

1-1-2013

# The Rhetorical Event of Modern Southern Humor: "A Requisite Element in Discourse"

David Allen Wright  
*University of South Carolina*

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THE RHETORICAL EVENT OF MODERN SOUTHERN HUMOR:  
“A REQUISITE ELEMENT IN DISCOURSE”

by

David A. Wright

Bachelor of Arts  
Furman University, 2005

Master of Fine Arts  
University of South Carolina, 2008

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

English

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2013

Accepted by:

Chris Holcomb, Major Professor

Christy Friend, Committee Member

Elaine Chun, Committee Member

Paul Allen Miller, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Andrea Michelle Wright, who, because of her encouragement, patience, and feedback, deserves as much credit for its completion as I do.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my entire dissertation committee for their input on this work. Dr. Dan Smith's advice in the planning stages of this process also proved very useful. More than anyone else, this project would not have been possible without the thoughtful and considerate assistance of Dr. Chris Holcomb. From beginning to end, he has been patient and available, and he deserves my heartfelt thanks. Additionally, I am grateful to the libraries and the librarians at both the University of South Carolina and Furman University, whose resources and expertise were integral to the research involved in this work. Finally, Dr. Tom Rice and Mrs. Noreen Doughty have been extremely helpful to me as I completed my Ph.D. program, and I thank them for their guidance and assistance.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the rhetorical nature and dynamics of Southern humor in the second half of the twentieth century by analyzing, from a distinctly rhetorical perspective, a selection of popular Southern humor texts. It seeks to understand how Southern humor happens—its methods and techniques—and it also seeks to understand, as much as possible, the implications of these events for the various interlocutors and participants involved. By investigating the stylistic, storytelling, and linguistic techniques of Southern humor, while relying on the scholarship of writers in a variety of academic disciplines, I hope to answer the following research question: how does Southern humor, as a discourse event, enact and affirm many of the stereotypical aspects of the “Southern identity,” while it also questions and deconstructs those stereotypes at the same time?

Chapter One lays out the theoretical foundations, in both humor theory and Southern identity theory, that the subsequent chapters build upon. Each of Chapters Two, Three, and Four uses one of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals as a way of studying the rhetorical methods and impact of Southern humor in a more focused way. Chapter Two explores how Southern humor creates incongruity through the application of framing devices and the distortion of *logos* and demonstrates that humor derives as much from the way a joke is told as it does from any specific content or subject matter. Chapter Three focuses specifically on the role and persona of the humorist or comedian in the humor

event and looks at how that role imbues the humorist with a great amount of rhetorical power but also distances him or her from the audience. Chapter Four examines the rhetorical nature of laughter in humor, as well as the unique and paradoxical position of the humor audience as both a passive recipient of humor and the ultimate arbiter of the success (or failure) of that discourse. Relying heavily on the work on Mikhail Bakhtin, the concluding Chapter Five attempts to step beyond the normal limits of Southern humor by looking at Toole's *Confederacy of Dunces* and its grotesque protagonist, specifically, in order to better comprehend and test the limits of humorous decorum.

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In the South, humor (like argumentativeness in New York) is not so much a specialization as a requisite element in discourse; and Southern humor tends to work best when it isn't trying to be any funnier than life and death. (131)

– Roy Blount, Jr., “Southern Humor: Love It or Leave It”

Humor is an event, not an utterance. (5)

– James F. English, *Comic Transactions*

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of re-fusion. (529)

– Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics”

Lengthy academic treatises on the nature of humor and laughter tend to begin with one of two things, either a joke or an apology.<sup>1</sup> And as one might expect of academics, the jokes tend to be corny and the apologies tend to be lengthy.<sup>2</sup> Though, in defense of the apologists, the reasons for this tendency are understandable; as scholarly areas of interest go, these topics pose some unusual challenges. On one hand, because humor is as complex and messy as any other discursive field, sorting it out in a logical and disciplined manner often considerably impairs the entertainment value of the texts being considered, which explains the tendency to begin with an unadulterated joke before diving into the normally solemn analytical act. On the other hand, the necessary element of frivolity that accompanies events of humor apparently poses a continual threat to these academic pursuits being taken seriously by the larger scholarly community. Thus, we end up with

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<sup>1</sup> Usually of the “defending a choice” variety, but occasionally of the “seeking forgiveness” variety as well.

<sup>2</sup> This trend goes back at least as far as Aristotle’s brief discussion of “ready wit” in Book IV of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which seems ambivalent at best about the tactfulness and civility of most humorous discourse. This continues into Cicero’s claim that when joking “we ought to take account of the people, the case, and the circumstances, so that our joking should not detract from our authority [...]. But this only provides us with a rule for omitting witticisms when they are not called for; we want to know how to use them when they are” (184).

a number of examinations of humor that expend a significant amount of time and space defending the decision<sup>3</sup> to study it academically in the first place. Similarly, the field of Southern Studies, while not inherently connected with “frivolity” of any particular sort, often seems to demand and deliver a similar kind of academic justification for its own existence before it can begin to ask the questions it truly wants to ask. Perhaps this is because Southern studies, as a distinct academic field of inquiry, is still relatively new on the scene; or perhaps it is because of a lingering suspicion that seriously studying the South might seem like a pointless venture—or worse, a joke—to some people in academia. Both of these are possibilities, but the likelier explanation for a defensive posture, in the cases of both humor and Southern studies, is that each of these disciplines is made up of a collection of normally distinct areas of study. Consequently, a significant amount of effort must be dedicated to delineating, as clearly as possible, what exactly humor studies is in each separate iteration, what kind of questions it asks, and what kind of answers it is likely to produce. The same goes for Southern studies. Whether a scholar’s disciplinary “home” lies in psychology, sociology, or English goes a long way toward determining the possible methods and results of an inquiry, even if the topic is generically “Southern humor.” Because the present work is a rhetorical<sup>4</sup> analysis of modern Southern humor, it seems especially important in this introductory chapter to establish, as precisely as possible, what exactly I mean by “Southern” and by “humor,”

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<sup>3</sup> Most of these defenses mention that humor has been the object of philosophical and scientific study for nearly as long as those concepts have been around, which is true, but this fact also suggests, at least in my opinion, that the defenses aren’t really necessary in the first place. No one questions the need to study political or religious discourse, and humor is certainly as prevalent as either of those in Western civilization.

<sup>4</sup> A field famous (and infamous, thanks to Plato) for its lack of proprietary material.

before attempting to show how those two quantities come together to form a particular kind of discourse.

In a larger sense, this dissertation as a whole aims to first carefully establish the theoretical foundations in both humor and rhetorical studies that will then be used to analyze a selection of modern Southern humor texts. This analysis will show that, more than anything else, humor is a dualistic form of discourse that, while inherently communicative, is also inherently obfuscating. More specifically, Southern humor, rooted as it is in the often ambivalent discourse of Southern identity, amplifies this dualism because of its dependence on well-known, if not always celebrated, stereotypes. Humor and Southern identity, generally, depend on internal, external, and often contradictory tensions in order to function as they do, and as a rhetorical analysis of Southern humor, this dissertation is an attempt to understand the nature of those tensions and how they interact and play off of one another. Consequently, the primary argument of this dissertation is that Southern humor is part and parcel to Southern discourse, and it serves as both a glorification for and a self-reproach to the monolithic sense of Southern identity. In doing so, Southern humor also tends to both perpetuate and contradict the very idea of the monolithic “South” in the first place. As such, the rhetoric of Southern humor is really an argument for *and* against the South in one—albeit ironic—package. And this project examines how this simultaneous pro/con argument is accomplished.

### **1.1 Defining and Theorizing Humor (Seriously)**

Approached with the narrow-eyed, critical gaze of the no-nonsense academic, what the heck is humor, anyway? Is it the process of finding something amusing and laughing at it? Is it the thing that creates those feelings in the first place? Or is it both?

Because the collective philosophical understanding of humor has a complicated history and a complex present, these are not simple questions to answer. In *Comedy After Postmodernism*, Kirby Olson paints a brief but accurate portrait of the history and nature of taking humor seriously in Western civilization:

Comedy has been looked down upon since ancient Greece in favor of tragedy. In the Greek dramatic competitions, comedy was given a small place compared to tragedy. In postmodernist theory, however, comedy has been seen as an antidote to the totalitarian state and the authoritarian individual. [...] Like desire, laughter is strangely fluid and cannot be contained by rational thought. In fact it has escaped every means of rational description by philosophers and other writers during the whole history of our civilization, despite thousands of valiant tries, from Cicero to Hobbes to Freud. (5)

On the first point, when you look across large amounts of time and many cultures, the positive tonal shift is palpable in writers discussing humor. Ancient Greek and Roman writers, to varying degrees, profess uncertainty about and mistrust of humor as a rhetorical instrument. This uncertainty and mistrust become less and less common as we move toward the present. Of course, Olson is exactly right about the “fluid” nature of this thing we attempt to catch under the expansive and somewhat formless<sup>5</sup> title “humor.” The humorous event categorically resists logical “containment,” if what we seek is necessarily a kind of syllogistic formula to solve. When we try to approach humor head-on, we tend to run into brick walls that look like tunnels, Wile E. Coyote-style, which forces us to approach it from the side, in a constant flanking maneuver. While such an approach will always force our understanding of humor to be slanted, perhaps this is most

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<sup>5</sup> Like a pair of comfy sweatpants, the term “humor” can be made to fit almost anything, but that fact comes with as many negatives as it does positives.

fitting anyway, since humor itself is, in the words of Emily Dickinson, always “slant.”<sup>6</sup> In Cicero’s discussion on laughter and humor in *De Oratore*, he acknowledges the difficulties of describing humor and, from the outset of the exposition, claims that some things about humor are beyond him and, possibly, everyone else. Cicero divides his discussion into five parts, each meant to address one “question” about laughter in discourse. The first question, which we might assume to be of primary importance given its position, is “what is [laughter’s] nature”<sup>7</sup> (186). Cicero defines what he means by laughter’s “nature” as “what laughter actually is, how it is excited, where it resides, how it wells up and bursts forth so suddenly that we cannot check it even if we want to” (186). Tellingly, he then attempts to sidestep the first question completely but, in doing so, nevertheless offers some clues into his understanding of laughter—specifically its duplicity and opacity. He argues that the nature of laughter “does not concern our present conversation and, even if it did, I would still not be ashamed to admit that I am ignorant of what even the people who claim to understand it do not know” (186). In other words, Cicero claims that *no one*, not even so-called experts, knows precisely what laughter’s “nature” is, and for all that is understood about how to effectively and acceptably bring laughter out of someone—which is the focus of his remaining questions—the internal mechanisms that produce laughter remain a mystery. This is particularly perplexing since, as Cicero points out, laughter is so involuntary; like most other seemingly “natural” bodily functions, laughter appears to be more *in-control* of the person experiencing it than controlled *by* him or her. Yet because laughter as a physical event

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<sup>6</sup> From the poem “tell all the truth but tell it slant,” in which she suggests that roundabout truths are the only kind that humans can handle without being blinded.

<sup>7</sup> *Unum, quid sit. De Oratore*, II.lviii.235.

stems from a mental process, we cannot easily put our finger directly on the wellspring of the operation, as we literally can with most other bodily mechanisms, in order to trace the source back to its fundamental “nature.” This combination of the bodily and the mental epitomizes the form and function of humor in that one cannot easily separate the two and not destroy the humor in the first place. Cicero knew this and, perhaps justifiably, chose not to even engage in speculation. Enlightenment thinkers began the pursuit for a scientific explanation of the nature of laughter, giving rise to our idea of “humor theories,” and we still grapple with this question today. As of yet, we have no single, satisfactory grand theory of humor. The best we can do is to cobble together a sort of disciplinary mosaic of humor theories, taking the pieces from each that seem to most resonate with one another. Jane Littleton and Michael Pickering describe the inevitable shortfall of humor theories this way: “They strive to embrace far too much. Humour<sup>8</sup> is a multiform and dynamic human phenomenon, and has no universally essential feature” (293). Though, should this come off as an undesirable situation that needs to be remedied, an interdisciplinary<sup>9</sup> conception of humor more honestly reflects the multifaceted nature of humor as we currently understand it. Olson describes individual efforts at defining humor, taken separately, as “glancing attempts to capture the ineffable,” which cannot help but be oversimplified and incomplete when compared to a nuanced, if complicated, interdisciplinary approach (5).

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<sup>8</sup> The British spelling variation, “humour,” comes up a number of times through sources I used in this work, and when directly quoting them, I have retained the original spelling, as is the case with Littleton and Pickering. In all other instances, I use the Americanized version, *sans* the “u.”

<sup>9</sup> I strongly prefer this term, as opposed to something like “multidisciplinary,” because humor studies tends to blend methodologies; that is, one work might make use of ideas from psychology, sociology, and linguistics in such a way that where one stops and another starts becomes impossible to distinguish.

In “Humor: An Introduction,” Arthur Asa Berger begins by claiming that “Humor is an enigma” and that “our comedians and fools” are “untouchable” (6). While Berger seems to mean “untouchable” in a purely positive sense—as in free from constraint or common judgment—the more leprous meaning applies equally well here too. Humorists engage in a practice that they are rewarded immensely for (if they successfully find an audience), but it also sets them apart from normal people, because, as Berger says, humor *is* an “enigma.” It is pervasive but rarely understood; it can be entertaining and unsettling at the same time. On this point, Paul Lewis writes that “humor and fear often seem to arise together or in sequence not because fear causes humor but because they have a common origin in incongruity,” the feeling that something is not as it was expected or ought to be (*Comic Effects* 5). The divergence from fear and humor’s common origin is really the result of a kind of threat assessment. Jumping off from the work of John Steele, Lewis argues that in the case of fear, the threat posed by some incongruity is interpreted as “real” and imminent, whereas in the case of humor, the threat turns out to be relatively harmless and can be “laughed off.” But again, the nature of this laughter is the true enigma that has defied humor theorists across time, and Berger provides a nice summary of four of the most significant and commonly referenced humor theories. And each summary includes that theory’s big-name practitioners.

Berger works more or less chronologically through his list, beginning with the superiority theories of humor, which is the category most applicable to the writers of ancient Greece and Rome. As the name implies, the key aspect of superiority theories is the idea that humor arises from a revelation and enjoyment of the feeling of superiority, either in the humorist, the audience, or both. Because humor is seen as a form of ridicule,



its main purpose is to isolate and expose some failing in the object of ridicule, and this object could be almost anyone or anything. As Berger points out, the object of ridicule could even be some past version of the person now feeling superior (7). In the perspective of these theories, the target of humor is less important than the resulting division between humorist/audience and target. Some of the major figures who fall into this category of humor theories are Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Hobbes, and Charles Baudelaire (7). Next, Berger describes incongruity theories of humor.<sup>10</sup> He claims that “incongruity theories, in one or another of their manifestations, are the most generally accepted theories of humor,” and while I agree with this assertion, I would add that this is likely because they are also the most general theories of humor. In that way, incongruity theories, which stem from the perception of “a lack of consistency and harmony,” form the foundation for other, narrower theories of humor (Berger 8). The main proponent of incongruity that Berger mentions is Henri Bergson, whose *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, continues to be one of the preeminent works for scholars looking to ground their ideas in the historical texts of the field. Bergson argues that humor arises from something non-human intruding into the human realm—the combination of the “mechanical” with the “living”—and while his terminology has not stood the test of time incredibly well, his more general idea of incongruity provides the basis for nearly every other theory of humor. Third, Berger discusses the psychoanalytic theories of humor, which are dominated by the ideas Sigmund Freud put forward in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Also termed “relief theories,”<sup>11</sup> psychoanalytic theories,

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<sup>10</sup> It seems worth reiterating here that these divisions are in no way mutually exclusive or comprehensive; they often overlap and share ideas.

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, p. 312

unsurprisingly, turn to the mental and emotional aspects of humor as a way of explaining why people participate in humor, what this participation does for them, and what it does to them. Freud's primary argument, better captured, I think, in the term "relief theories" than "psychoanalytic," is that humor serves as a waking release valve for psychic pressure and neuroses caused by the repression of any number of primal urges and desires. Through incongruity and a number of linguistic techniques, humor cloaks these exposed desires in such a way as to make their expression socially permissible; thus, while a person could not, theoretically, get away with being openly lewd in public, a well-turned joke can redirect the energy of the desired lewd discourse outward, rather than inward. Like dreams, jokes are mainly mechanisms that serve to relieve psychic tension, and which also act as direct—albeit blurry—windows into the true inner-workings of a person's unconscious mind. Fourth, Berger concludes his survey by describing what he calls "cognitive theories of humor" (10). Other common names for these theories are "linguistic" and "semantic" theories of humor. According to Bergson, "These theories involve the way in which the brain processes information and focus upon the paradoxical aspects of humor—or of the information we categorize as humor. From this perspective humor involves (among other things) the resolution of logical paradoxes and other logical problems" (10). Since about the mid-1980s, a majority of the humor-related scholarship coming out of the social sciences would fall into this category of humor theories, mainly because most of the studies on humor done in these disciplines—psychology, sociology, and linguistics, in particular—are experiment-based and data-driven. Consequently, they must establish a testable (that is, logic-based) conception of humor. Among the most well-known purveyors of this type of humor research are Victor

Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, whose work in the 1980s and '90s on the “Semantic-Script Theory of Humor” remains highly influential today. These theories are probably best understood as their own, separate branch of humor studies, rather than simply as an offshoot of incongruity theories, but the two are intrinsically connected because the cognitive script theories use a similar notion of incongruity as a touchstone for their conceptions of how humor operates, even as they apply it in different ways.

Each of these various theoretical perspectives, their uses, and their shortcomings will be explored to a much greater degree in the following chapters. My main reason for introducing and briefly describing them is to illustrate the only really definitive aspect about humor and humor theories: their multiplicity. Even though humor takes vastly different forms from event to event, as Supreme Court Judge Potter Stewart said of obscenity, most of us know it when we are witness to it, even if we can't offer an absolute definition. For that reason, the major theories of humor each contribute to our still-developing conception of humor, but none is likely to ever completely subsume all the others. And, in the end, this multiplicity of meaning and method for understanding humor seems much like humor itself—situational, fluid, perplexing, and full of possibilities.

The approach that I attempt to take in this work, which we might call the rhetorical theory of humor (since no one has copyrighted that phrase to my knowledge), uses all of the preceding theoretical perspectives as they seem most relevant and useful to answering the questions concerning the rhetorical power and techniques of Southern humor that I am interested in. As such, this scholarly approach should provide a greater amount of flexibility and, hopefully, a greater sense of the complexity involved in

studying humorous discourse than any single theoretical perspective could provide on its own. In the end, my overall goal in this work is just as theoretical as it is analytical because it has to be. Because there is no well-established “Rhetorical Theory of Humor”—though many rhetoricians have studied humor—putting the various theories on the table and testing their viability as tools for analyzing Southern humor seems a necessary first step. In this case at least, my rhetorical theory for studying humor begins by looking at the established available means of analysis, then combining those that seem to speak to each other and the humor texts in interesting and illuminating ways, which is what I have done my best to accomplish in the following chapters. People joke about everything, and my hope is that by observing how speakers and writers within this relatively narrow slice of humorous discourse fashion their humor, in terms of its subject matter, form, style, and delivery, we might come away better equipped to analyze humor of any variety.

## **1.2 Defining and Theorizing Southern Identity**

Just as there is no monolithic understanding of humor, the idea that one pervasive, all-encompassing “Southern Identity” exists and is just waiting to be found—probably at the end of an oak-lined dirt road somewhere in Alabama—is a fiction. As discussed in the previous section, the academic study of humor exists on a spectrum that varies greatly depending on the disciplinary perspective being brought to bear upon it, and the same goes for the study of the American south. Nonetheless, a great amount of ink has been spilled, particularly over the last seventy years or so, in an attempt to capture and analyze the essence of the Southern identity—broadly defined, of course. As with humor, where and when you look at the topic also heavily influences the kind of answers you get in

return. Consequently, since this is primarily a rhetorical study of humor, not the South, I have limited my survey of scholarship on the South to works focused specifically on Southern identity and culture in the latter half of the twentieth century, a stretch of years that also includes all the texts I analyze in this work. However, even given that limitation, there is more than a little disagreement about what “Southern” means and what it does not.

The South exists in the minds of many Americans (North, South, or otherwise) as a unique, signifying thing. However, according to Richard Gray, the South and Southern culture only signify when understood as “oppositional” terms; that is, “‘Southern’ vs. ‘American’/‘Northern’/ ‘Western’” (4). Gray explains: “In this context, ‘South’ and ‘North’ end up functioning rather like a photograph and its negative, in a mutually determining, reciprocally defining relationship” (4). Like humor’s relationship to “serious” forms of discourse, the South stands as a “deviation” to the norm and is thus granted a special, if in some respects undesirable, status. Understood in this way, without another “direction” to push back against, the South would have no distinct regional identity, and communities would be forced to identify themselves on a more local level. In fact, Gray argues that this has always been the reality: “The South has never *not* been made up of a number of castes, classes, and smaller communities that at best live in uneasy coexistence with each other and at worst are in active conflict—and some of which, at least, choose to claim that *their* South is *the* South, their story the master<sup>12</sup> narrative of the region” (5). This fact plays out almost anywhere you go in the South and begin talking about specific regional distinctions. While most Southerners use the

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<sup>12</sup> I can only assume (and hope) that Gray is aware of how loaded that word is when it is included in a discussion of the South, identity, history, and power.

terminology of “the South” in certain contexts—that is, versus “the North”—on specific points, there tend to be more localized “Souths” than a grander, monolithic South. For instance, while outsiders might generically refer to “Carolina” and mean either state, no one from North Carolina or South Carolina would fail to make such a distinction. Similarly, the meaning and proper form of barbeque and barbeque sauce in the South depends greatly upon what part of what state you happen to be from.<sup>13</sup>

And like all composite communities of this sort, “the South” is really more of a (sometimes) convenient fiction than a tangible reality. For this argument, Gray relies on the renowned text by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, in which Anderson explains how “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (6). By “imagined,” Anderson does not mean that such communities do not exist in reality; they absolutely do. Their existence, however, is sustained through a cognitive bond between people that is based on a set of shared *ideas*, rather than any force or construct exterior to the mental conception of the community. The community exists (and exists in a particular fashion) because people believe it does. Anderson lays out the three key aspects that allow for this imagining: *limitedness*, *sovereignty*, and *community* (7). Though fairly straightforward, defining these terms should make it easier to illustrate how the South works as an example of an imagined community. Regarding “limitedness,” Anderson says that communities must be imagined as having “finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (7). There must be divisions, in other words, between “us” and “them,” even if those divisions blur

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<sup>13</sup> This is an instance where Texas’s “Southern-ness” stands on shaky ground. Beef barbeque indeed.

from time to time. Regarding “sovereignty,” Anderson argues that because the social and intellectual forces of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries “were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm,” communities were forced to imagine their sovereignty as a consequence of their separation from other communities (7).

Functional sovereignty requires definable boundaries at which the power and laws of the community come into effect. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for this discussion, communities must be imagined as communal, “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). Thus, for the South to exist as a community in Anderson’s terms, it must be imagined as limited, sovereign, and communal. And in many respects, we do imagine the South in these ways. However, exceptions and outright contradictions to all three of these categories also inform our understanding of the South, which leads to irony, incongruity, and paradox—the necessary ingredients for humor. Like the history and “reality” of Southern identity, humor works by combining things and ideas that ought to not make sense together in a way that does make *a kind* of sense, but this sense often requires leaps in logic and ethics that cannot be overlooked. And the same holds true for constructing a shared sense of Southern identity as well. The rest of this section will explore Anderson’s required categories separately to show how each contributes to the multifaceted and dynamic image of Southern identity that I want to carry through and inform the rest of this text.

Whether or not the South is a limited, definable place has probably never been more problematic a question than it is today. As technologies of communication and transportation continue to advance, the process of disseminating ideas and ways of life

becomes easier and quicker. This would seem to suggest that a geographic label, such as “Southern,” should eventually become irrelevant. However, as the comedian, writer, and conservative-leaning Michael Graham points out in *Redneck Nation*, the more the rest of the country begins to think and act “Southern,” the more meaningful and potent the label becomes. With exasperated good-humor, he explains:

Every one of the fundamental southern ideas I spent my life opposing—racism, irrationalism, mysticism, professional wrestling—has been accepted and absorbed by our nation as a whole. [...] Somehow—and I’ll be damned if I can figure it out—the South lost the Civil War of 1860, lost the civil rights struggle of 1960, but has managed to win the battle of ideas. (xv)

Graham’s point, while certainly reaching a bit beyond its grasp of reality, bears on this discussion because what he is really talking about is the dissolution of the traditional boundary lines—drawn in ideas, values, and ways of living—that have separated the imagined South from the imagined everything-else in America. And since Graham is talking about the dissolution of traditional boundaries, it is probably worth examining where those boundaries have traditionally been drawn. Perhaps the simplest and most expedient definition of the South is to harken back, as Graham does, to the Civil War and say that, in the present, the South equals all the states that seceded and formed the Confederate States of America. In most respects, this works, but push the definition a little, and cracks begin to show. For instance, what of the aptly-named “border states,” Kentucky and Maryland, neither of which officially declared war one way or another? And what of Virginia, whose northwestern side broke away to form a completely separate state? Is West Virginia not Southern as a consequence? Also, factor in that almost every state sent regiments to the “other” side, ostensibly to fight against their own



“countrymen,” and the Mason-Dixon line begins to look insubstantial in relation to the breadth of the question.

John Shelton Reed, nearly parroting Anderson, says that “the South is, to begin with, a concept—and a shared one. [...] People know whether they’re in it or not. As a geographer would put it, the South is a ‘vernacular’ region,” meaning it is imagined through common ideas and the expression of those ideas in a shared language (5). Reed provides a compelling series of maps that demonstrate, using a wide and creative variety of Southern criteria, that there is a core Southern geography, a peripheral South, and then the non-South. His first map, drawn from a survey of 68 undergraduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, shows the percentage of “Southern-ness” for each state in the U.S. (6). Only seven states, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee, were described as Southern “All in All” by 90% or more of the students. Four states, Texas, Kentucky, Florida, and Virginia, were described as Southern by between 50-89% of the students, and four others, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and West Virginia, counted as Southern, according to between 10-49% of the students. All other states received less than 10% of the students’ votes, including Maryland, which, to return to the Civil War divisions, was as much South as North. Following this initial mapping of the South, Reed provides 23 additional maps, using a different test of “Southern-ness” each time.<sup>14</sup> With very few exceptions, all of these maps show a South remarkably similar to the map produced by Reed’s college students, and the exceptions tend to be those areas on the periphery of the “core South.” Similarly, Rosina Lippi-Green describes how dialect variation is used to judge

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<sup>14</sup> These include “Where Kudzu Grows,” “Acres of Cotton Cultivation, 1909,” “Lynchings, 1900-1930,” “Housing Units without Complete Plumbing, 1980,” “Active Dentists per 1,000 Residents, 1982,” and “*Southern Living* Readers as Percentage of White Population, 1981.”

people in America and shows how a group of students in Minnesota evaluated the “*Deep South* or ‘Southern Trough’” (202). The students considered this area, which corresponds pretty closely with the “core South” of Reed’s maps, to have the most negative regional dialect<sup>15</sup> of English (202). This negative valuation was also reflected in their description of the South, in general, as the most undesirable place to live in the country (202). What this seems to argue above all else is that we know the places that are undeniably Southern and the places that undeniable aren’t; the tricky parts are the places in between those two. Thus, because the South has no hard-and-fast border, the other two principal aspects of imagined communities—sovereignty and community—become even more important to creating a shared sense of Southern identity. It is probably worth reiterating at this point that as much as scholars and folks generally may talk about “the South,” there are actually many versions of the South, each unique to the people and places constructing them. Some of these versions probably match fairly closely the notion of the South perpetuated in various media and texts—predominantly White, conservative, religious, racist, uneducated, etc. However, there are plenty of examples of Southern communities that defy these stereotypes. Certainly, many of the urban areas in southern states do not fit the above description, and, for one specific example, the Sea Island communities off the coast of South Carolina, where the Gullah culture still persists, definitely do not fit the stereotype.

The story of Southern sovereignty (or the lack thereof) is probably one of the most strife-ridden and shameful ways of conceptualizing the South because it is basically

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note here that there is no single “Southern dialect,” but instead, there are many variations of English, which fall into a spectrum of dialects that could all be termed “Southern.” For non-Southerners, however, it is often very difficult to differentiate between Southern dialects, just as it is difficult for Americans to distinguish between various eastern-European languages and dialects, while it is not difficult for people from Russia, Slovenia, or the Czech Republic.

a history of state-sanctioned oppression and willful social truculence. Of course, this history grew out of the South's primary attempt at autonomous self-governance, the Civil War.<sup>16</sup> When that conflict didn't go the South's way, bitterness toward "the Yankees" and a begrudging resistance to Federal governance came to epitomize the region's version of sovereignty. However, the struggle for some semblance of Southern sovereignty in the latter half of the twentieth century is more of an economic and cultural question than a political one, though these areas certainly overlap regularly. Termed "the Bulldozer Revolution" by C. Vann Woodward in his canonical essay "The Search for Southern Identity," the perceived loss of the traditional Southern lifestyle and culture, in the pursuit of something new and decidedly un-Southern, symbolizes the fragile and uncertain state of Southern sovereignty since the 1960s. However, Woodward is openly ambivalent about this "revolution"; he explicitly states that the loss of many of the aspects that provided "indisputable proof that the South was different" is not worth mourning (121), including clearly oppressive things like "the poll tax" and "the lynching bee" (120). Even so, Woodward frets that giving up other things may mean giving up the historic sense of the South altogether, with nothing substantial at hand to replace it (120). In that way, the South would become just another part of the country, its suburbs and cities indistinguishable from those in the North and West. Describing his symbol of this change, the bulldozer, Woodward writes:

The great machine with the lowered blade symbolizes the revolution in several respects: in its favorite area of operation, the area where city meets country; in its relentless speed; in its supreme disregard for obstacles, its heedless methods; in what it demolishes and in what it builds. It is the advance of the metropolis. It encroaches upon rural life to expand urban life. It demolishes the old to make way for the new. (121)

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<sup>16</sup> Here we are again equating the present South with the Confederacy. It is unfortunately, at times, an unavoidable slippery slope.

Clearly, what Woodward fears most is the loss of the oft-referred to Southern “heritage,” and with it legitimacy, purpose, and self-determination in the South—the things sovereignty generally provides. The problem is that retaining the South’s traditions and mores comes at such a high economic, social, and moral cost. In *Redefining Southern Culture*, James C. Cobb discusses the various ways that Southerners have attempted to maintain a sense of tradition and control of their regional identity in the face of the so-called “New South.”<sup>17</sup> For example, Cobb describes the Agrarians and their text, *I’ll Take My Stand*, as “less intent on defining agrarianism or even deriding industrialism than rallying their fellow white southerners to rise in revolt against what they saw as the ongoing New South effort to northernize their society” (163). The fight, therefore, was only about economics and vocation in so much as economics and vocation affected the state of Southern culture and society. As illustrations, Cobb points to similar and more recent debates about the flying of the Confederate flag over Southern state houses and the singing of “Dixie” at official state events as being part and parcel to the same, contiguous debate over Southern sovereignty. To employ a Southern turn-of-phrase, Southerners will “hang on like a tick” to any tradition or symbol that seems either particularly Southern or particularly annoying to anyone who isn’t Southern, as a method of demonstrating their liberty. Is this a legitimate exercise of sovereignty? Probably not. But given that there is no “legitimate” South, either, the description seems rather fitting: Southern sovereignty symbolized by an insignificant, blood-sucking parasite that just won’t go away.

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<sup>17</sup> What the bulldozers help create.

Finally, we turn to the imagined concept of community as it relates to the formation of Southern identity. Historically, at least, this aspect is the most ironic and, thus, leads to the most opportunities for humor. At the beginning of *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash presents us with the most basic irony of “the South”: “if it can be said there are many Souths, the fact remains that there is also one South. That is to say, it is easy to trace throughout the region [...] a fairly definite mental pattern” (xlvi). Writing decades before Anderson, here Cash captures the same concept of the imagined community—particular to the South in this case, however—where a large number of people can share what is essentially a list of fictional ideals and characteristics (many of which that do not apply universally) that provides them with a sense of belonging. Where in 1941, Cash limited this shared sensibility specifically to white Southerners, in “Southern Culture: On the Skids?” Reed argues that a multi-ethnic, multi-racial sense of Southern-ness is upon us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or at least it ought to be: “[W]e need to recognize the growing Asian and Hispanic presence in our region. [...] Even across the historic black-white divide, there has been an emerging, tentative recognition and exploration of the obvious fact that the two races have [...] influenced one another to such an extent that we can speak in some respects of a biracial southern culture (147). As Reed points out, whom one chooses to include in the Southern community depends more upon the perspective and “context” one chooses to apply to the question than any inherent characteristic (147). In other words, if we work outward from the notion of the Southern identity as a binding mechanism that brings disparate people together through a shared sense of Southern culture and tradition, we would doubtlessly focus on the common attributes that “mean” Southern to otherwise different groups. Conversely, if

we work inward from the notion of the Southern identity as a sorting mechanism that weeds out the “quasi-Southern” from the real McCoy, we would doubtlessly focus on the differences between people who might self-identify as Southern, at least generally.<sup>18</sup> Using an example from a previous writing of his, Reed summarizes the idea this way: “Jews in the South can be viewed as either southern Jews or Jewish southerners. In a southern context, they look culturally Jewish; in a Jewish context, they look culturally southern. Take your pick” (147). While neither perspective is wrong, neither is completely right—just as any conception of Southern identity is bound to be if it refuses to include people and perspectives that may not fit into the traditional image (read: White, Protestant, and male) of what the South has been and is supposed to be. My contention in this work is that Southern humor actually pushes both ways—outward and inward—at the same time. Though this pushing may not be completely unique to Southern humor, it stands out within it. Humor can draw diverse groups together into the collective, homogenous laughing audience, but it usually does so by playing on the most divisive and sensitive stereotypes that distinguish these groups in the first place.

In the first chapter of his book, Cash describes what he sees as the incredibly ironic and irrepressible grand myth of Southern identity—the one that most helps sustain his “one South” concept. According to Cash, the quintessential Southerner is the rugged, individualistic yeoman farmer, living off the land and nearly outside of society. Though it was not even a common way of living in Cash’s era, it is certainly less common today. Yet we continue to find this image reproduced and bandied about in libertarian

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<sup>18</sup> I would absolutely cause some categorization problems in this approach, even though I have no doubts about my own Southern credentials. Among these are the following: I’ve lived in South Carolina (a core Southern state) my whole life, can whistle “Dixie” and the theme to the *Andy Griffith Show* (though not simultaneously), and know Elvis’s birth and death dates. However, I don’t own a gun, I don’t like to fish, and I’m an ardent believer in evolution, global warming, and comprehensive sex education.

propaganda, much as it was in *I'll Take My Stand*. The irony is, of course, that if this were a reflection of reality, there would be little need for an identifiable community identity in the first place. In this conception of Southern identity, every man (which presumably includes his stay-at-home wife and brood of Future Farmers of America) is his own, little primordial village; the property lines of his farm are his nation's boundaries; and his word is his nation's law. And more often than not, that law is, ostensibly, a direct extension of Biblical law. As Charles Reagan Wilson posits, "Religion, broadly defined, rests at the heart of southern culture and what it means to be southern" (169). Wilson argues that while religion had always played a significant role in Southern culture, as far back as there was such a thing, in the years leading up to and following the Civil War, "a religious culture had been established wherein a religious outlook and tone permeated southern society," and in many ways, this "outlook and tone" persist to this day (171). For instance, compare our current political climate in the South with Wilson's description of the "post-Civil War South," where "southerners stressed 'democracy' less than the conservative concepts of moral virtue and an orderly society" (173). While the specific meanings of "virtue" and "order" have shifted since the mid-1860s, the approach to social and cultural governance has not. For Wilson, the key to the perpetuation of the Southern religious culture, like all religions for that matter, is the consistent participation in ritual: "the existence of a sacred symbol system and its embodiment in ritual define religion" (172). And in Southern culture, community supporting symbols and rituals abound. For instance, Wilson mentions the hero-worship of Confederate soldiers, particularly Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, who quickly became Christ-like martyrs for the Southern cause following the war. The brunt of this

Southern religious culture exists, according to Wilson, to deal with “a profound problem,” namely that “[h]aving lost what they considered to be a holy war, southerners had to face suffering, doubt, guilt, a recognition of what seemed to be evil triumphant, and above all death” (189). Thus, this Southern “civil religion” serves as a salve, albeit a mighty stinging one, to alleviate the wound of *being* Southern in the first place.<sup>19</sup> I believe that humor permeates Southern culture to the degree that it does because it serves as a counterbalancing ritual to religion. Whereas religion offers Southerners a way of mourning and memorializing the persistent myth of Southern prominence and independence, humor offers a way of making light of it—of recognizing the ridiculousness and backwardness of holding on to a “Lost Cause.”

### **1.3 The Event of Humor as Ritual: “A Project of Re-fusion”**

Jeffrey C. Alexander defines rituals as “episodes of repeated and simplified cultural communication in which the direct partners to a social interaction, and those observing it, share a mutual belief in the descriptive and prescriptive validity of the communication’s symbolic contents and accept the authenticity of one another’s intentions” (527). If we accept Alexander’s definition, rituals are inherently rhetorical, in that they are crafted, purposeful, and shared discourse events. They are also inherently postmodern, in the sense that they are “reality constructing” symbols, rather than merely “reality perceiving” ones; though, in all likelihood, the folks participating in them probably see them as purely reality perceiving (Colletta 856). Rituals work to crystalize and affirm the meaning of an abstract idea through shared experience. Alexander argues

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<sup>19</sup> This is why so much of Southern identity is bound up in family and history and why many Southerners are so resistant to recognizing “outsiders” as Southern, even if they live in the South. It is not enough simply to cognitively *know* what being Southern is all about; I believe that if you don’t grow up with this shared legacy of loss (no matter how imagined and fictive), it would be difficult to take on later in life.



that the importance of rituals to our social institutions lies in their ability to “sew back together the elements of performance” that our increasingly segmented society has “*de-fused*” (529). He writes: “To be effective in a society of increasing complexity, social performances must engage in a project of *re-fusion*. To the degree they achieve re-fusion, social performances become convincing and effective—more ritual-like” (529). Because rituals are explicit, though metaphorical, demonstrations of shared identity, they are the primary method for maintaining and propagating imagined communities. From the Pledge of Allegiance, to the Lord’s Supper, to the playing of a particular song before the home team takes the field—rituals create, define, and support imagined communities. This conception of ritual also fits squarely into Johan Huizinga’s category of “play” as a “sacred activity” that “contributes to the well-being of the group” (9). Rituals, as specific examples of play in human life, are outside of the “ordinary” and are “limited”—both of which are definitive aspects of play according to Huizinga (8-9). Most importantly, however, to the understanding of ritual-as-play is that a ritual “creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection” (10). Because rituals must follow a prescribed set of rules to function *as* “ritual,” they need to be honed and shaped into a kind of self-contained “perfection.”<sup>20</sup> Rituals are the most, and sometimes the only, tangible evidence of shared identity and experience that community members can point to. And because rituals stand as evidence of an otherwise unobservable phenomenon, like scientific experiments, rituals must be reproducible to be meaningful. Writing about performativity and theatricality, Samuel

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<sup>20</sup> Consider how disruptive it is when someone coughs or sneezes during a wedding, when in “normal” life, these activities go relatively unnoticed. Also consider how this applies to humor; a comedian can tell the same joke hundreds of times, but if executed perfectly, it will still get laughs. In fact, the repetition probably makes it more successful.

Weber claims that the theater, which operates as its own sort of ritualized space, “is a place of fixity and unfreedom, but also of fascination and desire. A prison, to be sure, but one that confines through assent and consensus rather than through constraint and oppression” (8). Rituals are a kind of prison because they limit us to being the same every time we perform or observe them, but it is this sameness, this reassurance of identity and significance, that we desire from the ritual in the first place.

Regarding the purpose of ritual “secular performances,” Alexander argues that their goal “remains the same as the ambition of sacred ritual. They stand or fall on their ability to produce psychological identification and cultural extension” (547). The unique complexity that humor, as a type of ritual, brings to the table is its enigmatic and ambivalent nature. Mary Douglas argues that whereas “standard rites” “assert hierarchy and order,” “jokes have the opposite effect,” even as they draw from and engage with the same sets of cultural symbols as do standard rites (369). She says: “[Jokes] do not affirm the dominant value, but denigrate and devalue. Essentially a joke is an anti-rite” (369). Looking at humor from one perspective, Douglas is correct. All humor bears within its rhetorical nucleus a spark of irony, which can spread and destruct any sense of stability and sincerity in an utterance, rendering the ritual moot in the sense of being a “sincere” performance. However, Douglas is a bit too quick to put humor completely in the “anti-rite” box. Writing 26 years after Douglas, James F. English recognizes the difficulty involved in pinning humor down securely to any single argumentative position. According to English, because humor is an event—a whole system of “symbolic exchange”—it is impossible to say exactly how that system functions on every level or from every perspective (5). English mainly supports this claim by pointing to the ironic,

overlapping, and context-dependent system of meanings that make humor possible. As he says: “We are always laughing at something too complex, too multiple and divided, to be given a proper name” (12). In other words, humor is an anti-rite, but it isn’t only that. We can say this with certainty, even if we cannot then say what exactly humor is in addition to being an anti-rite.

This brings us to the question of how the theories of humor, the South, and social rituals come together as a rhetorical analysis in this work. The short answer lies in the first epigraph from Roy Blount, Jr.’s essay, “Southern Humor: Love It or Leave It,” on the main title page. The full quote reads:

Southern humor tends to be mixed in with violence, heartbreak, preachment, politics, libidinousness, gustation, anger, nostalgia, racial conflict, and adventure. In the South, humor (like argumentativeness in New York) is not so much a specialization as a requisite element in discourse; and Southern humor tends to work best when it isn’t trying to be any funnier than life and death. (131)

Blount, a Southern humorist who lives in the Northeast, correctly identifies humor as quintessential to the composition of “Southern” discourse. In this, I believe that Blount is half right, or at least that he has correctly labeled one side of the Southern coin. Humor is the flip-side—the check-and-balance—to religion in terms of the formation and ordering of the Southern identity through language. These two forms of “cultural communication,” to use Alexander’s phrase, run throughout Southern discourse like the intertwined double-helix of DNA. While fervent religious belief imbues the Southern identity with a literally God-given meaning and purpose,<sup>21</sup> the prevalence of humor in Southern discourse calls this purpose into question through irony. Don Florence describes humor’s destabilizing properties, writing: “By underscoring and magnifying the

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<sup>21</sup> Taken at face-value, at least.

instabilities of language and thought, humor renders the world and the self protean” (8). As such, humor and religion ought to be mutually exclusive, but somehow they both reside happily in the Southern identity.<sup>22</sup> Both humor and religion are so deeply embedded in the tapestry of the Southern identity that, as Blount describes, they are “requisite element[s]” in Southern discourse; the concept would not exist, as such, without them (131). Even though they have the markings of ritual, religion and humor are requisite elements in Southern discourse because, as Matt Wray puts it, such practices “make social boundaries seem natural and unremarkable” (14). The more normalized a ritual—like a certain style of humor—becomes, the more ingrained in the everyday performance of a cultural identity it will become. Until eventually, the two become synonymous. The ritual stops *being* ritual and becomes requisite. And this is why a rhetorical analysis of modern Southern humor makes for a compelling research study: it is everywhere in Southern discourse. Because it is so common, we must *work* to see it as a ritual of re-fusion, to see it as framed and crafted and purposeful, in other words, to see it as rhetorical and not just “natural.”

#### **1.4 Project and Chapter Summary**

First and foremost, this dissertation aims to explore the rhetorical nature of Southern humor in the second half of the twentieth century by applying traditional rhetorical analysis methods and concepts to a selection of popular Southern humor texts. It seeks to understand how Southern humor happens—its methods and techniques—and it also seeks to understand, as much as possible, the implications of these events for the various interlocutors involved. By investigating the stylistic, storytelling, and linguistic

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<sup>22</sup> This should, perhaps, come as no surprise, given that the man who wrote “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” was a slave-holding Southerner.

techniques of Southern humor, while relying on the scholarship of writers in a variety of academic disciplines, I hope to answer the following research question: how does Southern humor rhetorically negotiate the cultural boundary between a Southern and a more mainstream American identity to create a form of discourse that is meaningful on both registers?

Each of the first three chapters of this work “uses” one of Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals as a way of studying the rhetorical methods and impact of Southern humor in a more focused way. Chapter Two, “‘Society [and Humor] is structured in contradiction’: Play Frames of Incongruity in *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*,” explores how Southern humor creates and uses incongruity through the application of framing devices and the distortion of *logos*, and it demonstrates that humor derives as much from the way a joke is told as it does any specific content or subject matter. Chapter Three, “‘At once commanding and naked’: *Ethos* and the Standup Humor of Andy Griffith and Jerry Clower,” focuses specifically on the role and persona of the humorist or comedian in the humor event and looks at how that role imbues the humorist with a great amount of rhetorical power but also distances him or her from the audience. Chapter Four, “‘That ain’t funny is it, Sis?’: Audience, Laughter, and Hostility in the Humor of Lewis Grizzard and Jeff Foxworthy,” examines the rhetorical nature of laughter in humor, as well as the unique and paradoxical position of the humor audience as both a passive recipient of humor and the ultimate arbiter of the success (or failure) of that discourse. Relying heavily on the work on Mikhail Bakhtin, the concluding Chapter Five, “Releasing the Pyloric Valve: Disrupting the Decorum of Southern Humor in John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*,” attempts to step beyond the normal limits of

Southern humor by looking at Toole's novel and its grotesque protagonist, specifically, in order to better comprehend and test the rhetorical limits of humorous decorum. In the end, we will see that Southern humor is part and parcel to Southern discourse, and it serves as both a glorification of and a self-reproach to the monolithic sense of Southern identity. The rhetorical maneuvers of Southern humor tend, seemingly, to work at cross-purposes, arguing for *and* against the South at the same time. From this paradox springs the "requisite element in discourse," but also the potential for a great amount of shame, worry, and consternation about just what it means to market and to laugh at Southern humor.

## CHAPTER 2

“SOCIETY [AND HUMOR] IS STRUCTURED IN CONTRADICTION”:  
PLAY FRAMES OF INCONGRUITY IN *THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW* AND  
*THE BEVERLY HILLBILLIES*

Jokes occur because society is structured in contradiction; there are no jokes in paradise, or in the telos of the good society. (9)

– James F. English, *Comic Transactions*

The epigraph above from English’s *Comic Transactions* makes a bold and substantial claim, namely that humor stands in direct opposition to the ordinary conception of a “paradise” as a united community, free from conflict, disagreement, and misunderstanding.<sup>23</sup> More specifically, joking reveals the social dysfunction inherent to all communities, no matter how idyllic they may seem, because they arise from the conscious recognition of social incongruence. Metaphorically speaking, jokes are like social volcanic eruptions, which, in the act of relieving the pent-up pressure created by societal dysfunction, reveal that dysfunction in a conspicuous and potentially harmful manner. Thus, in response to Cicero’s second question of humor, “what is its nature?,”<sup>24</sup> this chapter will first discuss incongruity theories of humor generally and then use those

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<sup>23</sup> In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a novel which is nothing if not very un-funny, George Orwell imagines what a systematized attempt at creating such a “paradise” might look like: “In fact there will *be* no thought, as we understand it now. Orthodoxy means not thinking—not needing to think. Orthodoxy is unconsciousness” (54). In other words, when you truly love Big Brother, not only *wouldn’t* you make jokes, you could not.

<sup>24</sup> *Alterum, unde sit. De Oratore*, II. lviii. 235.

theories to examine how societal contradiction is foregrounded in humorous texts, specifically the so-called “ruralcoms”<sup>25</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, through the use of language play and ironic play-frames (186). Much like the necessary ingredients for fire—fuel, oxygen, and heat/pressure—incongruity does not by itself create humor, which is why humor, generally, is so ripe for rhetorical analysis. These components must be carefully crafted and kindled to really get a fire/laugh going. As the title of this chapter suggests, no story is inherently humorous; the humor derives from—depends upon—*how* the story is put together, how it is “structured in contradiction,” in other words. The methods of this structuring are fundamentally rhetorical concerns in that they directly influence the persuasive effects of a text. By applying what are usually referred to as “incongruity theories of humor”<sup>26</sup> to the Southern television situation comedy (“ruralcoms”), we should come to better understand the rhetorical methods of humor in Southern sitcoms, as well as test the limitations and possibilities of the theories themselves, since they tend to be almost exclusively applied to text-based discourse. Specifically, by looking at the “framing” techniques used to create incongruity and humor in these sitcoms, we can gain insight into how the communities portrayed in these texts are imagined, both by the shows’ producers and by the shows’ audiences.

## **2.1 Incongruity: The “Core Element” in the Alloy of Humorous Discourse**

Even though humor studies is, at best, a loosely defined academic field, there does exist a general agreement that incongruity is one of the common features, if not *the*

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<sup>25</sup> Whitt, p. 233.

<sup>26</sup> Though it is often referred to in the singular (Incongruity Theory), I prefer “Theories” because no universally agreed upon understanding of incongruity and humor exists in humor scholarship.



principle, feature of humorous discourse. Milena Kozić summarizes the centrality of incongruity: “Most research is consistent in identifying some sort of incongruity as the core element of humour” (107). While I agree generally with Kozić’s basic assertion, I also agree, in particular, with the vagueness of the phrase “some sort of incongruity,” because not all incongruity functions or looks the same in all humor. For example, much of the scholarship that this chapter builds on focuses almost entirely on incongruity found in “script-based” or exclusively verbal texts that do not include the complex sight and sound-based content regularly featured in a sitcom. This focus leads predominantly to linguistically based humor analyses. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with this kind of analysis, it does have a limiting effect on our working understanding of incongruity as a fundamental concept in humor, and one of the goals for this chapter is to push incongruity beyond the conceptual boundaries of the “script” of a text. However, in order to have a general working definition, we can say with English that incongruity is a kind of semantic “contradiction,” which when manipulated and exposed to an audience in the right way, creates the potential for laughter.

Kozić identifies Henri Bergson as one of the earliest modern proponents of incongruity as a unifying theme or component in humor, and without a doubt, his book, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, still ranks among the most referenced treatises on humor even though it is now over 100 years-old (Kozić 107). As his title suggests, Bergson’s analysis looks at humor primarily by investigating the causes of laughter. The second sentence in the work asks, “What is the basal element in the laughable?”; and though Bergson never exactly uses the term incongruity,<sup>27</sup> his main

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<sup>27</sup> His two most frequently deployed terms for the qualities that create laughter are “rigidity” (9 & ff.) and “inelasticity” (10 & ff.), which he presents as being typical of mechanical/inanimate objects but not

points all directly relate to this idea (1). Eventually, Bergson comes to the conclusion that “[w]e laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing,” meaning, in more general terms, that laughter arises when we apprehend incongruity—in this case, “a person” who should give the impression of being a person, but incongruously appears to be “a thing”(58). While a significant focus on *linguistic* incongruity would come to dominate incongruity theories in the latter half of the twentieth century, Bergson’s ideas are fundamentally “sight” based—what we might now refer to as slap-stick or prank humor.<sup>28</sup> Bergson’s configuration of humor here is based on a fundamental and ironic *seeming* to be both human and nonhuman. Consequently, the mere presence or possibility of such an incongruity is not sufficient fuel for humor to ignite and combust into laughter; someone must *get* the impression as well as “give the impression” of incongruity. That is, humor depends as much on an audience’s perception and interpretation of incongruity as the existence of the incongruity in the first place. Not only does Bergson identify incongruity as the basic ingredient of the humorous event, he also recognizes its essentially social nature, which will be discussed in depth below.

In addition to Kozić and Bergson, a number of others view incongruity as humor’s primary ingredient. For example, Meyer describes the basis of incongruity theories thusly: “An accepted pattern is violated, or a difference is noted—close enough to the norm to be non-threatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable. It is this difference, neither too shocking nor too mundane, that provokes humor in the mind of the receiver” (313). Similarly, in a fairly extensive summary of various theories

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humans. It is also worth remembering that Bergson was writing in French, and the French term *incongru* specifically connotes impropriety in manners rather than contradiction generally, perhaps explaining why Bergson doesn’t use it.

<sup>28</sup> I’m thinking specifically of The Three Stooges and Jerry Lewis as good examples of Bergsonian humor.

and critical approaches to understanding humor, Leon Rappoport writes: “If there is any single triggering mechanism that most modern scholars and comedians agree offers the most important explanation of humor, it is encounters with *incongruity*” (16). He goes on to argue that one of the main strengths of incongruity theories of humor is their flexibility of application. That is, while other humor theories, such as the “superiority theory,” focus on how the participants in the humorous event are affected by it, incongruity theories allow for a wider view—“something outside the individual” (Rappoport 16). Ironically, most incongruity-based analyses tend to drill down humorous into discourse, occasionally deconstructing it on the syllabic level, in order to make these larger claims, but nonetheless, they are not dependent on interpreting humor from the perspective of the individual subject, which does make investigations like this one of sitcom humor possible and not completely subjective.

In the opening chapter to *Comic Effects*, Lewis introduces humor studies as a field of scholarly inquiry and then builds on and extends Rappoport’s definition of incongruity in two important ways. First is the notion of incongruity “resolution.” Lewis says that “*humor appreciation is based on a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then resolving it*” (9). In this case, resolving an incongruity does not mean eliminating it or choosing one meaning over another; instead, resolution is the mental process by which a person allows the incongruity to play out in search of a possible meaning, humorous or otherwise. Lewis describes resolution as an attempt to “identify a way in which it might make sense to connect the ideas or images involved [in the incongruity]” (9). Essentially, resolution is the “getting” (or not) of a joke, and failed attempts at humor often result from presentations of incongruity that defy, for any

number of reasons, the making of semantic connections for an audience. The results in these instances, as Lewis remarks, tend to be moments of confused, “awkward silence” (9). Meyer also notes the rational, logic-based orientation of incongruity theories: “Rather than focusing on the physiological or emotional effects of humor, incongruity theory emphasizes cognition. Individuals must have rationally come to understand normal patterns of reality before they can notice differences” (313). In this way, incongruity theories are limited in two important ways. First, they focus almost purely on the process of *understanding* humor, or “*getting*” it, not on the quality or appropriateness of the humor. Secondly, incongruity theories are limited by a presumed sense of what the “normal patterns of reality” consist of. While in the case of most humorous texts this limitation may not prove to be an issue, there are certainly to be some instances when what is “normal” is either misinterpreted or misapplied, which would, thus, affect any analysis of the incongruity that follows.

Second, Lewis says that “*humor is a playful, not a serious, response to the incongruous*” (11). Key to this precept is the opposition of “playful” and “serious” as the two possible responses to perceived incongruity. And while one of the goals of this chapter is to complicate the seeming clarity of this dichotomy by examining complex humorous texts, Lewis’s main point that humor comes from incongruities<sup>29</sup> which invite playful interpretations remains quite instructive. Rappoport echoes this notion, arguing that humorous incongruities must be of a “nonthreatening” variety (16). As examples of both “serious” and “playful” incongruities, Lewis writes: “There is all the difference in the world between a rogue bull moose attacking campers and Rocky’s friend Bullwinkle,” which works in the most obvious sense that no one is likely to be physically

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<sup>29</sup> Themselves often being full of language play.

harmful by watching a *Rocky and Bullwinkle* episode (11). However, taken beyond this facile difference, this perhaps off-hand comparison illustrates the complexity of humor and contextual dependency of incongruity. That is, I can easily imagine situations and forums in which a rampaging moose could be hilarious,<sup>30</sup> and I have certainly seen enough of *Rocky and Bullwinkle*<sup>31</sup> to know that being playful and nonthreatening is no guarantee of creating successful humor. In other words, “playful” and “serious”—as pre-indicators of humor—depend primarily on presentation and interpretation in discourse; they are rarely, if ever, inherently obvious qualities.

## 2.2 Incongruity as a Mode of Social Irony

Two further aspects of humorous incongruity are worth noting and thus require further explanation before attempting to apply an “incongruity” analysis to Southern humor. First, structurally speaking, incongruity as a component of humor has much in common with the general concept of “irony.” Though the two terms are by no means synonymous, there is a significant amount of overlap in their conceptual definitions. Additionally, they are both commonly used and, sometimes, oversimplified in humor analyses. Thus, we need to first approach a tentative understanding of irony and where incongruity fits into it, before proceeding any farther down the humor path.<sup>32</sup> Second, many writers note the inextricably *social* nature of creating and perceiving incongruity, which, in turn, makes humor a social mechanism, as is suggested in the above epigraph

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<sup>30</sup> Though probably not if you’re one of the campers being rampaged upon.

<sup>31</sup> About two episodes.

<sup>32</sup> As Hutcheon puts it: “[T]he relationship between irony and humor is a vexed one [...], but none the less not one that can be ignored in dealing with the politics of irony” (25-26). Or when dealing with the politics of humor, I would argue.

from *Comic Transactions*. This discussion of incongruity, then, provides an apt opportunity to explore Southern humor's social nature because a number of texts identify incongruity as one of the clearest indications of social tension and negotiation in humorous discourse.

Though most humor theorists tend to explicitly define humor as its own conceptual field, the thematic and functional connections between humor and irony are too numerous and weighty to disregard. Zooming out from humorous discourse, it is a fairly simple task to draw these connections between discussions of irony, on the one hand, and incongruity theories, on the other. In *De Oratore*, for instance, Cicero describes ironic speech as being “mock-serious in your whole manner of speaking, while thinking something different from what you are saying” (198). In this case, the possibility for humor comes from the incongruity between what is said and what is really meant, as well as from the incongruous “manner of speaking,” which works to highlight irony by presenting the ridiculous as if it made complete sense. Directly echoing Cicero's argument about presenting an ironic “manner” in order to create humor, Quintilian writes that a “joke may lie in some remark about a ridiculous look or gesture; such jests are very attractive, more especially when delivered with every appearance of seriousness; for there are not jests so insipid as those which parade the fact that they are intended to be witty” (451). Taken to its logical end, the funniest incongruity-through-delivery would also be the most wholly ironic, in that the speaker's “appearance of seriousness” would never break and thus would never dissolve the ironic tension. That is, there would never be a “wink-wink, just kidding” moment, forcing the audience to sort out both the incongruity in the language and the incongruity in the delivery.

It seems worthwhile at this point to attempt to clarify why incongruity and irony are not simply synonymous in regards to humor, because conflating the two terms lies at the bottom of a slippery conceptual slope. Indulge me in a metaphor as a way of explaining the difference between humorous incongruity and irony. If the whole humorous event is like a car wreck, “incongruity” is a way of describing the distinct “vehicles” being brought violently together. Irony, however, is the actual collision itself—the most significant and, because it happens so quickly and has no tangible substance of its own, the most difficult aspect to analyze. For one almost nonexistent moment, two normally separate entities become one (and not one) before separating out again, though they tend to be significantly and permanently altered by the encounter. In other words, incongruity is only really noticeable when normally separate things come together in an ironic moment. And like traffic moving at 70 m.p.h. on the Interstate, we all know that the potential for a collision (irony) is all around us, all the time, but focusing on that potential would probably render one unable to drive or to communicate in anything but the most tentative and inefficient manner. Thus, comic incongruity only announces itself through an ironic collision, making irony a fundamental catalyst for any humorous discourse that follows.

Attempts to describe and theorize about the nature of irony are often clouded by approximation and couched in figurative language<sup>33</sup> because it is difficult to talk about a collision without merely describing the situation before the collision, describing the situation afterwards, and using vague words like “suddenly” and “crash” in between.

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<sup>33</sup> See preceding paragraph.

However, a few writers give us more. In his immense<sup>34</sup> *The Concept of Irony*, Søren Kierkegaard argues that the figure of Socrates, as understood through the writings of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristophanes, is the epitome of irony in that it is a figure of nothingness. However, as Kierkegaard points out, this is not a nothingness “in the usual sense of the word,” but a unique kind of nothingness that works to deconstruct everything around it that is based on faulty logic and presupposition (37, note).

Kierkegaard uses a fascinating illustration, worth quoting at length, to clarify this point:

There is a work that represents Napoleon’s grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with an almost alarming necessity. So also with Socrates’ rejoinders. One hears his words in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees. There is not one single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important. (19)

Kierkegaard’s concept of irony, like his understanding of Socrates and the image of Napoleon in this example, cannot be adequately explained using only positive terms. Succinctly put, what irony *is* is a “not,” which is to say the *absence* of an *is*.

Slavoj Žižek exemplifies this absence using Herman Melville’s famously impassive non-scrivener, Bartleby. Žižek says of Bartleby: “[H]is refusal is not so much the refusal of a determinate content as, rather, the formal gesture of refusal as such. [...] There is a clear holophrastic quality to “I would prefer not to”: it is a signifier-turned-object, a signifier reduced to an inert stain that stands for the collapse of the symbolic order” (384-385). That is, Bartleby prefers *not*, period, and as a character, he represents

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<sup>34</sup> In both quantity and quality.



nothing so much as nothingness. Bartleby does not hold a mirror up to society; he is a brick wall.<sup>35</sup> Like Socrates, Bartleby disrupts the functioning of society by refusing to play by the normal rules, and like Socrates, it ends up killing him. Socrates refuses to give a straight answer, even when he's on trial for his life. And as Žižek puts it, "Bartleby couldn't even hurt a fly—that's what makes his presence so unbearable" (385). The impenetrableness and depth of their negativity makes them impossible to endure. Kierkegaard writes, the "trees are trees"<sup>36</sup> in the painting, even after an adequately "sophisticated" observer makes out the figure of Napoleon; yet they are not *only* trees. They are both trees and framing device, and it is up to the observer to perceive the duality and, thus, to also perceive the figure of Napoleon.

Employing Kierkegaard's ideas to describe Mark Twain's humorous use of irony, Florence argues that "Twain brings us to face a blankness, an epistemological void. [...] Humor dissolves appearances, revealing the hidden formlessness of life in order to let the mind laughingly manufacture its own forms" (5-7). So often oversimplified as simply saying the opposite of what is "really" meant in a given situation, irony is more like the blank space separating opposing meanings, and when these meanings come together, their close proximity highlights the irony, the irresolvable "nothingness" between them. This means that in "legitimately" ironic moments, there can be no single, obvious "real" meaning; there must be the possibility for another interpretation. Functionally, irony obfuscates commonplace certainties, and it is through the sorting out of irony that the

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<sup>35</sup> Walls, both literal and figurative, play a large symbolic role in the story; though as of yet, I have been unable to transmit my enthusiasm for this role—or much else about the story, which I regard as possibly the best short story in American Literature—to introductory English students. Much like the narrator of *Bartleby*, I am always hopeful that their lack of engagement is a well-executed act of emulative participation. Ah, Undergraduates!

<sup>36</sup> Of course, considered on another level, the trees are again not trees, but paint manipulated to give the impression of trees—an additional irony embedded in this example surely not lost on Kierkegaard.

“manufacturing” of new meaning—and humor—can be achieved. Hutcheon puts it this way: “All these images [...] do imply, however, that ironic meaning is *simultaneously* double (or multiple), and that therefore you don’t actually have to reject a ‘literal’ meaning in order to get at what is usually called the ‘ironic’ or ‘real’ meaning of the utterance” (60). Understood thusly, irony categorically subsumes “the literal” and “the real,” turning them into purely subjective, interpretive concepts. This is one of the key arguments in Derrida’s “Signature Event Context”: because language “spoken or written” can be “*cited*”—that is, made ironic through repetition—“it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring” (12). For Derrida, irony forms the necessarily shifting foundation of all symbolic communication because it allows for semantic movement and change; that is, there is no sign that could not be made to also be its own opposite through irony.

In his discussion of sacred languages, Anderson provides a nice bridge between irony and the importance of a social system of signs and meanings for humor. Anderson’s central point in this discussion is that in a number of Eastern traditions, the “signs” of a language were not arbitrary: “The ideograms of Chinese, Latin, or Arabic were emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it” (14). Working under such an understanding, irony as defined above ought to be impossible; that is, if discourse is not one possible description or telling of reality, but a symbolic embodiment of reality, then all statements must be either right or wrong, true or false. There is no room for interpretation, no conceptual use for irony; put simply: “there are no jokes in

paradise” (English 9). Yet, as Anderson points out, most modern societies do not have a widely shared sacred language, which opens them up to irony’s ambiguities and possibilities, and often to the untranslatability of their jokes. Most jokes’ intelligibility derives mainly from a culturally shared sense of meaning, what normally counts as “congruent,” in other words. In “Logical Mechanisms: A Critique,” Christie Davies argues that the “logic” of most jokes’ incongruity is society dependent and that, typically, a “joke is funny not because the logic *per se* is faulty [incongruent] but because in our society to employ such reasoning is contrary to our values and social conventions” (164). Thus, what is incongruent in one social and cultural circumstance may not be incongruent at all in another. Or more likely, such a joke might make no sense whatsoever in translation—it would be neither congruent or incongruent, just incoherent—because individual society’s “values and conventions” tend to differ so widely from one another.

Hutcheon makes the case for irony’s intrinsically social nature, writing: “Because irony [...] happens in something called ‘discourse,’ its semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspects of its contexts of deployment and attribution” (17). And consequently, if incongruity is a genre of ironic discourse, then incongruity, too, is intrinsically social.<sup>37</sup> To this point, Bergson begins his landmark study by claiming that “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable” (3). Here, Bergson seems to suggest that only things that are immediately and physically related to humans can be “laughable,” which is too restrictive for the whole scope of humorous discourse, but if we

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<sup>37</sup> A number of scholars agree on this point, which makes it important to note, but since there is such general consensus, I’ll try not to belabor it too much, either. However, the social causes and effects of humor are much less agreed upon, and Chapter 4 will tackle them in much greater detail.

say, instead, that “the comic does not exist outside” of human consciousness and meaning-making, then Bergson’s point stands. In other words, a landscape uninterpreted would never be funny, but if a person could detect something incongruous—natural or otherwise—about a landscape, then the potential for humor exists.

Most likely due to its fundamentally ironic basis, incongruity is essentially group subjective and is, thus, never completely idiosyncratic nor completely stable. And though incongruity may be perceived and experienced on an individual level, the rhetorical tools necessary to do these things are acquired through socialization. David Johnson Thornton calls this perception “feeling incongruity,” saying: “Expectations are tied to social experiences and perceptions of community, and because these socially conditioned expectations are always, to some degree, in flux, incongruity is never a clear-cut matter of fact but more a matter of feeling or sensibility, tied to the tensions and uncertainties of social change” (431). Describing the same phenomenon, Fine and De Soucey use the term “referential” for the socialized nature of humor in small-group culture, writing, “Joking presumes that the parties involved share references—their idioculture—by which they make sense of the implicit meanings of this jocular interaction. Put another way, it is not just that the parties know each other, but they share a history and an identity and can understand joking references” (3-4). How one jokes and what one jokes about depends as much on the group being joked *with* as the subject matter of the joke itself. By discussing humor more generically, Elliot Oring further expands the “referential” concept of Fine and De Soucey in his discussion of “Appropriate Incongruity”—a term Oring coined to describe the various aspects of the social mediation of humor (2). According to Oring, for any incongruity to successfully

create the potential for humor, it must be “appropriate,” meaning that the incongruity must make sense or offer some sort of psychic satisfaction – i.e. an audience must be able to “get” how the incongruous aspects relate to one another and to the situation in which this relationship occurs (1-4). While Oring goes to some length to delineate various sorts of appropriate and inappropriate incongruities, the central point here—what is and is not deemed appropriate—can only be determined in a social context. It should also be noted at this point that my primary focus in this chapter is on the raw materials of joking (i.e. the incongruities of humor as social incongruities), and at several later points, I discuss other ways in which humor is social (e.g. how a given joke conveys social information about the speaker who makes it and the listener who laughs at it, and how a joke can reconfigure the rhetorical dynamics and relational/hierarchical differences among participants).

### **2.3 Putting Incongruity to Work**

Before I attempt to do so myself, it will be useful to see how incongruity as an analytical concept tends to be applied to humorous discourse. Lewis claims that because “incongruity is an element of structure, it has been most clearly isolated and studied by psychologists who manipulate joke structures in their research. Such manipulation demonstrates that, stripped of its incongruity, a joke is no longer a joke” (9). By and large, most of the textual “manipulation” that Lewis refers to here centers around “punch-line” humor.<sup>38</sup> For instance, in an attempt to put forward a general “technique” of joking,

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<sup>38</sup> This is not to suggest that *only* these kinds of analyses utilize the term “incongruity,” which is far from the case. However, most of the time, the folks who employ these ideas as a critical methodology for discourse analysis are engaged in close, text-based “script” comparisons and interpretations. In most other instances where incongruity is a topic, it tends, itself, to be a point of discussion, but not necessarily a strategy for examining humor.

Freud spends the first half of *Jokes* in an extended formal analysis of linguistic joking mechanisms. Much like in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud's theories in *Jokes* follow from his close-readings of a multitude of specific examples, and the vast majority of these employ humor based on some sort of linguistic incongruity, or what Cicero calls "the unexpected turn" (202). E.M. Dadlez argues that incongruity, in general, springs from such a turn: "It is the *exposure*, the whipping off of masks and concealments, that is startling and unexpected. This is where the incongruity lies. And the startlement and unexpectedness are enjoyable or satisfying because they involve a revelation or insight" (13). The moment of incongruity "exposure"—we might reuse my term "collision"—is ultimately important in the overall trajectory of humorous discourse, from this perspective at least, because if the punch-line fails to land, if the mask of incongruity is fumbled with rather than "whipped off," then the whole humorous enterprise fails as well.<sup>39</sup>

In current humor scholarship, the so-called Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) is probably the most regularly employed linguistics-based incongruity theory.<sup>40</sup> Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, two of the most prominent names in humor studies, are the main promulgators of this theory, and their analytical schemes continue to be cited and used to analyze humorous discourse. Describing the SSTH, Attardo writes that "SSTH shares its ontological foundation with transformational generative grammar: the

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<sup>39</sup> This concept aligns fairly elegantly with Jeffrey Walker's definition of "modern enthymeming" as "a stylistically intensified argumentative turn that serves not only to draw conclusions but also, and decisively, to foreground stance and motivate identification with that stance" (55). What else is laughter if not an "identification" with the stance of a humorist on the funniness of a joke?

<sup>40</sup> This method, and system-based humor studies in general, are more common in Europe than the United States. The most significant humor studies association and its affiliate journal, *Humor*, are centered in Europe as well, though the journal regularly features articles by Americans and about American subjects.

SSTH is meant to account for the native speaker's humor competence" (196). That is, the whole aim of the SSTH enterprise, examples of which tend to be tedious to parse, is to explain, with as much precision as possible, the linguistic origins and operations of verbal humor—why a particular combination of words might be funny to someone, in other words. The basic explanatory premise of SSTH is that all “joke-carrying-texts” must be “compatible, fully or in part, with two different [and opposing] scripts” (197). By “scripts,” Attardo means the context-based understanding of a word or phrase that a person brings to text; thus, “script” is a shorthand way of saying “the way/s a person might interpret a text.” These analyses tend to begin by quoting a joke text, then proceed by breaking it down into its opposing scripts to see how these scripts lead to a potentially humorous resolution in the punch-line.<sup>41</sup> As Attardo notes, however, the SSTH is limited to analyzing the linguistic *potential* for humor; it cannot be used to assess the value or “quality” of a joke text (214). He writes: “For the SSTH, a good joke and a bad one were indistinguishable” because the methodology only recognizes linguistic incongruity; it has no means for judging the relative success of that incongruity for humor creation (214).

Though they are fairly few and far between, there are scholars who attempt to build from and extend the scope of the common linguistic theories of humor by applying these theories to aspects of humor beyond, or in addition to, the punch-line. Chief among these writers is Neal Norrick, whose several recent articles use the SSTH as a starting

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<sup>41</sup> Because most of the jokes examined in these studies are not very funny, and because I know a joke that works well for this kind of analysis, I will use it here. First, the joke: Louis XIV says to one of his court jesters, “Make a joke about me”; the jester responds, “*Je suis désolé, mais le roi n'est pas un sujet.*” (I'm sorry, but the king is not a subject.) The jester, understanding the precariousness of his position, creates a job-saving (and perhaps head-saving) joke/non-joke by invoking two different “scripts” for the concept of a “subject.” In the literal sense, a king is technically not a subject (to another's authority), and, thereby, is also not an appropriate subject for a joke (a kind of discursive authority). However, by invoking the pun, the jester does fulfill the king's request by making a joke about him, or at least about the concept of kingliness.

point for discussing other aspects of humor. One article, “Toward the Conversational Performance of Narrative Jokes,” discusses “timing” in narrative jokes because this aspect of humor not only goes unaccounted for in standard script-theory analyses, but is completely unnoticed. In another, “Laughter Before the Punch Line,” Norrick examines how narrative joking creates laughter “anywhere besides just after the punch line” (75). In a very similar study, Villy Tsakona uses the term “jab lines” to label discourse elements that inspire laughter outside of punch lines in narrative jokes. Both writers point out that laughter, and therefore humor, in narrative joking occurs at various points in a text, some of which contain linguistic incongruities and some of which apparently do not. They also reveal that while “jab lines” can be structured similarly to the “whipping off,” revelatory form of most punch lines, they do not *have* to be, which suggests the need for a more inclusive and flexible approach for using incongruity as a means to examine humor. Also, the shared focus on narrative jokes in these texts implicitly argues that these sorts of jokes require a different lens for study and, perhaps, also offer the opportunity for a more complex, nuanced portrait of incongruity and humor. This possibility will be of particular importance in the following analysis of southern sitcom humor, because even though a sitcom is not strictly a narrative genre (but is, instead, a dramatic one) much of its humor springs from sources of incongruity beyond the normal scope of the SSTH, in ways very similar to those in narrative-based joking.

#### **2.4 Play and Play-Frames in *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies***

This incongruity analysis of *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* builds off of two key concepts: 1) language play and 2) play-frames. The concept of language play is pervasive in modern communication and rhetorical studies, at least



partially because of its connection to popular poststructuralist writers, like Derrida, but also because it captures the essence of the ironic discourse that much of poststructural analysis tangles with. In his seminal essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida describes play as “the disruption of presence,” meaning that, as we have previously seen with irony, play always implies the possibility of a “not” in a text (292). Because discourse involves a continuous “chain” of signification, no utterance can ever *mean* by itself; to signify, it must be connected to this chain (292). All communication is a reflexive movement between what is said/written and the possible re-statements that follow; the space between statement/restatement opens up discourse to play—and, thus, to incongruity as well. Certainly, more commonplace meanings for play enter into Derrida’s conception also. In “Plato’s Pharmacy,” he describes the “god of writing” as “[s]ly, slippery, and masked, an intriguer and a card, like Hermes, he is neither king nor jack, but rather a sort of *joker*, a floating signifier, a wild card, one who puts play into play” (93). Here, play clearly relates to amusement, gambling, gaming, and obfuscation. Play signifies risk and the unknown and depends on, to follow Derrida’s metaphorical lead, a kind of discursive sleight-of-hand, to function; that is, playful discourse cannot be too explicit about how it is playing or the game ceases to exist. If we know everyone’s hand, there is no play to make, and if we know the punch-line, there is really no joke to make. In his discussion of Bergson and the functioning of metaphor, Kenneth Burke contributes to this understanding of play and its fundamental role in the functioning of communication. Burke writes:

As the nearest *verbal* approach to reality, M. Bergson proposes that we deliberately cultivate the use of contradictory concepts [metaphors]. These will not give us the whole of reality, he says, but at least they will give us something more indicative than is obtainable by the assumption

that our conceptualizations of events in nature are real, and to be taken as fundamental enough for brilliant men to set about scrupulously treating these necessary inadequacies of thought and expression as though they reflected corresponding realities in nature. (94)

Though counterintuitive if we believe that there is such a thing as “straightforward” or “sincere” non-metaphoric language, the argument here is that jokes, or ironic discourse in general, allow us to *more honestly* approach a reality imbued with or, to use English’s terminology, “structured in” incongruity. If we acknowledge the futility of any attempt to capture a stable “whole of reality” in anything more than a very limited and transitive sense, then play—as movement, as change, as possibility for difference—becomes the operative quality of humorous discourse. In what is probably the most cited and thorough theoretical immersion into the concept of play, Johan Huizinga writes, “In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (1). Put another way, play is explicitly performative in that it does not pretend at transparency, as “normal,” propositional discourse often does. Taking this into consideration, we can examine how *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* foreground language play to create humor and also (perhaps inadvertently) approach reality more honestly.

*The Andy Griffith Show* (hereafter *Griffith*) premiered on CBS in 1960, aired 249 episodes over 8 seasons, and was among the most popular shows on television throughout its run. Episodes continue to be widely syndicated on both network and cable channels. Similarly, *The Beverly Hillbillies* (hereafter *Hillbillies*) premiered on CBS in 1962, aired 274 episodes over 9 seasons, and was arguably more popular<sup>42</sup> than *Griffith*. And while

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<sup>42</sup> Whitt describes *Hillbillies* as “one of the most critically despised and publicly acclaimed situation comedies in American television history” (229).

its legacy in syndication has not quite stood the test of time as well as *Griffith's*, its impact still lingers as a synecdoche for the collision of high- and low-brow culture that formed the premise of the whole show. For the most part, both shows eschew the kind of moral ambiguity and “savagery” that Andrew Silver marks as being the defining characteristic of 20<sup>th</sup> century Southern literary humor, as seen in the writing of Erskine Caldwell, among others (“Laughing Over Lost Causes” 63). Instead, most incongruities on these shows are farcical and lighthearted<sup>43</sup>—at least superficially—and arise due to what Norrick calls “Contrast,” which “involves the exploitation of dissimilarities between separate discourse systems for humorous effect” (“Interdiscourse Humor” 392). That is, usually the audience is being invited to laugh at someone or some situation that is ridiculous and fairly inconsequential. And in rare cases, usually on *Griffith*, we are invited to laugh along with a character on the show, most often Andy himself.<sup>44</sup>

Because language play so thoroughly pervades the text of most *Hillbillies* episodes,<sup>45</sup> you could almost choose one at random and immediately find several examples of how incongruity normally operates on the show. In the first season episode “The Clampetts Get Psychoanalyzed” for example, Jethro, whose lack of brains is recognized even by the other members of the Clampett family, winds up visiting a

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<sup>43</sup> I want to emphasize that the *humor* is farcical and lighthearted, not necessarily the whole storyline. Some episodes, particularly in the early seasons of *Griffith*, regularly trended toward the sentimental and melodramatic.

<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, one of the most notable differences between earlier seasons of the show and later ones (aside from the move to color and the absence of Don Knotts, the show’s comedic center) is the progression of Griffith’s character. In early seasons, he is often the point of reason and wisdom in the middle of otherwise ridiculous situations, yet in later seasons, he, too, is made to be part of the absurdity. Griffith did not play “silly” anywhere near as well as he did “folksy.”

<sup>45</sup> There are two main, interconnected reasons for this: 1) the plots of most episodes are razor-thin on substance, which is doubtlessly one of the reasons why the show never garnered much critical acclaim, and 2) what substance the plots do have usually derives from one or more instances of incongruity-based confusion.

psychiatrist to get a “certificate of health,” which will allow him to continue pursuing his fifth-grade education.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, we are immediately in the realm of absurd incongruity, given that one of the things we are meant to go along with is a grown man (somewhat) earnestly pursuing his 5<sup>th</sup> grade education along with normal eleven-year-olds. This is a fairly regular story-line on *Hillbillies* that a number of episodes riff on. However, the incongruity erupts in this episode, specifically, because the Clampetts are so ignorant of the civilized world that they have no way of discerning among different kinds of doctors. Granny, whose homeopathic remedies factor into a number of storylines, requires Jethro to stick out his tongue so she can judge his health. She then flicks it with her finger, declares him healthy, and tells him to “Get back to school!” However, when Jethro informs her that the certificate must come from an “M.D.,”<sup>47</sup> Granny assesses the ridiculousness of the situation, saying, “I been doctorin’ better’n 60 years! [...] Ehhhh! City doctors. Ehhhh!” (“The Clampetts Get Psychoanalyzed”). The situational humor created in this scene stems from the linguistic vagueness of the “M.D.” abbreviation, the meaning of which the Clampetts can only guess. Like much of the incongruity on *Hillbillies*, the humor in this scene is derived from the Clampetts’ good-faith misinterpretation of a seemingly commonplace concept, which none of the other characters in the show even think of explaining to them. This misinterpretation is, of course, abetted by Granny’s presumption that all “doctorin’” is essentially the same, and that one “Mrs. Doctor’s” declaration of health is as good as any other “Mr. Doctor’s.”

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<sup>46</sup> Jethro is in his mid-twenties at this point.

<sup>47</sup> Naturally, none of the Clampetts know what “M.D.” stands for and assume it must mean “Mister Doctor,” to which Granny responds, “Well, I’m a M.D.—Mrs. Doctor!”

The verbal interchange between Jethro and the psychiatrist, Dr. Twambley, that follows this scene provides an even clearer and more representative instance of the linguistic play that typifies the humor of *Hillbillies*. After witnessing a man suffering from a “return to infancy complex” leave Dr. Twambley’s office, we see Jethro bop in, literally as innocent as a baby:

Dr. Twambley: “Would you, uh, like to tell me all about yourself and why you’re here?”

Jethro: “Well, why I’m here is that I can’t go to school ‘til I get ex-aminated by you.”

Dr. Twambley: “I see. Just lie back and relax.”

Jethro [plopping down on the psychiatrist’s couch]: “Well, thank you!”

Dr. Twambley: “Now suppose you tell me about this problem you’re having at school.”

Jethro: “Well, my biggest problem is stayin’ awake while the teacher’s talking.”

Dr. Twambley: “Well, that might be nothing more than a benign, subconscious rejection of authority represented by the teacher. It doesn’t mean that you necessarily lack interest, or capability, or intelligence. Above all, you mustn’t let this cause you any distress. Together, we will probe into the underlying causations and . . .” [He is interrupted here by Jethro’s loud snoring.] So good to feel needed.” (“The Clampetts Get Psychoanalyzed)

Dr. Twambley’s immediate assumption that Jethro’s “problem at school” is psychological in nature is understandable, given that he thinks Jethro has been required to see a psychiatrist. Thus, on one hand, his approach makes sense; both he and Jethro are operating from honest, if completely mistaken, scripts—both of which happen to be incongruous with the actual situation and with each other. However, even upon meeting Jethro and hearing his explanation that he struggles to stay awake in class, Dr. Twambley

fails to reassess his assumptions, which allows the humorous incongruity to play out. The doctor's instant launch into psychobabble is a recognizable stereotype of medical professionals, which is immediately countered by Jethro's—albeit unintentional—assessment: snoring. Because neither character can think outside or beyond his expectations, even when appearances and actions speak loudly against them, neither character understands the other in the slightest. Jethro has no frame of reference, besides Granny's tongue flicking, to judge one doctor from the next, and Dr. Twambley, who is so completely immersed in the ideas of psychoanalysis that he talks to the portrait of Freud hanging on his wall, automatically assumes that anyone who steps in his office must have “underlying causations” to “probe.” We, of course, know that there is nothing “underlying” the kiddie pool that is Jethro's psyche. Because we *can* see the play of incongruity in the scene, we can laugh at the characters' ignorance. This scene is shot through with incongruities, and they often cut in multiple directions. For instance, Jethro's Southern dialect is contrasted with the professional discourse of psychiatry, which is itself satirized through incongruity when it puts Jethro into a deep sleep, and we in the audience are left to wonder who we more identify with: the bumpkin asleep on the couch or the pompous psychiatrist who put him there.

The first season episode of *Griffith* “Andy the Matchmaker” provides another example of incongruity operating in dialogue of a sitcom text. The episode begins with Andy's “inept deputy Barney Fife”—famously played by Don Knotts—tendering his resignation, something he does several times during his tenure on the series (Graham 344). In this instance, Barney is quitting because he thinks he caught Opie making fun of him:

Andy: “Now whoa just, just a minute now. ‘Fore I accept your resignation, I got to have a little explanation here. Now, just *ease* back and tell me what’s got into you.”

Barney: “This is the last straw, Andy. It’s bad enough there ain’t any deputyin’ for me to do, but I don’t like to be teased about it.”

Andy: “You was a, you was *teased*?”

Barney: “That’s right, and by your own son, Opie.”

Andy: “Well, what happened?”

Barney: “I seen him do it. I caught him red-handed.”

Andy: “Well, what’d Opie do?”

Barney: “You don’t believe it, do you? Well, I didn’t think you would. [...] He wrote a poem about me on the wall of the bank!”

Andy: “What poem?”

Barney: “I wrote it down. [Pulls folded piece of paper from his pocket.] I’d like to offer this as fool-proof evidence. [Reading.] ‘There once was a deputy called Fife. / He carried a gun and a knife. / The gun was all dusty, the knife was all rusty, / cause he never caught a crook in his life.’ Now that’s undermining the dignity of the law! It makes out like I, I never wanted to catch crooks, and that just ain’t so! I’d catch ‘em in a minute, but how am I gonna catch ‘em if there ain’t any, for heaven’s sake? If only somebody would just commit a crime. One good crime! If only somebody would just ... kill somebody.”

Andy: “Barney!”

Barney: “Oh, I don’t mean anybody we know.” (“Andy the Matchmaker”)

Though this is a fairly short interchange, several incongruous elements come together to create humor. First of all, though they are both speaking with stereotypical Southern accents, Andy’s slow, drawling style of speech—compared to Barney’s sharp, fast style—serves as a potential source of incongruity, particularly because of Andy’s position of authority as sheriff. In several instances, Andy slows down and stretches out words,

like “ease” and “teased,” which makes them sound unusual, and which also highlights the contrast between his character and his hyperactive deputy. Secondly, Barney’s main complaint is that he has no crime to stop and no criminals to apprehend, incurring the derision of Andy’s six-year-old son. However, Opie’s graffiti<sup>48</sup> does provide Barney with a crime to stop and “evidence” to collect—just not the kind he hopes for. Finally, Barney works up to his declaration that “if only somebody would just . . . kill somebody,” his life would be a whole lot better, which serves as the main punch-line in this interchange. The fact that Barney cares so much and is hurt so deeply by the taunts of school-children stands in contrast to the no-nonsense portrayal of the law enforcement business in contemporary police dramas such as *Dagnet*. Similarly, the ridiculousness of a police officer wishing for a crime to solve should be clear-cut, but presented as it is in this text, Barney’s unethical desperation comes off as funny and endearing, because we know that the likelihood of his wish for a murder being fulfilled in Mayberry is about as likely as seeing an African-American character with a speaking part on *Griffith*.<sup>49</sup> The incongruity in this scene depends primarily on the audience’s understanding of what “real” police work is versus what they see portrayed in Mayberry, which is enhanced by Barney’s obsession with being more like a “real” police officer instead of being grateful for his easy job, which he still manages to botch with regularity.

Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham posit this same kind of “audience awareness” as one of the main features in Old Southwestern humor: “Character,

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<sup>48</sup> Further adding to the humor of the scene and Barney’s mounting feelings of inadequacy is the subsequent revelation that Opie doesn’t yet know how to write, so Barney has, in fact, failed to solve even this “crime.”

<sup>49</sup> Which is to say, not very likely.



language, and comic physical movement are all essential considerations in the Southwestern sketches, but underlying the most successful is a tension which the reader senses” (xix). In other words, the incongruity at play in Southern humor often works on two separate yet simultaneous registers: the in-frame and the out-of-frame.<sup>50</sup> In “in-frame” incongruity, the incongruity at work is explicit and the information needed to make sense of it is provided nearly completely in the text; while in “out-of-frame” incongruity, the audience must bring ideas and perspectives into play with the text because the necessary contrasts are not completely supplied for them. Even though a text can employ both types of framing, making the distinction is helpful for analysis. But before going further with this specific argument, it is essential to have a good hold on what critics mean by the idea of a “play-frame” in the first place.

If play is, as Derrida terms it, “the disruption of presence,”<sup>51</sup> then the play-frame is the 1) the cognitive space or “field” that allows that disruption to take place and 2) the necessary context for making sense of that disruption. Thus, play without framing—without rules and limitations—doesn’t really “play” and becomes more like chaos. The metaphor of the frame comes up in a number of discussions on play and humor, and in most cases, the depictions align well with one or both of the two meanings just described. Concerning the first meaning of play-frame, Huizinga notes that one principle requirement of play is its “limitedness,” its need for a defined and “secluded” field of play: “Play is distinct from ‘ordinary’ life both as to locality and duration. [...] It is ‘played out’ within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning” (9). Much like the ordinary structure of a sitcom plot, the play-frame exists

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<sup>50</sup> My terms.

<sup>51</sup> I like the phrase: “incongruity in action,” which, as far as I know, is of my own creation.

more or less disconnected from the world that surround it. As Huizinga puts it, “Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is ‘over,’” and what came before and after the frame is possibly unknown and of little consequence, either way (9). William F. Fry argues that without the play-frame “humor is not comprehensible as such,” because the incongruity that marks humorous discourse would seem “peculiar, or assaultive, or eccentric” otherwise (57). The frame calls attention to the playfulness of the discourse and tells the audience, “Seriously, I am joking”—the paradox that Fry sees at the heart of all humor (57).

Derrida, too, speaks in terms of limitations—the finite versus the infinite—when he invokes the metaphor of a “field of play” in “Structure, Sign, and Play”:

If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite language, but because the nature of the field—this is, language and a finite language—excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, [...] instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. (289)

By repeating the phrase “that is,” Derrida essentially “performs” the conceptual point he is making here. With each new iteration, Derrida is both referencing and un-referencing the iteration that came before, which both adds to the layers of meaning present in his discussion and detracts from the precision of any particular one of his iterations. The field he plays within is finite—limited by the structures of language and his audience’s shared sense of those structures—but the individual playful iterations that are possible within those structures are infinite.

Kozić further describes this first sense of the play-frame as providing “the insulation” needed for incongruity play to occur, and by this, she means that a frame acts

as a signal to the audience that the “normal” rules of reality and discourse do not necessarily apply here (108). The frame is a kind of “cue” that the “rules of logic are relaxed” in this space (Kozic 108). In the cases of *Griffith* and *Hillbillies*, their respectively famous opening and ending credits sequences provide just the kind of play-frame cue that Kozic describes. The opening credits for *Griffith* show Andy and Opie walking together down a dirt road, presumably in the backwoods outside Mayberry,<sup>52</sup> fishing poles in hand. Opie is barefoot, and the end of his jeans are rolled up, Tom Sawyer style. Andy wears his sheriff’s uniform, but in his customarily casual way. Part of the time, they hold hands—Opie is only five or six<sup>53</sup>—and part of the time Opie throws rocks into the pond just off-screen. The instantly recognizable whistled theme song is dubbed over by a game-show-announcer voice that reads the name of the show and principal actors, as was typical (and necessary) with radio shows. A modified version of the theme music provides the sound for the show’s end credits as well. The overall effect of the opening sequence, which totals a mere 20 seconds, is like distilled televisual nostalgia (even for 1960), and it provides a tangible play-frame for the humor of the show to work in, as surely nothing too serious or transgressive could happen in such a place, populated by such wholesome, simple folk. The opening and closing sequences of *Hillbillies* are possibly even more famous and closely associated with the

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<sup>52</sup> Doubtlessly filmed somewhere in Southern California, like the rest of the show.

<sup>53</sup> When the show moved to color for its sixth season in 1965, the opening sequence was reshot and the sound rerecorded. Though the shot mirrors the original in many ways, the changes make an immense difference. The contrast between color and black & white is startling, but the more subtle discrepancies actually seem to have a bigger cumulative effect: the pitch of the theme song is lower, giving it a less chirpy, bright sound; Don Knotts’ name is absent for the first time; Opie is significantly older (about 12), making his rolled-up jeans and rock throwing seem more forced, less genuinely childish; and instead of holding hands, Andy places his hand on Opie’s shoulder, clearly indicating that the central character dynamic of the show has changed—while the whole premise of the show is that in Mayberry nothing ever really changes.

show than those of *Griffith*. If the opening of *Griffith* is a romanticized and heavy-handed vignette that represents the general texture and sentiment of the show, the opening sequence of *Hillbillies* is a neon billboard. The theme song, “The Ballad of Jed Clampett,”<sup>54</sup> recorded by the famous bluegrass musicians Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs, lays out the complete premise of the show, in the unlikely event that a viewer is seeing it for the first time. The visuals of the sequence follow along as the song narrates, showing Jed inadvertently discovering oil on his land in the Ozarks and the family’s subsequent move to Beverly Hills in their homemade truck, which Whitt describes as being “reminiscent of the Joad truck in *Grapes of Wrath*, but this time the mountain family is smiling, hopeful, and charmingly naive” (241). One might argue that it is easy to be “smiling, hopeful, and charmingly naive” when you have stumbled into millions of dollars, but the consistent refrain of *Hillbillies* is that these people were like this before they got the money and would continue to be if they lost it all—which is itself a regular plot feature used on the show. The Clampetts are continually being grifted and conned by people from California and people from the Ozarks, yet they always manage to keep their wealth and their positive outlook on life.

As is the case in *Griffith*, the sitcom plot structure is probably the single most significant framing device that allows for play to occur within the course of each episode. Due to their brevity and episodic nature, sitcoms usually cannot cover much ground, in terms of plotting, per episode, especially since most of the screen time is devoted to humorous dialogue. However, the limited nature of sitcom plots does not mean that they

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<sup>54</sup> This song, a staple for most banjo players, was #1 on the Country Top 100 chart for three weeks in 1962. Concerning its cultural influence, Barbara Ching writes that the song has been “continually rewritten to tell the story of Southern ne’er do wells; I have heard stories of men named Jim Baker or Bill Clinton” (210).

do nothing, go nowhere, or require nothing of their viewers.<sup>55</sup> Much of what a sitcom does or does not provide, in terms of information and narration, factors into the second, but no less important, meaning of play-frame: framing as contextualization. That is, a play-frame in discourse works as a kind of lens which sets the boundaries of play for a text, as we have already seen, and it also serves as a reference for making meaning in a text full of incongruity. The frame guides interpretation by limiting meaning, by downplaying<sup>56</sup> some meanings and strongly suggesting others. Arthur Koestler's discussion of humor in *The Act of Creation* provides the basis for this understanding of framing. Koestler says: "The pattern underlying all varieties of humour is 'bisociative'—perceiving a situation or event in two habitually incompatible associative contexts. This causes an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic or 'rule of the game'" (95). The term "habitually" is critical to the idea of play-framing as lens, because a play-frame works by anticipating and using "perceptions" of normality as the space for staging the "fusion" of incompatible scripts that leads to humor (Koestler 94). Chris Holcomb invokes the language of viewing in his explanation of Koestler's point here; Holcomb writes, "Without this double-vision, so to speak, there would be no jest" (71). In other words, play-frames must be based, generally, on audience expectations and preconceptions as a way of providing the necessary common ground for incongruity perception to take place. Or conversely, if *everything* in a text had to be interpreted to be understood, then the humor is likely to fail. Thus, it should be

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<sup>55</sup> *Seinfeld*, the quintessential "show about nothing," is dense with verbal play and cultural references, which is why the "plot" of a typical *Seinfeld* episode can be summed-up in one sentence: the gang waits for a table at a Chinese restaurant ("The Chinese Restaurant"), or while on a trip to the country, the gang visits a boy who lives in a hermetically-sealed bubble ("The Bubble Boy").

<sup>56</sup> As we will see shortly, humorous play frames, by definition, cannot completely refuse meanings.

no surprise that most of the characters on *Griffith* and *Hillbillies* take one stereotypical form or another; a subtly nuanced character would take too long to create and be too comedically unpredictable to not cause problems to the fairly rigid sitcom structure.

Which brings us back to the idea of in-frame versus out-of-frame incongruity. The two sitcoms discussed here provide a nice complement for each other in this regard, because while the humor in *Griffith* is mostly based on out-of-frame incongruities, the humor in *Hillbillies* is mostly<sup>57</sup> based on in-frame incongruities. The “in-ness” or “out-ness” of a particular frame does not have to do with whether or not a character on the show is laughing at the same joke as the audience. Only occasionally do characters, in either kind of framing, apprehend the humor in the same distanced way that the audience does,<sup>58</sup> and often humor “stems in large part from the fact that the characters are not in on a joke that the episode’s audience gets” (Detweiler 728). Instead, in-ness or out-ness depends on whether the audience must supply one of the “two habitually incompatible associative contexts” or not (Koestler 95). In the case of *Griffith*, Mayberry is usually presented *as normal*, and if you find *Griffith* funny, it is probably because the situations and general mode of living in Mayberry strike you as incongruous with your perception of “real” life. In real life, Andy would tell Barney to quit his whining and get back to work; or more likely, Andy would have fired Barney many, many mishaps ago. On the other hand, most of the humor in *Hillbillies* comes from misunderstandings and miscommunications that happen between characters on the show or that come about because of the cultural collision that is the show’s founding premise. Yet, there are many

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<sup>57</sup> I say “mostly” in each case because neither show is all of one thing and none of the other.

<sup>58</sup> This is less true in some recent meta-comedic shows, such as *Seinfeld*, *The Office*, and *Modern Family*, where on-camera and off-camera laughter regularly coincide.

occasions when these shows offer more—when *Griffith* gives us in-frame incongruity and when *Hillbillies* gives us out-of-frame incongruity—and it is these moments that open up the possibility for satirical, critical interpretations of these texts.

Some critical discussions of *Griffith* and *Hillbillies*, and sitcoms generally, focus only on the obvious jokes and ignore the (often implied) social commentary working in the texts. For instance, Kozić takes an unfortunately simplistic approach to how play-frames operate in sitcoms, writing, “What a play frame does is indicate that what is unfolding is not to be taken seriously. [...] It is this playful approach to the boundary between reality and unreality that marks humour off from serious discourse, and effective communication presupposes that signals are given to indicate which realm one is operating in” (110-111). If we could read humorous, *play-full* texts as simply serious or not-serious, then I would not have a problem with Kozić’s argument here, but ironic discourse does not allow for this clarity. Elaine Chun says it succinctly: “Still, the boundaries between frames – for example, between *non-serious* frames, such as comedy and joking, and more *serious* frames – are not always clear” (281). In fact, humorous texts, like sitcoms, necessarily complicate the not/serious “boundary” because they are framed and presented as a dramatized versions of reality-told-funny. Many shows—*Griffith*, *Seinfeld*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, etc.—further blur this distinction by using an actor’s actual name in the title and script of the show. Pushing the societal and cultural importance of sitcoms even further, Paul Wells argues that “the sitcom is the most appropriate site for these small acts of political and ideological ‘smuggling’, [sic] and this is central to the genre’s endurance and constant rejuvenation in the American context” (181). Thus, by approaching *Griffith* and *Hillbillies* from a more open-ended

perspective, we can begin to see how “[t]he distances between signifiers and what they signify, between what speakers mean and what they say, and between what is said and what is understood, become both subjects and vehicles of satire” (Knight 119).

Taken at face-value, *Griffith* presents itself as the totality of its opening sequence: sweet, rural, innocent, familial, and whimsical. Eric Detweiler says the show espouses “communal family values,” and it is one of his two primary examples of “[c]ompassion and heart in sitcoms”<sup>59</sup> (743). None of these adjectives are wrong, but they are not completely right, either. As often as *Griffith* is compassionate in some way, it is scathingly (if perhaps passive-aggressively) critical in others. The most striking examples of this are the occasional in-frame incongruities presented. These normally take the form of an outsider coming into Mayberry, which alone is usually enough for conflict to ensue. These outsiders are most often urban and/or non-Southern,<sup>60</sup> or they are hicks from the countryside beyond the town.<sup>61</sup> Both cases—the urban and ultra-rural outsider—are presented as the bizarre quantity in the play-frame; Mayberry is always the gauge that measures the acceptable and unacceptable on the show.

Specifically in the case of Ernest T. Bass and the Darling family, Mayberry seems to be the place that offers the chance at upward mobility and societal respectability. In nearly every instance that these characters appear, they are looking to find an acceptable mate, either for themselves or their progeny. Apparently, the marriageable resources in

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<sup>59</sup> The other is *Happy Days*. Apparently Ron Howard is the key to a sentimental sitcom.

<sup>60</sup> The range of characters here is wide. Most often these characters are from Mount Pilot or Raleigh, the “big” cities nearest Mayberry, but they sometimes wind up in town from much farther away. One particularly far-fetched recurring character is Malcolm Merriweather, an English butler on holiday in the U.S.—a kind of reverse Beverly Hillbilly.

<sup>61</sup> Most notably, the musically gifted but backward Darling family and the rock-throwing, nearly-feral Ernest T. Bass.



the hills have been completely exhausted, and thus, they must come to town to replenish the stock. Invariably, these episodes milk the hillbillies' bizarre behavior and ideas for humor by posing it up against the, presumably, normative behavior of the folks in Mayberry. In one famous example, Andy and Barney attempt to civilize Ernest T. Bass in order to take him to a party so he can meet some girls. They do a passable job, until at the party, Ernest T. can no longer contain his wild urges and reverts to his "natural" state of uncouth redneckery. This progression is invariable in the other episodes that play on this cultural and societal division; the hillbillies always eventually reject the "civilized" ways of Mayberry, and return to their "proper" place—out of sight in the mountains. Whenever these people are in town, they are a problem to be dealt with; and while Andy may always handle them good-naturedly, he never invites them to stay. We can certainly say, as Silver does about most twentieth-century Southern humor in *Minstrelsy and Murder*, that the show furthers "middle-class political agendas in response to times of acute social crisis" by "overdetermin[ing] the otherness of the poor, even while appropriating the rural poor's antiauthoritarian energy to define themselves over and against the upper classes" (189). Graham levels a similar criticism, specific to *Griffith*:

The timing of the show could not have been more ironic, for it premiered just months after black students in Greensboro, North Carolina, launched the lunch counter sit-in movement. [...] Entirely white and almost untouched by contemporary social or political upheavals, Mayberry offered a weekly testament to a nostalgic (white) ideal of American life, a fact not lost on Griffith and Knotts, who, Griffith has said, were intentionally evoking their memories of the 1930s South. (345)

In this way, *Griffith* stands as a sort of unintentionally self-satirizing text, which is made all the more remarkable and disconcerting because of the show's continued popularity. *Griffith* only "brings an innocent, *common* and timeless 'feel'" to a very segregated and

willingly naïve audience (Wells 181). Does this then mean that *Griffith* is not the light-hearted, return to the good ‘ole times that its fans want it to be? Of course not. But like most of the similarly white-washed and rosy-cheeked sitcoms of the ‘50s and ‘60s, *Griffith* is probably best remembered as a light-hearted, return to the good ‘ole never-was times.

In contrast, no one likely thinks of *Hillbillies* as an honest remembrance of good times past, yet it, too, offers potential moments for social satire and commentary, and since it does not have the saccharin-sweet sentimentality of *Griffith*, any criticisms it makes do not include quite the same moral baggage. That is, it is clear that we should laugh at pretty much everyone on *Hillbillies*; this is not always so clear on *Griffith*. In fact, Whitt argues, rather convincingly, that *Hillbillies* “functioned as surprisingly deft and often double-edged social commentary” (230). The Clampetts’ persistent ignorance of and inability to adapt to modern life are certainly the most common play-frames for the humor in *Hillbillies*, as one misunderstanding breeds further misunderstandings and increasingly ridiculous scenarios. Yet, nearly just as regularly, *Hillbillies* offers a perspective that showcases and satirizes the absurdities of the “high-life” in Beverly Hills. Whitt argues that, though seemingly simplistic in its presentation, the undeniable, “underlying, unsettling theme of *The Beverly Hillbillies* remained: a consumer culture is driving technology and is alienating us from ourselves. Even Granny, a consummate nonconsumer, could not save the television audience from the commercials that interrupted the situation comedy” (240). Again, this deep and multi-layered irony is absolutely not part of the in-frame incongruity of *Hillbillies*—which is dominated by the campy, critically derided verbal humor discussed earlier—but must be read into the text

by “the comparatively sophisticated viewer” (Whitt 231). Yet, in another twisting turn of irony, the very “sophistication” that would allow a viewer to see the satire at play in *Hillbillies* contains an indictment of the worldliness and “alienation from self” that Whitt says the show satirizes. This critical irony comes through most clearly in the character of Ellie May, who serves as the good-natured heart of the show. The primary incongruity of Ellie May’s character is that she is, by far, the prettiest girl around, but she remains blissfully unaware of her femininity and its power, and instead, prefers to spend all her time “rasslin” and taking care of her “critters.” Because Ellie May does not constantly look at herself through everyone else’s eyes, she is not obsessed with her appearance, and instead of being “alienated from herself,” she seems completely attuned to herself and generally resists the urgings of her family to be more ladylike, as well as the constant stream of eligible bachelors seeking to court her.<sup>62</sup>

## 2.5 Conclusion

How, then, are *Griffith* and *Hillbillies*, as examples of Southern humor, structured in contradiction? That is to say, with Cicero, what is the source of their humor? Incongruity provides the foundation for humorous discourse, but functionally, incongruity works to create humor through play. And play, as incongruity in action, requires a limited field—a play-frame—to operate within. Thus, humorous stories are, from their very outset, “structured in contradiction” by establishing a play-frame that an audience can conceptually grasp, then putting incongruous elements—which individually must also fit into contextual frames—into play with each other within that frame. These incongruities create humor by exposing contradictions that already exist in the collective

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<sup>62</sup> Though, to be fair, most of these suitors are just as interested in marrying into Jed’s fortune as anything else.

consciousness of an audience, but framing these incongruities is necessary in order to ensure they create humor instead of fear or anger. To put it mildly, this can be a fairly complex and nuanced process containing many variables and chances for failure, yet successful humorists make it seem completely natural. The next chapter will discuss some of the ways they accomplish this feat, focusing primarily on how humorists create and use personas of joking authority to their advantage.

## CHAPTER 3

“AT ONCE COMMANDING AND NAKED”:<sup>63</sup>

### *ETHOS AND THE STANDUP HUMOR OF ANDY GRIFFITH AND JERRY CLOWER*

The preacher’s dual allegiance—responsible to God and people, imitating one and imitated by the other—should be internally coherent. But the division introduced by that duality, like the one between words and deeds, could also make the preacher’s persona dangerous. (41)

– Claire M. Waters, *Angels and Earthly Creatures*

Now we should turn to the role of the joker. He appears to be a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity. (372)

– Mary Douglas, “The Social Control of Cognition”

When ancient writers, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, discuss humor as a rhetorical device, they most commonly do so in terms of its relationship to *ethos*. According to Aristotle, *ethos* is the “seeming” of a speaker to his audience: “for it makes much difference in regard to persuasion [...] that the speaker seem to be a certain kind of person and that his hearers suppose him to be disposed toward them in a certain way” (*On Rhetoric* 112). The character that a speaker presents derives not just from the words he says and their possible meanings, but, as Douglas describes, also from the “certain way” these words are delivered, and from many other habits of discourse. These many attributes, manners, and actions culminate in the speaker’s *ethos*, the “certain kind of person” that he appears to be to the audience. Regarding the use of humor in

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<sup>63</sup> Laurie Stone, *Laughing in the Dark*, p. xiii.

persuasion, Cicero goes so far as to claim that a speaker “must be permeated, so to speak, with a nature, a character that is suited to these types [of humor]” (204). Thus, working from Cicero’s third question regarding laughter, “should an orator want to stir up laughter,”<sup>64</sup> this chapter aims to investigate 1) why maintaining an identifiable *ethos* is so critical in the humorous event and 2) how two of the most famous and successful Southern standup comedians of the twentieth-century, Andy Griffith and Jerry Clower, accomplish this task through various rhetorical techniques that they rely on in their comedy (186).

### 3.1 The Importance of *Ethos* in Humor

If we accept the claim from the previous chapter that irony, in one form or another, is the essential quality of the incongruent “scripts” that make up the text of a humorous event, then in a literal sense, a humorist is one who operates and markets in irony, a notoriously “slippery” mechanism to employ (Hutcheon 116). Because irony is such a challenging concept to explain—much less control—most of the scholarly discourse that is specifically concerned with the humorist’s persona and character rightly focuses on the performative balancing act<sup>65</sup> humorists must constantly negotiate between irreverence and authority, or to invoke Claire M. Waters’ binary: “between earth and heaven” (2). Describing Thomas of Chobham’s “concept of ‘doubleness,’” Waters writes that “the body’s potential to reinforce the preacher’s words, quickly turns to the body’s potential to undermine those words,” which nicely summarizes the dilemma of “Holy

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<sup>64</sup> *Tertium sitne oratoris, velle risum movere. De Oratore, II.lviii.235*

<sup>65</sup> “As an entertainer, the fool must strike a balance, or seesaw motion, between folly and wisdom” (McMullen 15).

Duplicity” in Late Medieval preaching that Waters explores (41). Describing the exact same function of irony, in general, Hutcheon claims that “while irony can be used to reinforce authority, it can also be used to oppositional ends—and it can be suspect for that very reason” (29). Essentially, a preacher’s *ethos* derives from his dual persona as both an instrument of God and a fallible human being, and the mediation of this duality can be a powerful rhetorical tool—for good *and* for evil.

Both the preacher’s and humorist’s personas can be used to manipulate audiences into highly aroused states—religious exaltation, on the one hand, and hysterical laughter on the other—and both grant their purveyors a kind of cultural “immunity” that lets them say and do things that “normal” people would not be allowed to get away with (Douglas 372). But whereas the duplicitous danger of the preacher’s persona lies in being too “earthly,” the danger for the humorist, ironically, lies in being too “heavenly,” too disconnected from the audience by the slipperiness of irony. Speaking to this point, specifically about Mark Twain’s humor, Florence says, “The persona must have some identity, some underlying sustainment; as readers, we must have some sense of Mark Twain, the persona and implied author, as a being, a mind, if his narratives are not to lapse into chaos before us” (15). To avoid this “lapse into chaos,” the humorist must maintain an *ethos* that his audience can identify and trust enough to let the incongruity of the discourse do its subversive work without dissolving away all meaning.

Concerning the importance of the humorist’s persona to the audience, Florence pulls no punches: “For something to be funny, it must enter the humorous world of the humorous mind. Should that world shatter, should that mind [...] disintegrate, should the reader no longer sense [sic] a manufacturing and controlling presence, a force for humor

in the work, then the writing lapses into the banality of ordinary existence” (16). Though Aristotle is not quite so dramatic as to suggest that the unregulated or careless use of humor might lead to complete semantic chaos or complete banality, he does suggest, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that the best use of humor or “wit” in discourse falls along a social middle-ground, avoiding the extremes of the unrestrained and excessive “buffoon” and the non-humorous “boor” (103-104). The main attribute of the “ready-witted” speaker for Aristotle is “a sort of readiness to turn this way and that; for such sallies are thought to be movements of the character, and as bodies are discriminated by their movements, so too are characters” (103). Thus, successful humor requires a kind of mental gymnastics, which allow a speaker to assess a discursive situation and deploy a “tactful” movement. The two key aspects for Aristotle’s conception of ethical humor, then, are the speaker’s ability to know what kind of humor will be appropriate in a given situation and to be ready and able to deliver the humorous discourse effectively.

Extending Aristotle’s conception of a speaker’s *ethos* in *On Rhetoric*, Greenbaum argues that a “comedian must create a comic authority, a persona, which invites the audience to respond to the conversation by laughing. If the audience dislikes the comic, the jokes, no matter how well written or delivered, will not produce the desired result” (35). And, much like Aristotle, Greenbaum acknowledges the necessary “risk” involved when humorists “engage themselves with the audience” (35). Because humor as a form of discourse can always fail for purely semantic reasons, adding another possible instability in the form of a shaky *ethos* could certainly have disastrous effects on any comedian’s performance. But when well-established and maintained, a performer’s *ethos* provides a solid foundation for both the performer and the audience to cleave to, in order to



withstand the chaotic force of the joking text. Fine and De Soucey use the term “embedded” to describe this contextual situatedness of the humorist’s persona in relationship to his audience and vice-versa:

First, joking is *embedded*; it occurs within the context of an on-going relationship. As a general rule, joking does not occur between strangers. [...] To joke requires individuals who are aware of and are considerate of each others’ identity. The joker must know the target (and the audience), and the target and audience must know the joker. This relationship gives the joker the *right* to joke. (2-3)

All of these writers emphasize the familiar quality of the relationship that needs to exist between speaker and audience, if the humor event is to be successful. And clearly, the responsibility for creating and maintaining this relationship falls completely on the speaker and his ability to quickly fashion an appropriate persona for himself in the minds of his audience.

Among the ancient writers who discuss humor in oratory, Cicero’s treatment or “excursus” on humor in *De Oratore* provides the most thorough exploration of both the importance of and the possible ramifications to a speaker’s *ethos*, when engaging in the use of humor. While Cicero’s discussion of humor, in general, relies heavily on Aristotle’s writing on the subject, he does spell out a theory on the “source” of humor that conceptualizes the speaker’s delicate relationship with his subject matter: “The seat, the region, so to speak, of the humorous [...] lies in a certain dishonorableness<sup>66</sup> and ugliness.<sup>67</sup> For the only, or at least the most important way of making people laugh is to point out and mark something dishonorable in a way that is not itself dishonorable” (186). Cicero then claims that “it is indeed clearly fitting for the orator to stir up laughter

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<sup>66</sup> *Turpitudine*: ugliness, baseness, disgrace (Cassell’s 229).

<sup>67</sup> *Deformitate*: deformity, ugliness, disgrace, dishonor (Cassell’s 62).

[...] because it shows the orator himself to be refined,<sup>68</sup> to be educated,<sup>69</sup> to be well bred<sup>70</sup> (186). Clearly, in Cicero's rhetorical context, what and who were laughable were easily divisible from those who did the laughing, and the dividing line was Roman culture itself. To a well-trained orator, calling upon the behaviors and bodies that signaled an inappropriate or unseemly *ethos*, then using them to disparage his opponent would have been second nature. However, the inherent danger, which Cicero implicitly acknowledges, is that in the act of conjuring, some of the ugliness and dishonorableness might rub off on the orator, marring his *ethos*. For this reason, the orator who chooses to engage in humor must firmly establish his *urbanum* credentials; there can be no doubt about where his real character lies. Discussing the concept of *prudentia*<sup>71</sup> in *De Oratore*, Robert W. Cape, Jr. argues that, for Cicero, the greatest of orators is he who can combine practical experience with formal education—someone who has learned all the rhetorical tools and also has the cultural savvy and grace to know when and when not to use them. This understanding coincides perfectly with Cicero's stance on the use of humor in oratory: that employed elegantly, humor further raises the orator above that which he mocks, but employed inelegantly, humor can equate the orator with the deformed and disgraceful.

While Freud does not discuss *ethos* per se in *Jokes*, he does construct a three-person schema for joking in which the first-person is the teller of a joke, and like the classical writers before him, Freud recognizes the detrimental effects that telling jokes

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<sup>68</sup> *Politum*: polished, refined, accomplished (*Cassell's* 171).

<sup>69</sup> *Eruditum*: instructed, educated (*Cassell's* 80).

<sup>70</sup> *Urbanum*: of a city (esp. Rome), urban, refined, elegant, witty (*Cassell's* 231).

<sup>71</sup> “[K]nowledge gained from experience, rather than from theoretical speculation” (Cape, Jr. 39).

can have. However, as Freud's primary emphasis is on the psychical aspects of joking and less on the rhetorical ones, he argues, "An urge to tell the joke to someone is inextricably bound up with the joke-work; indeed, this urge is so strong that often enough it is carried through in disregard of serious misgivings" (143). For Freud then, the persona that the joker presents to his audience is less important than the working of the "joke-work" on both joke teller and listener. Using Freud's work as a launching pad, James F. English expounds on the inherent social nature, and instability, of the humorous event. According to English, even though "humor seeks to shore up identifications and solidarities, it does so by working on those very contradictions of 'society' which assure that all such identifications and solidarities will be provisional, negotiable, unsettled" (10). From the perspective of the humorist attempting to "shore up" his *ethos* for an audience, English's argument serves to highlight Cicero's exhortation to *prudentia*; that is, while identities in humor will always be "negotiable"—always possibly dishonorable—the prudent orator will be most able to anticipate and negotiate the edges of the identities he plays with.

Because the humorous event necessitates a certain amount of social and/or semantic transgression, the establishment of an identifiably "humorous" *ethos*—that is, a persona of one who *is* funny and who is in control of that funniness—is especially critical, especially in standup humor. Such a persona grants the humorist a unique kind of "immunity," which several scholars discuss at length. Douglas says that "[the joker] appears to be a privileged person who can say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity. He is by no means anything like a taboo breaker whose polluting act is a real offence to society" (372). Ostensibly, the actual "taboo breaker" would not be

granted the same social immunity as the joker because “they have let go their moorings and are temporarily displaced” from the normal social order (372). To use Cicero’s terminology, actual taboo breakers are the ugly and dishonorable in society—even if only temporarily. The joker, on the other hand, “merely expresses consensus” for the community; in other words, his job is recognize and point out these taboo violations, but to also do it in such a way as to create laughter and alleviate social tension, rather than to ratchet up social tension and possibly create actual physical violence. As Fine and De Soucey explain, “The joker cannot be called on the implication of his or her remarks, because ostensibly there are no implications” (17). That is, if the joker is merely expressing in a unique and affective way what the group already thought, how can the individual be held responsible for the group’s commonly held, “if not socially approved” beliefs (Mintz 74)? Thus, Douglas refers to the joker as a “ritual purifier,” who “lightens for everyone the oppressiveness of social reality, demonstrates its arbitrariness by making light of formality in general, and expresses the creative possibilities of the situation” (372). Mintz echoes this conceptualization, calling the comedian a “*shaman*, leading us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogeneous understanding and expectation” (74). The language that Douglas and Mintz use here shares a great deal with Waters’ understanding of the preacher’s duality. Though he discursively deals in the more negative aspects of society, the joker actually serves an overwhelmingly positive purpose, much like a religious leader: by enacting and maintaining a persona of duality—which puts his own character at no small risk of “infection”—he encourages community stability and purification.

However, there is a darker side, a more ominous potential, to this understanding of humorist as purifier. In his discussion of the Greek concept of the *pharmakon* in *Plato's Pharmacy*, Derrida theorizes on the nature of a rhetor who maintains an *ethos* so infused with irony—the primary characteristic of the *pharmakon*—that it becomes the dominating characteristic. Explaining the concept as he conceives it, Derrida says that “the word *pharmakon*, even while it means *remedy*, cites, re-cites, and makes legible that which *in the same word* signifies [...] *poison* (98). That is, even while serving as a social stabilizer, the *pharmakon* causes pain, because “[t]here is no such thing as a harmless remedy” (99). The *pharmakeus*,<sup>72</sup> a speaker who uses and embodies the *pharmakon*, then is one who necessarily causes pain and pleasure, or “painful pleasure” (99). Understood as such, the distance between the speaker and “the objectionable” narrows, until the speaker, or humorist in this case, goes from being a *shaman* to being the social scapegoat himself—à la Socrates in Plato’s *Defense*. He then becomes the embodiment of that which is both absolutely essential to the identity of the community and absolutely unacceptable, and in purging him, the community purges the unacceptable from the community as a whole. Mikita Brottman emphasizes this point: “the stand-up comic has traditionally functioned as a cultural scapegoat, manifesting our deep-seated antisocial urge to admit what we truly feel” (119). However, most humorists<sup>73</sup> avoid being literally purged from society because their discourse takes place within the structured play-frame of the entertainer’s stage, whether on television, radio, or an actual auditorium stage.

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<sup>72</sup> Sorcerer and/or magician (Derrida 117).

<sup>73</sup> With the unusual exceptions of people like Michael Richards, whose comic *ethos* could not save him from the magnitude of his social transgressions.

Focusing his discussion around the term “abjection,” John Limon brings together the discursive concepts of Derrida in an analysis of standup comedy that describes the symbolic act of social purging that comedians perform on-stage. Limon explains his multifaceted use of the word “abjection,” writing: “I mean by abjection two things. First, I mean by it what everybody means by it: abasement, groveling prostration. Second, I mean by it what Julia Kristeva means: a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable” (4). For Limon, standup comedy and humor, generally, serve as “a way of avowing and disavowing abjection,” or as Cicero might say, a way of pointing out what is dishonorable without becoming dishonorable oneself (4). And Limon is not unaware of the necessity for persona duality in standup; he writes, “Stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial” (6). More precisely, humorists must be both natural *and* artificial, or their personas must contain both. Their artificiality comes from the clear and present fact of their position as entertainers in the act of performing in front of an audience, and their naturalness must—or at least *should*—come from their ability to make their performance fluid, unencumbered, and seamless. Holcomb discusses the importance of this combination of artifice and naturalness, called *sprezzatura*, in jesting in the early modern court: “The challenge, therefore, of the spontaneous jest [...] is not to avoid premeditation, but to erase all signs of premeditation so that listeners will think that the spontaneous jest is a natural extension of the courtier’s grace, a trait that sets him apart from his inferiors” (71). Both Limon and Holcomb also recognize the paradoxical position of humorists in relation to their audiences. In one sense, the humorist is the authority: “The comedian works from above his audience: he

looks down on them as upon children [or parishioners] and lectures them” (Limon 26-27). Yet, the humorist is dependent on the audience to “make his jokes into jokes” (Limon 27). And if a joke fails to work, coming across as “too contrived or overly calculated,” an audience can exert its authority harshly—“an authority not only to evaluate the success of the jest but also to define the character of the one who delivers it” (Holcomb 71). Establishing a carefully crafted and executed character of seeming naturalness and authenticity, then, is the key to delivering powerful, effective humor without being infected by the dishonorableness inherent to it.

Chun provides an excellent explanation and analysis of how one standup comedian, Margaret Cho, establishes and uses a complex *ethos*—that includes both explicitly artificial and seemingly natural elements—to her rhetorical advantage. Chun’s analysis focuses on Margaret Cho’s use of multiple “voices” in her humor. In particular, Chun discusses Cho’s use of both Mainstream American English (MAE) and “Mock Asian,” which is essentially a put-on accent<sup>74</sup> that is most often used when people want to disparage Asian speakers of English:

Cho’s use of stereotypical Asian speech is not a straightforward instance of racial crossing, given that she is a comedian who is ‘Asian’ according to most racial ideologies in the U.S. In other words, she engages in racial crossing practices without symbolically crossing racial boundaries herself, performing the speech of a *racialized other* who is not necessarily a *racial other*. Consequently, while Cho’s use of Mock Asian may necessarily reproduce mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians, she is able to simultaneously decontextualize and deconstruct these very discourses. (264)

Because Cho’s natural or “authentic” accent is of the MAE variety, her employment of Mock Asian is inauthentic, but because she is racially identified as “Asian-American,” her expert voicing of Mock Asian contains a certain amount of legitimacy as well (274).

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<sup>74</sup> Think Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), except not quite as offensive.

During her standup routine, Cho moves quickly and repeatedly between MAE and Mock Asian, and according to Chun, much of Cho's humor derives from this performed problematizing of the boundaries of identity, racism, and mockery. However, Chun also contends that because the distinctions "are not always clear" between Cho's "non-serious" and "serious frames," her humor also makes arguments that are not purely comic in nature (281). By establishing her own *ethos* as one of ethnic and linguistic complexity, Cho works toward *de-othering* Asians, albeit ironically, in addition to "*de-centering whiteness*" (Chun 285). While the moves that Southern humorists make to establish an authentic *ethos* may not be quite as complex as this, it is no less critical that they provide a viable persona for their audiences to hold on to.

### 3.2 Identifying an Authentic Southern *Ethos*

Unlike in the case of Margaret Cho and her "Mock Asian" humor, there are no readily identifiable physical attributes (other than being white<sup>75</sup> perhaps) that absolutely immediately signal "Southern," though there are certainly certain common stereotypes—rough clothing and appearance, buck teeth, and facial hair, for example. However, it is a fairly straightforward task to trace the lineage of what characteristics make up an "authentic" Southern *ethos* in humorous discourse because so many of the identifiable traits persist over time. In "The Origins of the Humor of the Old South," J.A. Leo Lemay traces most of the nascent characteristics in Southern humor to now-obscure folk works from England and America, some of which date from as early as the mid-seventeenth century. Use of a Southern dialect, storytelling, exaggeration, and rural settings are

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<sup>75</sup> Though there are several non-white standup comedians who claim a Southern identity, such as Henry Cho and Alex Reymundo, theirs is always a hyphenated Southern-ness: Asian-Southern, Hispanic-Southern. In fact, two of Reymundo's TV specials are titled *Hick-Spanic* (2007) and *Red-Nexican* (2009). Much of their humor deals with this hyphenated identity.



among the most salient characteristics noted. However, most scholars focus on what is collectively referred to as “Old Southwest Humor,” which comprises folktales, short stories, novels, and plays dating from the early-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> In their introduction to *Humor of the Old Southwest*, an anthology of humorous texts, Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham claim that “Southwest humorists often separated themselves from their characters. [...] The Southwest humorist wanted to laugh at the earthy life around him and to enjoy it, but he did not want to be identified with it” (xvi). However, as time and styles of discourse progressed, the separation between the humorist and the laughed-at characters in a text narrowed, until, by the mid-twentieth century, writers like Caldwell and Flannery O’Connor provide no mediator between the laughing and the laughed at. In modern Southern humor, the comic tension between “knowledge and ignorance” is often left to the audience to sort out, which makes the humorist the locus of both qualities (Cohen and Dillingham xix). This progression, from haughty observer to participant of the “earthy life,” coincides with W.J. Cash’s characterization from 1941 of the quintessential “man at the center” of the Southern *ethos*: the cracker-made-good:<sup>77</sup>

The whole difference [between the Southerner and the English squire] can be summed up in this: that, though he galloped to hounds in pursuit of the fox precisely as the squire did, it was for quite other reasons. It was not that hoary and sophisticated class tradition dictated it as the proper sport for gentlemen. [...] It was simply and primarily for the same reason that, in his youth and often into late manhood, he ran spontaneous and unpremeditated foot-races, wrestled, drank Gargantuan quantities of raw whiskey, let off wild yells, and hunted the possum: —because the thing

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<sup>76</sup> The death of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) in 1910 provides a fitting transition date from “Old Southwest” humor to just “Southern” humor because Twain is, by far, the most famous purveyor of Old Southwest humor and by 1910, the region designated by the term “Old Southwest” no longer contained the western frontier of the country as it did in the early 1800s.

<sup>77</sup> Though he unfortunately does not figure into this work, the ultimate modern example of the cracker-made-good is, of course, Elvis Presley—he of Cadillacs and fried peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

was already in his mores when he emerged from the backwoods, because on the frontier it was the obvious thing to do, because he was a hot, stout fellow, full of blood and reared to outdoor activity, because of a primitive and naïve zest for the pursuit in hand. (30)

For Cash, the *mythos* of the Southern aristocracy is just that, a myth. It never actually existed as a rooted, European-style patrilineal system, but the idea of its existence was used and continues to be used as a justification for the perversions of antebellum Southern society. However, beginning with Cash and H.L. Mencken, the notion of a South easily divided between the sophisticates and the ruffians has become harder and harder to support. The narrative frame often used in Old Southwest humor of the wise and witty observer relating tales of backward hicks<sup>78</sup> has become less and less common, to the point where being a Southern humorist now is all but synonymous with being a “redneck.” In point of fact, Allison Graham claims that “the poor white Southerner may be the most durable and marketable popular ‘product’ of modern Southern culture” (336). Thus, the modern Southern humorist’s *ethos* is an inversion of Cicero’s distinction between the coarseness of the rustic or street entertainer and the polish of the Roman aristocrat; his honorable/dishonorable binary has been flipped. What would normally be regarded as base, ugly, and unrefined becomes the rhetorical markers of Southern authenticity. And, in effect, qualities normally associated with “refinement” and education become the signals of an inauthentic, “put-on” Southern persona.

Yet, as we know, effective humor requires a multiplicity of meaning. That is, the Southern humorist’s “unsophisticated” *ethos* can never be unadulterated, because it must also include the derisive, intellect of superiority that once stood at the forefront of Old

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<sup>78</sup> Clearly this is not a universal technique in Old Southwest humor, as *Huckleberry Finn* is narrated by Huck himself, who is categorically the opposite of sophisticated. It is, instead, Twain’s authentic rendering of Huck’s character that inspires much of the awe and angst directed at the novel.

Southwest humor. Andrew Silver goes so far as to assert that “southern humor is a tendentious discourse which borrows heavily from contemporary and traditional representations of the poor, often to promote, however subtly, middle-class political agendas in response to times of acute social crisis” (189). To conceal the middle-class “reality” that Silver argues for, Southern humorists must use a variety of rhetorical techniques to foreground the “blue-collar” authenticity of their Southern-ness—their “earthliness”—while sublimating the wry jester’s wit that provides the Burkean “perspective by incongruity” which fuels the humorous event.

### 3.3 “Act Naturally”: *Ethos* in the Humor of Andy Griffith and Jerry Clower

In “Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy,” Wuster describes how Steven Martin created his on-stage *ethos* of the “humorous comedian” by foregrounding the artificiality of the standup situation: “The most immediate sign of Martin *playing the comedian* [emphasis mine] is in the absurd piling on of visual elements—white suit, arrow-through-the-head, bunny ears, banjo, balloon animals, etc.” (26). Whereas the humor for most standup comedians comes largely from telling jokes or humorous narratives that stand somewhat apart from their comic personas, Martin’s entire physical presence (which includes the additional irony of the exceedingly bad jokes he tells) becomes the locus of his humor. In other words, Martin’s humor becomes “a type of ‘meta-comedy’ in which the various trappings of comedic performance become objects of laughter in themselves” (Wuster 27). Wuster argues that this “creation of a comic ‘character’” is part and parcel to making Martin’s humor successful, and in this way, Martin’s reliance on *ethos* is quite similar to other humorists, especially Southern ones, who must maintain a distinctly Southern identity for their humor to work. In either

case, we can adequately argue that “[t]his personality is not a direct reflection of the comedian’s true self, but a character that is shaped and developed in order to create a comedic dynamic” (Wuster 25-26). Clearly, it is impossible to make claims about a comedian’s “true self”<sup>79</sup> versus his comedic character, so the question really concerns the foregrounding or masking of the artificiality of that character. Martin’s humor revolves around the explicit ridiculousness of his persona,<sup>80</sup> while Southern humorists emphasize the “reality” of their Southern pedigrees.<sup>81</sup> As such, the perceived in/authenticity of the *ethos* necessary to perform the meta-comedy of Steve Martin stands in direct opposition to the *ethos* typically maintained in Southern humor.

But the burden of “acting naturally” that Southern humorists carry is likely just as demanding and certainly requires as much comedic *sprezzatura* as does Martin’s meta-comedy. Graham discusses this concept in relation to Andy Griffith’s early work in the entertainment industry:

No distancing of performer from performance seemed possible for the country boy: “I can’t just play-act a part; I have to *be* it,” he claimed, verifying his “natural,” uncomplicated, and essentially *inartistic* sensibility. The ingenuous yokel who simply “acts naturally” is hardly a candidate for advanced training in the manipulation and articulation of emotion. Rural artistry, in fact, is often perceived as guileless skill, the product of tradition rather than invention – *folk* art, in other words. (339)

However, Graham’s argument here relates merely to the “perceived” lack of artistry and technical prowess of Southern performers in American popular culture, not their realities.

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<sup>79</sup> Whatever that means.

<sup>80</sup> The ironic awesomeness of Martin’s real/fake, stupid/brilliant comedic character deserves more recognition than it receives nowadays, but as Wuster recognizes, Martin’s humor “plays with the formal limits of what is laughable” and pushes ironic meaning too dangerously close to sheer meaninglessness to be a sustainable kind of performance (36).

<sup>81</sup> For instance, “Larry the Cable Guy,” who was born in Nebraska, which is not exactly the heart of Dixie, never drops his exaggerated redneck persona. Essentially, he is always performing.

And in any case, one could easily interpret Griffith's declaration that he must "*be*" the roles he plays as a, perhaps unconscious, recognition of the level of commitment to a particular kind of *ethos* that his field requires. No matter how we interpret Griffith's statement, however, the degree of seemingly unaffected *ethos* authenticity he achieved throughout his career was remarkable, which Graham notes: "Griffith found his hick persona consistently mistaken for his off-screen and off-stage personality" (338).

There is probably no more expedient evidence to use to establish a Southern *ethos* than actual biographical information,<sup>82</sup> which Mintz notes as being essential to a comedian's self-introduction to an audience: "The comedian then establishes his or her comic persona, discussing personal background, life-style, and some attitudes and beliefs. This allows the audience to accept the comedian's marginal status and to establish that the mood of comic license is operative" (79). Clower prefaces many of his sketches by detailing his biographical data,<sup>83</sup> clearly using it as a way of firmly establishing his Southern credentials in the minds of his audience members:

First of all, I want you to know that I come from Route 4, Liberty, Mississippi. Now that's 12 miles west of McComb, Mississippi; 65 miles due north-east of Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and a 116 miles due north of New Orleans, Louisiana. It was there that I first saw the light of day, out in A-met (Amite) County. September the twenty-eighth, nineteen-hunnerd and twenty-six, I was born there.<sup>84</sup> (Clower)

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<sup>82</sup> Some brief biographical information on Griffith and Clower: Both were born in 1926 to working-class families. Both grew up in solidly rural communities: Griffith in Mount Airy, N.C., and Clower in Liberty, M.S. Both graduated from college: Griffith with a degree in music from UNC, Chapel Hill, and Clower with a degree in agriculture from Mississippi State. While Griffith, obviously, went on to become a national figure in the entertainment industry (see Chapter 2) and Clower remained a primarily regional celebrity, their Southern origins were significant for them throughout their respective careers.

<sup>83</sup> His first album is titled *Jerry Clower from Yazoo City (Mississippi Talkin')*.

<sup>84</sup> In this and all subsequent transcriptions of Clower and Griffith's oral performances, I have tried to render the sound of their speech as closely as possible, while still maintaining readability.

If you know anything about the geography of southwest Mississippi and southeast Louisiana, or you were to look at a map of that area, you will understand why Clower gives Liberty's location in relation to how many miles away it is from these other towns: it is in the proverbial middle-of-nowhere. Thus, it should come as no surprise that many of the stories that follow this standard introduction are about farming, hunting, and other rural activities. In fact, immediately following the description of where he is from in "A Coon Huntin' Story," Clower describes what a typical day's activities included for his household when he was young:

All we had done is just cut down a few fence rows; shuck and shelled some corn and went to mill; drew up some water because that was wash day; helped get the sow back what rooted out from under the net-wire fence; sharpened two sticks of stove wood real sharp and pegged them down over the bottom wire of the fence where the hog couldn't root out no more ... and had a rat killin. [light audience laughter] If I'm lyin, I'm dyin. We had rat killins in those days. (Clower)

This description ends up being fairly inconsequential to the actual point of the story—the coon hunt that would take place that night—nonetheless, it contains several of the most commonly used comedic techniques of Southern standup artists. It includes both exaggeration and ironic understatement, which Cohen and Dillingham describe as being essential qualities of the Southern humor tradition since the early day of Old Southwest humor: "Rich in similes and metaphors and in exaggerations, this backwoods language is characterized by concreteness, freshness, and color" (xvii). Clower begins by framing his description with a subtle understatement, "All we had done is just," and then he goes on to list a quantity of things, each of which logic tells us would probably be a day's work in of itself. From this incongruity, there is certainly the potential for humor. However, when the audience laughs after Clower declares "and had a rat killin," he seems to

attribute the laughter to the ridiculousness of the idea of a rat killing and thus replies, “If I’m lyin, I’m dyin” (“A Coon Huntin’ Story”). This phrase, a common Southern colloquialism, captures much of the fascinating irony that permeates questions of *ethos* in Southern humor, because in one sense, we know Clower *is* lying, or at least exaggerating quite a bit. But we know he is also telling the truth. They did (and probably still continue to, in some areas of the South) have rat killings on farms where grain was stored; and in a very literal sense, he, like everyone else, was dying—just not right at that moment. Hutcheon discusses the difficulty of sorting out this kind of ironic ambiguity, writing that “intention is one of the few ways we have of distinguishing lying from irony. [...] The difference is in lying’s intention to deceive, to withhold information, and irony’s temporary or restricted intention to dissimulate (to an evaluative end)” (118). More than likely, the only “evaluative end” that Clower aims for is laughter, but in any case, his end is certainly not malevolent or negatively manipulative, as we might associate with outright lying. However, Hutcheon’s assessment, particularly with the word “temporary,” could be read to suggest that irony necessarily reveals its deception eventually, which is certainly not the case here. That is, Clower’s audience *could* consciously question the factualness of his descriptions and decide that they are most likely exaggerated or outright implausible, but he does not invite them to do this. He absolutely never says, “Oh, I’m just kidding. We never did any of that stuff, but we *were* pretty busy most days.” It just wouldn’t have quite the same effect. Thus, his stories are presented as fact, no matter their far-fetchedness. Defending this technique,<sup>85</sup> in particular to Southern humorists, Stephen A. Smith writes: “They generally profess to be

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<sup>85</sup> Perhaps in an over-Romanticized and generalized way.

telling facts, but they always tell truths—even when their narrative conversations flirt with fiction” (174). And since comedians are not held to a standard of journalistic integrity as to “the facts,” their “flirtations” (or more) with fiction typically do not seem to bother their audiences. On the contrary, part of what makes Clower’s on-stage persona so strong is his ability to seamlessly blend verifiable fact with exaggeration.

Unlike Clower, most of Andy Griffith’s standup routines are not built around his “real” life-story, family, friends, or birthplace. Instead, his persona is of a rustic storyteller, imbued with seemingly authentic folksy-ness, of the sort that might be used as a sideshow in a county fair: come hear the “country yokel” talk *real* hillbilly talk (Graham 338). Compared to Clower, the style of Griffith’s act makes his *ethos* more clearly a performance—in its extremity—but it also makes it more integral to the act itself—in that he never breaks this character. Whereas Clower’s persona is explicitly as much that of a comedian as it is of a “genuine” Southerner, Griffith essentially “plays it straight.”<sup>86</sup> The character is as much a part of the humor as the words coming out of his mouth, to the point that separating them would destroy the humor completely. This aligns with Cicero’s claim in *De Oratore* that “the more serious and solemn your expression—as it is when you are joking, Crassus—the wittier the things that you say seem to be” (204). In this instance, Cicero may be making fun of Crassus, but in the case of Griffith, the claim holds true. However, this conception of the “all-in” comedic persona poses a problem to Amy Carrell’s conception of “joking competence,” the term

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<sup>86</sup> In this difference, Clower and Griffith are analogous to the comic personas performed by John Stewart and Stephen Colbert on their respective “fake news” shows. Whereas Stewart has always maintained an *ethos* of the comedian-playing-newsman, explicitly there to tell jokes, Colbert’s *ethos*, like Griffith’s, is one of playing it straight—as Colbert would say—“from the gut,” meaning not based in facts, research, or verifiable evidence of any kind. In both cases, an *ethos* of the not-joking comedian creates more ironies, confusion, and satire than the commonplace “these are the jokes” comedian.



she uses to describe a comedian's ability to signal to his audience when a joke is being delivered and when the discourse is "sincere" or "bona-fide" (184). The difficulty with Griffith's bumpkin persona, in regards to the distinction that Carrell wants to assert, is that it makes no room for a truly ironic *ethos*, one that is not sincere *or* insincere, but is almost always sincere *and* insincere.<sup>87</sup>

Griffith's most famous standup routine, "What It Was, Was Football," provides an excellent example of how he uses his persona to create the humor in the text. In this routine, Griffith, in the character of the naïve bumpkin, describes his astonishment and confusion at a college football game that he unwittingly (naturally) got dragged into witnessing. He delivers his descriptions of the game—which include calling the playing field "this purty little, green cow pasture"; the referees "five or six convicts"; and the football a "funny-lookin little punkin"—with nothing but seeming sincerity. In fact, the word "football" never actual comes out of his mouth during the routine, only occurring in the title. In many instances throughout the performance, Griffith responds (in character of course) to the audience's laughter, interpreting it not as being directed at his unwitting ignorance, but at the ridiculousness of the spectacle he is describing. In most instances, his rejoinder to the laughter is simply "They did" or "They was," as in: "And what I seen was this whole raft of people settin on these two banks and a-lookin at one another across this purty little, green cow pasture. [Laughter] Well, they was" (Griffith). These short responses serve much the same purpose as Clower's "If I'm lyin, I'm dyin," in that they make a subtle argument for the sincerity of the persona being put before them. And in Griffith's case, he provides no discernible *purely* "bona-fide" moments, to use Carrell's terminology, which makes it easy to understand why some people assumed that he "really

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<sup>87</sup> Much like Steve Martin's persona, where the jokes are and aren't the jokes.

was” the character of his routines. Like Cho’s use of Mock Asian, Griffith defamiliarizes the same topics he draws from to create humor, including his own identity, and forces the audience to decide what they are laughing at and why. As Dunne and Dunne explain: “[L]isteners can recognize that they have been accepting without question sports conventions that really make no sense. At the same time, the rube who cannot figure out what’s going on is exposed as pretty senseless too” (256). That is, his description of the football game as “the awfulest fight that I have ever seen in m’ life!” may not be the “normal” way that people would characterize the sport, but it is also undeniably accurate (Griffith). This also allows his audience to assume a collective persona of superiority, much like that of the Old Southwestern humorists, who laughed at characters like Griffith’s with regularity.

Even considering the inclusion of biographical information, the manipulation of their voices and the projection of others’ voices is the primary and most powerful way that Clower and Griffith immediately establish themselves as authentically Southern.

Working from the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Douglas J. Glick writes:

One of Bakhtin’s central points was a simple, yet profound one. His concept of “voice” taught us that the semiotics of “sounding like yourself” exists, as it were, only relatively. Indeed, we know today that “how we sound”—or better perhaps, “who we are through speech”—emerges at the interpretive intersection of the many social framings of “speaker types” and “language in use” in interaction with cultural ideologies and other aspects of the ongoing context of interpretation. (291)

Glick further emphasizes the importance of language and voice in the performance of standup humor: “Given the essentially empty and thus ‘imaginary’ stage, it is primarily language that is used to bring into shared existence the kinds of knowledges that are key to an understanding of the performance’s humor” (294). According to Glick, then, the

humorist's individual voice only exists as an identifiable persona through the interpretive interaction of speaker and audience. And since the medium of standup is primarily language itself, the humorist's *ethos* depends almost totally on his ability to shape language effectively. Furthering this point, Smith remarks that Southern humorists "have a keen understanding of language," which allows them to be funny without seeming to work for it (174). They speak the vernacular fluently, in other words, and for Christie Davies, the use of regional speech variations in humor "is not a mere put-down based on class or region for it also indirectly affirms and celebrates those patterns" ("Scottish Jokes" 112). And in the case of humorists looking to establish their personas as solidly working-class and Southern, there is no more efficient means than to employ the "local modes of speech" (Davies 111).

In terms of their verbal performances, both Clower and Griffith use fairly consistent, but quite individually different, dialects in their performances. For example, while both regularly "drop the -g" off of words ending in "ing," which is one of the most common and identifiable Southern dialect features,<sup>88</sup> only Griffith extensively employs what is called "a- prefixing,"<sup>89</sup> another distinctly Southern dialect feature, but one more associated with Appalachian speech, which may help explain why only Griffith uses it. While it would be possible to perform a point-by-point linguistic dissection of these two humorists' dialects, for the purposes of this analysis, it seems sufficient to conclude that

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<sup>88</sup> Though it is certainly not unique to Southern dialects and has been associated with speakers of working-class backgrounds across regional and ethnic lines (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 175).

<sup>89</sup> In this technique, an "a" is placed before participial verbs ending in "ing," as in Griffith's comment that "I looked down there, and I seen five or six convicts *a-runnin* up and down and *a-blowin* whistles" (Wolfram 45).

they both operate within the range of Southern dialects in their humor and this adds to the credibility of their respective *ethos*.

In addition to the accenting features that these comedians use, they also regularly voice other sounds that fall outside of the easily-defined verbal range, but that enhance their characters nonetheless. Robert A. Stebbins notes this as a fairly common technique in standup comedy, saying: “Often verbal content is augmented with a range of theatrical embellishments such as special costumes and props, grunts, snorts, and howls, bodily movements and facial gestures” (3). Clower, in particular, routinely takes the “grunts, snorts, and howls” to extremes that Stebbins’s description just does not quite capture.<sup>90</sup> Simon J. Bronner uses the terms “whoops and hollers” in an attempt to convey the sense of Clower’s sounds (497). The most instructive and certainly the most famous example of Clower’s embellishments comes at the climax of “A Coon Huntin’ Story,” where a man that Clower was coon hunting with, John Eubanks, has climbed to the top of “the biggest sweetgum tree in all of Amite River swamps” in order to knock out a raccoon their hounds had treed. But upon reaching the “coon” in the tree, John realizes that it is not a raccoon, and is instead a lynx—or as Clower puts it, “a souped-up wildcat”—which proceeds to maul John:

*Whaaaaooooowwww!* You could hear John squallin.

“What’s the matter with John?”

“I don’t have no idee.”

“What in the world is happenin to John?”

*Knock’im out, John!*

*Whaaaaooooowwww! This thing’s killin me!*

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<sup>90</sup> In all honesty, these are noises that must be heard to be appreciated.

The whole top of the tree was shakin. The dogs got to bitin the bark of the tree and fightin one another underneath the tree, and I was kickin'im, "You, dogs get away! What's the matter with John?"

*Knock'im out, John!*

*Whaaaaooooo! This thing's killin me!* And John knew that Mr. Barron toted a pistol in his belt to shoot snakes with. And he kept hollerin, "Hooooo, shoot this thing! Have mercy, this thing's killin me! *Shoot this thing!*"

And Mr. Barron said, "John, I cain't shoot up in there. I might hit you."

And John said, "Well just shoot up in here amongst us. One of us got to have some relief." ("A Coon Huntin' Story")

The phrase "Knock'im out, John!" has become a short-hand way to refer to this sketch, one that is synonymous with Clower himself. Undoubtedly, the last line of the sketch does work as a kind of punch-line, or resolution, to this narrative, but the laughs garnered by Clower's crescendo of "whoops and hollers" leading up to the final line are just as big. In many of Clower's routines, his unique blend of folksy sayings and these "embellishments" seem to lead to the majority of the laughs, which argues for the primacy of his comedic persona and performance style instead of the "material" itself. Or from another perspective, Clower's "material" is just as much located in his performative techniques and *ethos* as it is within the textual script he follows.

By far the most commonplace voicing technique used by standup comedians, of almost all varieties, is called "character footing," a term which Jason Rutter fashions from Erving Goffman's more general notion of "footing" and which Rutter describes:

refers to the voice that is adopted by stand-up performers for only a short period of time within a stand-up sequence. These changes in voice act not only as indicators of who said what in the telling of a narrative but, in stand-up especially, as tools for ordering the interaction. Character footing is usually associated with either the quotation of a character in a narrative [...] or the creation of a character in a narrative. (317)

Character footing allows comedians to perform a multitude of voices and personas in a one-person routine. Glick discusses the British comedian Eddie Izzard's virtuosity with character footing, where he regularly shifts quickly between several characters. Part of the humor in Izzard's performances comes from the frenetic yet brilliantly orchestrated nature of his "dialogic" monologues. And as is the case in Margaret Cho's use of character footing in *Mock Asian*, the development of multiple voices both demonstrates the humorist's dynamic comedic persona and allows her to separate, if only tenuously, her "authentic" voice and persona from the ones created by the footing. Footing also allows a humorist to distinguish between voices—that is, to stratify different voices and social types and subgroups within the same general dialect community. Clower regularly uses character footing in his routines, much in the same way that writer's use dialogue in telling narratives. For instance, in "A Coon Huntin' Story," every time a character other than Clower's own<sup>91</sup> says something, as in "Mr. Barron said" or "John said," is an example of character footing. In these cases, the footing is fairly straightforward and mostly meant as a dramatized way of progressing the story. However, in the well-known sketch "Marcel's Talkin' Chainsaw," Clower uses character footing to establish the cultural power dynamics and class distinctions at play in the scene. The main character in "Marcel's Talkin' Chainsaw" is Marcel Ledbetter, a (presumably fictional) childhood friend of Clower's who appears in multiple routines.<sup>92</sup> In this story, Marcel is returning

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<sup>91</sup> One could probably make the argument that Clower's character's voice *in* the story is somewhat different than his comedic voice *telling* the story, but that gets pretty fuzzy pretty quickly.

<sup>92</sup> The Ledbetters appear as a group in several of Clower's routines and typically serve as examples of the poorest of the poor and most ignorant of the ignorant, as when Uncle Versey—the paterfamilias—argues against the church purchasing a new chandelier, thinking it is an obscure musical instrument, when the church is most in need of new lighting. Whenever the Ledbetters make an appearance, Clower makes a point of reciting all of the children's names in quick succession: Ardel, Burnel, Raynel, W.L., Lenel, Odel, Udel, Marcel, Claude, Neugene, and Clovis.

home on a particularly hot summer day, having spent the day hauling pulpwood to the paper mill in McComb, and decides to stop at a “beer joint on the county line” for a “big Nehi belly-washer” to cool off (Clower). However, because of Marcel’s appearance and lack of civilized attire—“there was nothing between him and the Lord but a pair of overalls”—he gets nothing but abuse from the people at the roadside bar; one of the customers goes so far as to call him a redneck. The climax of the story also provides the title, because after being refused service, Marcel retrieves a chainsaw from his pulpwood truck and proceeds to saw through the screen door to the bar. Clower, of course, voices Marcel, his detractors, and most memorably, the chainsaw in this scene. And while Clower does not noticeably differentiate his dialect when voicing the different characters, he firmly establishes a tone of condescension in the characters in the bar. And while the joke ends up being on the bar owner and his patrons, once Marcel gets through destroying the door, their assessment and mockery of Marcel as a rough “redneck” is never really refuted. That is, Clower’s use of character footing allows him to inhabit multiple perspectives in this story, none of which is necessarily his own and, by virtue of being the storyteller, none of which are not his own.

Though it does not coincide with Rutter’s definition of character footing as a “briefly” inhabited voice, one could argue that Griffith’s ubiquitous bumpkin persona operates similarly to more standard character footing in that he is putting on a voice as a way of “ordering the interaction” in the routine between himself (as character and storyteller), the story, and the audience. Rutter distinguishes this technique from character footing, however, because “adopting a theatrical persona [...] takes stand-up away from its [sic] position as the ground zero of performance comedy to a more

theatrical style” (317). While there certainly is a difference in the degree of transparency between Griffith’s onstage persona and Clower’s, both are undoubtedly “theatrical” in the sense that they are performed for the benefit of the audience and the humor, in general. For this reason, Rutter’s distinction seems a little unnecessarily narrow.

In any case, Griffith does also rely on more traditional character footing techniques in several of his “retellings” of famous texts, which include “Andy and Cleopatra,” “Swan Lake,” “Opera Carmen,” and “Romeo and Juliet.” In each of these routines, Griffith recites what Jeff Foxworthy might call the redneck version of the famous story, and he often provides multiple character voices, though always through the filter of his own performed voice. Much of the humor in these retellings comes from Griffith’s mispronunciations and rustic translations of heightened and foreign language. In “Romeo and Juliet” for instance, Griffith describes Romeo seeing Juliet for the first time, saying: “Everything was a-goin good, til all of a sudden this girl Juliet come down the stairs, and he [Romeo] was so struck by her, that he gave a soliloquy right there. [Laughter.] He did! And it wasn’t about bein or not bein; it was about doin or not doin. [Loud laughter.] Well, the dos won out over the don’ts.” Similarly, in the retelling titled “Andy and Cleopatra,” Griffith haltingly recites a Latin phrase spoken by Julius Caesar to Cleopatra: “*Ars mutatis longa vita mutandis brevis.*”<sup>93</sup> He then translates the phrase as follows: “As sure as the vine twines round the stump, you are my darlin, sugar lump” (Griffith). The intertextual<sup>94</sup> play that Griffith engages in with these retelling routines

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<sup>93</sup> The phrase itself is the scrambling of two common Latin phrases: 1) *Ars longa, vita brevis* and 2) *Mutatis mutandis*.

<sup>94</sup> Arguing that parody “is one of the many forms of intertextual allusion,” Simon Dentith writes: “At its most obvious level [intertextuality] denotes the myriad *conscious* ways in which texts are alluded to or cited in other texts: the dense network of quotation, glancing reference, imitation, polemical refutation and so on in which all texts have their being” (5).



exemplifies how he uses his persona to balance high and low culture against one another for the sake of humor, at the expense of both high and low culture.

With these retellings, Griffith creates parodies of famous texts, and he also enacts a parody of the homespun storyteller through his textual choices and his subsequent bulldozing of them. This blending of high and low matches Greenbaum's assessment of how "comedians establish and maintain their comic *ethos*": "by strategically aligning their discourse to conform to the dialogic style [...] which mixes voices, questions authority, and embraces class distinctions, with the comedian aligning him or herself with the lower classes, even while ostensibly making fun at their expense" (38). By taking his material from canonical works of art, Griffith implicitly puts himself in a position of learned authority, yet through his humorous mangling of these works, he deflates their importance and "aligns" himself with a lower-brow perspective. Neither perspective stands without the other, and neither creates humor without the other. Though it easily overlooked, Griffith also situates his character in contrast to the football crowd in "What It Was, Was Football." Griffith begins the story, saying: "It was back last October, I believe it was, we was a-gonna hold a tent service off at this college town, and we got there at about dinner time on Saturday." Though he never refers to it again during the routine, Griffith's character is in this "college town" because he is travelling with a religious group that is there to put on a tent revival, a practice that is not without its own cultural significance in the South. This juxtaposition of the literally religious culture of the South and the pseudo-religious culture of college football is one of the more subtle and overarching jokes in the routine, but it, too, relies upon what Michael Pearson, echoing Cicero, calls a "comic discordancy" between "two styles, one literary and the

other vernacular” (53). While he never renders any famous plays into his Louisiana vernacular, Clower also builds his comic *ethos* by juxtaposing himself against “high” culture in a number of his sketches. For instance, in “The Resort Hotel,” Clower begins by complicating the “high/low” distinction by describing how his career in the entertainment industry has altered his income bracket: “You know I ain’t gonna lie to y’all. Since I backed into show bizness, I have been making above-average means. And I never did know how some of the more affluent folks lived.” But he then proceeds to describe how once when he was doing a comedy show at a fancy resort hotel (the kind of place where the bellman wears a “claw-hammer tailed coat”), all he wanted to do was lounge around in his room and watch college football. However, he was unable to because this hotel was so fancy that they didn’t have televisions in the guest rooms—to which Clower responds: “Man, they got televisions at them \$8.88 a’night.” Without a TV in his room, Clower must go to the hotel lobby to watch Nebraska play Alabama, where a group of “high-society women” requests that the channel be switched to a tennis tournament instead of football. Clower replies: “Ladies, I love everybody. But y’all are fixin to read in the morning paper, big headline, all the way across the page, ‘Grand Ole Opry Star and Born-Again Southern Baptist Whups Four Women at the Rich Hotel!’” Clower’s unique position, as an unreformed country boy with money allows him the opportunity to observe the high-society culture without actually being part of it. He must comprehend the ways and styles of the “rich folks” without falling prey to them, and he must be able to translate this meeting place of high and low for his audience. It is from the balancing of these two styles that the *ethos* of the effective humorist emerges. By keeping multiple possibilities in play, the balanced humorist leaves much up to the

audience and the “joke-work” it performs to sort out and resolve the tensions and ambiguities upon which humor relies.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In the overall spectrum of the humor event, the persona of the humorist serves as a kind of fulcrum, balancing the incongruous semantic text on one side and the interpreting audience on the other. The humorist is a conduit (conceptual and sometimes physically) through which humor flows, but which also shapes and molds the discourse. *Ethos* plays a large part in the form and style of this movement because the humorist must inhabit a character that is both authentically funny and, in the case of this analysis, authentically Southern. Southern standup comedians, including Andy Griffith and Jerry Clower, use a range of techniques to form their *ethos* for their audiences. However, as Silver argues, while Southern humorists want to align themselves with lower-class voices in order to establish themselves as “authentic,” their humor actually works from a middle-class perspective. That is, because Southern humor tends to derive from a blending of high and low, the persona of the humorist can never be exclusively an *ethos* of the dishonorable, to use Cicero’s terminology. As Silver explains, the middle-class character of Southern humor reinforces the existing cultural “boundaries of class and race even while experiencing the thrill of transgressing them” (188-189). However, several prominent humor theorists, including Freud, English, and Davies, question both our ability to accurately identify the targets of humorous discourse and the actual ability of humor to *do* anything beyond create laughter. Consequently, Chapter 4 explores the complex and dynamic relationship between Southern humor, its audience, and the tendentious power of laughter.

## CHAPTER 4

“THAT AIN’T FUNNY IS IT, SIS?”:  
AUDIENCE, LAUGHTER, AND HOSTILITY IN THE HUMOR OF LEWIS GRIZZARD  
AND JEFF FOXWORTHY

Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. (5-6)

– Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*

Laughter may be the social equivalent of pain, the *group* incorrigible. (11-12)

– John Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*

Laughter is the clearest, most immediate, and—in nearly all cases—the most desirable feedback that a humorist can receive. The previous chapters hold water only if we assume that while humor and laughter are bound up together, they are not synonymous. Laughter is an integral part of the humorous event, yet because it is not exactly a *crafted* part of the humorous text and is not directly under the control of the humorist, laughter—and the laughing audience that produces it—is probably the most elusive aspects of the humorous event to quantify and explain. And like the other primary ingredients of the humorous event, laughter is fundamentally paradoxical. That is, while an individual’s laughter is often involuntary—something one is “made to do”—an audience’s collective laughter (or refusal to laugh) often determines whether or not something is considered

funny in the first place. Discussing his fourth question of humor,<sup>95</sup> Cicero argues that “the limits within which things are laughable” depend on knowing and aiming for what an audience will laugh at and accept as laughable (Sutton 375), and for Cicero, those limits exclude the excessively wicked and wretched from the realm of the laughable: “Our audience wants villains to be wounded by a weapon more forceful than humor, and do not want the miserable to be mocked, unless they happen to behave arrogantly” (187). The power of what the collective audience “wants” determines the limits of the laughable, but this “want” is often an unspoken one, sometimes an unspeakable one, which is why successful humor often depends on the element of surprise and the well-turned phrase, in order to give the audience what it “wants” in such a way as it will accept. Cicero puts it this way: “Such faults, if ridiculed in a neat sort of way, will not fail to make people laugh” (187). Clearly, no one party controls laughter in the humorous event; it is instead better understood as a negotiation.

Referencing Hélène Cixous’s “Laugh of the Medusa,” Shari Zeck claims that “laughter is in and of itself transgressive, [...] it is the eruption of the body into the symbolic” (223). Zeck goes on to underscore the limitations of laughter’s transgressiveness, but the larger point remains: genuine laughter is a kind of spontaneous and uncontrolled “eruption” whose transgressive power pushes in all directions. Stone compares it to a “sneeze,” writing that laughter “isn’t deliberated but bursts forth, almost always from a sense of wickedness. [...] As Mel Brooks puts it, ‘Comedy is when you accidentally fall off a cliff and die. Tragedy is when I have a hangnail’” (xiv). Seen this way, there is something perverse and hostile in laughter. No one fears the joke itself, but

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<sup>95</sup> *Quartum, quatenus*: “The fourth question: to what extent must the humorous be employed?” (187). Also translated as “the limits of [the orator’s] license” (Sutton 373).

many people have a great fear of being laughed at, and these writers also focus on the danger of laughter to the ones laughing as well. Excoriation by laughter—of both the laugher and “laughee”—lies at the heart of joking and reveals, as close as possible, the fundamental nature of humor as a rhetorical mechanism. This nature is further complicated by the many different forms and purposes of laughter. For instance, laughter can be voluntary or involuntary, fake or real, forced or withheld. And in most instances of shared laughter, there is probably some of all of this happening in an audience. While it is not within the scope of this analysis to survey humor audiences regarding the nature of their specific laughter, we can analyze humorous texts to see how humorists use the power of laughter to shape and control their audiences. Conversely, we can also illustrate how humorists anticipate an audience’s reaction and shape their texts accordingly. The first section of this chapter examines how humorous discourse shapes an audience and opens the door for laughter to start and then continue echoing. The second section looks at how laughter can create solidarity and cohesion in an otherwise disparate audience. In more homogeneous social or cultural groups, like Southerners, laughter can serve as not only a powerful social binder but also a forceful regulator of values and behaviors. Finally, the third section attempts to apply these concepts to the humor of Lewis Grizzard and Jeff Foxworthy, two of the most renowned and subtly hostile Southern humorists. In the end, this analysis should mainly teach us two things: 1) Southern humor is as much an inward-looking mechanism for conceiving of and regulating the “Southern identity,” for Southerners themselves, as it is an outward-looking discourse that draws lines of distinction between Southerners and non-Southerners; 2) and since laughter is the primary response to humorous discourse, understanding its dynamics provides the best

opportunity for understanding the rhetorical force of the humor as a regulating mechanism, even if we are not always able to say with certainty what is being laughed at or the specific nature of an individual's laughter.

#### 4.1 “In Need of an Echo”: Implicating the Audience through Laughter

Bergson's image of laughter as a growing echo works remarkably well because it nicely suggests the two most important and paradoxical aspects of the audience's function in humor. In the first sense, laughter *needs* an echo because it is “not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound”; instead, laughter, as the primary action of an audience, is actually a *reaction* to something conveyed by a humorous text, then is sustained through the “successive rumblings” of others' laughter. That is, though laughter can cause harm to its object on the one hand, on the other, the laughing subject is typically passive—incapacitated by the act of laughing itself. At its most persuasive, humorous discourse is the opposite of a call to overt, purposeful action, unless that action is laughing. And the disruption created by laughter is probably humor's most powerful effect, in that it provides a critical moment of inertia that puts the control, meanings, and aims of humor in play. Echoing Bergson,<sup>96</sup> McMullen also invokes the reciprocal quality of laughter, writing that “it is the experience of a complacent audience that suddenly its laughter turns back upon itself, forcing it to ponder for the moment just where the real fool is to be found” (10). Like the humorous text and the humorist's persona, the audience and its laughter often seem to be simultaneously of two opposite natures, i.e., both powerless and powerful. While this makes them rhetorically fascinating, it also makes them resistant to easy explanation.

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<sup>96</sup> Ha ha.

Regarding the power of humor and the act of laughing on an individual, Quintilian writes that “though laughter may be regarded as a trivial matter, [...] it has a certain imperious force of its own which it is very hard to resist. It often breaks out against our will and extorts confession of its power, not merely from our face and voice, but convulses the whole body as well” (443). The negative connotation of Quintilian’s words is hard to miss. Laughter “breaks out” and causes “convulsions.” Like an inquisitor, it “extorts confession”—but through pleasure instead of pain. For Quintilian, laughter becomes a force that works against a person’s “will” to remain composed and in control of his or her body, which would have been of paramount importance to maintaining the necessary social proprieties expected of Roman citizens. Thus, laughter is a thing to be cognizant and wary of at all times, since it could potentially reveal things about the laugher that he or she would rather keep hidden.<sup>97</sup> Charles Baudelaire takes Quintilian’s concern a large step further, claiming in the essay “On the Essence of Laughter” that “human laughter is intimately linked with the accident of an ancient Fall, of a debasement physical and moral” (149). For Baudelaire, who was obsessed with humanity’s innate fallibility, laughter is an outward sign of this convoluted nature—“an expression of a double, or contradictory, feeling” (156). Whereas pure “joy” comes from a sense of “unity,” laughter is instead a “symptom” of humanity’s fundamentally miscegenated origin—being progeny of both God and Satan (156). Given that Baudelaire literally claims that laughter is evidence of the Satanic in humanity, it is

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<sup>97</sup> Quintilian’s concern holds true in modern times as well. I distinctly remember intentionally not laughing at raunchy jokes in movies and TV shows as an adolescent when I was around my parents, since laughing would be an indisputable indication that I was familiar enough with the subject matter to get the joke. It is nigh impossible to feign ignorance and still be in on the joke.



difficult to overstate how disparaging he is of the comic in art and society,<sup>98</sup> yet even through his overwrought prose<sup>99</sup> and theology-laden moral philosophy, Baudelaire nails the essential tenets of incongruity theory and anticipates Freud's theory of joking-as-catharsis that was still 50 years from being published.

Fittingly, all this concern over the potential threats of humor and laughter comes about at least partially because laughter and the hostile feelings that often underwrite it—superiority, mocking, ridicule, *schadenfreude*—arrive relatively unannounced and, thus, are difficult to guard against beyond constant vigilance. Because it is reciprocal and echoing, the force of laughter is not strong-armed and abusive, but must instead work sneakily, through collusion, surprise, and deceit, bringing an audience into the act of the “crime” before it really knows what’s going on. Moira Smith describes the relationship between joker and audience as a friendly negotiation: “Thus, the joker’s unilateral switch into humor [...] represents an invitation to others” who signal their “acceptance of the joker’s invitation” with laughter (152). Hutcheon speaks to this idea in regards to the functioning of irony, writing: “it has its targets, its perpetrators, and its complicitous audience” (40). And while the audience for humor is necessarily “complicitous” in the play of an incongruous text, it can be an unconscious complicity (until it’s too late, at least). Lewis argues that “[b]eneath the level of conscious awareness, operating as a seductive and largely fallacious appeal, humor influences our identification with and support of particular characters and groups” (35). Though at some point—often because of framing techniques—there is likely to be some conscious awareness for a joke hearer

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<sup>98</sup> This criticism stands in opposition to his opinion of the “purely” ridiculous, which he locates in the “grotesque” and sees as a legitimate art form. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of the grotesque, Mikel Bakhtin, and their relations to Southern humor.

<sup>99</sup> He was French, after all.

that he or she is being brought into the space of ironic discourse, where the normal rules of propriety and logic may not apply. That is, crafted humor is rarely a hit-and-run type event, and the audience for it is rarely a truly “innocent bystander.” This is not to say that humor and laughter cannot have the “seductive” power that Lewis prescribes, only that the seduced audience normally must be open to being seduced, at least tacitly. Lewis inversely says as much: “So, when humor fails, when a listener recoils in anger or discomfort, it is often because the listener and the teller have different values, a difference that manifests itself in an unwillingness or an inability to treat a particular subject lightly” (34).

Without a doubt, Freud’s discussion of hostility and joking in *Jokes* provides the most thorough and cited exploration of the psychological and sociological<sup>100</sup> aspects of joking. While Freud’s application of this conception of joking to the individual psyche may be novel, we know, drawing again from Cicero, that humor has been understood to “mark something dishonorable in a way that is not itself dishonorable” going back thousands of years, not just over a hundred. But instead of diminishing the value of Freud’s contribution to our understanding of humor, that he occupies a significant spot in the same landscape as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian makes his ideas all the more relevant.<sup>101</sup> Freud makes so many claims, counter-claims, and explanations in *Jokes* that a complete analysis of them all would be the work of countless articles and books,<sup>102</sup> but for the purposes of the present work, three of Freud’s main points are particularly

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<sup>100</sup> For Freud, joking intertwines the individual psyche and the social psyche, because “[a] joke [...] *must* be told to someone else” for the “psychical process” of joking to come full circle (143).

<sup>101</sup> Ironically, while much of Freud’s work has become a kind of running joke in other disciplines, *Jokes* continues to be taken quite seriously and relied upon in humor studies.

<sup>102</sup> A number of which have already been written.

instructive: 1) that jokes are quintessentially transgressive of some sort of societal norm or standard—of conduct and/or expression; 2) that the so-called “joke-work” delivers a cathartic (and socially acceptable) release for the joker and the audience that is the social equivalent to dreaming; and 3) that, like an echo of thunder in the mountains, joking and laughter perpetuate themselves by reflecting back and forth between people.

Freud illustrates how a joker can forge laughing alliances, albeit unconsciously, within an audience by sneaking normally repressed ideas into the social realm through the use of humor. Discussing the “purposes” of jokes, Freud introduces the idea of the “tendentious” versus the “innocent” joke (90 and following). Essentially, tendentious jokes readily suggest a target for their humor, while innocent jokes do not.

Consequently, tendentious jokes “run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them,” presumably because they would be offended or hurt by them, while innocent jokes are constructed so that they “aim” most clearly at language use itself (90). Puns and other “plays on words” are probably the most accessible examples of innocent joking. However, as Freud delves deeper into his theory concerning the psychic economics of joking, he becomes increasingly suspect of the existence of purely innocent humor because all successful jokes have a purpose, even if it is merely “evoking pleasure in its hearers” (95). And for Freud, joking with a purpose—even an unconscious one—is a kind of social aggressiveness because jokes primarily function by doing and/or saying what is not normally allowed in “polite” society. Fry makes a distinction between “aggressive” versus “hostile” humor that adds a helpful nuance to Freud’s explanation of tendentious jokes. Fry argues that while “[a]ll humor is aggressive” because it is “active, forceful, dynamic, and vigorous” and “attacks the status quo,” it is not always hostile

(“Humor and Paradox” 60). Fry characterizes hostile humor as “unfriendly, antagonistic, tending toward destruction” (60). Freud’s “tendentious joke” category most clearly aligns with Fry’s description of “aggressive” humor in that both allow for but do not necessitate out-and-out hostility in the content or meaning of a joke. However, I believe Freud would most likely be unwilling to discount the probability that some latent hostility—albeit a deeply repressed and perhaps unrecoverable one—might form the basis of the humorous mode of expression itself. Whether or not this makes all joking inherently hostile is harder to speculate about, and in terms of the jokes that I will be looking at in this chapter, their hostility is fairly indisputable.<sup>103</sup> The key here is that the hostility of a joke, once told, is not reserved for the teller, but is instead shared amongst the hearers, who are affected by it to a greater degree than the teller—a fact which Freud sees displayed in their laughter. Additionally, the audience might already share the hostility that a given jokes expresses or, through the joke itself, they might become complicit in that hostility, if only temporarily.

Because his conception of tendentious joking is recursive and context-dependent, Freud provides an interesting example of how jokes progress or develop, to the point of seeming “innocent” and unrelated to their original intents:

Only when we rise to a society of a more refined education do the formal conditions for jokes play a part. The smut becomes a joke and is tolerated when it has the character of a joke. The technical method which it usually employs is the allusion—that is, replacement by something small, something remotely connected, which the hearer reconstructs in his imagination into a complete and straightforward obscenity. The greater the discrepancy between what is given directly in the form of smut and what it necessarily calls up in the hearer, the more refined becomes the joke and the higher, too, it may venture to climb into good society. (100)

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<sup>103</sup> This is one of the nastier simplicities of much Southern humor. Rarely is the pertinent question “is this humor hostile?” but instead is “*how* is it hostile and towards *whom*?” The hostility itself can normally be assumed.

Though Freud's casual references to "refined education" and "good society" can be distracting, his point that the "obscurity" of a successful joke often depends on the audience's "reconstruction" of it holds true regardless of class or caste. To use Freud's terminology, everyone laughs at smut (or at least wants to), but as people move farther up the social ladder, openly laughing at *undisguised* smut becomes more and more unacceptable. Taken far enough, the disguise becomes so complete that jokes can have the appearance of innocence, in that they bear no resemblance whatsoever to the smut from which they derive. Thus, the more roundabout and subtle a joke's connection to its inherent smutiness—the "more refined" it is—the higher its potential psychological payoff for a hearer. Because we all have, to one degree or another, "repressed" certain urges, we cannot, under normal circumstances, act upon or directly voice these urges. Nonetheless, they still exist, and jokes—being an indirect form of expression—allow us to experience them, if only within the context of a play-frame. Freud explains: "But to the human psyche all renunciation [repression] is exceedingly difficult, and so we find that tendentious jokes provide a means of undoing the renunciation and retrieving what was lost" (101). Logically then, for Freud, a society without jokes, a society with no need for repression, would be fundamentally primal, rather than extraordinarily refined. But because the movement of Western society has been toward more refinement (i.e. more repression), joking and laughter serve a necessary social binding purpose, and though we may be offended by the content of much humor on one hand, our appreciation of it on the unconscious level—which comes out in our laughter—is much more important.

The cathartic power of laughing at a joke is paramount to Freud's conception of joking, generally, and also to his understanding of the audience for joking, specifically.

Concerning the rhetorical power of jokes, Freud argues that “the joke *will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*” under ordinary circumstances and “will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close investigation” (103). In other words, joking is powerful because it supersedes logic and taps into feelings and ideas that a person would not merely choose to ordinarily ignore, but that would—without the joking structure—be wholly unspeakable. In point of fact, jokes are only able to announce the normally unspeakable in roundabout ways. The ineffable, by definition, must remain ineffable, or else it never really was so in the first place. Thus, the joke itself never actually says what it means to say in a point-blank kind of way; instead, it opens the door for its audience to “reconstruct” the meaning—to get the joke. Should a joke actually just declare its meaning with no pretense or suggestion, it ceases, technically speaking, to be the joke it set out to be and becomes either pure “obscenity”<sup>104</sup> or some sort of meta-joke about failed joking. This balance between suggestion and declaration is the key to Freud’s understanding of the symbiosis between the joke and the joke hearer. On one hand, because the well-turned joke offers pleasure, it holds sway over a willing audience; yet, on the other hand, the audience must find the joke pleasing and validate it through laughter for it to be considered a “well-turned” joke. A joke is only funny because an audience laughs, and for that reason, jokes do not exist as acontextual statements of fact. They are instead moments marked by “an indefinable feeling,” “a sudden release of intellectual tension”—completely subjective, in other words (Freud 167). Jokes are neither right nor wrong; they are successful or unsuccessful, depending on whether or not

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<sup>104</sup> Again, relying on Freud’s terminology.

they result in “successive rumblings” of laughter. A joke text is really more like a catalyst or trigger that can—but might not—result in laughter, which is necessary to complete the joking “process” (Freud 143).

On this point, Freud argues that joking requires three people or, more precisely, three perspectives: 1) the joker, 2) the target or butt of the joke, and 3) the hearer<sup>105</sup> (100). Though jokes are similar to dreams in terms of their psychological benefits, dreams are absolutely individual and obscure—even to the dreamer. However, jokes are “the most social of all the mental functions that aim at a yield of pleasure” and the “condition of intelligibility is, therefore, binding on [them]” (179). In fact, Freud claims that the “urge to tell the joke to someone is inextricably bound up with the joke-work; indeed, this urge is so strong<sup>106</sup> that often enough it is carried through in disregard of serious misgivings” (143). Describing Freud’s three-person “Joking Triangle,” Jerry Aline Fleiger describes the hearer of a joke as both the recipient of a joke and “a collaborator” in the joke process (77). That is, a joke’s full psychic payoff only occurs when an audience (other than the joker, himself) hears the joke and laughs, or we might say, reflects the pleasure of the joke back at the teller who cannot fully experience the release of the joke on his own. Freud employs an economic metaphor to describe the relationship between joker, comedic butt, and audience: “The psychological process in the hearer, the joke’s third person, can scarcely be more aptly described than by stressing the fact that he has bought the pleasure of the joke with very small expenditure on his own part. He might be said to

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<sup>105</sup> Freud also refers to the hearer as “indispensable” to the “completion of the joking process” (155).

<sup>106</sup> Smith astutely points out that another “reason that a move into the humorous mode demands support from others is that such a move is inevitably transgressive” (160). That is, by confirming that a joke *is* actually funny to someone else also confirms the teller’s social (and possibly mental) stability. Conversely, if you’re the only person who gets a joke, the defect probably doesn’t lie in everybody else.

have been presented with it” (148). Because the audience does not expend the psychical energy required to come up with the joke, their “pleasure quotient” in the joking exchange starts at a much higher point than the teller’s and, thus, gets into the black much easier and more completely. Fry puts it more simply in *Sweet Madness*: “The more confounded the audience (or the more they are ‘surprised’ by the punch line), the more hilarious the laughter” (109). Similar to the idea of the “surprised” audience is the “primed” audience, where the audience is not caught off-guard, as is the case with surprising humor, but instead knows a joke is coming and is actively engaged in the humor event. An audience primed to laugh is one ready and willing to get the joke, but that does not anticipate the punch line itself. Should they guess the punch line in advance, the audience would begin to mirror the joke-teller’s perspective too closely for the punch-line to land with full force.

Critical to Freud’s argument here is his understanding of who can laugh at a joke and the nature of that laughter, because it is the most obvious and available means for measuring the success of a joke: “It is possible that my need to communicate the joke to someone else is in some way connected with the laughter produced by it, which is denied to me but is manifest in the other person” (143). Laughter acts as both a gauge of a joke’s effectiveness and a rhetorical tool for the joker, in that it is a signal, first, of acquiescence to the humor being delivered and, second, of an audience’s openness to further joking. Channeling Bergson (but quoting Dugas), Freud writes that “we laugh as it were ‘*par ricochet* [on the rebound]’. Laughter is among the most highly infectious expressions of psychical states. When I make the other person laugh by telling him my joke, I am actually making use of him to arouse my own laughter” (156). In these two



sentences, Freud beautifully captures the essence of the sneaky and somewhat suspect power of humor and laughter. These things *are* infectious; they do spread seemingly of their own accord—sometimes against our will. Certainly, this infectiousness is due, in part, to the relationship that Gillian Pye identifies between humor and power (59). Pye argues that “getting” a joke implies a kind of “discursive strength” and “competence” that can build psychological confidence in an audience, because the ability to recognize and appreciate humor requires a nuanced control over “signifying structures,” which include the audience’s signified self-image (59). Smith takes this idea a step further, claiming that “the way we think about humor is inextricably tied to how we think about selfhood,” because humor turns the self into an object to be manipulated (158). As a consequence, humor and laughter can often be unapologetically self-serving, particularly when the “self” is not merely that of an individual, but an identifiable community or group that develops its own humor, complete with its own targets and tendentiousness.

#### **4.2 “The Group Incurable”: Humor as a Re(flex)tion of Society**

Bergson’s image of laughter as echo ends on the somewhat ominous note of “thunder in a mountain,” which suggests the second key aspect of the audience in humorous discourse—laughter as the cumulative group “incurable,” to use Limon’s term, that is both affect and effect.<sup>107</sup> That is, one cannot argue with an echo any more than one can separate individual echoes from the series. The same holds true with laughter, particularly when it is the laughter of a group. And while there is considerable debate about whether or not the power of laughter works as an active, guided force, little disagreement exists about laughter’s importance in understanding the dynamics of group

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<sup>107</sup> In this case, both are nouns.

identities. As we have already seen, Freud describes the humorous rhetorical situation as a negation where the joker seeks to create an alliance between himself and the audience over and against the comedic butt. Similarly, Mary Jo Neitz argues that while “[h]umor is often described as a means of decreasing social distance,” it usually does so only within an established in-group of jokers who can share in the humor (215). As such, the force of laughter pushes social outsiders farther away from the laughing group and, at the same time, pulls the members of the laughing group closer together: “Cohesion is also a result in situations in which a witty remark is ostensibly directed against a target but actually is intended to reaffirm the collectivity and the values held in common. In such cases humor and laughter both dramatize the violation of the norm and [...] reaffirm the norm” (Neitz 215). This double force of group humor is the primary function that most scholars discuss on this topic, and it will be the primary point of entry in the textual analysis of this chapter on Grizzard and Foxworthy.

On this topic, Smith says that social humor “is a key component in the [...] promoting of solidarity,” then she immediately points out that the “flip side of solidarity is marking boundaries” (159). No matter how big or small of a discourse community is created by a shared humor—it could be as small as a group of two to a whole nationality—there must be some outsider or Other for the community to pose itself against, and that is no less of a paradox than the basic matter of humorous incongruity itself. To make a community by joking is to bring together by creating divisions. Discussing the Lacanian theory of humor, Flieger writes: “Even though the joke seems to function as a tool for establishing community [...] the joking process nonetheless turns out to be as double-edged as its punch line. For the joke is a circuit in which no one’s

identity remains uncontaminated by exposure to the Other's desire" (91). Essentially, joking does create a community, but it is not a paradise of purity—it is a community of “contamination” in the sense that all of the laughing participants are party to the paradoxical turns and incongruity. Group solidarity is achieved in this way only by getting close enough to the Other to mock it and, thus, the identity of the in-group is bound up, albeit negatively, with the constructed identity of the out-group. Without both, neither would exist in the same fashion. When pressed, Smith argues, invoking an interesting biological metaphor, groups will even divide themselves in order to create insiders and outsiders if none are readily present: “Small groups act like organisms marshaling antibodies to beat off invaders; targeting undesirable members and effectively treating them as outsiders, they are sometimes able to drive these targets out of the group” (162). In such cases, according to Smith, humor “is used to create and mark solidarity for some at the expense of ostracizing others” (162).<sup>108</sup>

For the force of humor to do this pushing and pulling, in-groups and out-groups must be established and understood by the participants of the humorous event, even if those divisions will be deconstructed<sup>109</sup> during the course of the humor. For that reason, humor must market in stereotypes, usually for all the involved parties, humorist, target, and audience. In most cases, this stereotyping falls on the shoulders of the humorist, though the audience typically acquiesces to it. Michael Cundall writes that “[b]oth the

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<sup>108</sup> I am reminded of the *Seinfeld* episode “The Library,” where Elaine is bemused by the idea of teenaged boys giving each other “wedgies” as a form of adolescent social regulation. When asked what girls do instead, she responds flatly, “We would just tease a girl until she developed an eating disorder.” Unfortunately, the aims of most of our humor fail to mature significantly as we age.

<sup>109</sup> I am not sure if I believe that humor allows for this to happen completely.

teller of the joke and the audience ‘are involved in the complicity of illusion.’<sup>110</sup> This complicity occurs when both audience and teller subscribe to the stereotype: by finding humor in this joke one helps to make the stereotype more secure” (160). Mintz also describes this need for audience group-think, particularly in stand-up humor: “The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogenous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily. ‘Working the room,’ as comedians term it, loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as a personal predilection” (78). Rutter contends that, in actuality, most humor audiences have a “tendency to act as a collective” anyway, without much provocation, and audience members “will follow responses of others in the audience by replication and without the direct influence of other stimulus or suggestion” (308). Doubtlessly, this “tendency” connects to the cathartic release offered to the individual by laughter, particularly shared laughter. As Limon points out: “The specific benefit of laughter is obliviousness. In this respect, laughter has a strange intimacy with pain. [...] pain is the thing about which I [the individual] cannot be wrong, and laughter is the thing about which *we* cannot be wrong” (104). According to Limon, the “collective” laughter of an audience can never be wrong or “recanted” by an individual (11). While an individual may dissent from the group’s laughter, this dissention does not invalidate the laughter because it is the categorical opposite of laughter: “To criticize a joke is to miss it” (12). Thus, to exclude oneself from joke appreciation is also to exclude oneself from the joking group, without exception. Because the laughing group is both “single-minded and unimpeachable,” it does not merely discourage dissent—it requires laughing compliance. To not laugh is to self-exclude from the group. This homogenization through laughter is particularly

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted from Joseph Boskin, “The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo,” 1987.

effective since the group plays no *active* part in it—aside from laughing. All that is required to be “in” is to acquiesce to the group’s judgment. This passive influence of group pressure plays a large part in what Fine and De Soucey label as the “securing” function of laughter in social regulation: “Effective social units attempt to enforce social control in ways that do not appear oppressive; the best control is that which individuals perceive as beneficial in its own terms” (11). And since the laughing group is, at least seemingly, “homogenous,” there is no central figure or leader that the group looks to for instruction or that could be removed to dismantle the group. And while the possibility certainly exists for an individual or group to withdraw from the homogenous laughing group and stand in judgment of it, the effect of such a splintering is hard to predict. It seems just as likely that the dissenter/s would be mocked by the laughing group—perhaps for their lack of a sense of humor—as it does that the laughing group would reassess their laughter and emerge from their collective “obliviousness.”

While almost all humor exerts this pushing and pulling force on its participants, clearly identifying exactly what and/or whom is being pushed away or pulled closer together can be a tricky, perhaps even impossible, business. English argues that though humor creates “a temptation grossly to simplify the status of the comic object, the butt or target of the joke,” we must resist this temptation because the hallmark of humor is instability (10). Thus, any seemingly straightforward “identification and solidarity” will likely be rendered “provisional, negotiable, unsettled” by the in humorous event itself. Adding to this instability, English also claims that “[l]aughing together is not the same as reaching agreement”:

Humor makes us laugh not merely with our allies but with our enemies, with those whose psychical organization—whose orientation in regard to

the social imaginary, the ideological repertoire—is radically irreconcilable with our own. Indeed, a very important feature of the work performed through comic exchange is that even while the transaction intensifies certain lines of difference and antagonism it selectively obscures other such lines, effecting false consensus, overlaying a scene of necessary and ongoing conflict with the illusions of identity (community) and agreement (communication). (14)

Though he conveys it in significantly different language, English captures here the same pushing-away/pulling-together assessment of humor that I have already outlined, but he also adds an important complexity to the discussion, namely that humor refuses to be situated or easily controlled, either by its purveyors or its audiences. Humor brings people together and pushes people apart, yes, but often in seemingly contradictory and unpredictable ways. A safe joke rarely succeeds in creating much laughter because humor does not thrive in safety, in spaces clearly divided into right and wrong, black and white. Humor thrives by testing those boundaries, mixing them up in some way, shape, or form—straddling the fence between them. All this is bound to also raise interesting uncertainties about what exactly a joke *means*, who the *real* target is, and just exactly *who* is supposed to laugh at it, even as we readily acknowledge that those questions, more than likely, do not have definite answers.

In one of the most seminal moments in one of the most seminal works on the sociology of humor, Douglas asks: “Now what is the difference between an insult and a joke? When does a joke get beyond a joke? [...] When people throw excrement at one another whenever they meet, either verbally or actually, can this be interpreted as a case of wit, or merely written down as a case of throwing excrement?” (362). Because jokes are so culturally embedded and “expressive of the social situations in which they occur,” it can be difficult to observe joking from an analytical perspective and also to experience

the humorous effects fully. If Limon is correct in his assessment in the incorrigibility of the audience, these two perspectives are mutually exclusive. Similarly, Douglas takes the position that what does and does not qualify as joking, from one group to the next, depends on the particular rules and norms of each group. Nonetheless, she does argue that joking, as a social phenomenon, has certain common functional characteristics, regardless of any specific cultural signifiers that may be unique to one group or another. Because humorous incongruity “consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control,” humor is always “potentially subversive” to the official or earnest identity of a community (366). Here again, we see the dual force of humor, but from Douglas’s perspective, humor always acts as a push-back against a dominant social hierarchy and its symbols. So the group that would be brought closer together through humor, according to Douglas, would always be one posed against the orthodoxy of the larger society. Like Alexander, Douglas relies on the idea of the social “rite” to explain her theory on humor, but she argues that a joke actually operates as an “anti-rite” in that it works to counteract and destabilize the meanings that “standard rites” serve to enforce: “The rite imposes order and harmony, while the joke disorganises [sic]. From the physical to the personal, to the social, to the cosmic, great rituals create unity in experience. They assert hierarchy and order. In doing so, they affirm the value of the symbolic patterning of the universe” (369). Jokes, on the other hand, create incongruous connections that “denigrate and devalue” the normal order (369). Perhaps the most important thing to understand about Douglas’s argument here is that jokes do not offer a stable but different pattern to the normal social structure. Humor is not the choice of one hierarchy over another; it “merely affords the opportunity for realising [sic] that an accepted pattern has no

necessity. [...] It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general” (Douglas 365). Far from being a determined, lethal instrument for change, the subversive, laughing audience is bound together by nothing so much as “frivolity” and, to use Limon’s term, obliviousness. This is, of course, not to suggest that these bonds are not incredibly strong; they are simply not likely to lead to some collective action or call-to-arms.

This point—that the power of humor rarely leads to overt social action—is basically Christie Davies’ largest and most repeated contribution to humor studies, and while it is a perspective worth considering, if for no other reason than it stands against many other popular humor theories, it suffers from several important shortcomings. In a multitude of publications over the last thirty years, Davies argues for the relative impotence of humorous discourse as a cause for why people do anything. For him, humor merely reflects “reality”:

It’s not that the jokes cause reality. Reality leads to the jokes. That’s a very important point that you can’t get the P.C. [Politically Correct] people to see. They somehow think that jokes have a power. And I suspect one of the reasons is if you look at the people who subscribe to a P.C. ideology, they’re scribblers. They’re people who write little ideological tracts that they’re quite convinced are going to transform the world, and they’re not. And because they believe in their own power to affect the world through words, they assume that words have a kind of super-power, which is a way of flattering themselves. Therefore, they argue, ‘Why is the world bad? It’s because of other people’s words,’ and jokes are an example of this. And it’s all total nonsense. (“The Right and Duty to Tell Politically Incorrect Jokes”)

Even Davies’ title for this speech delivered at a college libertarian society meeting suggests the paradox that he works himself into: on one hand, he argues for the importance and “duty” to tell politically incorrect jokes, while on the other, he constantly undermines this call by scoffing at the idea of “powerful” jokes. In another text, Davies



explains his understanding of jokes through a well-crafted metaphor: “[Jokes] are not social thermostats regulating and shaping human behavior, but they are social thermometers that measure, record, and indicate what is going on. To become angry about jokes and to seek to censor them [...] is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is” (9). In one sense, Davies is exactly right; jokes, as intentionally composed units of language, are not “at fault” or evil, in and of themselves.<sup>111</sup> And while he certainly makes a strong point that humor does not usually exert an overt force on people—other than perhaps the urge to laugh—he seems to completely disregard the idea of discourse as an integral component *of* reality. Somehow, for Davies, “words” and “reality” are mutually exclusive, and the former can only report the status of the latter. Apparently, Davies has some way of understanding and operating in “reality” where discourse serves as only a sideline reporter to the goings-on of the world. However, I cannot so easily make this distinction<sup>112</sup> and, therefore, can offer, at best, a much more tentative answer to the question of what humor “does” in society. For instance, using Davies’ own thermostat vs. thermometer metaphor, thermometers may not literally lead to, create, or control the temperature, but they make the temperature “real” and solid in a way that would not otherwise be available, and they do so in a sharable, communicable way. Thermometers give relative meaning to temperature and make the effects of a thermostat possible. Similarly, jokes can make individual ideas, feelings, and senses solid and communicable. Where that communication leads is often impossible to predict with any certainty, but that

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<sup>111</sup> This metaphor reminds me of the, now cliché, argument against gun control: “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” As if guns, somehow, had a multitude of other purposes.

<sup>112</sup> Doubtlessly dooming myself to the status of “scribbler.”

unpredictability does not validate Davies' total dismissal of humor's reflexive influence. Writing about the "humorous" cartoons published on a white supremacist group's website, *White Aryan Resistance (WAR)*, Oring provides a powerful and disturbing example that seems to refute Davies' insistence on the innocuousness of humor as mere reflection of some exterior actuality. In no uncertain terms, Oring argues that *WAR's* humor is a key strategy for selling the *commonality* of its hate:

Humor implies a community; a fellowship of laughers with whom the humor is shared. Although humor may educate, it is not a formal means of instruction. It is not the means by which people are *persuaded* to adopt particular views. Humor, rather, calls upon individuals to invoke an extant body of tacit, everyday knowledge in order to recognize and make sense of an incongruity. Humor succeeds only if individuals are made to access concepts, associations, and values with which they are already familiar. [...] To laugh at the [*WAR*] cartoons is to imagine—rightly or wrongly—other laughers like oneself. (56-57)

Though it is not often as distastefully employed as in Oring's example,<sup>113</sup> humor's most obvious power resides in its sneaky coerciveness, its ability to activate and draw upon connections, commonalities, and beliefs that people might not even be aware of—or at least not readily willing to own up to. The individual hearer *must* make a choice either to laugh and automatically be inducted into the laughing group, with all of its implied values and beliefs, or to not laugh and automatically be ostracized from the laughing group. This is precisely the force that Southern humor uses to push and pull its audience into laughing submission.

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<sup>113</sup> Morris provides an equally persuasive and morally counterbalancing example in her discussion of Native American stand-up comedy as a cultural "contact zone": "Sitting in a dark comedy club face to face with a Native comedian who looks you in the eye as he weaves a story that implicates you in uncomfortable ways, but still makes you laugh almost involuntarily—how to explain this?" (44).

### 4.3 Who Might Be a Redneck?: The Hostility of Lewis Grizzard and Jeff Foxworthy

The difference between the targets and the jokers in Southern humor can be a particularly complicated thing to sort out because it tends to offend *and* please so many people. And the reason for that is no mystery; the discourse itself is, at times, seemingly self-denigrating and self-aggrandizing, all at the same time. Like Douglas's "excrement throwing" conundrum, the problem with interpreting Southern humor's hostility is essentially one of perception. Mainstream Southern humor tends to throw excrement in every direction and gets away with it, because of how difficult it is to pin down. Depending on your perspective, Southern humor can seem like the voice of the underclass, resisting the totalizing caricaturization of the South, or it can seem like it is doing nothing *but* totalizing, caricaturizing, and stereotyping Southerners. Often, these "seemings" happen simultaneously, and the negotiations between them become most obvious when Southern humorists position the South or Southerners as "one homogenous people"<sup>114</sup> against the rest of the world (read: "the North"), as opposed to when the South becomes the all-encompassing universe of the joke. In those cases, Southerners themselves get divided into the in-groups and out-groups for the enjoyment of the audience. In either case, the humor depends upon the establishment of an "us vs. them" mentality, but who occupies those categories tends to be ambiguous at best. And consequently, we rarely know, with any sense of certainty, who is being laughed with vs. who is being laughed at.

Separated by less than a generation, Lewis Grizzard and Jeff Foxworthy have strikingly similar backgrounds. Both are solidly middle-class Georgians by birth, and

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<sup>114</sup> Taken from the title of Trent A. Watts' book, *One Homogenous People: Narratives of White Southern Identity, 1890-1920* (2010).

both of their careers took them away from the South to large, urban areas,<sup>115</sup> even as their public personas remained solidly Southern. While Grizzard (born in 1946) was known for his newspaper columns and books, which are mostly collections of his columns, Foxworthy (born in 1958) is famous for his stand-up comedy. However, both humorists dabbled successfully in each other's area of expertise. Foxworthy has published several collections of humor, and Grizzard maintained a side-gig as a kind of humorous lecturer, sort of like Mark Twain for the Reagan era. And both have made a good living<sup>116</sup> by expertly inhabiting and commodifying certain aspects of Southern culture into a widely marketable humorous product. And most of these aspects coalesce in the infinitely malleable yet undeniable signifying figure of "the redneck."<sup>117</sup> As a symbol for the complex social hostility in Southern humor, one can hardly do better than the image of the redneck, because it exemplifies the ways of being that Southern culture simultaneously denounces and glorifies to the "outside" world and to itself. As Lucy Jarosz and Victoria Lawson claim, "'rednecks' as an essentialized group—a political, ideological cipher and cliché—become a foil for white, liberal, middle-class guilt," and as such, the site of the Southern humor event serves as the contact point for the strong and competing emotions of Southern guilt/shame and Southern pride (11).

Though their personal backgrounds are similar, Grizzard and Foxworthy's humorous styles stand miles apart. Reading Grizzard, a journalist by training and

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<sup>115</sup> As far as I can tell, Foxworthy has primarily resided in Los Angeles since hitting it big in the early-'90s. Grizzard's book *If I Ever Get Back to Georgia, I'm Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground* details his time as the sports editor for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

<sup>116</sup> This is a significant understatement in Foxworthy's case.

<sup>117</sup> Certainly, depending on the audience, context, and intent of the discourse, other labels are often also applied: white trash, cracker, good 'ol boy, country, hillbilly, etc. Nonetheless, "redneck" is the most commonly used epithet in and outside of Southern humor.

vocation, one can easily forget that he's trying to be funny, and occasionally, he clearly is not. There are no discernible jokes, for instance, in the column "The Gift of Loving a Child," which describes a couple whose two sons both died young, one in a car accident and one of leukemia (44-46). Most of his writing is done as a first-person narration, and he is an effective storyteller. Intending the observation as nothing but a compliment, Stephen A. Smith says that Grizzard's "self-made persona is pure southern" and "[I]ike most other contemporary purveyors of Southern humor, he holds a more tolerant vision of the South, one that respects and includes women, blacks, poor folks, and other democratic heroes" (179-180). While I cannot speak to the veracity of this statement when it comes to all other Southern humorists, certainly in Grizzard's case, he *is* more tolerant and inclusive—except when he's not, which is often. Jennifer Beech describes this tension, writing that the "author's professed desires for tolerance may be overwhelmed by a more deep-seated response" (179). At best, his is an ambivalent tolerance and a patronizing inclusivity, and worst, he can be downright nasty. Yet, it is a sneaky nastiness because it is a sneaky humor. Because he rarely just "tells jokes," the import of Grizzard's humor can be upon you before you know it. As is often the case with good gospel music (one of Grizzard's favorite topics<sup>118</sup>), the artistry of the medium obscures the essential message to the point that you're not really sure what you've agreed to until it is really too late to back out. Conversely, Foxworthy's style is unabashedly rote, perhaps even purposefully so, given that the routine that made him famous—"You might be a redneck if..."—is a simple and easily replicated formula. If Grizzard's humor

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<sup>118</sup> Grizzard's central thesis, about gospel music and all other good things Southern or otherwise, is one of intrinsic purity, which he seems to have the ultimate say on. Things that are the way they should be (men who are manly and women who aren't, for instance) please him. He listens to gospel music "with gusto and a clean conscience" because it has yet to be "perverted" like so many other areas of modern life (60).

sneaks up on you like gospel music, Foxworthy's gets into your brain with the unthinking persistence of a mantra: *you might be a redneck if, you might be a redneck if, you might be a redneck if*. However, similar to Grizzard's longing for purity in all things, a big part of Foxworthy's humor is its "cleanness" or lack of "smut" (Dunne and Dunne 251). Though, in practice, these two descriptions simply seem to mean that he avoids using much "R-rated" language and graphic sexual descriptions, since he does curse fairly regularly on a "PG-13" level and certainly makes inferential references to sex and sexuality from time to time. However "clean" or not Foxworthy's humor is, it undoubtedly ridicules while reveling in all things redneck. This paradox of "cleanliness" and "purity" is one of the main reasons why I chose to use Grizzard and Foxworthy for the chapter focused on the humor audience and laughter. At best, the idea of a "clean and pure" Southern-ness is a good-natured myth; at worst, it is a bald-faced lie. As noted earlier, Grizzard and Foxworthy are, by far, two of the biggest names in modern Southern humor, and on the surface, both seem pretty vanilla when it comes to the tendentiousness of their jokes. Yet, if we ask *who* is being led to laugh at *whom* in these two humorists work, the layers of internal tension (Southerner vs. Southerner) and external tension (Southerner vs. Whoever) immediately become apparent. Because of this dual tendentiousness, these humorists, who are at times scathingly critical of the South, are also regularly defended as Southern (entertainment) nobility. For that reason, I think that the audiences they shape with their humor and the way their humor is shaped by their audiences should be pretty representative of modern Southern humor, broadly speaking.

When Grizzard and Foxworthy aim their humorous ridicule inward, creating internal divisions between "this South" and "that South," the redneck (and its various

permutations<sup>119</sup>) tends to be the objectified Other that the laughing audience is invited to critically distance itself from. Rappoport explains this function of humor: “It is within groups [...] that we can frequently see the most vicious use of slurs and stereotypes. [...] On a broader scale, within every dominant majority group there are slurs and stereotypes applied to its own members who do not live up to its standards” (45-46). Thus, inclusion and exclusion through humor depends on what equals “dominant majority group” in a given context. Foxworthy’s joke structure would seem to complicate this binary because it appears to implicate the listener *as* redneck, but this is where the genius of Foxworthy’s “routine” shows itself. His jokes only invite acquiescence from the audience; they never force it. They are always either hypothetical, self-directed, or ensconced in a narrative structure. Foxworthy’s “You might be a redneck if...” joke frame, for example, contains an easy grammatical nuance where the audience can “op-out” from self-identifying with the joke’s payoff: the word “might” is more of a suggestion of status than a direct affirmation. That is, if he said “You *are* a redneck” instead, the effect would likely be substantially different. The joke referenced in the title of this chapter plays on this distinction. The whole joke reads: “If you go to the family reunion to meet women, you might be a redneck” (Foxworthy). As the laughter subsides, he says, “I think we offended somebody out here”; then, in an exaggerated Southern voice, presumably meant to be one of those “offended” members of the audience: “That ain’t funny is it, sis?” (Foxworthy). Clearly, Foxworthy recognizes that this joke pushes some line of what is

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<sup>119</sup> See note #118 for examples. Several authors (see Newitz and Wray, in particular) attempt to explain how redneck is not an all-inclusive term, and these attempts can come off as defenses of certain behaviors and indictments of others, but I believe they are attempts at understanding the delineations and definitions that exist at various levels within Southern culture. These distinctions might seem like much ado about nothing to a cultural outsider, just like all Southern accents sound essentially the same to non-Southerners. In this case, the labels themselves are much less important than the rhetoric that puts them to use.

an acceptable topic for ridicule and what's not in a way that his other redneck jokes on excrement, intoxication, and general uncouthness do not. But rather than backing down on that account, he takes the joke further by inhabiting the voice of a hypothetical audience member, for whom the joke hits a bit too close to home. However, because his monologue never stops being part of the original joke context, the audience goes along with him. Similarly, many of Foxworthy's other jokes, whose incongruities spring from the same general topics as his redneck jokes, are equally critical of low Southern culture and its inhabitant, but he escapes criticism because he frames the jokes in narratives that often put himself or his family members in the positions of ridicule. For example, Foxworthy jokes about how people lose touch with style as they grow older, but frames it in reference only to his father:

True story. Last year I'm in the grocery store with my dad. He is wearin a pair of platform-heeled dingo boots; white, flare-legged Levis that only miss the floor by ten or twelve inches; and a skin-tight, over forty and feelin foxy t-shirt. Like, "Dad, people are starin at'cha."

"Well, son, there's somethin' about a Dingo man." (Foxworthy)

The invitation to the audience here is at least two-fold. First, they can certainly laugh at the over-the-top image Foxworthy presents of his father's clothing and cavalier attitude about it. But the more profound invitation is the story's transferability; the suggestion is that Foxworthy's father, or the imagined image of him, merely represents a whole category of ridiculous old, out-of-touch people. And it is this connection between the specific image of the joke and the general category that the audience must complete themselves, and in so doing, create an in-group of laughers and an out-group of those who are laughed at.



Grizzard's criticisms of the South are a little harder to come by because he tends to relegate things he does not approve of, televangelists for example, as prohibitively un-Southern. Occasionally, however, sarcasm bleeds through the page and becomes apparent in his descriptions:

Rural Americans, especially those in the South, have long been misunderstood by other segments of the population. Some folks think just because a fellow has a gun rack in the back window of his pickup that he's on his way to shoot a bunch of liberals. [...] And possibly their biggest misconception of all is that the pink plastic flamingos positioned in many front yards are "tacky."

Nothing could be further from the truth. Tasteful, well-bred individuals normally paint the trunks of the trees in their yards white; line their driveways with old tires, also painted white; plant flowers between the tires; and place at least three pink flamingos strategically about the lawn.

Common riffraff, meanwhile, decorate their yards by taking the tires off a '52 Studebaker and putting the automobile on cement blocks beside the house. (162-163)

If Grizzard were not actually suggesting that the description of the "tasteful, well-bred" people's yards did qualify as "tacky," I cannot imagine that he would have spent quite the amount of space he does detailing it. And certainly, the ridiculousness of "strategically placed" plastic flamingos is more than a subtle invitation to laugh (chuckle perhaps?) along with Grizzard. But in no way does that detract from the very real criticism in the third paragraph about "common riffraff." Both groups and their "decorations" are tacky, it is just a matter of degrees and taste.

However, just as much as Southern humor creates "internal" tension and divisions amongst Southerners, it also glorifies the distinctiveness of the South, as Grizzard suggests, by playing off of "external" tensions and divisions between the South and the rest of the country. If we accept Southern humor as a kind of ethnic humor, then we can ascribe to it the same rhetorical qualities that Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson connect

to African-American and Jewish humor. They write: “Mocking the features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of the most effective ethnic infusions into national humor, [...] Minority laughter affords insights into the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status” (97). Thus, Southern humor serves as a buffer against the perceived mocking from the rest of the country; it enacts a rhetoric of Southern solidarity, ironically exemplified by the symbol of the redneck. So while this symbol aligns the South, as a stereotyped totality, with many of the characteristics that it is internally ambivalent about, the ownership of the symbol provides a better sense of self-determination than would otherwise be possible. And because the redneck is the most readily identifiable and straightforward<sup>120</sup> Southern characterization to outsiders, its negative connotation, while a hefty price to pay, is worth the attention and distinction it buys the South. Rappoport notes this tendency in several regional group identities, though none are quite so pervasive or wide-spread as the Southern identity; he writes that “many of these groups maintain a sense of pride in their distinctiveness. As a result, they can take on the status of permanent aliens who become stock characters in all varieties of comedy” (61). The message to non-Southerners, essentially, seems to be: “You may not like us (and we’re honestly not totally thrilled about ourselves either), but you know who we are, what we believe, and where you can stick it.

Grizzard’s writing is chock-full of examples that clearly proclaim the (real) South’s quality in comparison with the non-South—you essentially just have to pick your topic of choice. On women: “As one who has traveled and researched across this great

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<sup>120</sup> “Like the hillbilly, the redneck was doubly debased, a primitive even in the most primitive section of the country, an unschooled and unschoolable mental incompetent” (A. Graham 340).

country of ours, I must confess that there are considerable inequities between Northern women and Southern women” (122). He then goes on to explain how Northern women have a tendency to not shave their legs, while Southern women, “even big, fat, ugly Southern women,” “wouldn’t be caught dead without shaved legs” (123). He also claims, in no uncertain terms, that Southern women are better cooks, are not as mean, and “scrunch”<sup>121</sup> better (123). And on what is a proper alcoholic drink for a man: not a whiskey sour (26). He explains his reasoning, saying, “[A] whiskey sour is a drink for a man whose mother made him practice piano a lot when he was a kid. A man who drinks whiskey sours also probably throws a baseball like a girl—limp wristed. A man who drinks whiskey sours and then eats that silly little cherry they put in the bottom probably has a cat or a poodle for a pet” (26). For Grizzard, men ought to act like men and women ought to act like women, and if you’re confused about what that always means, just ask him for clarification. Interestingly, most of Grizzard’s writing does not explicitly reference “the South,” the implication being, of course, that he does not need to. His point of view is so directed by the centrality of proper Southern culture that constant reference to it would be unnecessarily redundant.

In contrast, Foxworthy regularly returns to the explicit comparison mode between Southerners and “the rest of the country,” usually as a way of showing how the South is special and unique. For instance, he discusses unique Southern vocabulary like “yeeownto,” as in, “We goin’ to the mall. Yeeownto?” (Foxworthy). Yet far from acknowledging that the Southern words are a kind of degradation of standard English, Foxworthy creates solidarity with his audience, which happens to be in Texas, saying, “It

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<sup>121</sup> Essentially cuddling on a cold night. Northern women can’t do this well because of their tendency to have rough, hairy, “Brillo pad” like legs (123).

is good to be back in Texas, here. Back here where people talk normal” (Foxworthy). The audience responds to this, perhaps blatant ploy to the home-town crowd, with a loud ovation of hoots and hollers, which Foxworthy then responds to in kind: “Woo-hooo! That’s a word in Texas!” (Foxworthy). This, of course, draws even louder and more raucous hoots and laughter. Taking the claim of Southern “normality” a large step further, Foxworthy equates Southern speech with divinity: “I’m from Georgia originally, but I live in California now. And people out there, they always make fun of the way I talk. You know, and I keep tellin ‘em, you’re gonna be real surprised when you get to heaven and St. Peter says, ‘Y’all git in the truck. We goin up t’the big house’ (Foxworthy). Thus, while Foxworthy does not suggest that Californians cannot get to heaven, there *they* will finally be the ones out of place, and the Southerners will feel right at home. In *If I Ever Get Back to Georgia, I’m Gonna Nail My Feet to the Ground*, Grizzard does break from his normal mode of merely exuding “Southern” and explicitly discusses Southern language. And if the sentiment was not quite so judgmental, he could be writing for Foxworthy. Describing Southern words and phrases that his strict grammarian mother would allow him to get away with, Grizzard says:

My mother, for instance, had no problem with the term “fixing” in place of “going to” or “it is my intention to,” as in “I’m fixing to do my homework.” I still say “fixing,” and anybody who doesn’t like it can stay in Boston and freeze.

My mother also had no problem with certain southern expletives, such as:

*Hot-aw-mighty*<sup>122</sup> (God Almighty)

*Dang-nab-it* (Of all the rotten luck)

*Dad-gum-it* (Same as above)

*Shut yo’ mouth.* (You’re kidding me—and please note it’s not “Hush yo’ mouth,” which a lot of people from up North think.)

*Lawd, have mercy.* (About the same as “Shut yo’ mouth.”) (88)

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<sup>122</sup> My grandfather’s personal favorite.

Much like Foxworthy's career-making "Southern language" jokes, Grizzard's list—which later comes to include the Southern, two-syllable pronunciation of "shit," "*shee-yet*," as well as the correct pronunciation of "sumbitch," "*suhbitch*"—binds Southerners together in a way that defies geographical boundaries, as it essentially argues that being Southern depends as much (and perhaps more) upon a shared mode of expression as it does on where you live (88-89). This kind of Southern-focused humor highlights the distinctiveness of certain Southern expressions, not to show the particular wrongness or evilness of the non-South,<sup>123</sup> but instead to prove, first and foremost, that the South is real and distinct—that it exists, if not geographically, but conceptually. And second, it suggests that it might be more desirable, or at least more colorful, to express oneself in a Southern way.

Perhaps the exception that most clearly proves this point is the several writers who argue that the essential redneck qualities, which Foxworthy summarizes as "a glorious lack of sophistication," know no geographic boundaries (C. E. Davies 184). Citing the resounding national popularity of quintessentially Southern and oft-derided institutions like country music and NASCAR, Cobb writes, "American culture has always been more southern than many contemporary liberals are willing to admit, but the national embrace of so many activities and traits once deemed distinctly southern raises questions about how much longer they can be legitimately identified with the South" (323). Similarly, Michael Graham claims that the South gets unfairly judged for being backward, not because it isn't, but because the rest of the country is as well. To this point, he writes: "I will never dispute the notion that the American South is dominated by irrational attitudes about race, religion, and culture. My challenge is: Tell me what part

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<sup>123</sup> Though it sometimes does that.

of America *isn't*" (5). In other words, unapologetically uncouth people can be found everywhere, yet Southern culture and Southern humor, in particular, remains strongly associated with these traits, to the point that for many non-Southerners, "Southern" and "redneck" are synonymous. This is a myth that could not be so well maintained and pervasive without some level of cooperation or, at a minimum, tacit acceptance from the culture and the people being mythologized.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The discussions that precede this chapter depend upon it to make sense, because, as a social form of communication, the humorous event necessitates an audience to occur. And, as the final leg of this three-legged stool, this chapter should stabilize the larger image of humorous discourse that I have been constructing. This is not to say, however, that this chapter offers any sort of finality or conclusion to a rhetorical understanding of humor. In fact, more than anything, it argues for the reciprocal nature of humor—that humor works through a reflexive movement between humorist, text, and audience, then back again. Additionally, by developing a nuanced conception of laughter as a social mechanism, this chapter illustrates two essential aspects for understanding the rhetorical nature of Southern humor: 1) that humor, generally, and laughter, in particular, work to create and maintain social alliances by forging groups of laughers, which stand in opposition to the "laughed at"—though the lines separating these groups are often fluid and fleeting; and 2) that Southern humor has a particularly complicated relationship with this aspect of laughter because it regularly shifts between an internal humor, that marginalizes and ridicules "rednecks," while also attempting to present a dignified and pure Southern perspective, from which to ridicule anything that smacks of being non-

Southern. The next chapter is an attempt to look at Southern humor's paradoxical relationship with the concept of decorum, or contextual appropriateness, as it is illustrated in the novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole. Toole's novel is one, which in its satirical extremities,<sup>124</sup> is both absolutely Southern and absolutely not Southern.

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<sup>124</sup> And in this novel's case, it's all extremities.

## CHAPTER 5

### RELEASING THE PYLORIC VALVE: DISRUPTING THE DECORUM OF SOUTHERN HUMOR IN JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE'S *A CONFEDERACY OF DUNCES*

Carnival is a fart in the face of established rule, but it serves church and government by providing a safety valve for grievance. Needing to contain the fart—to curb its sting and range—the church contrives Lent, a period in which meat is forbidden and eating curtailed. The result, literally, is a lot less shit. (xvi)

– Laurie Stone, *Laughing in the Dark*

“My life is a rather grim one. One day I shall perhaps describe it to you in detail. For the moment, however, you must know a thing or two about my valve.” (143)

– Ignatius J. Reilly in John Kennedy Toole's  
*A Confederacy of Dunces*

Until now, this rhetorical discussion of Southern humor has focused on examples and techniques taken from texts and authors who fall pretty neatly into the recognizable field of modern Southern humor; that is, no one is likely to take issue with the claim that Foxworthy, Griffith, Clower, and Grizzard are good representatives of “Southern,” generally speaking, or Southern humor, specifically. These are some of the biggest names in the field, and thus, their humor does much of the shaping of that field, while it in turn it is also shaped by our understanding and expectations of what Southern humor *is*. However, if I have tried to make one point conclusively in the previous chapters, it is that humor defies categorical thinking, which is what makes humor so rhetorically fascinating. From one perspective, many of the previously discussed texts perpetuate



traditional, conservative Southern attitudes and ideas, yet because they deal in incongruity, their edges blur, and what seems rock solid one minute can become quite shaky ground the next. Thus, the goal of this concluding chapter is to look at a relatively obscure—at least compared to the humor of Jeff Foxworthy or the writing of Lewis Grizzard—Southern text that constantly pushes the boundaries of humor, “good” taste, and decorum through unflinching absurdity: John Kennedy Toole’s novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces* [hereafter, *Dunces*]. Even though the questions of taste and social decorum are such contextually specific issues, understanding how they are negotiated in one humorous text like *Dunces* should provide an—albeit limited—opportunity to usefully put the various individual theories previously discussed in this work into play alongside one another, in the hopes of forming as complete a picture as possible of the rhetorical nature of this specific humorous event.

Set in mid-twentieth-century New Orleans, a city which itself stands as a synecdoche for the various strands of comic displacement that weave throughout the book, *Dunces* seems both very Southern and very un-Southern, as does its overwhelming<sup>125</sup> anti-hero protagonist. Toole immediately calls attention to the perfection of the setting with the two epigraphs to the novel, both of which argue that New Orleans is singular in its peculiar combination of history, geography, culture, dialect, and personality. The first epigraph, which is apparently of Toole’s personal creation, reads:

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<sup>125</sup> The moral and narrative complexity of this book and, in particular, its main character becomes evident when you look at the long, unsuccessful history of the attempts to make a movie adaptation. The short version is that no one can figure out what to do (that is, how to make money) with a story and a main character that are so simultaneously compelling and repellent in every way. A similar situation occurred in the case of *Forrest Gump*, where the original satirical novel became a saccharin-sweet movie that retained only the smallest nudges of the satire from the original text. Luckily, the same fate has yet to befall *Dunces*.

There is a New Orleans city accent ... associated with downtown New Orleans, particularly with the German and Irish Third Ward, that is hard to distinguish from the accent of Hoboken, Jersey City, and Astoria, Long Island, where the Al Smith inflection, extinct in Manhattan, has taken refuge. The reason, as you might expect, is that the same stocks that brought the accent to Manhattan imposed it on New Orleans. (xv)

The second epigraph, which is a quote from A.J. Liebling's *The Earl of Louisiana*, a book from 1961 originally published as a series of articles in *The New Yorker* about Huey Long's younger brother, reads:

“You're right on that. We're Mediterranean. I've never been to Greece or Italy, but I'm sure I'd be at home there as soon as I landed.”

He would, too, I thought. New Orleans resembles Genoa or Marseilles, or Beirut or the Egyptian Alexandria more than it does New York, although all seaports resemble one another more than they can resemble any place in the interior. Like Havana and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico form a homogenous, though, interrupted, sea. (xv)

John Lowe claims that “Toole seems to [...] want to present the Big Easy as a city in perpetual Carnival, a world where life is turned inside out. Ignatius is the perfect kind of Carnival, a fact signified by the name of his much-beloved, now-deceased Collie, Rex, the title of the most legendary of the Mardi Gras krewes” (161). And far from being problematic, this constant absurdist discord makes the text what it is, even if it does make it difficult to categorize. *Dunces* successfully pushes the envelope of Southern humor by employing the common rhetorical techniques of the genre, then turning them on their heads. In other words, *Dunces* is both “Southern *satire*” (the satirizing of the South) and “*Southern satire*” (satire of, by, and for Southerners<sup>126</sup>), which is a fairly rare combination in Southern humor. If the biting social satire in Southern humor—such as that previously mentioned in *The Beverly Hillbillies*—gets overlooked, the text can be easily rendered

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<sup>126</sup> With thick skins and good senses of humor, of course.

into so much inanity, or conversely, the text is labeled “literary,” becomes completely serious, and only ever read in Southern literature classes. However, in the case of *Dunces*, the satire is undeniable and makes for a hilariously entertaining work of fiction, though it does tend to rub some audiences the wrong way, for one reason or another. As we will see, the book regularly references Ignatius’s obsessions with Boethius and masturbation, sometimes on the same page. The tactical humorous brilliance of this incongruous pairing is that both topics are likely to alienate a pretty wide swath of readers, which is exactly what Toole’s satirical anti-hero excels at. Littleton and Pickering describe the position that interpreters of this kind of humor face as a “dilemma of choice”:

If we reject any attempt to denounce or control humour and comedy, we are immediately faced with the issue as to whether such rejection means opting for a position which simply permits, without qualification, all forms of comic discourse, regardless of their content and presentation. Any invocation of our irrepressible comic demon, working mischief in forbidden areas, obviously lends support to this position, but in its populist appeal it raises the difficult issues of moral relativism. (293-294)

The difficulty here is that no language, no set of words, is inherently funny *or* serious exclusively; as Cicero puts it, “each and every commonplace that I may touch upon as a source for the humorous can, generally speaking, also serve as the source for serious thoughts” (190). The difference lies completely in how these commonplaces are employed—honorably or dishonorably—or for the purpose of this chapter, decorously or indecorously. The question of joking decorum runs throughout Cicero’s treatment of humor, because being decorous in all things is perhaps the single most important general tenet for the “gentleman orator,” which is the presumptive audience for Cicero’s discussion in *De Oratore*. Thus, Cicero insists on a decorum of humor, but because

humor is, by definition, a violation of decorum, artfully combining the two is obviously problematic and requires a detailed understanding of the orator's audience, their expectations, and what sort of humor will be both permissible and appreciated in a given social situation. Littleton and Pickering come down against the "moral relativism" that a laissez-faire attitude toward humor might lead to, agreeing with Cicero's careful, systematic approach to the understanding and use of humor in discourse. That is, while there is a necessity for freedom of speech, society also has the right to judge that speech as morally (and also possibly comedically) bereft. They argue that humor can push boundaries in a moral way, but it requires a good sense of relative morality—a stronger than average moral compass, in other words—rather than an anything-goes moral relativism. This trait is on display throughout *Dunces*, as Toole continually pushes against a number of moral injustices of his time and place, while he also perpetuates stereotypes and attitudes of the time, particularly regarding race and sexuality, that would most likely be condemned in a contemporary work. In the introduction to *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict*, Paul Lewis argues that recent humor outlets like "on-line jokes and parodies" make it easier to perceive the "harmful uses of humor" because they tend to go beyond the "predictable and safe joking of the most widely consumed comic genres" (7). While I agree with Lewis that a good understanding of the ways and means of modern humor necessitates that we explore the "fault lines in our humor culture," I contend that we can look into the not-so-distant past, at challenging texts like *Dunces* and to paradoxical characters like Ignatius J. Reilly, to find these fissures just as easily as we can find them on the Internet.

## 5.1 Creating Boundaries to Cross Them

Kirby Olson makes a pretty bold, but sound, claim regarding the tense relationship between Platonic philosophy's search for "transcendence truths"<sup>127</sup> and comedy's "transgression of categorical and conceptual boundaries and norms"; he says they are completely incompatible (14). Similarly, at the end of the introduction to *Funny Peculiar*, Mikita Brottman asserts that the two meanings of the word "funny," "the first being 'comical, amusing, or entertaining' and the second being 'strange, odd, or disturbing,'" were once not separate and that the true psychological basis of all laughter, and the humorous generally, is a psychological disturbance of some sort or another (xxiii). Brottman, who is clearly trying to annoy all the seemingly happy-go-lucky humor scholars out there, states her thesis quite plainly: when it comes to humor, "it's all funny peculiar" (xxiii). She then spends the rest of the text showing how all laughter is a sign of some underlying and quite serious neurosis. The problem here is not with Brottman's primary claim; other scholars also describe the source of humor as a kind of mental block or disturbance. The difference is that Brottman sees humor as a negative symptom of that disturbance, while most other scholars see humor as the psyche's healthy way of dealing with an otherwise intractable incongruous dilemma. With a text like *Dunces*, it is tempting to go over to Brottman's critical and condemning way of looking at humor because so much of that which is "funny ha-ha" in *Dunces* is also "funny peculiar," but I believe that is exactly the point Brottman misses—or perhaps could not personally comprehend in the first place. Because she places so much emphasis on the "funny peculiar" side of humor, she discounts the "funny ha-ha" side as

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<sup>127</sup> This works best if we read Plato straight—that is, unironically—which would not be my choice, but for the sake of Olson's argument, I'll suspend my disbelief for a moment.

a mere surface. Because she, admittedly, does not enjoy humor or laughter, she assumes that the fault must lie in the joke, rather than in herself. However, if we give equal credence and weight to the “ha-ha” and the “peculiar” sides of the humor coin, we must accept the values as equal, balanced, and mutually inclusive, as we must accept that “heads” necessitates “tails.” That Brottman focuses exclusively on the psychology of humor and disregards its sociology is telling because, as has been shown, humor is not an individual pursuit. And thus, what counts as peculiar and/or amusing is less an indication of any one person’s neuroses, than perhaps an illustration of what a particular audience deems appropriate or inappropriate in a given rhetorical situation.

This discussion about “funny ha-ha” versus “funny peculiar” as it relates to a rhetorical understanding of humor seems closely connected to the classical concept of decorum as Robert Hariman describes it in *Political Style: The Artistry of Power*:

Decorum articulated the rules governing the selection of diction appropriate to one’s subject or situation. [...] The lineaments of this concept are presented in the classical handbooks, which suggest two dimensions of the concept corresponding to the alternative perspectives available in any explicitly identified social code: a relatively uniform, commonsense, commonplace system of instructions and a more complicated awareness of those instructions as somewhat arbitrary markers of a constantly shifting field of social relations. Decorum operated at both levels, as a set of conventions and as a theory of conventions. (180)

Undeniably, there is a decorum of humorous discourse, in both of Hariman’s senses of the word, even if no authoritative “handbooks” exist that lay out the measured particulars of the discipline. But what makes humor decorum uniquely complicated—much more so than in the rather stagnant field of political discourse—is that its “constantly shifting field of social relations” is not a hazard to be dealt with and avoided when possible, but is instead rather more like the goal of the whole endeavor. That is, humor shakes up social

relations because it must not be straightforward, if it wants to be funny. If someone must be “in” on a joke, logically, someone else must be “out,” and as such, the idea of functionally “decorous humor” would be something of an oxymoron—if humor were a static, solid thing, that is. But as humor is a rhetorical event that depends on a particular context and audience in order to happen, we can experience decorous humor events all the time that would, under different circumstances, be completely ineffectual.<sup>128</sup> On one hand, Stone describes humor that does not succeed because it does not truly engage in this “shifting field” as “safe and conventional, inviting audiences to cozy to authority and cave in to, rather than recognize, their fears”<sup>129</sup> (xiv). She continues: “This is true of comedy that sneers at everything, serving sarcasm as satire, emissions from a school-yard bully with no point of view, no knowledge” (xiv-xv). On the other hand, she argues that the “most stirring comedy mixes pain with pleasure, its pleasure in part deriving from its pain” (xv). Morris concurs with this assessment of what makes successful stand-up humor operate as both a socially constructive and transgressive form of discourse, writing:

Facilitating communication between people with different views, inverting hierarchies, subverting power structures, understanding varied perspectives, attempting to create unity out of divisiveness—this is not just a description of a Native American comedian’s epideictic encounter in the contact zone of the theatre; it is also a description of our unique kind of public space and performance as scholars and teachers. (50)

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<sup>128</sup> This reminds me of the sitcom *The Office* and how much of its humor comes from carefully constructed instances of indecorous humor and its comi-tragic results; in fact, I know several people who say they cannot watch the show because of how uncomfortable the awkward situations make them, even though they are aware, of course, that the show is fictional.

<sup>129</sup> Cobb discusses this phenomenon as it has played out in the commodification of the “redneck” persona as an identifiable lifestyle choice: “[H]aving at last acquired the resources for full-scale participation in the national consumer culture, upwardly mobile southern whites were not only able but eager to consume their own regional identity as rapidly as commercial marketers could commodify it” (228).

Clearly, every stand-up routine does not create the kind of transformative “contact zone” of discourse that Morris describes; in fact, some events work counter to this movement and do the opposite of all the things in Morris’s list. The point is, however, that the stand-up situation—which is in many ways the most immediate and dynamic<sup>130</sup> type of humor event—always offers *the potential* for more communication and understanding by first illustrating our “hierarchies” and “power structures,” then showing their meaninglessness. Because of its exaggerated blending of high and low cultures (and basically any other opposing forces that it can get its proverbial hands on), another excellent arena for studying this transformative power of humor is carnivalesque literature, as most famously delineated by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and epitomized (in a modern way, at least) in *Dunces*. Bakhtin’s description of how folk humor relates to the larger social world provides a useful structure for understanding how a carnivalesque text like *Dunces* negotiates and stretches the normal boundaries of taste and decorum in Southern humor.

## 5.2 Bakhtin and the Rejuvenating Grotesqueries of Folk Humor

Before discussing the specific ways that *Dunces* functions in the folk humor traditions of the carnival and the grotesque, it seems worthwhile to clearly define these terms, relying primarily on the writing of Bakhtin, but also using the work of several, more contemporary scholars. These concepts provide the foundation for the understanding of folk humor as a society-forming and a society-regulating type of discourse, which is what Bakhtin puts forward in the introductory and theoretical sections of *Rabelais and His World* and which is what I also want to attempt to apply to *Dunces*.

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<sup>130</sup> Making it both the most potentially transformative and the most difficult to analyze.



Laying out the foundation for his thorough study of Rabelais' work, Bakhtin writes that "the scope and the importance" of folk humor "were immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture" (4). And not only was this opposition "boundless" in terms of its "variety," it was universal within the popular cultures that participated in these festivals (4). Carnival laughter, for instance, "is not an individual reaction to some isolated 'comic' event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people" (11). In other words, the carnival reorients the humor event—which we know is never a completely self-contained experience, though it can certainly appear to be so—in order to showcase its social basis and function. In this way, the carnival simply makes transparent some of the normally opaque aspects of humor.<sup>131</sup> Bakhtin further describes the universality of the carnival, writing:

[Carnival] belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. (7)

The metaphor that Bakhtin chooses for this description of carnival highlights its essentially performative nature; that is, carnival is like a stage play turned outward, where the artificial distinction between performer and audience, created by the "footlights," dissolves. Whereas this dissolution in "normal life" would presumably work to obscure

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<sup>131</sup> Rappoport extends this idea further in a metaphor that is both beautiful and a little revolting; he contends that "language itself is a somewhat messy human invention that has never been static or antiseptic. It is rather more like a smelly compost pile that slowly cooks to generate much of the linguistic fertilizer that writers, musicians, and comedians rely upon in creating the works that shape and feed our culture" (63).

the constant actor/spectator nature of human existence, the play-frame of the carnival literally thrives on everyone being voyeurs and exhibitionists. In the carnival, we all watch and we all are watched. In other words, we all perform for ourselves and each other. John Marmysz describes the value of this recurring group activity as a way of dealing with the often disquieting struggle of folk life: “The carnival was an opportunity for the common people to gather together and celebrate their connection with the earth and its powers of creation and destruction. [...] For the people who worked the land, thus, the painful and upsetting realities they faced every day were part and parcel of the overall regulation of life” (146). As such, the carnival dynamic actually represents a more transparent image of the “realities” of life than other regulated forms of discourse, but its harshness necessitates its humor—otherwise everyone might simply give up, which presumably would be bad news all around. As Stone indelicately but accurately expresses in the epigraph to this chapter, carnival serves as a communal “safety valve,” without which the constant pressure of normal life might become too great and lead to truly dangerous outbursts. In the case of *Dunces*, Ignatius, with his constant referencing of the state of his valve, serves as a stinking, bloated, and temperamental manifestation of this pressure release mechanism. And he certainly cuts one of the most complete grotesque figures in modern literature, to the point that one wonders if Toole drew some amount of inspiration from Gargantua and Pantagruel, Rabelais’ central characters. According to Bakhtin, these characters typify the quintessential element of the carnival play-frame: duality, or the exaggerated inhabiting of contradiction.

Bakhtin discusses grotesque realism’s focus on the exaggerated corporeal body at length and how, in the Renaissance, such a representation would have been “gay,”

“gracious,” and “deeply positive” (19). It is only in later eras, when any focus on the physical body and its functions became strictly taboo, that Rabelais’ images became perplexing, scandalous, and perverse. In their time, Bakhtin argues, Rabelais’ works would have fit into a well-established folk humor tradition that falls in line with the “essential principle of grotesque realism”: “degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (19). By taking the focus off of the “high” and “abstract,” grotesque realism focuses on the earthly by constantly showing the human body in flux, “in the act of becoming” (317). Bakhtin further describes this “act”: “One of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born,” the point being, it would seem, to show that these opposing forces are cyclical, natural, and inevitable (26). As is also the case with the “contact zone” creating humor described by Morris, “[t]he last thing one can say of the real grotesque is that it is static; on the contrary it seeks to grasp in its imagery [...] the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being” (Bakhtin 52). This celebration of bodily transformation through detailed, carnal description has much in common with the forms of humor previously discussed in this work because any kind of transcendent meaning and understanding comes about through the interpretation of a particular text in a particular situation. That is, one must experience the grotesque, and likewise the humorous event, in order to appreciate it. Thus, the following section attempts to apply Bakhtin’s concepts of the carnival and grotesque realism to *Dunces*, as an example of the carnivalesque in Southern humor, to see how well they fit into Bakhtin’s definition of folk humor. Given that Ignatius’s academic background, which he refers to regularly, is medieval history and philosophy,

this application of Bakhtin's ideas to *Dunces* is particularly fitting. Key to the plot of the novel, in fact, are Ignatius's obsession with Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy* and his constant attempts to interpret the world of 1960 New Orleans through the lens of an imprisoned 6<sup>th</sup> century philosopher.

### 5.3 The Grotesque Carnival of *A Confederacy of Dunces*

In the "Introduction to the Twentieth-Anniversary Edition" of *Dunces*, Andrei Codrescu claims that the novel is "*the* New Orleans book," and he describes Ignatius as "a late-'50s, early-'60s Don Quixote," whose "presence guaranteed disaster, yet no one emerged unchanged after an encounter with him" (vi). In the world of novel writers and literary scholars, comparing a work to *Don Quixote* is something akin to comparing a baseball player to Babe Ruth or a basketball player to Michael Jordan—there is no higher praise, in other words. But in the case of *Dunces*, Codrescu's comparison is meant not only as the ultimate compliment, but as specific and pointed interpretation. The satirical agendas and techniques of both works, though separated by hundreds of years and an ocean, have more similarities than differences. As Codrescu describes, *Dunces* "is the work of an insider, a genuine act of treason by someone with access to all the privileged information. Toole was a traitor [to New Orleans], and no amount of rehabilitative boosterism can erase the stigma" (viii). Thus, unlike Rabelais' writing in the Renaissance, Toole's "degradation" of the social order was not celebrated; in fact, he couldn't even get it published once it was completed.<sup>132</sup> The reason for this—both the novel's genius and its still somewhat taboo status—comes back to one undeniable

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<sup>132</sup> We can only speculate about how much this rejection influenced Toole's suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning in 1969, but as Codrescu justifiably says, "[E]ven if this played only a small part, the fools [the New York publishing establishment] have a lot to answer for. Toole's job was far from done" (vii).

feature: the book's cadre of grotesque fools, clowns, and harlequins is completely honest.

Codrescu writes:

Toole's characters are the very opposite of caricatures: they are ultra-realist depictions of a time and place, complete with nose-hairs, cataracts, swollen feet, warts, intestinal distress, political opinions, and social codes. Ignatius Reilly, the gargantuan slob who torments everyone with his "artistic genius," is a merciless camera lens trained on an eternal stupidity that, far from dated, flourishes unchecked in our day. (viii)

The key difference between Rabelais' world and Toole's (and subsequently ours) is that the "ultra-realist depictions" contained in Toole's work distress rather than amuse us; instead of being reassured by these reminders of our shared earthly origins and fates, we resist and seek to refute them. As Codrescu puts it, even as Toole is "lionized for his accomplishment," "his masterwork is still too raw" (ix). It refuses to be "nice" or easily dismissed, and thus, Ignatius remains a fascinating, despicable, disgusting, and unresolvable paradox, for both the other characters in the text and especially for its readers.<sup>133</sup>

For structure's sake, I will use Bakhtin's "Three Forms of Carnival Humor"—1) Ritual spectacle, 2) Comic verbal compositions, and 3) Curses, Oaths, and Popular Blazons—in the following analysis of *Dunces* as a way of separating and categorizing the various carnivalesque techniques in the text (5). Concerning the three forms, Bakhtin says that "in spite of their variety," they "are closely linked and interwoven in many ways" (5). Similar to Aristotle's core rhetorical concepts of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*, these forms may be more useful as an analytical heuristic than anything else, since they are so intrinsically connected in an actual rhetorical situation. Thus, while the forms give

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<sup>133</sup> He could be described as the murderous Anton Chigurh is in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*: "He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has his principles" (153). With both characters, their principles just happen to be very peculiar to themselves.

us a workable approach for assessing *Dunces* in folk humor terms, they also raise arbitrary barriers around the text that are unnecessary for enjoying and appreciating the novel as a work of humorous fiction.

Describing the societal and cultural position of comic festivals in Rabelais' time, Bakhtin writes that they were "sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials"; they were no less stylized and rhetorically engineered, but their aims and forms were drastically different (5). As such, comic spectacles served as a counterpoint to the dominant and "official" societal and cultural hierarchies of the day, and this counterpoint opens up the door for criticism that would more than likely not be tolerated under "normal" circumstances. Discussing the rhetorical power of satire, Matthew Hodgart claims that the point of the grotesque ritual is to "[reduce] man from nakedness to the condition of an animal, in which any claim to social or even divine distinction must appear even more ridiculous," which is extremely ironic in the case of *Dunces*, given that Ignatius consistently dresses as if it's winter in Wisconsin rather than New Orleans (30). Discussing Bakhtin, Marmysz concurs with this assessment of folk humor's powerful—and positive—social force, writing that the "debasements" of folk humor were "intended to regenerate and repair the separation that has developed between life's negative and positive poles" (147). The shared spectacles of carnival were like a cultural "reset button" that worked to alleviate stress in ways that the church and state could not. And this kind of careening, carnivalesque ritual is certainly not completely foreign to Southern literature. For instance, discussing the work of Erskine Caldwell on so-called "camp meetings," Sylvia J. Cook writes: "The carnivalesque rituals of Christian societies have traditionally been seen as burlesques or

parodies of religious ceremonies which served both to release and then contain energies that were usually suppressed by social and religious controls” (55). Call it what you will—carnival or camp meeting—the social need for a collective release persists, bubbling up in these works of literature in the form of the grotesque ritual spectacle.

In a very real sense, Ignatius is one sustained walking, eating, pontificating, belching ritual spectacle that draws the somewhat episodic novel together. Like a six-verse hymn sung so poorly that it becomes a completely alternative form of entertainment than it set out to be, he is fascinating, horrifying, and hilarious all at the same time.<sup>134</sup> From the opening scene of the novel, Toole makes it impossible to rationalize Ignatius’s appearance and behavior, even when held in relative comparison to the other ridiculous figures in the novel. The initial description of Ignatius, which also begins the book, is worth quoting at length:

A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor of the cap Ignatius J. Reilly’s supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people waiting under the clock at the D. H. Holmes department store,<sup>135</sup> studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress. [...] Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person’s lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one’s soul. (1)

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<sup>134</sup> It may be necessary to grow up Southern Baptist to really understand what I’m talking about here.

<sup>135</sup> An actual landmark in New Orleans, as are nearly all of the other locations in the novel. As was the case with Thomas Wolfe’s controversial *Look Homeward, Angel*, which also treaded very close to the edge of “fictional,” the ambivalent reception of *Dunces* by the hometown crowd is easy to understand. The difference between notoriety and notorious gets pretty blurred at times in this work.

One cannot help but suspect that Toole had some familiarity with the traditional images of the grotesque, given that the first line suggests that, in appearance, Ignatius<sup>136</sup> gives the impression of going in “two directions at once” (1). More than anything else, Ignatius perfectly embodies the essential grotesque aspect of duality in all things, even down to his eyes, which are both blue *and* yellow, instead of just being green. Continually throughout the novel, he is sensitive *and* obtuse, bodily *and* abstract, hulking *and* delicate, obscene *and* surprisingly innocent. He is a roiling mess of contradictions that somehow works in this particular rhetorical situation. And like many characters in Southern humor, he continually transgresses normal boundaries of decorum and taste through his loudness, corpulence, and argumentativeness. However, unlike the normal grotesque types that populate much Southern humor—Ernest T. Bass, for instance, from *The Andy Griffith Show*—Ignatius transgresses both low *and* high boundaries of decorum. In particular, his articulate, pompous speech and insufferable haughtiness exclude him from academic society (which is itself pretty pretentious), just as much as his hunting cap and dirty boots do. More than anything, this dual transgressiveness is what makes *Dunces* a unique example of Southern humor. It combines the two, normally distinct, extremes of the Southern humor spectacle—the redneck ruffian and the effete socialite/academic—into one bizarre, genre-challenging package. Ignatius is not really either of these things exactly, because he is also not *not* these things. A big aspect of the normal decorum of Southern humor is the avoidance of this kind of type-defying character. In other words, Southern humor is fine with characters and images that are in “bad taste,” as long as they are easily categorized and bound to a defined social rung (i.e. the redneck). Toole’s centerpiece character offends because he is not easily contained.

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<sup>136</sup> Toole’s Gargantua.



In addition to being a kind of walking spectacle himself, Ignatius engages in ritual performances for his own satisfaction and enjoyment in a number of instances during the narrative. For example, he is obsessed with popular culture, particularly in the form of movies and television shows aimed at teenagers, but his enjoyment comes through his ridicule of these cultural texts. Early on in the novel, Ignatius's mother describes this ritual to a friend: "Every afternoon, as right as rain, he looks at that show where them kids dance.' [...] 'He don't like the show at all, but he won't miss it. You oughta hear what he says about them poor kids'" (35). Of course, what Mrs. Reilly does not quite understand is that Ignatius, in fact, loves and needs the show [presumably something like *American Bandstand*], but it is a perverted kind of love. Railing against the program to his mother, Ignatius says, "I would like very much to know what the Founding Fathers would say if they could see these children being debauched to further the cause of Clearasil. However, I always suspected that democracy would come to this. [...] The United States needs some theology and geometry, some taste and decency" (37). Like a hard-line conservative who religiously watches *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Ignatius needs the show to fuel his own righteous sense of purpose and superiority. Lowe describes this as "deeply hypocritical," which it is, but it is also perfectly grotesque (164). Doubtlessly, Ignatius is of two minds when it comes to these popular texts. Would he feel triumphant if he somehow engineered their demise? Absolutely. But he would also lose his *raison d'etre*, and thus, would have to find a new "insult to good taste" at which to direct his ire, though this would probably be pretty easy for him since he abhors nearly all aspects of modern life. As Lowe puts it, "Ignatius's general disdain for all things American and most cultural production after the medieval period marks him as the most

insufferable kind of snob, [...] especially in terms of the contrast between his literary high-mindedness and his actually infantile daily routines” (167).

At several points during the novel, Ignatius aspires to champion (and lead, of course) a revolution against all the cultural “abortions” that he sees around him every day, and the most discussed of these failed attempts is probably the workers’ revolt at the Levy Pants factory. In this instance, Ignatius conspires, awkwardly, with the African-American factory workers at Levy Pants, where he is “working” as an office clerk, to violently overthrow management in a “Crusade for Moorish Dignity,” the phrase he has written on one of his sheets, stained yellow by his night-time emission, to serve as the banner for their cause (119). The “crusade” begins to crumble when he asks two of the female workers to carry the sheet in front of the group as they storm the office of the factory:

“How come we gotta take that old sheet with us?” someone asked.  
“I thought this suppose to be a demonstration dealin with wages.”  
“Sheet? What sheet!” Ignatius replied. “I am holding before you the proudest of banners, an identification of our purpose, a visualization of all that we seek.” The workers studied the stains more intensely. “If you wish to simply rush into the office like cattle, you will have participated in nothing more than a riot. This banner alone gives form and credence to the agitation. There is a certain geometry involved in these things, a certain ritual which must be observed.” (119)

Conceived as a pseudo-religious ritual, the parody descends nearly to violence, then simply dissolves once the workers figure out that Ignatius actually intends them to physically attack the factory manager. They head back to work, leaving Ignatius alone, holding his stained “banner.” Naturally, Ignatius cannot understand their refusal, but neither can he act alone against the management. All of his physical substance merely

serves as a vehicle for his very large and active mouth; for anything other than self-amusement, he is impotent.

Bakhtin terms the second “form” of carnival humor as “Comic compositions,” and he describes them as consisting of “the entire recreational literature of the Middle Ages” (13). Because the scope of this literature encompassed such a wide swath of time and geography, “it underwent, of course, considerable transformation”; however, Bakhtin argues that “in spite of all these variations this literature remained more or less the expression of the popular carnival spirit, using the latter’s forms and symbols” (13). The most prevalent type of “Comic composition” that Bakhtin discusses is the parody of official, serious forms of literature. In *Dunces*, this form is best represented by the various writings that Ignatius composes throughout the text. Though Ignatius certainly seems to take them seriously and writes them with his best attempt at gravitas (even if they are often composed in crayon), the audience for *Dunces* is meant to immediately see their absurdity, relative to non-parody texts. These writings take several forms, including a pseudo-academic “comparative history” of medieval and modern cultures that he works on about once per month, but most common are the entries into his “Journal of a Working Boy, or Up From Sloth,” his ranting, rambling, and often just plain dishonest account of his time spent punching a clock. His first entry into this journal chronicles how, after a few days of employment at Levy Pants, he has “grown accustomed to the hectic pace of the office life, an adjustment which I doubted I could make” (86). He also describes how he has “succeeded in initiating several work-saving methods” to ease his burden; these consist of 1) arriving to work one hour late, 2) dumping all his filing into the trash can, and 3) complaining about his valve sealing whenever he is asked to do anything else (86-

87). Another example of a comic composition in the novel is the letter Ignatius writes, unbeknownst to his boss, to Levy Pants' biggest client, who has sent a completely justified complaint to the company concerning a botched order. Ignatius addresses the man as "Mr. I. Abelman, Mongoloid, Esq."; calls him "retarded" and "absurd"; and closes with, "If you molest us again, sir, you may feel the sting of the lash across your pitiful shoulders" (77). The key to Ignatius's character, and in some ways the novel as a whole, is that he does not mean this letter or his other writings as jokes whatsoever. Ignatius is completely serious; Toole's narrator comments: "Happily pondering the thought that the world understood only strength and force, Ignatius copied the Levy signature onto the letter with the office manager's pen, tore up Mr. Gonzalez' letter to Abelman, and slipped his own into the correspondence Outgoing box" (77). While this is certainly a willful act of dishonesty, Ignatius is not pulling a prank or being funny; he genuinely believes he is righting wrongs. And perhaps Toole's larger point in all this is that the world that surrounds Ignatius is, itself, crazy enough to let him get away with his nonsense for 330 pages.

These comic compositions serve two important functions in the carnival humor of the novel. First, as writings within the larger written text, they act as a mechanism that opens up a narrative window into Ignatius's mind so we can see that the performance he puts on for others is genuine, at least in the sense that he puts on the same performance for himself. As a character, Ignatius may act as the "safety valve" that must be opened, or in Lowe's words "unleashed," upon the other characters in the book to expose the incongruity of their city-sized universe. However, he is also a complete character, a valve-within-a-valve, so to speak, and these compositions help create depth in a character

who could easily come across as loudly one-dimensional (160). Secondly, these writings structurally and thematically help build to the cumulative combustion of the final scene in the novel that the various episodes have been working toward the whole time, which is necessary to complete the trajectory of the novel, given that Ignatius would, without strong provocation, happily wallow in his indolent miasma forever. On this point, Kline writes: “By virtue of its opposing elements the grotesque resists resolution; its unresolved nature becomes one of its structuring qualities. Consequently, the grotesque in extended comic fiction risks unsatisfying stasis” (284). This “unsatisfying stasis” does not happen in *Dunces* because the figures in the book who had, up until the end, been mostly acted upon by Ignatius, push back—though fittingly not in any kind of organized or concerned way. It is in this final scene that the key difference between Ignatius, as a modern (and therefore abhorrent) image of the grotesque, and the great grotesque figures in past literature exposes itself. The myriad and far-flung seeds of unrest and instability that Ignatius has sown throughout the novel germinate all at once upon him in the final scene, literally knocking him out.<sup>137</sup> Then in the aftermath, most likely facing either prison or the insane asylum, Ignatius runs away, or rather he is rescued by his much-maligned and previously-absent girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff. According to Kline, “The ending of *A Confederacy of Dunces* is less a classic comedy finish than it is a problematic mythos of spring in which the just are more or less rewarded, the blocking character is shunted aside, if not removed, and obstacles are perhaps eliminated, possibly allowing marriages to take place” (286). For growth and change to happen in this story, in this place and

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<sup>137</sup> Having traced a pornographic advertisement featuring a naked woman holding his copy of Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy* back to the Night of Joy, Ignatius hopes to meet a lusty lass who is also interested in medieval philosophy. Instead, he is attacked by a confused performing parrot and nearly run over by a bus, at which point he passes out in the middle of the street.

time, the grotesque symbol must be purged. Because unlike the classical examples of grotesque realism, which Bakhtin describes as “always conceiving,” Ignatius is instead always masturbating and recoils at any outward sign of maternal physicality (21). In this way, Ignatius quite literally acts as the stubborn, fatty plug in the cosmic “pyloric valve” of the novel, and once removed, the valve opens and the other characters are allowed to grow and progress.

Bakhtin describes the third form of carnival humor—curses, oaths, and popular blazons—writing: “It is characteristic for the familiar speech of the marketplace to use abusive language, insulting words or expressions, some of them quite lengthy and complex. The abuse is grammatically and semantically isolated from context and is regarded as a complete unit, something like a proverb” (16). Specifically describing the function of the *blason populaire*, Michael Cundall writes: “Jokes, witty sayings, humorous anecdotes, etc., that make use of such [stereotyped] views can be considered as examples of *blason populaire*” (159). Typically derogatory, the *blason populaire* is a broad term, encompassing most any discourse that relies upon some sort of stereotype in its logic. Thus, these curses and oaths serve as a folk humor shorthand, whose meanings are an all-or-nothing sort of thing. For instance, pronouncing someone a “redneck” carries with it all the aspects that are tied up in the cultural meaning of the word. They are performative rather than propositional, in other words. This third variety of folk humor is probably the most pervasive in *Dunces*, because it resides in the word choice and syntax of the text itself, but that also makes it the most difficult to delineate. In *Dunces*, curses, oaths, and stereotypes of one sort or another appear on nearly every page, which is why I think it will be more instructive to compare the language and affectations

of two thematically opposed characters—Ignatius and Jones the porter—as a representation of what Toole is doing with this kind of normally restricted language throughout the novel.

If a character exists in *Dunces* who could begin to balance out the indecorous heft of Ignatius’s personality, it is in the character of Jones, the young African-American man who is coerced into working for a pittance as a porter at the Night of Joy bar and dance club in the French Quarter in order to stay out of trouble with the law. In a number of ways, he is Ignatius’s negative (or positive). For instance, as compared to the near gleeful exactness with which Toole describes Ignatius’s attire and physical appearance, Jones is, for the most part, fairly nondescript—except for his eyes and face. Introducing Jones in the novel, Toole writes:

In the precinct the old man sat on a bench with the others, mostly shoplifters, who composed the late afternoon haul. He had neatly arranged along his thigh his Social Security card, his membership card in the St. Odo of Cluny Holy Name Society, a Golden Age Club badge, and a slip of paper identifying him as a member of the American Legion. A young black man, eyeless behind spaceage sunglasses, studied the little dossier on the thigh next to his.

“Whoa!” he said, grinning. “Say, you mus belong to everthin.”

The old man rearranged his cards meticulously and said nothing.

“How come they draggin in somebody like you?” The sunglasses blew smoke all over the old man’s cards. “Them po-lice mus be getting desperate.”

“I’m here in violation of my constitutional rights,” the old man said with sudden anger.

“Well, they not gonna believe that. You better think up somethin else.”

No matter the time of day or night, where he is, or what he is doing, Jones wears sunglasses and is surrounded by a thick cloud of cigarette smoke, yet he still manages to pick up on the how skewed his world is, even if he can do very little to change it. As an opposing anti-force to Ignatius, Jones often seems immaterial and without body, as the

“spaceage sunglasses” metonymy suggests. While there is always too much of Ignatius (in most any way you can conceive of), Jones is more like an incorporeal set of eyes, similar to the famous billboard for “Dr. T. J. Eckleburg” in *The Great Gatsby*, which is nothing but a set of gigantic eyes staring out from behind of equally gigantic glasses—an advertisement for an optometrist that comes to symbolize the all-seeing and judgmental (though impotent) gaze of a higher moral authority. And in the topsy-turvy world of *Dunces*, it makes perfect sense that the character whose perspective is most obscured would also be the most perceptive and most even-keeled. He doesn’t need anyone to tell him that a plausible story matters much more than a righteous plea about constitutional rights in this place. When it comes specifically to ritualized oaths and curses, where Ignatius is loud, obnoxious, and insulting, Jones keeps his mouth shut or speaks in ambiguous phrases, irony, and innuendo. For instance, when Jones “negotiates” for his job with Lana Lee at the Night of Joy, which seems like it might be the dumpiest bar in the city, Toole writes:

“Don worry. I come in regular, anything keep my ass away from a po-lice for a few hour,” Jones said, blowing smoke on Lana Lee. “Where you keep them motherfuckin broom?”

“One thing we gotta understand is keeping our mouth clean around here.”

“Yes, *ma’m*. I sure don wanna make a bad impressia in a fine place like the Night of Joy. Whoa!”

Nearly everything that comes out of Jones’s mouth is either cigarette smoke or potential sarcasm. Conversely, Ignatius nearly makes a sport of being hyperbolic, bloviating, and openly insulting. For example, using one of his favorite expressions to accost “the newest member of the art guild” whose amateurish still-life paintings offend him greatly, Ignatius exclaims, “Oh, my God!” [...] “How dare you present such abortions to the



public” (209). We get a sense that Jones may be just as critical as Ignatius of the dunces that surround him—and he would certainly be more reasonable and justified in his criticisms—but he could never express himself as Ignatius does, since he would immediately be thrown in jail or lynched. Fittingly, in the end, Jones may be the character who comes out the least marred by his encounter with Ignatius, most likely because he managed to not get himself noticed.

#### **5.4 Conclusion: A *Confederacy of Dunces* as Satire and Maybe Even Southern, Too**

Undoubtedly, as a modern equivalent to a historically specific form of humor, *Dunces* falls squarely into Bakhtin’s spectrum of folk humor, but can this kind of modern carnival also work as real satire? That is, can it be more than just absurdity? Lowe argues that we *must* think of it as more: “We begin to run into problems, however, when we try to confine this baggy monster to only one of our existing literary categories. [...] A more productive route might be to think about the book’s multiple contributions to American culture as a whole; how exactly does its humor work and does it do *more* than amuse us?” (159). Similarly, Bakhtin claims that most modern scholarship on folk humor does not correctly conceive of its complexity—its necessary “ambivalence”—and labels it as either “purely negative satire” or “gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content” (12). *Dunces* stands as an exception to the rule. We are meant to enjoy our time with Ignatius and all the other dunces just as much as, and maybe more than, we are meant to stand in harsh judgment of them. The book is chock-full of terribly flawed and, simultaneously, very entertaining fools; it would be too difficult and depressing to read otherwise. Absolutely, *Dunces* is satirical, but it is not merely that. Its morality, like much of its humor, is implied and must come from the reader, engaged in

the experience of the humorous event. It does not offer an easy or clear solution to the miasma of human existence presented in the narrative, the closest it comes perhaps is Ignatius's escape from New Orleans. Like Voltaire in *Candide* and Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and *A Modest Proposal*, Toole's judgment can seem harsh in the text because the reader is not offered any breathing room, a space of sanity and morality and proportion—the point being, perhaps, that any such space would be just as much of a fiction as the exaggerated events and characters in the work. In the world of *Dunces*, all is incongruity, which supports the idea that Ignatius is not really much more absurd than any of the other characters, he just happens to be a different flavor of absurd. If any resolution to the incongruity in *Dunces* is to be found, it must spring from the reader because Toole's masterpiece maintains its ambivalence to the end. There is never a clear inside and outside—all is within the play-frame—which is the key aspect of the grotesque, but usually not of Southern humor.

Which leads us, inexorably, to the final question:<sup>138</sup> is *Dunces* really an example of Southern humor? The answer is a conditional “yes.” While it shares many of the key textual and thematic aspects of traditional Southern humor, its refusal to be easily categorized and subsumed into the Southern humor fold makes it unusual among the popular Southern humor of the last thirty years. Hugh Ruppensburg makes a strong case for *Dunces* Southern chops, arguing that Toole presents us with a, fittingly ironic, image of the urbanized agrarian mindset in Ignatius; like the Southern agrarians of *I'll Take My Stand*, Ignatius seeks a return to God, and art, and symbolic form. While their geographies are strikingly different, the principles they lobby for are not far apart at all.

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<sup>138</sup> Itself a narrowed-down version of the big question from the first chapter, “What is Southern humor, anyway?”

In addition, as the epigraphs to the novel illustrate, *Dunces*, as a work and representation of Southern culture, is obsessed with classifying and reveling in its own sense of uniqueness and specialness. While Toole doubtlessly plays with and satirizes this tendency, in doing so, at the same time he gets to generate his own catalogue of the unique and special “thing” that is New Orleans. However, the key aspect of *Dunces*’ conditional Southern-ness is also the quality that makes it difficult to discuss. As Silver argues, most Southern humor only temporarily puts on the appearance of the oppressed “as a means of policing the boundaries of class and race even while experiencing the thrill of transgressing them” (189). There is an invisible line that separates Southern humor that contains nothing but weak, ready-made, and readily-forgotten incongruities (this is the majority), from the Southern humor that attempts, like *Dunces*, to engage in a discourse that truly puts the status quo into question. This humor creates the kind of cultural contact zone opportunities that Morris describes as equal to the work and pursuit of scholars. The problem is that it can be difficult to tell these two types of Southern humor apart. One is safe and one is risky, but they both can create laughter. One uses incongruity to prop up the power of the symbolic order, while the other “deflates” it using similar techniques. Consequently, perhaps the only way of telling the difference between the two humors is to look for what Pearson terms<sup>139</sup> “comic tension,” which is the disparity “between what the world purports to be and what it actually is. [...] There is the ideal of culture, and then there is the far less wholesome reality” (54). What makes matters confusing is that the Southern “ideal” does not always seem terribly wholesome

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<sup>139</sup> Pearson references works by Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O’Connor, among others; too often Toole’s is left out of such discussions.

or ideal. Nonetheless, we should be suspicious of *any* humor event that doesn't end with some remaining ambivalence—that doesn't leave the audience wanting more.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The standup humor of Henry Cho, a Korean-American comedian whom I referred to briefly in Chapter 3, serves as a fitting summative exemplar for the various arguments I have been attempting to put forward in the preceding chapters. Cho grew up in Knoxville, TN, and regularly claims that his family members were the only Asian people he had ever seen until he went on a trip to Korea with his father. Much of Cho's early standup material focuses on his unique perspective as a Southern Asian-American. However, not all of Cho's humor explicitly references his Southern background, but even when it does not, Cho embodies and plays upon a number of common Southern humor tropes, which places him squarely onto the spectrum of Southern humorists. For instance, in his standup routine "What's That Clickin' Noise?" Cho never explicitly references "the South," but instead riffs on his unfathomably stupid friend, "J. B. Stewart," who is such a backward redneck<sup>140</sup> that he is unfamiliar with something as seemingly commonplace as car turn signals:

This is how dumb he is. One time he was ridin in my car, and I flipped on the turn signal, and he just went, [with an exaggerated accent] "What's that clickin' noise? Hey, Henry, your car's makin' like a clickin' noise."

[Returning to previous speaking voice] You're an idiot. (Cho)

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<sup>140</sup> Another word that Cho does not have to use.

At the end of this routine, Cho brings up hunting, another quintessentially Southern activity, but he mainly does so in order to further ridicule J. B.'s intelligence and end on a callback to the phrase "What's that clickin' noise?":

He's dumb, but he's a great hunter. The way he hunts is dangerous. He'll go, "Man, if it *moves*, just shoot it."

He'll go like, [makes shotgun clicking then shooting sounds] "Got 'im, Zeke! [looking around] Zeke?"

And Zeke's last words were like, "What's that clickin' noise?" (Cho)

Cho's casual, nearly off-the-cuff rendering of hunting and his friend's style of speech are critical to the success of these jokes; though they may be completely fictional, Cho convinces us that he's merely relating stories about his friend. And in doing so, Cho turns a set of Southern stereotypes into a personal—and thus unique—Southern persona.

Yet, Cho also contradicts a number of Southern stereotypes, creating immediate incongruities in his performances. For instance, Cho references watching *Star Trek* in one joke and not as a means of making fun of people who watch the show, but in order to continue mocking J. B. The most obvious incongruity is the combination of Cho's ethnically Asian physical appearance with his undeniably Southern dialect. Though he does not use a very "thick" accent as his regular speaking voice onstage, no one would be likely to mistake it as anything other than Southern, either. He augments his Southern pronunciations by also peppering in a number of colloquial Southern phrases, such as "He's dumbern' dirt" and "Bless his heart" (Cho). He plays off of this most obvious of incongruities when talking about his first trip to Korea with his father in a routine titled "Going to Korea":

The next day in Korea, I'm waiting on a bus, just minding my own business, this American girl walked up. All the Korean people she could

pull out of the crowd, she pulls me out of the crowd and goes, [very loudly and very slowly] “Is this the bus-ee that goes-ee down-ee townee?”

[In his normal voice] I looked at her and said, “I reckon so. ... So what’s your name?” (Cho)

The subtlety and power of Cho’s punch-line delivery at the end of this joke depends in large part upon his use of the Southern phrase “reckon so” because of how unexpected it is in that particular situation. At the same time, however, it comes off as completely and authentically the response any other Southerner would give in the same circumstance.

Because of his performance style, Cho is both seriously Southern and un-seriously Southern. That is, he establishes his Southern credentials through a variety of techniques, but his legitimacy also calls many of the same Southern stereotypes into question. For his humor to work in the ways it does—to create the necessary comic tensions and to relieve them humorously—he must enact both roles “naturally.” He must *be* Southern, even as his humor challenges what it means to be Southern. If for whatever reason, it seemed as if Cho was simply “putting on” his Southern-ness to get laughs,<sup>141</sup> the humor would cease to be truly “Southern” and would become something much more straightforward and openly mocking. This does not happen, though, because humor is both repetitive and creative; it invokes and manipulates stereotypes to arrive at unexpected and (hopefully) funny conclusions. But in doing so, stereotypes are, by necessity, perpetuated, and no matter how transformed or critiqued they are by the end of a joke or standup routine, the stereotypes always remain central to comprehending the humor.

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<sup>141</sup> He undoubtedly “plays up” his Southern-ness when it suits his comic ends, but that’s a lot different than completely manufacturing an accent, personality, and background, à la Larry the Cable Guy.

This double and contradictory movement is the principle argument and contribution of this dissertation to the fields of rhetorical and humor studies. As a persuasive form of social discourse, Southern humor is a highly ritualized practice that, at its most successful, comes off as spontaneous and authentic, even as it calls the idea of truly “authentic Southern-ness” into question. To use Douglas’s terms, it is simultaneously rite and anti-rite because it both affirms and, at a minimum, potentially interrogates the South and what it means to be Southern. As Blount describes it, in the discourse of the South, humor (as a cultural ritual) has become a “requisite element” because it meets two needs of the larger Southern identity: 1) as a rite, it helps perpetuate a specific aspect of Southern heritage not easily conveyed by other means; 2) as an anti-rite, it helps Southerners deal with the often complex and ambivalent aspects of the Southern identity. However, the key to this understanding of Southern humor and, in my opinion, the most significant insight of this whole rhetorical study, is that this is not an “either/or” situation. That is, for Southern humor to work, it must seem authentically Southern *and* authentically humorous, but because humor requires a certain amount of disingenuousness, there is an ever-present suspicion that all of it may just be made up. Consequently, Southern humorists work tirelessly to reassure their audiences that, in fact, the absurd incongruities in their humor are based in truth—if not fact—or in Jerry Clower’s terminology, “If I’m lyin, I’m dyin.” After describing how his friend J. B. came to have the nickname “Jonly Bonly from Boldy Go,” Cho captures the same sentiment this way: “I can’t make that up. I am not that smart” (“What’s That Clickin’ Noise?”). This refrain of honesty goes to the heart of Blount’s “requisite” claim because an adeptness at participating in Southern humor serves not only as an authenticator of



Southern identity, but as one source for constructing the parameters of what counts as “the Southern identity” as well. And much of the power and subsequent responsibility (though not all of it) for determining how to create and adjudicate this identity falls on the humorist. Understood this way, clearly no one would want such a significant community ritual to be completely baseless. Thus, in one sense, Blount is exactly right when he says that “Southern humor tends to work best when it isn’t trying to be any funnier than life and death” (131). The point the humorists seem to keep making, however, is that they don’t *have* to try; the culture and the people they focus on continue to provide them with ample material—they’re just trying to do it justice.

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