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Writing the Essay

Due: 11/10/23

Comedy: Walking the Line between Catharsis and Harm

Contrary to the stereotype of lower-class neighborhood hoods consisting of people of color, Comedian Theo Von describes his childhood neighborhood as “poor black poor white” (Von 0:09), meaning the breadth of the socioeconomic struggles wasn’t limited to people of color. Von tells a story of how black kids would blame him for the disparity. Von responds by saying, “Dude do you think I would do all this shit to ya’ll, and then move right next door bruh”(Von 0:42-0:50)? On the subject of coming from a lower socioeconomic background, he retrospectively observed how some kids had jackets in the winter, which we did not. Instead, he says, “I was two tank tops in the winter” (Von 0:23). He also shares stories of him getting beaten up by black kids, going along with the stereotype of physical prowess, saying that, “they win” (Von 1:06). He makes a joke about fighting five black people in the dark, and then states, “If you’re black and feel like that’s racially insensitive, just that you’re fighting five white dudes in a cloud.” (Von 1:16-2:02)

Theo Von is a white, American comedian. An excerpt from Theo Von’s standup routine posted in 2017 represents his experience growing up in a mostly black, lower-class community. In this routine, Von focuses on his childhood through the lens of race. He lived in a diverse community, where everyone grew up underprivileged, despite racial differences. His jokes in the

routine center around reworking common stereotypes towards race, by placing himself, a white male, in the picture of struggle. Despite containing stereotypes and digging into sensitive subjects such as racial divide, Von doesn't appear to have the intention of hurting anyone, but writers who have commented on comedy's social role may beg to differ. It is comedy after all, but is this acceptable despite its possibility of reinforcing offensive stereotypes? As a white man, should Von be condemned for the content of his standup routine? Who is allowed to make jokes about what?

Robin Tapely, author of the philosophical essay "Just Joking!" - The Ethics Of Humor argues that there is an extent to which comedy transitions from offensive, to morally objectionable. She references Lafollete and Shank's theory that beliefs are fundamental to humor. This means that in order for someone to find a joke funny, there must be a grain of truth to be recognized in the joke at hand. This perceived truth can be both real, meaning a genuine belief, or imagined, accepting a joke in a hypothetical sense - as in "I can hypothetically believe this to be true," but don't necessarily hold this belief in reality. Tapely outlines an imagined truth by saying, "If I believed x to be true, then this joke would be funny" (175). Here she's referring to the hypothetical space in which people can find humor funny, even if they don't necessarily hold certain beliefs to be true; they can imagine themselves holding a certain belief in order to participate in a joke. Tapely believes that there is a distinction between humor that is offensive, and humor that is morally objectionable. Morally objectionable humor involves what Tapely considers "social harm" which she defines as "a significant impairment to some group or group member's attainment or sustainment of social equality" (179) Furthermore, Tapely uses her definition of morally objectionable, stating that "a person in a dominant social position, publicly and intentionally targets some person or group who is in a subordinate social position in a way

that degrades or dehumanizes that person or group.” (180)” Robin Tapely believes that comedy goes too far when it becomes morally objectionable, meaning it perpetuates certain forms of control from a person of power towards a person with less power, thus reinforcing the dynamic.

Is there a particular group of people that is “allowed” to find certain humor funny, or are certain people that are “allowed” to make offensive jokes? Tapely would object to Von’s use of stereotypes about black people, due to his white skin color. In truth, Von is white, and therefore, is in a questionable position to make such jokes. I’m curious about the idea of permission in comedy. What types of jokes are permissible given a comedian’s experiences? What gives the audience permission to laugh at a particular joke and is there ever a need for permission?

Does exposure to certain types of humor reinforce social barriers, or does it provide a point of catharsis for all parties? Is there ever a line that can be drawn in comedy, or are the cases in which morally objectionable humor appear extrinsic to comedy itself?

To begin to answer some of these questions, one must take a closer look at what constitutes comedy, which Robin Tapely does in “Just Joking!” - The Ethics Of Humor. The issue that arises is how can one quantify or operationalize moral objectionability. This isn’t meant to be a logical fallacy, but rather to point out that humor falls under a certain paradigm. A comedian attempts to make people laugh through their jokes and overall performance. I think it’s incredibly difficult to establish where a joke becomes morally objectionable. An argument brought up in Tapely’s writing is the idea that one can make an egregious statement or observation, and caboose it with the line “just kidding” which serves as a protective mechanism for morally objectionable language. Tapely states, “The speech problem to be overcome is defining morally objectionable jokes, conceals the idea that because we are ‘just joking’ we can say anything whatsoever with moral immunity” (181). I wonder if such a way of spreading hate

can be classified under comedy, or exists as something else, which I will call illusory comedy. Comedy is about intentions, which means that when a comedian delivers a joke, they have the intention of making people laugh. The case of illusory comedy is the antithesis of comedy, as it is delivered with the intention of either harming another individual or not having laughter at the forefront of the user's goals. What can be perceived and understood is the reception of such instances of comedy. If a comedian continuously makes audiences roar with laughter and continues to do so, it is likely that they find joy in what they are doing. Suppose an individual makes negative comments towards an individual or group of people and follows it with "just kidding" and receives no positive reaction. In that case, they're likely to be participating in illusory comedy, but not the true form of comedy. Illusory comedy does not fall under comedy as people can use the veil of "just joking" as a guise for hate speech. If Von's Humor were morally objectionable through Tapely's logic, wouldn't he have already been censored? Clearly, people don't think that he should be. In addition to his standup, Theo Von also has a Netflix special called, *No Offense*. Von has a large platform for his humor, which in the public eye seems to accept and even support.

A thinker whose thoughts concerning comedy relate to Theo Von's is Hannah Gadsby. In one standup routine, Gadsby goes meta. She asserts that as a queer woman herself, it could be damaging to others who fall under the same or similar categories to be making jokes about her own identity. She makes a point of not being stereotypically queer, which is related to Von's implicit unstereotypical whiteness. In a way, he's so stereotypical and white that it breaks the trope of the character that he aims to portray. There is also the idea of the physicality of being on stage, that is, Von's whiteness and how this frames his humor. What is it ok to joke about? Is there ever a line? This relates especially to Theo Von, as he is white, and in this routine, makes

many jokes about black stereotypes. The fact that he grew up experiencing the events he discusses in his routine adds another layer of complexity. In Tapely's writing, she says that in order for one to find a joke funny, there must be a real or imagined truth to be found in the joke. For Von, it's clear that this is true, as he is generating content from his experiences as a white child growing up in a diverse and lower socioeconomic community. Gadsby's thinking applies as Von's comedy could potentially be damaging, as it relates to many stereotypes involving race, however, for Von, the roots of these jokes are lived experiences. Can Von's comedy be justified through his lens and more largely, does comedy that makes an audience laugh need such justification? How can we reconcile Theo Von's white background with the content of his standup?

Whereas Tapely would perceive Theo Von's comedy as a stepping stone towards moral objectionability, Cathy Park Hong may provide answers for why Theo Von still has an audience and why he deserves a stage. This relates to the notion of gaining catharsis through comedy; laughing at the pain. Hong might view Von's routine as a method of gaining clarity about identity and furthermore counteracting the tendency to automate our identities. In her writing, she references her fixation with comedian Richard Pryor, and how engaging with his work lifted her from a depressive state. Hong discusses identity within the context of comedy. She was a poet and found that through this medium, she tried to free herself from her Asian identity, but still felt constrained and troubled by it. She states, "I suspect that if a reader read my poem and then saw my name, the fuse of the poem would blow out" (42). Identity fits into comedy in a significant way. Here, Hong argues that arguably one of the most salient features of the form of comedy is race. Humans are innately perceptive to visual stimuli above the other senses. This provides a reason for our focus on race in comedy. Hong calls us to, "Overhaul the tired ethnic narratives

that have automated our identities; that have made our lives palpable to a white audience but removed them from our own lived experiences" (47) The automated identities she's referring to is the tendency of media to want to push certain experiences onto members of certain backgrounds in order to fit their desired narrative. Although I would expect Tapely to object to Von's humor, the way that Von subverts the idea of automated identity may be a point of common ground between the two people.

The thing about Von's comedy is that, in a way, he subverts the narrative by discussing stereotypes in a way that reflects his lived experience. Who is anyone to deny Von the right to recount his experiences as a child growing up in a diverse community? Although some might consider his jokes, "offensive" I think it's difficult to extend the content of his routine into the realm of Tapely's moral objectionability. The content of a standup routine may be justified if the comedian has a genuine relation to the content of the jokes. For example in Von's case, he's reflecting upon his own childhood and drawbacks, which the audience finds humorous as he's able to laugh about himself and his situation. Hong also brings up the notion of self-deprecating humor by referencing comedian Ray Romano. Perhaps the way in which Von implicates himself in his comedy gives reason for him not being censored. It's an all-encompassing standup routine that invites his experiences as well as those of others. Von talks about being poor, his lack of privilege, and facing stereotypes himself. Had Von never lived the life that he has, and were simply making content out of black stereotypes that had no relation to his lived experience, I take it the audience wouldn't have had the reaction that they did.

The idea of catharsis through comedy has a lot to do with the concept of permission. While there are cases in which people use comedy to justify hate speech, there is an area before this line is crossed, in the case of Theo Von, where superficially offensive content may provide a

space for catharsis of all parties. There is something unifying about Von's childhood experience. He levels the playing field, by showing how adversity can affect anyone. It's this idea that we all grew up together, facing challenges and navigating life. Through his routine, Von debunks a broader notion of white privilege, exemplifying how his childhood was the opposite. He does this all while making the audience laugh. Here is the catharsis. First, Von's content comes from his experiences, which creates permissability, which the audience understands. Then, Von allows the audience to laugh at his experience, alongside himself. The way that Von implicates himself into his standup, removes the idea of us versus them, as it removes the power imbalance which Tapely talked about. In Von's standup, he'll make a joke about black people, and flip it around to joke about white people. It's the rawness in his approach to comedy that makes laughing at his humor okay. He doesn't hold back towards any groups, and because of this, people can laugh at others and laugh at themselves, therefore finding a cathartic escape from the seriousness of life.

Works Cited:

- Von standup routine
- Tapely
- Hong
- Pryor
- Gadsby → The piece that references Gadsby

- Do certain groups have a certain privilege for laughing at certain jokes
- Do people who are the butt of these jokes laugh at these jokes

- Is there a way to show the reader that questions evolve from each other → don't make it seem like two essays.
- Give the jokes from von first, and then his biography ← who's in the audience?
- First set of questions have to do with idea of "permission"
- Why is it good to give certain groups permission? Catharsis = apart of reason why it is ok to give people permission. = my answer
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Final Draft Instructions

Read all of these instructions carefully before finishing your essay or submitting your work.

1. **Review the prompt for Progression Two and verify that your essay responds completely to this prompt.**

Prompt: Investigate a **complex intellectual problem** in response to a cultural exhibit that employs humor in a controversial way. Complicate your understanding of this problem by introducing **3 other texts** into the conversation and analyzing and synthesizing their ideas. You will use the conversation between your cultural exhibit and your written texts to *transform your understanding of your initial problem regarding your exhibit and the ethics of humor*.

2. **Review the specific draft expectations and criteria detailed in the Progression Two assignment. Make sure your essay adheres to these criteria.**
 - Introduce and represent your exhibit
 - Establish a clear intellectual problem framed as a response to a specific observation of your exhibit.
 - Use claims, key concepts, and textual evidence from your chosen participant texts to respond to and complicate your sense of your problem.
 - Show how you and your participant texts agree, disagree or both about how to view your exhibit.
 - Synthesize (combine) the thinking of three texts to offer a new way of responding to your problem. (This is your argument.)
 - Write & edit to the length of 6-7 pages, double-spaced, proper heading in upper-left corner of first page
 - Format in-text citations, Works Cited page, and titles of sources according to MLA.
 - Give your work an informative and creative *title*
 - Add an *Acknowledgments* section at the end of your essay to thank anyone who gave you feedback on this essay (not counting me) or helped you with your thinking.

3. **Check for sentence and paragraph cohesion, and attempt to limit redundancies, unnecessary repetitions (like this one).** Examine how you move from one sentence to the next. Try not to repeat diction excessively but do repeat certain diction and key terms as a strategy to connect the thinking across your essay.
4. **Proofread for grammar and typos*.** I recommend reading your essay backward. This method uncentered your confidence and forces you to examine the movement from word to word, but out of the logic of the sentence. If you know you have a particular kind of mistake you tend to make, ask a friend to check for that. Put their name in the acknowledgements (i.e., subject-verb agreement, number, articles (the, a), homonyms (they're / their), verb tense etc.) If you want further help with a grammar problem, ask me, a peer, or make a Writing Center appointment.

Progression Two Portfolio (No required Writer's Memo–See Bonus Option)

1. **Gather in one digital file** all the work of Progression 2 (you probably have already done this) ***in reverse order***—Final Draft, Second Draft, First Draft, 2.2, 2.1. Be sure to have a proper heading at the start of each unique piece of work/assignment *and to delete any of my instructions.*
2. **Label portfolios “Last Name_Progression 2 Portfolio”** and submit to Brightspace.