster in the best and worst senses of the word since he exploded onto the comedy scene via YouTube videos of his silly teenage songs in 2006. He did not follow the normal trajectory of a stand-up comic—toiling in obscurity, working the door for Mitzi Shore at the Comedy Store, failing over and over and over again. He did not have to discover his persona as an autobiographical reflection of himself after decades of dirty work like Lenny Bruce or Richard Pryor. Rather, he is a product of his time, born hip. As *The New York Times*' Jason Zinoman puts it, Burnham “started his career at 16, when the joke songs he created in his bedroom went so viral that he became the youngest comic with a special on Comedy Central.” In a previous chapter, I have pointed to Leland's claim that “hip is a culture of the young because they have the least investment in the status quo” (22), and Burnham is a prime example both for how he came into popularity and how he has approached comedy since. Burnham's meteoric rise

rankled the comedy establishment whose sentiments Zinoman echoes in the assertion that “he’s a kid who never had to pay his dues in comedy clubs before headlining theaters.” Because he exists outside of even the comedians’ status quo, he is a quintessential hipster comedian and will help to illustrate the aesthetic of the twenty-first-century post-hipster persona.³⁹

After this immediate mainstream success, including two albums and the special *Words Words Words* (2010), Burnham had the appropriately hip response to fame and backed away from it for three years, during which he wrote a book of comic poems entitled *Egghead* (2013) and worked on his next hour-long special. In 2013, Burnham released that special, *what.*, on his YouTube channel and Netflix for free and to widespread critical acclaim. Zinoman praises its originality, calling it Burnham’s “most revealing departure” from the adolescent comedy that made him famous, and noting that it is “flashier, more theatrical and personal than [Burnham’s] previous work, evoking a high tech solo show more than quirky alt musical comedy.” *The Guardian*’s Brian Logan praises *what.* as being “ferociously accomplished” and “a full-frontal assault of music and meta-comedy that leaves you gasping for air.” In many ways, it is less a stand-up special than a piece of postmodern performance art, and that is both Burnham’s goal and the first link between his comedy and the philosophical traditions and hip sensibilities

³⁹ For a thorough and tragic insight into the “dues” that comics traditionally pay, see William Knoedelseder’s *I’m Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-up Comedy’s Golden Era* (2009) which tells the story of the stand-up boom of the late 1970s and the comic migration to Los Angeles. It is essentially the comedians’ version of the labor struggle that took place there, the grind of the comedians’ lives, and the fight to be paid for their work that was ultimately won at the cost of much bad blood and the 1979 suicide of Steve Lubetkin outside the Comedy Store. Lubetkin’s suicide note, amongst many personal things, contains the words, “To all comedians—Unite, it’s in your best interest” (241), the Marxist tenor of which serves to illustrate that stand-up comedy is utterly, if sometimes tragically, hip.

that inform it. In his project, Burnham is aligned both with the hipsters that came before him and the intellectual and comedic pursuits of postmodern theory and literature. Before turning my attention to Burnham's special, I will briefly articulate the connections between theories of the postmodern self and comedy. Having done so, I will then use this theoretical frame to examine Burnham's special *what.* within this context and in comparison to twentieth-century comic master Samuel Beckett. Through the use of multiple convergent media, Burnham disrupts the expectations of audiences who have come to expect—in large part due to the influence of hipsters like Bruce and Pryor—certain things from a comedy special. Technology allows Burnham to play the hipster as prestidigitator and consistently surprise his audiences, opening the door for his intellectual pursuits. In *what.*, this culminates in an exploration of self as infinitely split both by media and celebrity, and Burnham subjects this existential struggle to the hipster's magic by fracturing his identity and public perception only to remix and rebuild it in the hip image of autonomy.

The Postmodern Self as Comic Subject

Frederic Jameson famously sees one characteristic of postmodernism as “the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (1961). In this sense, the postmodern and the comic are closely related: the laughter of the marketplace defined by Bakhtin might be said to serve a similar purpose. Further, postmodernism is explicitly related to “the dominant motif in American comedy” as identified by Gerald Mast: “the ridiculing of social, moral, and intellectual pretension” (42). Along with this effacement, Jameson identifies other features of postmodernism as

“the transformation of reality into images, [and] the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presence” (1974). Leland follows Mailer to identify the “isolated present tense” (38) of the hipster, and this is precisely the position from which hip comedians ridicule all pretension from their positions as figures capable of navigating the disjointed subject positions of postmodern existence. To be postmodern, it might be said, is to be in some ways inherently comic. To be postmodern and comic in America is intrinsically hip.

The postmodernist as a persona with an aesthetic would be defined in Jameson’s analysis through the image of the schizophrenic—an image familiar to this study so far through Mailer’s association of hipsters with psychopaths and with Deleuze and Guattari’s larger project: *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Jameson’s sense of transformation and fragmentation can imply a postmodern self that loses its subjectivity and is left split and hollow. However, the philosopher and hip comedian are not dissuaded by this lack of subject position and seek to redefine the self precisely in the potential of its fragmented and indefinable position: its mobility and multiplicity. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is only “when the individual opens up to the multiplicities pervading him or her, at the outcome of the most severe operation of depersonalization, that he or she acquires his or her true proper name ... The proper name is the instantaneous apprehension of a multiplicity” (37). For Deleuze and Guattari, more is always better than less—more selves, more people, more perspectives, more thoughts, more thinking. This positive postmodern philosophy seeks to create order from the chaos of the fragmented, but an order built on allowance rather than restriction, on addition

rather than negation.⁴⁰ It is a fundamentally comic and fundamentally hip philosophy, and one that depends on a complex understanding of the self as post-subject that hipster comedians have helped to bring about in the twenty-first-century.⁴¹

I do not wish to suggest, though, that hipsters are the origin and epitome of this sort of humor and its resultant cultural evolution. Just as Bruce and Pryor's comedy can be clearly associated with aesthetic, artistic, and literary movements that dominate their time, so too the twenty-first-century has clear cultural antecedents. In the case of Bo Burnham, this antecedent is a particularly literary one: the comedy of Samuel Beckett. Reflection on the postmodern self in stand-up comedy as a means toward realizing and theorizing the positive, additive, potential of human beings and society is a major thrust of modern comedy that hipsters, as the arbiters of taste and tricksters of the genre, helped to usher into mainstream society and lend cultural capital. In *Machine-Age Comedy*, Michael North discusses modern and postmodern comedy in the context of Walter Benjamin's seminal culture studies essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). North's study emphasizes the close connection between humans and machines that is a result of our age and explores how modern comedians from Chaplin to Disney to Wyndham Lewis to David Foster Wallace have explored the

⁴⁰ This notion of the additive, positive nature of Deleuze and Guattari's thought and of the postmodern project in general is indebted to John Muckelbauer, whose book *The Future of Invention* builds on Deleuze and Guattari's project to rethink traditional notions of historiography and rhetorical invention in terms of dialectic. For Muckelbauer, traditional Hegelian dialectic performs negation of that which does not fit into a synthesis whereas the Deleuzian notion of "becoming" represented by the rhizome allows for a more additive and potentially positive understanding of history and rhetoric's role.

⁴¹ By post-subject I mean a world in which everyone is always already aware of their own subjectivity. Undoubtedly, the prominence of autobiography, documentary, autoethnographic film, reality TV and a lot more have played a significant role in bringing this about, but I think these comics have too. For more on the positive potential of hip see Dick Hebdidge's still highly influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

tenuous relationships between human beings and their machines that illuminate so much of contemporary existence. Central to this study is a thorough examination of Samuel Beckett and what North calls his “machinations.” As North puts it, “modern comedy in the middle of the twentieth-century was more or less defined by the works of Samuel Beckett,” and Beckett’s comedy is more or less defined by “a kind of black comedy” that recycles “costumes, props, and routines from vaudeville and the circus by bringing them into a bleak, post apocalyptic atmosphere” (141). This causes what Paul Sheehan calls in North’s report “antihumanist pessimism and alienation” to “become therapeutic and even heroic” (141). That North deems Beckett’s comedy modern is a result of his focus on the ways in which Beckett makes new the old “costumes, props, and routines”; however, the subjects that Beckett explores through these modernist machinations are precisely the fractured and multiplicitous selves of the postmodern.

In his analysis, North argues that Beckett’s comedy speaks to the machine-age because it illustrates how technology and new media cause their users and audiences to question “the very concept of identity not just by multiplying but also by abstracting the process of self-scrutiny that gives rise to it ... thus powerfully augment[ing] the original process by which a self is implanted in its unsuspecting host” (154). The constant flux of the self in Beckett’s novels, plays, and film suggests not only the fracturing and post-subjectivity of the self, but adds to it the positive potential of critical thought and intellectual inquiry into the nature of this self. The same fragmented and absurd world that led Lenny Bruce and the original hipsters to their quest for self-realization through media and the satirical edge of irony, leads Beckett to destabilize the traditional notions of self as split between mind or body, machine or man, and instead to see the absurdity of

such exclusions and negations by seeking the additive potential of multiplicity and comedy as I will explore further in the next section of this chapter. North suggests that through Beckett we might “reverse Bergson’s dictum to suggest that [the postmodern self] is a joke based on the humor to be found when a human being insists on acting like a human being” (155). In North’s analysis, what is most hilarious in the world is humanity’s insistence on its own primacy and importance: the fundamental orthodoxy of society, to which hipsters will position themselves in opposition. The postmodern self as comic subject has an important precedent in Beckett, and an important contemporary practitioner in Bo Burnham whose exploration of this self further delineates the post-hipster aesthetic by illustrating the potential for twenty-first-century hipsters to mine their identities through the media that captures it and to remix that media into the autonomous, intellectually active, jugglers of contradiction and multiplicity that have always defined hipsters.

***what.* Who: Beckett and Burnham and Postmodern Comedy**

At once, *what.* joins the ranks of the absurdist, hip, and post-. Its title’s blatant disregard for the conventions of capitalization and punctuation places it post-grammar, and asserts that this special exists to subvert and to deconstruct the norms of language, comedy, and identity. The first image is that of child Bo, the grainy quality of which suggests it to be home video recorded by the pool. Little Bo sings “Old MacDonald” as the opening credits roll. A black screen and the sound of an audience cheering. In the black, a disembodied voice says, “This is Bo Burnham,” as a pre-recorded keyboard riff begins to play. Together, the title and the disembodied voice, which is Burnham’s but modulated to sound almost mechanical and sporting a vaguely British accent, are

immediately reminiscent of the title of and disembodied voice that plays absurd chorus to Beckett's *What Where* (1983). Through this disembodied voice, Burnham will perform his hip comedy by first using it to identify his inside/outsider status as paradoxical entertainer pulling back the curtain of entertainment. Then, he will apply the rigors of his intellectual play to his own identity in order to finally juggle the multiple outsider positions that he occupies as a celebrity by riffing on and remixing a collection of disembodied voices into an assertion of autonomous, hip identity.

Beckett's play opens with the Voice of Bam—isolated—setting and resetting the scene:

We are the last five.

In the present as were we still.

It is spring.

Time passes.

First without words.

I switch on. (497)

At this point, the lights go up to reveal the playing area and two of “the last five.” These five, according to Beckett's instructions, are to be “as alike as possible” (496). The action of the play consists of the entrances and exits of Bam, Bem, Bim, and Bom and their conversations with the Voice of Bam who exists in a lighted area down and to the right of center stage. These conversations center around confession and each of the three is, in their turn led offstage to have their chance at either confessing or demanding the confession of another regarding first whether “he said it to him” (501) and then “that he said where to him” (503). Finally, Bam and the disembodied Voice of Bam are all that is

left. In this brief play, running only twelve minutes in the film performance for the *Beckett on Film* series, Beckett interrogates the fragmented, postmodern self through his characters' similarity and the visual and oral severing of Bam and Voice of Bam who are revealed to share a consciousness in the play's final lines—"I am alone" (504)—though they do not share a body. At stake in this interrogation is something important, some truth, that at first seems dependent on knowing what and where it is, but that is ultimately revealed to be the rejoining of a fragmented self to its consciousness through isolation and confession. To know the self, Beckett illustrates through Bam, requires opposing the self to others and interrogating that self as an individual: this is similar to the essence of the hipster persona and its potential as a comic subject as I have outlined it so far.

As the disembodied voice of *what.* introduces Bo and his basic demographics—twenty-two, male—the camera reveals Burnham on stage in a red light, a hood over his head, and his head bowed over a book of some sort. The voice continues, "he looks like the genetic product of a giraffe having sex with Ellen DeGeneres. He has a gigantic head and tiny nipples." At which point, Burnham looks up and visually responds to this insult. In these opening moments, Burnham sets up the thematic content of the show to come: an interrogation of who Bo Burnham is through the interaction of man and machine and the comedy this reveals. In the next lines of the Voice, Burnham joins himself to the absurdist and postmodern comic tradition of Beckett as well as to the hipster comedian whose autobiographical persona allows him to mock society by first establishing his place outside of it. The Voice reveals that Burnham has

isolated himself over the last five years in pursuit of comedy, and, in doing so, has lost touch with reality. You're an asshole, Bo. You hear me? You

think you know better than me. You think you know better than everybody. You will die alone. And you will deserve it. But in the meantime, you might as well tell those silly jokes of yours. See if that helps.

What follows is a highly energetic song about Burnham's relationship with himself as a performer in which he uses the multimedia available to him for comic effects that call into question the fabric of existence and reality—playing the hipster as prestidigitator and jongleur of multiplicity. As Burnham's recorded voice sings his situation, he responds on stage as a “danc[ing] monkey,” but, like the Signifying Monkey that in African American folklore subverts the reality and control of mainstream white society as a trickster, Burnham subverts his audience's ability to distinguish between reality and fiction—between what is part of the act and what is “real.” As I will show, blurring these lines sets up what will follow in the hour-long special by first establishing Burnham as the hipster inside/outsider, then using the ambiguity of this position to explore and explode the boundaries between audience and performer, thought and thinker, persona and person.

Burnham is a wildly talented performer, and *what.* is so meticulously constructed that he pulls off his postmodern comedy magic with aplomb. It is precisely this construction that helps to identify Burnham with the aesthetic of the hipster. In the opening moments of the special, Burnham's interactions with the disembodied voice position him as outsider and expose the slippery space of the performance in which reality, identity, and the orthodoxy of stand-up comedy's form are not set but mobile, not singular but multiple. After the introduction by the Voice, Burnham begins dancing around the stage to a pre-recorded song, the opening lines of which are: “you used to do

comedy when you felt like being funny / but now you're contractually obligated, so dance you fucking monkey." This immediately establishes for audiences the paradoxical position of the post-hipster comedian who must compete not only with the square elements of corporate oversight but also with his own status as a successful comedian who is simultaneously part of the corporate structure and intellectually opposed to its control. From there, the song continues to introduce Burnham and he acts out various commands like the dancing monkey he is. However, almost immediately, Burnham subverts this, revealing his own autonomy and his ability to play tricks on the audience to both comic and intellectual effect. The lyrics of the song continue, telling Bo to dance, take off his pants, and do other things. Eventually, the lyrics instruct Burnham to "drink some invisible water," to which he responds by pantomiming the act of drinking from a glass. As he is pretending to guzzle, the song is interrupted by the Voice's declaration: "oh shit! That water's real!" To this, Burnham responds by spitting up real water on the audience. It is easy to see on repeated viewing that Burnham has not opened his mouth prior to this for the two and a half minutes that he's been on stage, and the water has clearly been in it the whole time, but it is a good joke, one adapted from a long tradition of magicians and vaudeville comics that further places Burnham in the tradition of Beckett as he is described by North and in the tradition of hipsters as first portrayed by Broyard and traced in this study.

From this energetic beginning, the show moves at a fast pace, a fact to which Burnham alludes several times, at one point even doing a "slow joke" for "older people" in which Burnham's slowed-down voice plays through the theater's sound system while the live Burnham mouths along into the microphone and tells a cheesy joke: "what did

the ear of corn say when all of its clothes fell off? [pause] Aw, shucks.” He then proceeds, still in living slo-mo, to explain the joke in the most patronizing way possible: “get it? Like ‘shucks’ as in shucking corn and also ‘shucks’ the exclamation? Am I right?” This is a clear move to align himself with his young audience and their essentially hip position. It sets up the classic binary between young and old, hip and square, but through the media available to Burnham, makes it different and allows it to operate on multiple levels. It is at once funny because it is a cheesy “dad joke” and mocks the square tendency toward pedantry *and* because it disrupts the orthodoxy of time and physical performance by literally slowing down Burnham’s voice and imposing the artifice of recorded technology onto the actual space of the living performance.

In another bit that relies on the highly choreographed and meticulously constructed interaction between a disembodied voice and Burnham, *what*. further explores the fragmented postmodern self and comedy’s potential to not only reconcile its own warring impulses, but to possibly have a positive social impact. Immediately following a joke that mocks homophobia and religious zeal in the form of Bo’s mother, a female Therapist’s Voice interrupts the show and asks how Bo is feeling. He responds by seemingly slipping out of his stage persona and appearing to take on the life of a confused and insecure “real Bo.” This interaction eventually leads to a musical number in which the Therapist Voice separates Burnham’s left and right brain from each other while he embodies each of these warring personalities through song. This routine leaves a little to be desired in the laughs department, and reads like a twenty-two-year-old’s—albeit a very intelligent and thoughtful one’s—version of psychoanalysis. However, it is worth noting here for its conclusion, which asserts comedy’s role in reconciling these

competing desires for bodily pleasure and for scrutinizing ratiocination. “Maybe there’s something that we could do together,” sings the left brain (superego) to the right brain (id) through the comedian (ego) on stage, “take the best parts of both of us / put ‘em together.” The left brain settles on comedy as the productive, creative outlet that will unite the self and make it able to be both analytical and emotional, and finally a better whole. In many ways, this bit functions as a somewhat heavy-handed thesis statement for Burnham’s comedy, one that can double as an assertion of comedy’s potential import in society: the ambiguity of comedy in general, but of hip comedy especially, is particularly capable of providing its practitioners with a means of exploring these ambiguous human struggles.

This splitting of the self, accomplished visually through lighting and camera angle, is precisely what North identifies in Beckett’s comedy as a doubling of the self in which it “seems to become a pseudocouple by a process that Deleuze calls ‘inclusive disjunction,’ whereby things divide, but only into themselves” (152). For North, as well as for Deleuze, this division “generate[s] possibility out of repetition not by overcoming it or undermining it but rather by pushing it to an extralogical conclusion” (162). This “extralogical” world of possibility is the world of hip comedy and its assertion of the incongruities between the many performances of the self. Through this division, Beckett and Burnham explore the fragmented self’s existence, finding comedy the only appropriate response.

what. Why: Burnham and Bruce and the Post-Hipster

Aside from his age, autobiographical persona, media savvy, trickster affinities, and existential subject matter, Burnham is a twenty-first-century post-hipster comic in his

aesthetic sensibility as well. As with Bruce and Pryor, many of his hippest jokes rely on the “ironic reduction” identified by Philip Ford, the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, and the “poetics of cursing” established by Kate E. Brown to comment both on society and comedy itself. However, while his content is clearly drawn from this tradition, it is always pushed a little further, to its hippest ends. Throughout *what*. Burnham is foulmouthed and pushes the limits of his audience’s capacity for cursing and sexual imagery. In doing so, he is part of a long comic tradition, one that is generally linked to Lenny Bruce in American stand-up. But at times, Burnham’s awareness of this tradition provides him with the opportunity to push further by going beyond the boundaries that constrained his predecessors and to thereby occupy the hip space of isolation and opposition. Shortly after the “Left Brain-Right Brain” bit, immediately after a song about how deep he is called “hashtag deep,” Burnham moves to the front of the stage and sits on the stool there. A playful melody begins over the house speakers and Burnham begins pantomiming sitting at a keyboard typing. It at first appears innocent and in the context of the show, when Burnham has already revealed his penchant for poetry and his intellectual leanings, it is easily read as the act of writing. However, when Burnham stops “typing” and begins to pantomime the act of masturbation, the audience realizes their mistake with a laugh: he was not writing, but searching for pornography. What follows is a full minute and a half of Burnham pantomiming masturbation, orgasm, a feeling of shame immediately afterward, the act of cleaning up, and a miserable mimed apology to the room. In this bit, Burnham pushes the limits of what the audience can laugh at about human sexuality and explores the private shame of the masturbator by staging it publicly. He engages in a profane, pantomimed confession essential to hip comedy, but takes it to

new levels of discomfort and potential disgust by, in this bit, bringing to completion a bit for which Lenny Bruce was tried and convicted but which he never actually performed.

As Kevin Casper points out, *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* serves the partial purpose of allowing Bruce to defend himself from the accusations brought against him in a way that the courts never allowed. A crucial moment to this purpose comes when Bruce responds to the charge that he not only “said jack off, but he did it.” As Casper contends, “Bruce appears to take particular offense to this part of the transcript, because such accusations, if true, would harm his standing in the eyes of his more sophisticated female audience members” (351). Bruce defends himself saying, “I would never make gestures of masturbation ... I’m concerned with my image in that, I, I know it offends chicks ... Dorothy Killgallen is not going to see some crotch grabbing hooligan.” By taking this joke to its dirty and revealing conclusion in *what.*, Burnham first comments upon his place in the post-Bruce world in which such jokes are hardly shocking, and rarely considered in bad taste from a male comedian.⁴² Second, he takes it from a joke that is potentially offensive, in Bruce’s time, to his “sophisticated female audience members” to a joke that interrogates, not female decency, but the fragility of the male ego (his marked shame and need to apologize) and the irony of concepts like obscenity in the Internet Age. Burnham’s ability to do with impunity what Bruce only said underscores the argument of this project and highlights Burnham’s place within it. Because of the hipster, society as a whole, and comedy in particular, have moved beyond the orthodoxies that defined postwar America and into a time of greater freedom, based primarily in the hip emphasis on individual expression and autonomy that is the essence

⁴² See Mizejewski’s discussion of Sarah Silverman in contrast to other “gross” male comedians for a full exploration of the gender issues underlying much of this discussion.

of the hipster's performance of the outsider. This emphasis is Burnham's most convincing comic argument, specifically as it plays out in the finale of *what*. when he performs his outsider status by encountering the voices and opinions of others and remixes them into his own expression of himself as autonomous and awesome: rock star comedian.

***what*. Who: The Remix**

As the show concludes, Burnham moves to center stage and says that this was the end of his show. As he starts to move to exit stage right, he is suddenly stopped and interrupted by an invisible force that is somehow joined to the voice of a high school acquaintance (again, Burnham's recorded and modified voice) who says, "Bo, Oh my god," and continues with a recollection of the last time they saw each other freshman year. This voice soon reveals that the speaker (the gender is vague enough to raise questions) and Burnham "never talked or hung out" and audiences are immediately brought into the world of the celebrity as outsider with whom others identify. Burnham responds by pantomiming both insecurity and annoyance at this intrusion from his past. Moving to escape this voice and exit upstage, Burnham is confronted by another voice, that of an agent who wishes to sell him on the marketability of the young and who tells him that, according to research, "young people don't respond to this introspective material or, y'know, challenges to the form." The agent proceeds to give Burnham tips on being "relatable." Recoiling from mention of "the Bo Burnham Brand," Bo attempts to exit again and is interrupted by another voice from the past that calls him "fag," and laments how much he's changed and thinks he's better than everyone. This voice offers

the insight that “how [Burnham] acts onstage is different than how he is offstage,” and follows this by claiming “that makes no sense.”

All of this seems in many ways drawn directly from Beckett. The voices seem almost from *Krapp's Last Tape* in which the titular Krapp confronts himself through tape recordings; formally there is some reminiscence of the final moments of *The Unnamable* in which the disembodied narratorial voice encounters (or at least muses about) the author Beckett's completely separate characters Murphy, Molloy, and Malone; and Burnham's inability to escape the stage, held in place by these voices recalls *Act Without Words I* in which an unseen force seemingly attached to an offstage whistle prevents the Man from exiting his desert hellscape. In these final Beckettian interactions, Burnham is confronted with the more nightmarish result of his celebrity. Like Richard Pryor, whose recovery narrative is also a confrontation with his celebrity, Burnham will turn this nightmare against itself by remixing these voices into a new text that powerfully asserts his own autonomous identity opposed to the judgment of these external voices.

Quickly realizing that he can manipulate the voices by occupying different space on the stage with his hand (i.e., pointing stage right makes the sound “Bo, oh my god” and stage left, “fag,” and so on), he begins to reduce these voices to their barest essence until they become merely beats in the hands of a skilled DJ. Leland discusses DJs' hipness as their ability to pick up a beat and change it on a whim to anything else, exposing the overwhelming positive creative potential of the signal. In the final moments of *what*. Bo Burnham takes the voices of his past and ironically reduces them to the essential phrase, “we think we know you.” This becomes a beat as it repeats again and again: “We think we know you. / We think we know you. / We think we know you.”

From this statement of essential, single-level truth—that there is a single, knowable Bo—Burnham takes a paradoxical and constructive departure as he begins to riff on the rhythm of the repeated phrase. Moving around the stage, he pantomimes adding various keyboards, organs, drums, and guitars to the steady beat laid down by the refrain. As he does this, the sounds of the instruments are added to the track playing through the theater’s speakers and the effect is that of an arena rock show. Bright lights, dramatic movement, and the continuous addition of sound upon sound that creates a wall of noise visually repeated by a wall of white lights from upstage lead to the sudden dénouement of the disembodied voice saying, “Mr. Burnham,” and Bo bowing and taking his leave as the credits roll to the sound of more recorded footage of baby Bo.



Figure 5: Bo Burnham, Postmodern Rock star

In these final moments, Burnham delivers the crux of his argument, one that is essentially hip and connected to the satirical ends of comedy in the postmodern era: that identity is a creative force through which individuals and societies may construct and reconstruct themselves in the present tense of each personal and social becoming. As autonomous outsider with the technological skills of a twenty-first-century magician, Burnham's post-hipster continues the tradition of the hipster as existentialist and performer. Through his manipulation of media and exploration of the self's multiplicity, he illustrates the potential of the hipster persona today, and by his success he links that persona to comedy's popularity as a mode of intellectual discourse today. Like Burnham, other post-hipsters repeat much of the hip aesthetic as it developed in the twentieth-century, and by exposing those repetitions to twenty-first-century difference further reveal hip's potential as a driving force in American popular culture and open up discussions of comedy's role in twenty-first-century social movements. The rest of this chapter will explore precisely such a hipster by examining actor, comedian, and writer Aziz Ansari's post-hipster persona.

Aziz Ansari: The Brown White Negro

In the conclusion of *Pretty/Funny* Linda Mizejewski calls for "Deleuzian thought" about contemporary comedians, a call that this study has in some ways already attempted to answer. For Mizejewski, the comedian who inspires a Deleuzian line of thinking is Ellen DeGeneres, whose body as it appears across multiple media, in multiple characters, and in multiple autobiographical moments (as closeted and then open lesbian in both the fictional world of her sitcom and the "real" world of her celebrity) "acts as a relay point for multiple, often contradictory social desires evoked by her meanings as clown,

celebrity, outsider, butch, blond, CoverGirl model, and groom to a femme bride” (213). These multiple and sometimes clashing Ellens elicit not a confused or muddled persona that is incapable of clear meaning for its audience, but a living and vibrant persona whose meanings add to each other. This addition provides her LGBTQ audience who share some or much of these contradictory experiences and identities in their lives with a body to whom they can relate. In Mizejewski’s argument, the repetition with difference of Ellen throughout her many public incarnations is an always positive embodiment that adds meaning to her persona by its multiplicity rather than detracting from it through contradiction. For the non-LGBTQ audience that also makes up a large portion of DeGeneres’s fan base, this provides a model of growth and change that encourages an open, understanding, and empathic response to the often seemingly contradictory (though, of course, not necessarily so) and many-faceted nature of human sexuality.

So far, I have used this Deleuzian analytic model to suggest that the hipster persona embraces his living, autobiographical multiplicity and paradoxical nature in part by constructing this nature through the media available and always by placing it in opposition to the orthodoxy of single-level meaning or identity. When the hipster becomes stagnant—through persecution, obsession, addiction, etc.—he ceases to be both funny and relevant, and becomes the tragic figure of the “old hipster.” The post-hipster follows the model of hipsters before, but by nature of the twenty-first-century, does so with a hip stance that begins in a paradoxical attitude toward hipness itself. Aziz Ansari’s post-hipster’s many incarnations, like the many Ellens that inspire Mizejewski’s final thoughts, offer a fruitful example with which to explore the Hip/Square binary as it may or may not exist in the twenty-first-century and by doing so to better understand

comedy's ubiquitous presence in American culture today. By analyzing Ansari as post-hipster, I want to first point to his repetition of the white hipster as Brown White Negro: an Indian-American appropriation of a white appropriation of black identity that marks his inside/outsider position and leads to potent satire of race in twenty-first-century America. Fundamental to this discussion is an understanding of post-hipsters' relation to consumption—of media, technology, food, and more—as a means of hip expression. Ansari's hipster exists to satirize this consumption, both as it relates to the appropriation of racial identities and race relations and as it informs the twenty-first-century disdain for “hipsters.” Through his multifaceted post-hipster, Ansari finally aims his satire at hipness itself and by doing so makes a comic argument for empathy and thought that is potentially the best of the hip sensibility.

The Sitcom Hipster: Aziz as Tom Haverford, or, Satirizing Superficial Hip

Aziz Ansari was born to Indian immigrants in South Carolina in 1983. Raised with dark skin and a distinctly foreign and non-European sounding name in the American south, Ansari necessarily developed the awareness of doubleness and otherness that is the source of both much comedy and all hipness. Like those who came before him, Ansari uses this double-consciousness to appropriate twenty-first-century white hipness as a consumptive performance while also imbuing it with the disruption of his brown skin. Like the hipsters that Anatole Broyard describes as translators for the white square culture and like Richard Pryor in the 1970s and 1980s, Ansari uses this disruptive position to “discover the world” to his audiences. In the early 2000s, Ansari worked as a stand-up comic and improv actor in New York until landing the part that would make him relatively famous as Tom Haverford on NBC's *Parks and Recreation* (2008-2015).

Unlike many comedians (particularly in the 1980s and 1990s) whose stand-up work seemed to be more a path toward a television or movie career than an end in itself, Ansari has parlayed his TV success into stand-up success and more: releasing four hour-length specials, a book, and his own semi-autobiographical Netflix series. Ansari continues to tour and develop new stand-up material, and his show *Master of None* has been the talk of critics since its release in late 2015. Ansari enjoys a level of success that would have been unheard of in Bruce's day, and in Pryor's, a success that is dependent on the post-hipness of the twenty-first-century and the freedoms of the post-network television era of which Netflix is the prime example. Amanda Lotz defines the post-network era in her book *The Television Will be Revolutionized* (2007). Lotz traces the (r)evolutionary path of television from the network era, to the multi-channel transition of the 1990s, to the then-burgeoning post-network era of the 2000s. Through careful analysis of the business and broadcasting practices of networks and the economic interests of various media outlets and potential media conglomerates at the beginning of the post-network era, Lotz theorizes a future mediascape that begins in the realization that "television is more than just a technology—more than a composite of wires, metal, and glass. It possesses an essence that is bound up in its context, in how the box is most commonly used" (29). This begins the exploration of Netflix and other streaming services and culminates in Lotz's description of television in this era as controlled by five Cs: "choice, control, convenience, customization, and community" (245). It is television's hip evolution, and relevant here for that and for the fact that Netflix has been home to Ansari's performance on *Parks and Rec* for many years; it also distributes his comedy specials and original series *Master of None*. Ansari's post-hipster, as it exists on Netflix, illustrates the

revolutionary idea that Lotz's title claims and serves as another model of post-hip's embrace of new media.

Ansari's *Parks and Rec* character Tom, is primarily the result of Ansari's own improvisational skills and might first be understood in relation to Maynard G. Krebs, the TV version of a beatnik on *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*. Like Krebs, Ansari's Tom represents the mainstream's appropriation of hip culture into a comic foil that serves to uphold the status quo of the square characters that populate his world by offering the absurdity and hilarity of the hip sensibility. This is the root of what has become the primary use of the label "hipster" in the twenty-first-century—as a scornful sign reserved for selfie-taking millennials and their ilk. According to Mark Greif this hipster is obsessed with "knowing about exclusive things before anyone else" and encapsulated by the more specific label "White Hipster" who fetishizes a "nostalgia for suburban whiteness" in the way that earlier hipsters had fetishized urban blackness. If Maynard G. Krebs was mainstream white culture's attempt to mock the White Negro, Tom Haverford is the post-hip mockery of White Hipsters' consumption and self-absorption. While Tom's hipness is often the butt of a joke, it can always be read as a post-hip commentary on "hip" that highlights his own inside/outsider status by playing up the paradoxes of the Brown White Negro identity.

When Aziz as Tom, a government employee who always wears a suit, reveals his own hip lingo, he offers the savvy post-hip viewer a commentary on hip culture and its underlying consumerism by subjecting the hip aesthetic of reduction that underlies much hip linguistic formulations like nicknames and ironic labeling to its comic equivalent: the

reduction ad absurdum.⁴³ In one of the many “confessional room” asides that mark the mockumentary form of shows like *Parks and Rec*, Tom reveals his own hip lingo (made perhaps most hip by its nature as only his):

“Zerts” are what I call desserts. “Tray-trays” are entrees. I call sandwiches “sammies,” “sandoozles,” or “Adam Sandler.” Air conditioners are “cool-blasterz” with a “z”—I don’t know where that came from. I call cakes “big ol’ cookies.” I call noodles “long-ass rice.” Fried chicken is “fry-fry chicky-chick.” Chicken parm is “chicky-chicky parm-parm.” Chicken cacciatore is “chicky catch.” I call eggs “pre-birds” or “future birds.” Root beer is “superwater.” Tortillas are “bean blankeys,” and I call forks “food rakes.”

Here, Tom the White Hipster in a brown body expresses the state of hipness in the twenty-first-century: no longer solely one end of a binary, but blurring the line between hip and square. Tom is a government worker who asserts his individuality through ironic linguistic construction. That this language centers on food and consumption only adds more layers to the humor and its potential for post-hip commentary on the arbitrary and inadequate nature of binaries like hip/square to properly encapsulate the complexity of contemporary existence.

This example only begins to illustrate Ansari’s multiple meanings as evoked by his appearance in television and on stage. The character of Tom Haverford exists to disrupt more socially important binaries as well in a way that draws from Ansari’s autobiographical experience and that also appear in his stand-up comedy’s post-hipster

⁴³ See Mast for a full description of this technique in American humor.

persona. Tom is a person of color with a very white-sounding name in small-town Indiana. His marriage is a green card arrangement for his white Canadian wife, and much of Tom's very presence in the early seasons of *Parks and Recreation* exists to undermine racial and social assumptions: to expose the utter irrelevance of the sort of twentieth-century binary thinking about race that is at the heart of hip (but not post-hip) culture. The hipster of the twentieth-century is a play between Mailer's White Negro and the black population that began to be culturally capable of speaking to both this hipster and the white establishment; the Brown White Negro of the twenty-first-century exists to interrogate the absurdities of both the construction of race and the continued existence of structural racism and prejudice. Leland's thoughts on hipsters of today:

For the post-hip generation, the black and white poles that for so long defined race have given way to a kaleidoscope of color, race and ethnicity, made even more complicated by crosscurrents of class and sexual orientation. This generation's world is not that of their boomer parents, however hip those parents think they are. Born around the time of the first rap single, the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" in 1979, and raised with anime, *Sabado Gigante*, gender studies and fusion cuisine, post-hipsters never knew a time when hip-hop was not the dominant cultural force or when you couldn't change your ethnic surround by clicking a remote control. ... More than any past generation they have grown up

omniracial, at least in their recreations. Many can't remember when ketchup outsold salsa or queer was an insult. (352)⁴⁴

The post-hipster's existence in this "kaleidoscope of color, race and ethnicity, made even more complicated by crosscurrents of class and sexual orientation" means that his comedy must be a comedy that comes from and responds to the multiplicity of its moment by undermining any attempts to impose the orthodoxy of simplicity or single-level meaning.

Beyond his acting, Ansari uses his post-hip sensibility to interrogate binary thinking about race as a southern or coastal phenomenon—i.e., the belief that it exists in the former but not the latter—in his stand-up special *Dangerously Delicious* (2012). After revealing his South Carolina roots, Ansari explains that many people seem to feel sorry for him based on their assumptions of what it must have been like to grow up as a person of color in the south. Like that of Tom Haverford, Aziz Ansari's post-hip sensibility is rooted in his own consumption and this frames his response as it allows him to take a position on racism that highlights his position as inside/outsider. Ansari reports that people respond to news of his southern origins saying, "oh no, but it's so racist there [pause] and your skin is brown." "Sure," says Ansari, "certain parts of South Carolina can be pretty racist, more racist than other parts of the country, but what these people forget is that the food there is delicious." This joke reveals the paradoxical nature of the post-hipster and of anyone who lives in capitalist society: that the struggle between hip

⁴⁴ Leland's thoughts are important for understanding hipness, but they are a bit reductive of the nature of race in the twenty-first-century, as more recent history has shown. Omniracial as pop culture may be, and post-racial as some may have wished to believe we were becoming in the early Obama years, recent history has exposed the fundamental problems that continue to plague race relations in this country. This is, in large part, what Ansari works to point out.

and square is compounded and complicated by the struggle between consumption and ideology. Ansari continues: “even if, right now, some dude stood up and was like, ‘hey I’m gonna say a bunch of racist stuff, but afterwards I’ll give you a biscuit,’ I’d be like, ‘that’s a weird deal, but I’ll take it.’ [Be]cause I hate racism, but I love a good biscuit.” After a pause for laughter, he comes to the point, one that challenges his liberal and no doubt eclectic Washington D. C. audience to consider their assumptions and to recognize that the “post-racial” world they perhaps imagine living in does not equate to a non-racist world: “I just think it’s a little silly when, sometimes, people act as if all the really crazy racism is just in places like South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, or whatever because I’ve seen crazy racist stuff happen everywhere.” He then tells the story of a friend in Los Angeles who was refused locksmith service by a man who hated Korean Americans and muses on the question of how many potential Korean customers the locksmith would have to refuse before he started to really lose money because of his racism. This connection between capital, race, consumption, and progressive thought is a mark of Ansari’s post-hip comedy, particularly as he frames it in the context of new media and technology. Ansari is perhaps at his best and hippest when exploring his favorite topic: human love and sexuality. It is to these explorations that I now wish to turn in order to end my analysis with a discussion of the twenty-first-century post-hipster’s reflections on two of hip’s definitive characteristics: thought and awareness of others. By doing so, I hope to provide a way of reading the post-hipster as a force for thoughtful intellectual engagement that may yet have a role to play in American society in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s 2016 election to the office of President of the United States.

Love and Marriage and Hipsters

In the Netflix special *Buried Alive* (2012) Ansari subjects the institution of marriage to a hip reduction by boiling it down to its most basic principles for humor. Claiming that marriage is “the most insane thing you can ever ask another person to do,” Ansari then imagines what a proposal would sound like in a world where the institution of marriage doesn’t exist: “hey, you know how we’ve been hanging out together a lot, right? ... [taking on an ominous, deeper vocal tone] I wanna keep doing that until you’re dead.” Ansari’s rhythm and vocal tone identify the punch line of this joke which reduces a social institution (one that traditionally signifies life and the creation of society—at least in Northrop Frye’s estimation of its use in comedy) to an ominous and absurd proposition, the goal of which is not life, but death. This skewering of the institution serves two important ideological purposes for Ansari’s show. First, it works as an important satirical transition into the bit that follows it, and second, it repeats an important theme in both Ansari’s work and the history of hip that positions him, yet again, as both the inheritor of that history and one of its post-hip examples: a repetition with difference.

In the bit that follows, Ansari moves from pointing to the absurdity of traditional marriage to the absurdity of opposing gay marriage. First, Ansari alludes to the dark and often predatory nature of marriage’s long and nefarious history by continuing his imaginary proposal, moving across the stage in an aggressive and advancing way while scowling and seeming increasingly simple, all of which visually identify this character with a more barbaric and antiquated human being than the dark and debonair Ansari. “I wanna be with you until one of us dies,” he spits. When the imaginary object of this proposal asks “who’s that?” Ansari replies with a guttural, “that’s the priest,” and the

sinister tone of his voice coupled with his aggressive advance downstage toward the audience conjures fear of the priest and connotes marriage's history as a means of control, power, and the commodification of human lives for the church and the state. As the aggressive groom forces the bride to eat a slice of cake, Ansari embodies her cowering from the groom's advance and saying, "this is really strange." While Ansari's reading of marriage's tenets as "insane" and "strange" draw laughter from his audience for their little incongruities and ironies, the violence and dark implications of the subject matter are also visually and aurally present in his rendering of the two participants in this proposal. When he delivers the final punch line of the bit, that the reason the man wants to get married is for "tax purposes," Ansari brings the institution of marriage back to its social origins in the cycle of capital and consumption and reduces its ideological importance to that ideology's problematic essence. The audience that laughs at this bit recognizes the social proposition of the humor (that marriage is at very least a problematic institution) and that recognition makes the proposition to come all the more acceptable: that objection to anyone's desire to enter into an institution with such a problematic and violent history is a failure to recognize that history and thus the most un-hip of human failings, ignorance.

Next, Ansari moves from the proposal bit to his own social proposition regarding marriage equality that paints its detractors as both ignorant and, perhaps even worse in the hipster's mind, old:

This is another thing that baffles me about people being opposed to gay marriage. Here these people are and they found someone to say yes to this totally insane thing, and then some other people are like, "no, it's weird. I

just think it's weird." ... I don't see how you can be opposed to gay marriage at this point, like, you know you're on the losing side. There's no way it's not going to go through, there's no way. All the demographics that are really opposed to gay marriage, they're all gonna be dead soon. Like, whenever they ask young people, young people are like "Wha? Huh? What are you talking about? All music is free right now! What the fuck are you talking about?! Oh, two dudes are kissing?! I'm about to watch every movie ever, right now." They don't care at all.

To oppose marriage equality is not only, as Ansari makes clear, to be "on the losing side" of history, but it is ridiculously out of touch with the present: it is ante- and anti-hip in the post-hip world. The connection that Ansari draws here between youth and progressive ideology as opposed to age and conservatism is a clear assertion of the traditional hip/square binary toward a social end and worth noting. The punch line dismisses the entire conversation regarding marriage equality as unnecessary because there is cooler stuff to talk about, thus deconstructing the binary through hip opposition. When Ansari asserts that the young don't care about the issue at all because they would rather be downloading music and streaming movies, he comically makes a point about post-hip existence that is similar to Leland's: to the post-hip generation, who exist in the "kaleidoscope of color, race and ethnicity, made even more complicated by crosscurrents of class and sexual orientation," the arbitrary distinctions that lead squares to be on the wrong side of history are way less interesting than all the stuff we can consume. Ansari's hip reduction of a social issue highlights the progressive ideology as preferable, but then reduces it all to patterns of consumption. This reduction positions the post-hipster outside

of the fray and unconcerned with arguments that are, by their nature, old-fashioned and uncool. Aziz's post-hipster is parody in its repetition with difference of the hip sensibilities of earlier hipsters and his hip audiences. It is this parody that points to Ansari's larger comic argument: the intrinsically hip call to be more thoughtful and aware in our dealings with those we encounter.

In general, repetition plays an important role in the theory and practice of comedy, and it is something to which I have referred throughout this chapter. Bergson sees repetition as essentially comic because it is incongruent with the living impulse and thus a sign of "mechanical inelasticity" in humans that requires corrective laughter. However, Michael North notes that, contrary to Bergson's formulation, "the most mechanical aspect of ordinary life, though, is its tendency to repeat, and it is surely human repetitiousness that is at the heart of machine-age comedy" (199). North goes on to state that "repetition is funny in and of itself" and, paraphrasing Deleuze defines the nature of repetition's comic element: "the relation between repeats is governed neither by the law of identity and difference, nor by relations of subordination, nor by any kind of association at all, as if the repeat were radically disruptive every time it occurs" (199). Comic repetition in the machines and machinations studied by North "represents ... the paradox of perpetual modernity, of the new over and over again, ... and they prompt laughter instead of despair because each iteration has something in it that seems new" (200). In the ages of mechanical reproduction and new media discussed by North, originals and their repetitions contain an element of potential newness and difference that is comic because of its ability to produce new meanings and to challenge expectations.

North's important revision of Bergson's work for the twentieth-century and beyond focuses our understanding of comic repetition within the context of the technological era in which we live and to which Bergson could not have had access. Ideologically, repetition as a way of rethinking humanity's relationship to machine and moving beyond the "paradox of perpetual modernity" disrupts the man/machine binary in the way that contemporary satire and poststructural thought disrupt the many binary and hegemonic systems with which they interact. Such is the nature of one of the most common forms of comic repetition, as described by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody* (1985). For Hutcheon, "parody today points to the need to go beyond [the] limitations" of traditional modes of reading posited by Romanticism, formalism, and reader-response theory and to "take into account the entire enunciative act: the text and the 'subject positions' of encoder and decoder, but also the various contexts (historical, social, ideological) that mediate that communicative act" (108). Parody as an aesthetic points to a comedian's desire to be understood in a larger context and to an articulation of a comedian's position toward that context. When Aziz Ansari opens his special *Dangerously Delicious* with titles reminiscent of Saul Bass's *North By Northwest* titles, or *Buried Alive* with a jazz fusion cover of a Jefferson Airplane song by Tom Scott and the California Dreamers, or *Live at Madison Square Garden* with an Ennio Morricone-esque western theme, he is attaching himself to a group of twentieth-century artists whose modus operandi has been to make it new. And when he takes the American stage in expensive suits, a brown man with no discernible foreign accent, he subverts and makes new the image of the stand-up comedian as emcee that dates back to stand-up's origins in the Borscht Belt and the earliest hipsters.

Beyond serving as a transition into his bit about marriage equality, the marriage routine in *Buried Alive* discussed earlier also aligns Ansari's thinking about that particular institution with the hip sensibility that began this study. Barbara Ehrenreich's *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983) famously identifies the prevalence of divorce and the seeming collapse, according to conservative pundits and politicians, of traditional family values in the 1970s as not the result of feminism and the liberal revolutions of the preceding decades but as the result of, essentially, hip consumerism. In Ehrenreich's analysis, the hip sensibility of independence and individualism became the primary mode of American consumerism through the creations of the Madison Avenue "gray flannel dissidents" (Ehrenreich 29) who saw in hipness a freedom from the constraints of their own commitments *and* a valuable commercial idea. Thus the aloof male breadwinner and happy head of household of previous generations was replaced as the masculine cultural norm by the playboy whose rich inner life bucked against the confines of his marriage and his job in the pages of male magazines, and on the screens of televisions and movie theaters. Though he still showed up for work every day, he sought sanctioned spaces for the assertion of his own individuality in the commercial hipness of fashion, womanizing, and substance abuse.

So, when Ansari points to the absurdity of marriage as an institution, it would be easy to simply identify it as a repetition of an old hip position. However, Ansari's position is interestingly different in that it is the repetition of a mass cultural idea that is the repetition of a countercultural idea that is the repetition of an even more countercultural idea, and so on. When Ansari posits the absurdity of marriage, it is to an audience that is already well aware of that absurdity to some extent or another and it

leads the unmarried Ansari not to a repetition of the same mindset of hipsters past—that marriage is a suffocating crime perpetrated on men’s masculinity that must be endured—but to a new intellectual exploration that begins with his assertions about marriage equality and continues through an exploration of technology that becomes the driving force of Ansari’s work and its primary subject. Ansari is not content to accept that people still get married and want traditional loves and family lives just because “that’s the way it is.” Rather, in a move reminiscent of Leland’s definition of hip as “the combination of freedom and intelligence,” Ansari utilizes the immense intellectual freedom afforded him as a celebrity in the Internet age and his intellect’s drive for knowledge acquisition to better understand the nature of romantic attraction and relationships. This intellectual pursuit makes up much of Ansari’s recent work both on and off the stage. Through this work, Ansari reveals a fundamental tenet of the hip sensibility and that sensibility’s potential as a response to the conditions of the twenty-first-century. Through his massive and multifaceted exploration of modern relationships, Ansari argues for human empathy and active thought in the face of hip isolation and consumption. This argument encapsulates the hip sensibility at its best and, I believe, points to what, if any, potential it may have as a mode of comic address in the future.

Love, Empathy, and the Hip Nightmare: Superficial Reflections on Shitty People

In June 2015, Ansari appeared on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to promote his new book *Modern Romance* (2015). Stewart opens the interview by questioning Ansari’s method: “you know this about comedians’ books, right? It’s a cash grab. You’re supposed to just write your act down and cash two checks. [incredulously holding the book up] This is a real book.” The joke here is that, rather than write the sort of vapid

retelling of a routine or funny reflections that have become so popular for many comedians in recent years (though, again, Bruce was one of the first), Ansari paired with NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg to conduct “a massive research project ... that would require more than a year of investigation in cities across the world and involve some of the leading experts on love and romance” (*Modern Romance* 7). The book is the result of focus groups, interviews, extensive research, online and face-to-face, and draws from data sets that span the globe. It attempts to understand just what it is people are searching for when they search for love, how they’re doing it, and why. Ansari’s investigation is an old one, from Plato’s *Symposium* to Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, human love plays a central role in philosophical and social investigation. However, Ansari’s investigation is a repetition with the important difference of its temporal setting and the role that technology plays in modern romance. Through this investigation and the stand-up comedy that comes out of it, Ansari develops crucial insight into twenty-first-century existence that marks his importance as a public intellectual and the hipster’s potential importance as a comic persona.

First of all, it is very hip to write “a real book” instead of a “comedian[’s] book,” but it is hip in that post-hip way that it is a new imagining of an old/new imagining (a book by a comedian) using old media in new ways in the age of new media. More importantly, Ansari’s project intellectually engages with a large swath of twenty-first-century culture “in New York, Los Angeles, Wichita, Monroe (NY), Buenos Aires, Tokyo, Paris, and Doha” as well as on a subreddit through which large online focus groups were conducted (7). His access to the ways that people use technology to accomplish their romantic goals, offers a unique and insightful glimpse into the

relationship between hipness, technology, and consumer society. This insight once again highlights the role of the comedian as contemporary public intellectual and provides a clear connection between the hipster that existed in postwar comedy and the post-hipster of today.

Modern Romance's central argument comes from its investigation of how technology has influenced patterns of consumption to the point that they have become the same patterns by which many humans seek romantic fulfillment. He writes, "that's the thing about the Internet: It doesn't simply help us find the best thing out there; it has helped to produce the idea that there *is* a best thing and, if we search hard enough, we can find it" (125; emphasis in original). This is the hip nightmare: that in a world full of options and endless opportunity to pursue them, the pursuit becomes Sisyphean and totally un-hip. Ansari deals with this nightmare in *Live at Madison Square Garden* when he describes how hard it is to make plans with people in contemporary society. "I get it," he says after describing his attempts to make brunch plans with everyone in his contact list,

we all have the same nightmare. You know the nightmare. The nightmare is you *do* commit to doing the thing with [hypothetical] Phil, right? And you get there ... then you get that phone call: "Dude! Where are you? Biggie and Tupac faked their deaths! They're doing a show right now. I have an extra ticket. Where are you?!"

This is the nightmare of the hipster: that committing to have any experience will mean missing the best and hippest experience. On Twitter it is called "Fear of Missing Out" and marked by the hashtag "#fomo." However, what the post-hip Ansari ultimately

shows is that this is fundamentally flawed because in living for the possibility of experience, one misses out on actual experience, which is the essence of the truly hip.

In both *Modern Romance* and *Live at Madison Square Garden*, realizations about the effects of endless freedom, choice, and convenience caused by modern technology cause Ansari to question mass cultural patterns and to ultimately make a call for empathy and thoughtfulness that is consistent with the best of the hipster. *Modern Romance* concludes by asking modern singles to be aware of the multiplicity of their options and of the human emotions that are tied to those options: “With so many romantic options, instead of trying to explore them all, make sure you properly invest in people and give them a fair chance before moving on to the next one,” Ansari writes, speaking directly to his audience (246). While this conclusion is important for people seeking love, Ansari’s final thoughts are born out of his hip position as inside/outsider and have implications that go beyond the romantic to offer an important argument for all his twenty-first-century audience: “no matter how many options we seem to have on our screens, we should be careful not to lose track of the human beings behind them” (249). This is the argument of the living encrusted upon the mechanical that is essential to understanding both American comedy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first-centuries and American culture of today; this is the argument Lenny Bruce makes when he asks his audience for *rochmunas* in its thinking about Eichmann and Truman and the atrocities of World War II in the routine “Eichmann”; this is Pryor’s argument that “there are no niggers”; this is Bo Burnham’s argument about all individuals and celebrities; and this is Ansari’s argument when in *Live at Madison Square Garden*, after pointing out the negative potential of technology by saying that many of his generation are “rude, shitty

people” because of their phone dependence, he offers the argument that “we could all be a little more thoughtful.” Ultimately, the hipster as a comic persona is one that exists to promote just this: that we “all be a little more thoughtful.”

CONCLUSION

HIP TODAY AND TOMMORROW: AZIZ ANSARI ON *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*, JANUARY
21, 2017

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was sworn in as the 45th President of the United States. The next day, January 21, millions of people in Washington D. C., across the country, and around the world participated in Women's Marches to demonstrate solidarity and opposition to the president whose campaign rhetoric and policy initiatives directly attacked the principles of equality, respect, and diversity that underpin contemporary democratic liberalism. That night, Aziz Ansari took the stage at Studio 8H at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, New York to host *Saturday Night Live*. In the weeks leading up to and following these events, I fielded many variations of the same question from students, friends, and colleagues with an interest in comedy and a need to understand this moment in American history. The question being asked was born out of an understanding of comedy's role in pushing boundaries and encouraging social consciousness and a belief in that role's ability to effect social change. In short, a belief in satire and the laughter it incites as revolutionary forces led these folks to the simple question: how did this happen? I would like to conclude this study by offering its contents as a potential, albeit unsatisfying, answer to this question.

This study began with a brief articulation of the evidence of comedy's rising status in popular and scholarly conversations as a mode of public intellectual discourse. And this may be the greatest source of confusion regarding what comedy does within society: mistaking intellectual discourse for activism or social justice. In the half century that this study covers, comedy has undoubtedly risen as a site of public intellectualism, but we should not equate that rise to any real social or ideological influence. To explain comedy's popular and scholarly ascent, I have offered the example of the hipster persona as a model for how intellectual comedy rose in popularity by pushing the form and function of stand-up to new heights (and depths) in both its content and its modes of delivery. Because the hip sensibility that informs this persona in its various incarnations also became a dominant and driving force in American society through its ties to capitalism's development in the last half of the twentieth-century, these hipster comedians not only pushed the limits of stand-up's potential but also drove the public's fascination with comedy as it rose to its current status in popular entertainment by seeming culturally relevant. Lenny Bruce brought the hipster persona to life in the clubs of Los Angeles in the 1950s and then brought it into the public imagination through his live performances, albums, and notorious struggles with authorities in the early 1960s. In the decades after Bruce's death, Richard Pryor built on both Bruce's legacy and the legacy of the hipster as an African American trickster discovering a multifaceted world to mainstream white America. Pryor's popularity played an important role in comedy's boom in the late 1970s and 1980s. By utilizing new and emerging media as the conduit for their hipster personas and comedy, Bruce and Pryor pushed the boundaries of comedy's potential as a public text and set the precedent for hip comedy's approach to

the world and its technology. In the decades that followed, as technology and hip culture advanced together, the link between hip as a cultural force and comedy as a mode of intellectual discourse strengthened. Bo Burnham and Aziz Ansari offer two examples of the hipster persona created and perfected by Bruce and Pryor as it exists in the context of today's post-hip culture, in which hipness is its own dominant culture, but in which post-hipsters still exist to push intellectual, technological, and social boundaries.

Across the decades and media that separate the comedians under study here, certain traits unite these personas and identify them as hipsters: an inside/outsider position from which the comedian possesses knowledge of whatever orthodoxy is the butt of the joke, but also possesses the flexibility of position to critique it from the outside; an adaptability and embrace of contradiction, multiplicity, and paradox; an aesthetic of playful disruption that begins in the assertion of an autobiographical link between the person and the persona in its many iterations and across multiple media; and finally, an emphasis on inquiry and provocation that seeks less to make consistent and clear arguments from a fixed ideological position and more to instigate conscious response. At their best, these comedians challenge audiences to keep up as they deftly maneuver the playgrounds of their intellects. At their worst, they become obsessed with a single idea or impulse to the point of stagnation or pretentiousness. All of these traits became capable of speaking to American audiences in the last half of the twentieth-century and continue to attract the attention of millions today. The countercultural idea that hip came to represent in the 1950s and 1960s and that became one of the driving principles of American culture in the decades that followed continues to drive the popularity of comedians and consumer goods alike—so much so, in fact, that the footprints of hip can

be found leading in all directions of American life. Take, for example, the discussion of the inside/outsider position from which so much of the comedy under study here originates and apply it to much of the rhetoric of Donald Trump's "drain the swamp" campaign promises. The results are chilling.

This important paradox should not be understated, and begins to answer the question posed by my well-meaning students, friends, and colleagues in the days following the 2016 election. Those who labor under the illusion that comedy can change the world fail to recognize its general impotence and to forget its incredibly complicated nature. I should know, I was one of them when this project began. In *The Anatomy of Satire* (1962), Gilbert Highet concludes his discussion of Swift's "A Modest Proposal" by asking whether satire has "ever had any immediate and visible effect?" His answer, glib in its brevity, but full of implications for all such satire: "Swift's modest proposal had none" (60). A similar question was taken up more recently in a 2016 episode of Malcolm Gladwell's podcast *Revisionist History*. In the episode, entitled "The Satire Paradox," Gladwell explores "whether laughter and social protest are friends or foes." Through thoughtful consideration of several examples from the U.S., U.K., and Israel, Gladwell finds that satire can have important social ends, but that it rarely does in developed and sophisticated capitalist cultures like contemporary Britain and the United States. The example that Gladwell seems to find most appalling is Tina Fey's impression of Sarah Palin during the 2008 presidential campaign. Gladwell points to Fey's focus on ridiculing Palin's style of speech and comportment rather than the content of her ideas (or lack thereof) as the kind of impotent American satire that fails to achieve any substantial social effects because it does not aim the audience's laughter and ridicule at the issues,

but instead at the person. In the case of Fey's Palin, this not only failed to fully discredit the nefarious ideology for which she stood, but also ended up legitimizing Palin in many ways.

Gladwell's critique goes a long way to explaining the failure of almost constant comic ridicule and exposure to have any real effect on the popularity and election of Donald Trump. Complicating matters even more is the social context of comedy and its dependence on shared discourse communities to achieve any desired effects. A 2009 study at The Ohio State University of "the influence of political ideology on perceptions" of political satire found that, when faced with ambiguous satire like that of Stephen Colbert on his Comedy Central show *The Colbert Report* (or any of the comedians mentioned here), respondents tended to read Colbert's exaggerated persona through the lens of their own political belief—i.e., conservatives took him at face value and saw his character as reinforcing their beliefs while liberals saw the Colbert persona as satire ridiculing conservatism (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 212). Studies like this one highlight the complexity of all comic situations, so often rooted in the "social significance" that Bergson identified as essential to comedy in 1901. Because it depends on shared knowledge and discourse communities, comedy is easily misread, and satire especially often fails to convince those whom it ridicules of their folly, serving more often simply to reinforce the beliefs of its audience that those ridiculed are worthy of their scorn and laughter.

And this is why it is significant that Aziz Ansari, a hipster, hosted *SNL* the night after the inauguration in 2017. While it was clear from Ansari's opening monologue that he is no fan of the new president, this was not his overall point. Unlike the parodic

attacks on Trump and his advisors that Alec Baldwin and the rest of the *SNL* cast have undertaken in recent months—most of which are Fey-esque critiques of personal traits rather than hard-hitting satire of the issues—Ansari’s monologue attacked the more insidious issues of racism associated with Trump and his campaign before removing himself from the discussion to occupy a hip perspective on the political climate of the day. He begins the monologue by relishing that the new president, famously obsessed with his depiction on television in general and *SNL* in particular, is probably “watching a brown guy make fun of him.” This reflection on his own race leads Ansari to several points about the racism that Trump’s campaign seems to have legitimized—the “lowercase KKK” he calls it—and his own assertion that he “ain’t moving” in the face of threats against immigrants and their families. Throughout his monologue there are many fine jokes, including one about the absurdity of realizing that Trump’s racism and rhetoric has him “wistfully watching old George W. Bush speeches,” but it is the monologue’s conclusion that cements Ansari’s position as hipster comedian and points to how this study might help us to understand the role that hip comedy plays and will continue to play now and in the years to come.

The monologue closes with Ansari assuming the hipster’s paradoxical position. He speaks first to Trump supporters and tells them he hopes that they are right and that Trump will be a good president. Then, he speaks to those who are worried about the prospect of a Trump presidency, including the millions who marched across the globe earlier that day. “Change doesn’t come from presidents,” Ansari says. “Change comes from large groups of angry people. And if Day One is any indication, you are part of the largest group of angry people I have ever seen.” Throughout this study, I have shown

how hipster comedians repeatedly position themselves in opposition to both ideas and populations in order to incite laughter and potential intellectual response from their audiences through exposure to multiplicity and provocative inquiry. From this inside/outsider perspective, the comedians I have examined push against norms, expose hypocrisy and folly, and challenge audiences' perception in order to inspire active participation in the hip moment of the performance. These comedians rarely take fixed positions or make calls to action. Rather, they identify paradoxes and contradictions within all such positioning and encourage active thought that emphasizes ambiguity over argument. When Ansari verbally removes himself from the "group of angry people" using the pronouns "you" and "I" to separate himself from the group grammatically at the end of his *SNL* monologue, he once again embodies the paradoxical and playful position of the hipster. In doing so, his monologue becomes not a political statement, but yet another example of the primacy of thought over action to the hipster, and of what, if any, role this figure may play in the advocacy of social action. By removing himself from the group, Ansari emphasizes both his own role as hip observer and the group's role in fulfilling its own desires. His comedy up to this point has provided critics of the Trump administration fodder for thought, but he stops short of joining their cause and instead emphasizes the potential of "the largest group of angry people [he has] ever seen" to be its own force for change.

John Leland says of hip's paradoxical role in the annals of resistance: "though it likes a revolutionary pose, hip is ill equipped to organize for a cause" (9). While it is often attractive to imagine the Lenny Bruces and Richard Pryors of yesteryear, and the Burnhams and Ansaris of today as helping to usher in an era of open-mindedness and

social progress, to do so greatly misunderstands such comedians' role within and without society. If the comedy under study here is capable of anything at all, it is merely the encouragement of intellectual activity, not the incitement of social action or engagement. Hipsters have always privileged knowing, being "in-the-know," "hip to the new shit," and "with it." In the Internet Age, such a position of knowledge seems more accessible and democratic than ever before, yet events of recent years have clearly identified flaws in that belief: having access to information does not make the information accurate nor the people capable of understanding it. If hip comedy has helped to usher in an era of comedy as intellectual forum, its association with popular culture may have also made intellectual activity seem less rigorous and more fun than it actually is, and led to the post-modern reduction of civil discourse to meme wars and "fake news." Whatever the larger impact of American culture's shift toward hip in the last half of the twentieth-century, the comedians who occupy the paradoxical persona of the hipster do so not to simplify our understanding but to complicate it. From the outside, hipster comedians laugh at the very nature of constructing borders between inside and out. From the outside, hipster comedians mock the insider position of any ideological stance. And from the outside, hipster comedians force us to think and to rethink the vast and evolving array of positions that we take on a daily basis. What we do with these thoughts is up to us. The hipster cares only that we're thinking.

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April 2016.

APPENDIX A

A Timeline of Lenny Bruce's Obscenity Arrests and Trials (adapted from Collins and Skover 459-70)

1961

October 4: First obscenity arrest (previously arrested for narcotics, and police interest in Bruce's performances dates back to at least 1959). Arrested at The Jazz Workshop in San Francisco.

November 17: Trial for Jazz Workshop arrest begins.

1962

January 22: First Jazz Workshop trial is thrown out due to Judge Axelrod's failure to advise Bruce of his right to counsel. Case reassigned to Judge Clayton Horn.

March 5: Second Jazz Workshop trial begins.

March 8: Bruce found not guilty of obscenity in Jazz Workshop case.

October 24: Bruce arrested and charged with obscenity at The Troubadour in Los Angeles.

December 7: Criminal complaint is filed against Bruce for violating obscenity laws during his weeklong run at The Gate of Horn in Chicago during the first week of December.

December 28: Troubadour obscenity trial begins.

1963

February 12: Bruce is arrested after performing at Herb Cohen's coffee house The Unicorn in Los Angeles. This charge is consolidated with the Troubadour charge in trial.

February 18: Gate of Horn obscenity trial begins in Chicago.

April: Bruce is barred from performing in London and ultimately deported from England.

May 23: Arrested for obscenity at Le Grand Theater in Los Angeles.

July 1: Troubadour case is dismissed.

1964

January: Bruce barred from performing in Detroit.

March 19: Bruce arrested on obscenity charge based on evidence obtained during surveillance of The Trolley Ho in Los Angeles.

April: New York police attend Bruce's performance at Café Au Go Go in plainclothes and gather evidence.

April 3: Bruce arrested for Café Au Go Go performance.

June 16: Café Au Go Go trial begins.

June 18: Bruce's conviction in The Gate of Horn trial is affirmed.

July 7: Illinois Supreme Court vacates opinion of Gate of Horn case and orders re-argument of *People v. Bruce*.

November 4: Bruce, now acting as his own legal counsel, is found guilty in Café Au Go Go case.

November 24: Illinois Supreme Court reverses obscenity conviction in The Gate of Horn case.

1965

October: Bruce is declared bankrupt.

1966

August 3: Bruce dies of a morphine overdose in Hollywood Hills home.

2003

Bruce is pardoned for his 1964 conviction in New York by Governor George E. Pataki.

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