

# “Negotiating Race in Stand-up Comedy: Interpretations of “Single Story” Narratives”

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*“The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”*

~ Chimamanda Adichie (*TEDGlobal* 2009)

## **Introduction: Stand-up and Stereotype**

Stereotyping in some form – be it tacit assumption or overt statement – is bound up in the enterprise of stand-up comedy. This art form endows the performer with the platform to highlight public understandings of such constructions as gender, race, and sexual orientation. The inclination to lambaste or capitalize on stereotypical racial and gendered notions varies by comedian; however, these social divisions can rarely be addressed without reference to public assumptions about them. The “single story” indeed presents a danger in limiting awareness of the variety in terms of education, class, and belief systems that exist within socially-constructed ethnic and racial categories. This simplification contributes to othering them, erasing the historicizing and humanizing complexity of experiences, attitudes, achievements, and behaviors permitted to white Americans. Despite this potentially negative impact of stereotyping, social movements throughout the last century of American history, striving for racial equality, were given to essentializing certain cultural styles and values to solidify group membership, directing it toward a common socio-political purpose, and instilling a sense of pride.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I will outline how stand-up comedy walks the punch line of the single story, its balance tipping alternately between reinforcing and challenging ethno-racial assumptions. Stereotypes, much like any tool or implement, can be used to heal or further damage their subject, depending upon the intent and skill of the individuals wielding them. Comics take slightly different approaches to how and when they celebrate or question the truth of familiar ethno-racial stereotypes in their routines. In what follows, I will elucidate how stand-up audiences react to and understand the goals of the comedians who reference these stereotypes. In order to situate these reactions accurately, it is necessary to consider the factors shaping audience perceptions of the presentation of certain racial stereotypes as thought-provoking challenges, playful displays of ethnic pride, or socially damaging essentialization. The permissive space of the comedy club enables comedians to toy with what audience members assume are essential qualities of an ethno-racial group by telling their “many stories” (Adichie 2009) that exist beyond the “single story.” The very act of drawing attention to the stereotyping of behavioral differences by race, “opens up space for exceptions to be made and stereotyped behaviors disproved” (Jackson 2001, 6). On the other hand, given the polysemicity of humor, this rendering of racial stereotypes in comedy may be interpreted by audiences as an endorsement of them, should the mocking tone be too subtly voiced (Weaver 2010). I will loosely frame these presentations of ethno-racial stereotypes in stand-up comedy by classifying their approaches and potential outcomes as follows: negative reinforcement, cultural celebration, and expanding understanding. For each one of these effects, the narrative style of the comedians and the audience members' receptivity as shaped by socialization and previous inter- and intra-racial experiences informed the depth and degree of their respective influence.

## **Literature Review**

Relevant to understanding audience uptake of these discourses is the intersection of race and socioeconomic class in participants' evaluations of authenticity in a comedian's characterizations. This includes the perceptions of racial authenticity with respect to comedians' implicit or explicit references to class background. The literature on the class implications of racial authentication include Marcyliena Morgan's ethnographic work on middle class members of an African American speech community in Philadelphia. Her research revealed the view of "street culture" as one proud, valuable, yet not all-encompassing, piece of African American culture (1994, 83). E. Patrick Johnson's work on performances of blackness engages with this association of working class, urban culture with racial authenticity among his African American college students (2003). His focus on this association occasionally overgeneralizes young African Americans' processes of authenticating performances of race, yet touches on the pattern among some of my African American respondents of identifying black comedians who speak AAE (African American English) as seeming more "real," or honest in their portrayals of racial differences. Morgan and Fischer make similar observations with respect to the significance of AAE in Hip-hop as indexing "African American culture ... defiance, and injustice" (2010, 511).

There is also a considerable body of humor studies literature that debates the issue of how audiences interpret comedy performances that engage with weighty social issues. Humor scholars have typically divided themselves into two opposed perspectives on this point, though there run notably distinct lines of approach to the subject *within* both of them. On the one hand, some scholars argue that comedy acts as a potent medium for challenging socially conservative norms and hegemonic discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Some of the proponents of this position contend that racial comedy is inherently rebellious in its goals, seeking to upend the status quo through marginal or multiple perspectives (Boskin 1997; Gilbert 2004). Others temper

this assertion by claiming that such comedy can be polysemic, particularly with more ambiguous performance styles, and thus “double-edged in its outcome” (Weaver 2010, 132) with respect to audience interpretations. Audience reception is heavily dependent on their prior attitudes as well as the goals and strategies of the comedian (Rossing 2013; Thomas 2015). Rossing points particularly to the masterful approach of stand-up comedian and activist Dick Gregory in the early 1960s who spoke truth to power in a manner that avoided direct attack, which allowed audiences to listen and laugh without putting up defensive walls (2013, 69). On the other hand, those who more strongly challenge the insubordinate nature of comedy point to the ways in which it frequently has been deployed in service of the dominant social discourses as a corrective to those who attempt to rebel against the established order (Billig 2005; Santa Ana 2009). Raul Perez points to trends in the training of stand-up comics in the United States that encourage use of hackneyed, insulting racial stereotypes that are justified primarily through strategies of self-deprecation, being an 'equal opportunity offender', and the extended license granted by audiences to in-group racial joking (2013).

Humor scholars who characterize comedy as a social corrective employed to reinforce hegemonic perspectives wisely observe its potential to provide comforting justification for audiences' prejudices. Through negative, stereotypical depictions of minority groups, comics often provide “in-group psychological reassurance by sharing laughter at the expense of the butt [of the joke]” (Santa Ana 2009, 39). Social identity theory (SIT) in the field of social psychology considers the individual and social implications that come with such stereotyping. The theory examines self-conceptions of those within a group that conceives of itself as united by a common identity. This identity is formed in reference to other groups and may highlight and stereotype

positive traits one encounters with members of one's own (e.g., ethnic) group to build personal and group pride, while exaggerating intergroup differences (Abrams and Hogg 1990).

These scholars omit from deeper consideration, however, the many comedians who either intersperse hegemonic with counter-hegemonic discourses (Thomas 2015, 96) or sandwich their more insubordinate, “charged humor” - meant to make audiences both laugh and seriously consider social prejudices and injustices (Krefting 2014) - in between light-hearted observations of daily minutiae. Through such techniques, comedians – and particularly stand-up comedians in live performances – are able to acknowledge their divergent opinions and perhaps even provide a little of the comforting “reassurance” that Santa Ana has observed, while inserting social commentary that hitches a ride upon the rushing tide of laughter that precedes it. Audience members will recall having a good time, and that pleasure and positive feeling about the comedian will shape the lens through which they view the more challenging humor that accompanied it. Moreover, the very license-granting techniques of self-deprecation and in-group joking, which Perez points to as coating the bitter pill of degrading racial stereotypes for audiences, are equally deployed in the presentation of comedy material that undermines them. Discovering how an audience member will evaluate a stand-up comedy performance, requires understanding the narratives of self and “other” (marked by race, gender, sexuality, and political affiliation) each brings to the showroom.

## **Methods**

Given its unique position as a public space where social norms and assumptions are expected to be held up for scrutiny, the comedy club offers a prime location to examine the production, reproduction, and reception of racial discourse in the Midwest. While a more detailed explanation of the significance of my selecting the Midwest as a distinctive region of

particular interest would extend beyond the scope and space of this paper, it is worth noting that its frequent “everyman quality” (Lavin 2007, 694) and “homegrown and working class” style of comedy (Seizer 2011, 216) has drawn the attention of humor scholars to its unique character. My broader research project, though, takes as its subject the analysis of how the planned and improvised elements of each comedian’s routine impact how audience members – drawing upon their own sets of mediated and direct personal experiences – relate to and evaluate the performer’s racial commentaries. I conducted exploratory research on the ideological impact of stand-up comedy on its audiences from June to August 2009 at three clubs in Indianapolis, IN (Morty’s Comedy Joint and two Crackers Comedy Club locations) through 123 completed surveys distributed 10-30 minutes before each show I observed. The surveys covered contextualizing questions (i.e.: time and location), before delving into participants’ impressions of the comics’ authority to comment on race, accuracy of portrayals of race, and perceptions of challenged or reinforced racial stereotypes. Demographic data on age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education rounded out the survey. From late May through early October 2010, I traveled each week to one of the following five comedy clubs in the Midwest to conduct a qualitative field study that expanded on the 2009 survey data: The Comedy Attic in Bloomington, Indiana; Morty’s Comedy Joint in Indianapolis, Indiana; The Comedy Caravan of Louisville, Kentucky; Comedy Off Broadway in Lexington, Kentucky; and Go Bananas Comedy Club in Cincinnati, Ohio. I compiled observational notes on every performance and conducted interviews with thirty audience members and twelve comedians recruited from these shows. My observational notes served as references to assist interviewees during our discussion of specific moments or comedy bits within a show.

Recruitment of audience members typically took place in the lobby following a performance, as they slowly meandered out of the showroom and briefly greeted the comedians stationed near the doors. This was also the space and time in which I invited comedians to participate. I informed potential respondents that interviews would be audio-recorded, last thirty to sixty minutes, and take place in person or by phone, as suited their schedules – with the emphasis to audience members that all responses would be anonymous. My status as a middle class, highly educated, white woman certainly affected how different individuals connected with me, and what commonalities I chose to highlight to encourage their trust and interest in sharing their complete and honest opinions. Irrespective of race, parents with college students would say that they wanted to assist and further my research since they would wish someone to do the same for their child. Sometimes African American women would relate more to me in terms of gender during interviews (and later in focus groups), confronting pejorative stereotypes aimed at black and white women by some male comedians; other times it would be our shared academic achievements and desire to explore racial identity politics that opened up the discussion between us. Scholarship on this methodological challenge of white researchers encouraging candor among black interviewees has at times revealed that whiteness need not be a handicap in these situations. The presumed ignorance of white persons about much of black culture can have the effect of encouraging detailed explanations to one taken as naïve, yet sincere in their interest as a learner (Rhodes 1994:552). Mostly, the issue of my race did not surface in conversation, yet I worked to demonstrate to interviewees through my questions, much as a comedian works to display competence during early portions of a show, that I knew and could banter about the comics and popular figures they mentioned. I noticed that sometimes after these brief validations

of my genuine interest in the breadth of racial experience and comedy, an interviewee offered frank, favorable and critical commentaries on presentations of race in the stand-up shows.

For audience participants, interview questions began with general inquiries as to their (1) reasons for attending the show and any preferred comedy styles or comedians and (2) reactions to the presentation style and subject matter of each comedian from a performance, before shifting into the more introspective topics of (3) perceived accuracy and intentions of the comedians' who deployed racial comedy material and (4) thoughts on the comedy genre's relative influence – compared to interpersonal and media sources – on public understandings of race in the United States. The replies offered to the third and fourth question types comprise the majority of the audience responses discussed in this paper. I posed a similar set of questions to the comedians in the interests of comparability. As above, I inquired as to the comedy styles they preferred before proceeding into more technical questions concerning (1) their decisions on interweaving improvisation with planned material and (2) how often they adapted their material to suit different audience demographics. My final question for comedians echoed the closing reflection on comedy's social impact that I invited from audience members.

The qualitative data from these interviews were thematically coded and then organized into a frequency chart that tallied the most commonly voiced responses from audience members and comedians to the ways in which the subject of race was treated in the stand-up comedy shows that they attended or in which they performed. Those approaches to racial comedy material that they most frequently mentioned became the focus of my analysis of preference. In this analysis, I considered the reasons given as to why each performance strategy toward incorporating the topic of race was more or less favored by the comedians and audience members along with how well the performers' perceptions of successful (laughter-inducing)

approaches to race aligned with audience members' reactions to them. With respect to evaluating racial authenticity and stereotypes, club-goers and comics tended to agree on the following:

- (1) The lack of a broader contextualizing interracial experience among audience members can reinforce their acceptance of narrowly presented in-group racial stereotypes.
- (2) Comedy's ability to subvert racial assumptions depends upon the upbringing of audience members and how "open-minded" they are.
- (3) The *detailed* narrative of a comedian's racial experience is difficult to fabricate and thereby likelier to be authentic.

### **Stereotyping: Negative Reinforcement**

Stereotyping plays an often unconscious part in simplifying our complex social worlds. Franz Boas explored this inclination in his examination of human classifications (and confluences) of racial and ethnic types: "Every country impresses us as inhabited by a certain type, the traits of which are determined by the most frequently occurring forms. [...] The 'type' is formed quite subjectively on the basis of everyday experience" ([1928]1962, 22). Through repeated, if limited, exposure to "frequently occurring" cultural traits among a group identified as one "type," or race, individuals come to naturalize the co-occurrence of the traits with that type and to ignore that which problematizes this simplified schema. Within the comedy club space, comics' stereotyping provides the essential familiarity they must offer to their audiences in a joke's premise for the punch line to make sense. Without a familiar reference, it becomes difficult to interpret an incongruous punch line (with respect to expectations built by the joke teller). Given its elemental role in joke creation and recognition, why question the use of stereotypes in stand-up comedy? When I asked white comedian John Roy whether stand-up

comedians who take the equal opportunity approach of stereotyping multiple ethno-racial groups still reinforce assumptions, he replied, “Absolutely, it does. You’re up there reinforcing it. I don’t think that it’s gonna change someone’s opinion, but I think it makes people ... feel more comfortable with throwing those stereotypes around.” Roy’s comment recalls Adichie’s idea that when the same stories are told repeatedly to a population, they become the only perspectives or stories. A comic’s direct experience either through membership in or a close social relationship with persons of a group is highly valued among the audience members I interviewed as a marker of honesty and good intentions. This suggests that the ideological repercussions of a repeated, single story from these comics are more extensive.

*Performing Blackness: Playing too Loud?*

An African American audience interviewee, thirty-seven year old Regina,<sup>2</sup> from a show in late August 2010 at Morty’s Comedy Joint, neatly frames the problem with stereotyping that she has witnessed in some African American comedy:

**Regina:** Technically it’s [a stereotype] not true, but in all of our own experiences, we’ve all experienced whatever the stereotype is at least once, we can kind of- we can buy into it. So, for instance, the stereotype of how black people are late. Are all black people late? No. I have a very close friend who’s always early. But guess what, I know at least one person, my ex-mother-in-law, is always late - by an hour. So, to me it’s hilarious... [however] I would not put it before my children.

**Author:** What do you mean?

**Regina:** My small children, because they’ve not had the [breadth of] experience.

Regina finds the joke humorous, not so much due to a belief that “all black people [are] late,” but rather because she knows one or two people who fit the stereotype and connects to the reference

through these examples. She suggests that laughing at hackneyed stereotypes can be an innocent diversion; however, she reiterates that such stereotypes can relay false impressions of reality to those who lack her experience.

Another audience member, Carla, a twenty-seven year old Honduran American, offers a similar reflection on gendered racial stereotype humor. In one comedy bit, African American comic, Keith Bender, described four scenarios of two women of the same ethno-racial background (white, Asian, Mexican, and black) accidentally colliding shopping carts in a grocery store. Carla recalled, “[It] was *hilarious*, because I do know some women like that... I mean, I don’t have a lot of black friends – but I know one, the one friend that was mad at the stereotypical comment – I know she wouldn’t react like that [verbally and physically antagonistic] with the shopping cart situation.” She hastened to add that she “could see some reality, but only because I know someone who acts like that.” Carla shares Regina’s broader frame of reference, which encompasses those who both embody and challenge the racial stereotypes performed, so she laughed while believing the bit reflects only a “kernel of truth” with respect to “some women.”

Audience interviewee, Robin, a twenty-five year old African American college student originally from Chicago, offered her perspective on the equally exaggerated African American male stereotype jokes offered at a comedy show headlined by black comedian and radio personality, Nephew Tommy. When I invited Robin to recount specific stereotypes she encountered at the Comedy Off Broadway show, she drew greater attention to the issue of wealth and education with respect to its role in informing cultural diversity among African Americans. In the middle third of his set, Nephew Tommy loudly proclaimed, “I am a mother fuckin’ fan of Barack Obama!” and this resulted in the predominantly black audience bursting out in cheering

and applause. He then used this statement as a springboard to launch into a series of comments on how authentically or proportionally “black” Obama is in terms of his handling of political challenges, playing with the premise that he is a “50 per cent black man.” Nephew Tommy suggested Obama’s body carriage, or “swagger” identifies him as a suave and authentic black man, but then he qualifies this with the joke that a “100 per cent” black man “would fuck this shit up!” by becoming loudly verbally abusive and argumentative, whenever the Republican challenger should criticize him during the presidential debate. His reference to Obama’s body carriage and walk feature in John L. Jackson Jr.’s ethnographic analysis of what it means in Harlem to “act white” (2001). In one instructive passage about a young man, Tim, who understands this delicate balance of pursuing education while honoring cultural expectations, he writes: “I see that his clothes are obviously new and stylish; his walk is sure and confident. In his everyday behavior he doesn’t stand out from his classmates in any major way. This means that he is mostly safe from accusations of acting white, regardless of his extremely high grades in school” (186).

During the portion of the interview with Robin, devoted to her interpretation of the accuracy of the comedians’ portrayals of race and culture, I asked whether the 50 versus 100 per cent black man distinction seemed a fair and accurate one to make. Her assessment identifies education, and (implicitly) the money to finance it as more significant factors in understanding Nephew Tommy’s 50 per cent evaluation than Obama’s white mother:

I know he [Obama] went through some type of Ivy League school. So, I mean, it’s definitely in his background, definitely is apparent. [...] So maybe his parents, I don’t know if they are rich or whatever, but probably it’s still more *in* him, and a different

education, and so people like Obama, but that have both black parents and have the *same\_education*, they're probably gonna still carry themselves in the same etiquette *as well.*"

Robin's reply supports Marcyliena Morgan's ethnographic work with middle class African Americans: "None of them equate being middle class with an absence of African American culture and values. They argue that the street culture (as defined by sociolinguists) is integral to the community, and they object to any attempt to identify it as either representative or separate" ([1994] 2009, 83). Robin offers that those who raise children in an environment that encourages post-secondary education will more likely subscribe to the controlled, polite etiquette that Obama displays.

Nephew Tommy's onstage persona interestingly aligns with Morgan's reflection on this polysemy of blackness. He always appears attired in a finely tailored suit and boasts at one point during most routines of his educational background in theatre, highlighting how he simultaneously inhabits the working class streetwise attitude with the style and knowledge of an upper class sophisticate. Nephew Tommy's stage persona suggests that a common black cultural identity cuts across socio-economic divisions among African Americans (Omi and Winant 1986; Morgan [1994] 2009). Despite his acknowledgment of a more complex identity on stage, his interest includes playing often dehistoricized racial stereotypes like well-worn, favorite records to black audiences who enjoy them. So where is the danger of this story, which could be interpreted as celebrating defiant attitudes born of an unjust system? For someone like Robin who can situate these jokes within a broader geographic, class, and educational experience, the problematic issue of reinforcement may only apply in the sense that John Roy mentions, being "more comfortable with throwing these stereotypes around." However, Regina's earlier point of not wishing her children to encounter these unflattering stereotypes, suggests that this single

story in comedy more powerfully affects those with minimal exposure to the diversity of behaviors, attitudes, and education spanning class and racial categories.

### **Stereotyping: Cultural Celebration**

The more positive use of stereotypes discussed by comedians and audience members during interviews is their function as celebratory markers of the unique racial and ethnic heritage shared between a comedian and the audience. Comedian Steve Harvey performed with an all-African American line-up of comics in The Original Kings of Comedy tour (2000). In the routine, Harvey references the power of 1970s R&B star, Lenny Williams, to get him dancing and grooving. A number of African American women and men in the crowd in the recorded performance of the show rise from their seats and start dancing when he cues the music. A similar moment occurred during a performance by Nephew Tommy that I observed at Comedy Off Broadway. He began the shows that weekend by coming onstage to Hip-hop music and addressing the audience as a man who misses how life used to be. Next, he commented on how his entry did not get a “standing o” due to having a slightly older audience. He then suggested, “You gotta play something they know shit about.” At this point he cued the 1972 song “I’ll take you there” from the soul and R&B group, The Staple Singers. The predominantly African American audience started singing along, and continued singing when he periodically cut off the volume to the music to hear how well they recalled the words. When the song concluded, he asked them to give themselves a round of applause for their skillful display of this cultural knowledge, before proceeding to the next bit in his routine. The stereotyping here is subtle. Having already solicited and received ample applause from all those “over forty” in the audience, he assumed the older members of a largely black audience will share his love for these cultural touchstones of African American music. The shared pride in soul and R&B as markers

of African American artistry makes this reference in his material on being “old school” a positive, celebratory moment.

Such moments of cultural acknowledgment within a routine do not appear to be self-mocking or ridiculing of outsiders. Rather, these pieces of nostalgia grab the interest and build the energy of the crowd upon a few pieces of their honored and beloved ethnic and generational history. The manner in which Nephew Tommy called out the audience to remember shared music does not fall into the characterization of stereotyping I have thus far presented. It is certainly different in nature from the usual oversimplification and stark boundary drawing. Stereotyping does not only work in terms of limiting the range of a group’s qualities. Isolating and playing up a cultural trait can work to build in-group pride and solidarity (Abrams and Hogg 1990). Through these examples from his performance, it is possible to glimpse that he offers a *celebration* of identity here, which recognizes a core, shared ethnic heritage without framing his recollections in a way that confines the African American public he addresses to a single story. He confirms through his performance only a couple of the many markers of his audience’s proud identity.

Beyond such positive recognition of common ethnic and generational elements, there exists a somewhat more nebulous in effects and less complimentary form of racial stereotyping. This form frequently accomplishes the creation of a positive social effect – witnessed to some degree in the Nephew Tommy routine above – however, I must add the qualification that when used heavily in an act without any counterbalancing ethno-racial narratives, it returns to the problematic zone of the single story. Michael Billig’s work illustrates how even rebellious humor – feminist humor taken as the primary example – may serve a “disciplinary function” that reinforces social norms rather than challenging limited audience perspectives (2005). During an

interview with African American comedian Leo Flowers, I posed to him my standard question: “Does talking about these stereotypes reinforce inaccurate, negative images?” In his response, he suggested that even the somewhat less flattering racial stereotypes carry an appeal for some of the assembled black audience members:

Yes and no. Yes it does reinforce the negative images, but no because – I know people who still act like that. You know, it’s 2010, but there’s still a group of black people, still actin’ a fool. So, they deserve to laugh too and be represented and be heard. I mean, it’s unfortunate they still run around crazy. But in any group of people, you’re gonna have your knuckleheads. [...] It’s just a part of having a large group of people.

Flowers’s point that all groups within an audience deserve their chance to laugh at themselves is echoed in Paul Provenza’s *Satiristas* (2010) interview with the Latino performance troupe “Culture Clash.” Performer Richard Montoya describes how the group’s “Asian Car Gang Guy” and “gay jokes” are well received by members of those minorities: “That was a good lesson. We left out a whole group that should be *included* in good-spirited, equal-opportunity offense” (2010, 167). Of course, this situation raises questions about whether those who are not part of the targeted in-group will be able to understand these often dehistoricized depictions in the same contextualized manner as someone who experiences firsthand the economic, political, and cultural factors shaping the ridiculed behaviors.

In these instances, “dis-identification,” or the necessary distancing of one’s identity from that of a similar one targeted in a joke in order to laugh (Gilbert 2004, 11), need not occur for the in-group. Any directly-targeted audience members may heartily laugh at the jokes, as they too like to see themselves represented. In Leon Rappoport’s *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor* (2005, 41), he discusses the finding that while “people generally laugh more

and rate jokes as funnier when they ridicule members of an out-group rather than members of their own in-group” - a trend that would support the aforementioned concerns of Santa Ana (2009) - exceptions to this often occur in circumstances where a comedian from the in-group tells a good-natured joke. If acknowledging those who push beyond cultural norms within our ascribed ethno-racial identities serves to open lines of communication and understanding or gives those who fit or know people within these stereotypes a moment of recognition and release, then the function may be noted as positive, to an extent. Indeed, comedians’ inclusion of diverse in-group stereotypes may help to challenge discourses that offer little diversity or historical framing in their representations of racial identity.

### **Boundary Blurring: Expanding Understanding**

Upon my serendipitous discovery of the Sellout Comedy Tour in 2009, I began to consider how “charged humor” (Krefting 2014) can undermine essentializing racial ideologies. The group was comprised of four headlining stand-up comedians (including interviewees Vince Morris and BT), who as African American men made it their stated purpose to challenge racial stereotypes about them. This direct approach entails a tenuous balance between enjoyably imparting a message about the problematic limitations of racial stereotypes and forcefully lecturing on this issue in a way that leads to irritation rather than persuasion. This challenging of stereotypes occurs in two (sometimes concurrent) forms: (1) explicit verbal and/or physical satirizing of stereotypes and (2) displaying a range of personal interests, experiences, and styles of speech or dress that complicate common racial-behavioral associations. Simply inhabiting an unexpected persona onstage presents audiences with an exception that may destabilize their preconceived notions about African American men.

The Sellout Comedy Tour performances at Morty's Comedy Joint in Indianapolis each began with tour member Billy D introducing them with the statement that all of them have been called a sellout to their profession since they do not conform to expectations of black comedians. He follows this with a riff on the racialized "dick joke" genre: "and ladies, just because I wear a size twelve shoe [briefly pauses for the anticipatory laughter], doesn't mean you can't handle it." Arguably, calling up this stereotype – even to undermine it – might embed the common racialized assumption more deeply among those in the audience, given its often facile acceptance and familiarity. How, then, may such effects be mitigated, if not completely avoided? Between the tour's title and this introduction, audience members are provided early cues that this show is about entertaining them while undermining the applicability of racial stereotypes – sandwiching serious points in between lighthearted jokes. Indeed, four of the six survey respondents who answered in the affirmative to the question, "Do you think any racial stereotypes were challenged through this performance?" had attended a Sellout Comedy Tour performance. This suggests that conscious reflection about assumptions occurs more often when individuals are explicitly informed that this is the performer's intention. This does not indicate, though, that humor cannot have *serious* social ramifications (reinforcing hegemonic discourses through ridicule of divergence) without explicit statement of such intent (Billig 2005).

Prior personal experiences and relationships also factored into this perception of challenging stereotypes. Karin Barber, a performance studies scholar, speaks in a similar vein to Sam Friedman, who notes variability in interpretations by socioeconomic class (2011), and to Weaver, who observes the risk of some audience members missing the satirical message of in-group racial stereotype humor (2010), with respect to the tendency of individuals within audiences to interpret a speaker's meaning through the lens of an experience shaped by their

social contexts (2008, 138). One of the surveyed audience members, an African American woman, whom I observed talking to BT after the show, wrote: “Yes, I felt the stereotype that black young men can’t love rock music, drive pick-ups and just be a redneck was challenged by one of the comedians. The fact that they were all somewhat educated was a challenge as well.” As a college-educated woman who identified herself during a post-show conversation with BT as sharing his love of rock and roll from the 1980s, it is not surprising that she focused on these two elements and interpreted them as contested by the show. She connected with BT through their similar age and shared position as exceptions to ethno-racial stereotypes. This connection in turn shaped her perception of and receptivity towards what was likely challenged (musical preferences and education level) for the rest of the largely African American club audience. An African American man from the same show similarly identified with and found memorable BT’s love of rock and roll music: “The main racial stereotype, which stood out, was the joke about being a sellout if you enjoy a diverse [range] of music, i.e. rock and roll, or if you dress differently than many of the peers from your racial group.”

Performer Vince Morris, during my 2010 interview with him in Bloomington, shared an optimistic appraisal of the tour’s impact. He particularly touted the success of the “Ask a Black Man Anything” segment, where the audience sends up questions to be placed in a container onstage from which the four comedians draw. This is the final portion of the show devoted to answering questions – ranging from tongue-in-cheek to serious curiosity – about black stereotypes. The comic who feels he has a clever response jumps in to answer the question as soon as he is ready, and the others often add to this response before another question is read aloud. Morris elaborates:

**Morris:** No other four comedians can do it like we do. They *can't*, it's never been done before: our interaction, the way we banter and go back and forth – 'cause people don't expect it, 'cause all of us onstage are our own man. We disagree with *each other* sometimes. So it's not like we're all together, teaming up on the audience. The audience is watching us have a dialogue.

The organic, unscripted conversation and occasional disagreement going on in a “back and forth” fashion between the four comedians onstage carries a sense of reality with which an audience can connect and understand as implicitly resisting the idea that “all black men” do or think about anything the same way. This type of dialogue about racial authenticity during performances resonates particularly well with black audiences, who often verbally engage with comics “as literal coauthors” (Jacobs-Huey 2006, 76) and authenticators of the reality behind their commentaries. Despite the difficulty in discerning how deep of an impact the Sellout Comedy Tour shows have had on their audiences, the probability of informing or provoking thought among audiences increases when they witness these elements of personal revelation and honesty.

A couple of comedians interviewed in 2010, “Big” John Richardson from Louisville, KY, and Leo Flowers from L.A., found ways to challenge stereotypes by virtue of presenting a persona that flew against what their ascribed racial identity and other elements of size and appearance might have indicated about them to their largely white audiences. This subtlety works to insinuate perhaps new and divergent ideas for some club-goers, allowing them to reflect upon their assumptions without feeling reproached. In my interview with Richardson, he elaborated on his approach for connecting with his frequently majority white audiences:

When I walk on stage, people *see* me, and they wanna know *about* me: what I think, how I got to be here. And so that's all I really try to do, is answer those questions. I'm a black

dude, and this is what *I* experience, and I just make it *funny*. Ultimately, if we laugh together, then they'll remember it and think about it later on.

In addition to the issue of subtlety, Richardson's comments here underscore two keys to comedy's potential to broaden racial preconceptions:

(1) Share detailed personal experiences so that the audience can come to know you and be unable to deny your comments since you speak only for yourself.

(2) Recognize that laughter *usually* signifies a positive, affiliative moment between a comedian and audience members; so, the joke and its content will more deeply imprint itself in their memories for future reflection.

A white audience member in his early 20s, Jacob, saw Richardson's self-presentation as an example of comedy's power to tacitly contest racial stereotypes, which is possible, "'cause he [Richardson] comes off on stage as very warm and nice, as opposed to this persona of the big scary black guy – which kind of defeats the stereotype." Jacob's belief in the ability of a comedian to inform racial understanding through self-presentation that differs from expectation highlights the potential of acts like Richardson's to expand notions of racial authenticity.

Leo Flowers, like Richardson, primarily draws from personal experiences. During the early portion of his performance at Go Bananas Comedy Club in Cincinnati, he brought up his love of grapes as a vegan, telling jokes about his obsession, including his private urge to steal them from the grocery store and shake them out from his pants as the incarcerated protagonist, Andy Dufresne, did with pieces of his prison wall in the film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994). Revealing my own conditioned preconceptions during the interview, I admitted that his being a vegan surprised me and challenged stereotypical racial associations of the label. When I asked about his intentions with his humor on being vegan, he responded:

It's helping and a lot of comedians are now talking about vegans, you know usually negative, bringing up the stereotype stuff, which is really *good* for us because it brings more attention to the movement. But yeah, definitely that's a part of it. People hear that I'm vegan, and they don't believe it, and then they have questions.

His promotion of the vegan movement takes priority over any *racial* stereotype-busting intentions with his humor, suggesting that his use of this personal affiliation in his comedy only incidentally confronts racial assumptions about him as an African American.

African American audience member Russell from a Go Bananas Comedy Club performance in Cincinnati related quite easily to Flowers' less stereotypical interests and diet: "You cross one of those things where I'm a weirdo- I'm a vegetarian, and people all look at me, 'Oh my God, you're a big tall black dude. You're a vegetarian?' I'm like, 'Yeah.' ... so, again, a bad question for the wrong guy." Russell's non-stereotypical position led him to consider himself the "wrong guy" for the question; however, despite lacking the ability to speak as someone who could be provoked into a new way of thinking about racial boundaries by Flowers' self-presentation, he prompts the posing of an equally valuable question. By viewing himself as a "weirdo," Russell appears to consider those like him, who do not neatly fit into the widely circulated stereotypes, as exceptions to the rule. Does this perception structure the interpretations of the many audience members who have attended shows with Flowers, Richardson, and other comedians who do not conform to their expectations? Or do these comedians, to some degree, shift thoughts on the rigidity of racial boundaries?

Richardson offers a similar interpretation of how audiences react to persons who do not fit their racial preconceptions. He recalls that some small town white audiences' expectations of him as a "def comedy, rapping kinda 'I hate the world' kinda comedian," which arise when "they

see the dreadlocks and the blackness,” will transform during a performance. He notes that they will then perceive him as “one of the good ones,” to whom they can tell their more questionable, and often offensive, racial humor without provoking an impassioned argument. This “one of the good ones” comment lends support to the interpretation that audiences classify Richardson as an exception to the rule, who does not really undermine its broader applicability. Interviewee Carla offered a similar analysis with respect to Vince Morris’ solo performance in Bloomington, IN:

If Vince [Morris] performed here, I feel like these people wouldn’t take anything away because when they *leave*, all they see is more white people; they go back to their environment. However, maybe if he played that show in L.A., and this person was surrounded by white people and *occasionally* a few minorities... I can see that person being, “*Ohh*. I wonder if that person’s ever-” and it kind of opens up their mind.

Notably, Carla referred to the people most likely to change as those with a modest amount of exposure to persons of different racial backgrounds. She implies that those with regular, close interracial interactions would already possess knowledge about cultural differences and different forms of racism (here, racial profiling). Carla’s response represents the orienting theme of my audience interviews: prior engagement in a modest level of positive interracial interactions increases the likelihood of audience members opening themselves to the comedic introduction of new (or unfamiliar) ideas within American racial discourse. Her analysis also helps to clarify why Richardson’s audience members, who live in predominantly white, conservative neighborhoods around Louisville, KY, view him as an exception rather than a challenge to the pejorative racial stereotypes that persist.

In the above sections, the tendency of an audience member to read a stereotype as accurate or challenged shifted, depending upon the predictors of evaluation noted in the methods

discussion: degree of contextualizing racial experience, upbringing and open-mindedness of the audience member, and the subtlety and detail of the comedian's racial narrative. With respect to the first predictor, Regina could contextualize, yet still identify to a point with the stereotype that “black people are [often] late.” Equally, as a college student, Robin recognized that the street culture Nephew Tommy invoked as more racially authentic than the polite behaviors inculcated by white-hegemonic educational institutions did not preclude higher education as an African American cultural value. Such in-group stand-up humor, the dangers of which Perez highlighted earlier, poses a greater risk of reinforcing stereotypes among in-group youth and out-group individuals who lack an understanding of the diversity of the black experience. For audience members like Regina or Robin and comedians like Leo Flowers, in-group showcasing of certain unflattering stereotypes can be considered a pleasurable way to witness parts of one's experiences being acknowledged or even celebrated in a non-hostile forum.

When racial stereotypes are interrogated by comics of the targeted group, there arises the potential for audience members to question prior assumptions. This can be accomplished if the right combination of the following factors come together in these comedy club spaces: audience receptivity, prior positive experiences with the relevant ethno-racial group, and the perception that a comedian is sharing personal experiences without hostility. The woman who remarked on the survey that the Sellout Comedy Tour challenged stereotypes, personally identified with the racial experience of one of the comics, clearly marking her receptivity to their message. Jacob, who attended Richardson's performance, noted his apprehension of the racial jokes to come, but was won over by Richardson's laid back demeanor and subtle narration of his experience as the subject of racial profiling. Flowers also adopts a relaxed on-stage demeanor, while telling of his experiences with being a part of the vegan movement, which indirectly challenges narrow

audience assumptions about African American lifestyles. The delivery of these stand-up routines with smooth sophistication recalls the style crafted by Dick Gregory (Rossing 2013). Such an approach even has the potential to provoke thoughtful reflection in audience members whose interracial experiences have been limited – though lasting change, as Carla noted, hinges on regular exposure to persons who subvert these stereotypes.

## **Conclusion**

The question the more self-reflexive or message-oriented comedians performing in these comedy clubs have had to individually answer is: How do I call upon what is relatable and recognizable among audience members, while maintaining a level of personal truth and vulnerability that complicates these easy stereotypes? For Vince Morris, an answer came in the form of the Sellout Tour with its open dialogue among African American men with varied opinions, personalities, hometowns, and interests. For John Richardson, resolving this issue involves joking reflections to the audience on how assumptions about physically imposing black men like him as dangerous do not land anywhere close to the mark of his subtle wit and relaxed comportment. The most successful performance approach, which ties these and other comedians together in terms of responding to this challenge, is their willingness to bare the *detailed* experiences, thoughts, and disagreements that make each of them unique and too complicated to be understood through the oversimplification inherent in stereotyping.

Focusing on the cultural or behavioral styles purportedly unique to an ethno-racial group, however, need not present a problem. Nephew Tommy and Steve Harvey have demonstrated this with their crowd-energizing cultural and musical references. Dialogues with and co-participation of the audience on these points of identity are hallmarks of stand-up comedy shows in general and African American performances in particular. Equally, portraying the full range of

personality types and identities within a racial group stands as a potentially productive social function of stereotyping. As Leo Flowers recognized, these character types represent attitudes and behaviors that are products of their social and economic environments. Those who embody them may enjoy the equal opportunity to laugh when they see elements of their lives – or its exaggerated realities – presented without disparaging condescension. Of course, there remains the heightened risk of reinforcing stereotypes when audience members lack the cultural capital or literacy necessary to read the intended satire of a comedy bit (Friedman 2011; Weaver 2010) or when an audience member is not familiar with the broader historical context of and cultural diversity that surrounds these stereotypes. The point I continue to consider relevant in evaluating the place of stand-up comedy in circulating these public racial discourses returns to Adichie’s simple, but insightful observation: A single story is not by itself a harmful or limiting influence, unless it is the *only* story being repeatedly told by sources we trust.

### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Omi and Winant’s *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s -1980s* elaborates on how structural barriers rendered the neoconservative approach of racial assimilation unattainable, so minority racial groups turned to ethno-racial identification to demand political rights and recognition (1986:20).

<sup>2</sup> In my ensuing discussion of audience member responses, I will be using pseudonyms to maintain their promised identity protection.

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