

## Original Paper

# Invitational Rhetoric and Humor: Making Audience Laugh, Inviting Them to Think

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### **Abstract**

*Humor is a resource for discourse dealing with the taboo. Through the use of humor, comedians can practice uninhibited use of free public speech because audiences expect to laugh in these situations. This inherent expectation creates an environment where expression, objective opinions, and otherwise offensive ideas can be shared in a public space without fear of persecution or repercussion. As such, humor message creators are free to push social boundaries to create a discourse necessary to address what would be offensive. This freedom is important to this work because of how comedians approach the use of stereotypical ethnic humor. The culmination of audience expectation and openness creates an environment readily available for analysis of ethnic humor messages by researchers. Using the lens of Invitational Rhetoric, we uncover rhetorical messages embedded in the humor that work to challenge negative stereotypes about identity.*

### **Keywords**

*Satire, rhetorical humor, incongruent humor, invitational rhetoric*

### **1. Introduction**

Stand-up comedy is the act of a comedian performing previously written jokes in front of an audience who attend the event expecting to laugh. This use of comedy functions as a vehicle for a message without fear of offending because audiences chose to attend these events expecting to laugh. It is within this consenting relationship that we base our claim, by choosing to attend these events, audiences are inviting incongruent messages embedded in humor, leaving the comedian free to approach a variety of subjects that might be considered off-limits, taboo or inappropriate in other parts of our lives. This

invitation allows comedians and other joke writers to develop messages with a specific intent. From this intent, comedians can use humor to help establish an equilibrium within social groups to create rhetorical meaning by pointing out differences within those groups (Radcliffe-Brown, 1949). These differences often deal with race, stereotype, identity, gender, sexuality, religion, politics, socio-economic status, and the intent of the comedian is often to challenge the social norms associated with these differences. In 1962, Mark Twain furthered the notion of humor's power by explaining that, "For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution—these can lift a colossal humbug—push it a little—weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing stands" (p. 258).

Humor, as a communicated message, has the ability to invade ones' cognitive thoughts without making them feel attacked.

For the comedian, it is important to determine what type of comedy they will perform. There are several types of stand-up comedians such as prop, political, storytelling, observational, or absurdest. This role becomes known as their "style" and from this style, we can uncover many of the hidden messages intended. These messages are embedded in the jokes not only to make audiences laugh but also to make them think. In this essay, we examine this process using Foss and Griffin's notion of invitational rhetoric, in doing so, we examine several comedians whose styles of humor also function as a form of social critique.

Humor, comedy, and comedians are no stranger to popular culture. These avenues of entertainment have captivated audiences before the days of the Minstrel shows. "We know some human beings have been trying to make others humans laugh for thousands of years before there was a Phyllis Diller. It has always been a part of human culture" (Federman, 2021, p. 1). Comedy has a way of helping people look beyond their current situations to experience pleasure in the "now". This process of "comedy begins with personal reflections on the oddities and anomalies of life in which any individual indulges, but it takes on a broader, and even universal, significance when a writer, performer or visual artist constructs that reflection into a comic form" (Sturges, 2010. p. 280). The comic form means that a message is structured, then communicated to audiences within a joke. We argue that this process is intended. "Humor, as a communicated message, has the power to persuade. Message creators use humor in a variety of different situations and specific ways. Advertisers, public relations firms, politicians, educators, and salespersons all use humor as a method of establishing a rapport with their audience followed by systematic persuasion via their messages" (Pacheco & Meyer, 2012, p. 312). Many comedians, although looking to elicit the reaction of laughter, embed messages in their humor that lead audiences to think about the subject in a very specific way. "Humor's ability to enhance a message encourages message creators to employ it, particularly when attempting to influence their captive audience" (Pacheco & Nelson, 2015, p. 143). Freud (2002) argues, the process of creating a joke involves a combination of technique and thought. Most comedians do not tell a joke once, it is a

process of honing the message, trying it out on audiences, and developing the best delivery for the desired response. For a joke to be effective it is best performed by an experienced comedian who presents a strong comedic voice (Sturges, 2010). Having a comedic identity comes with experience and time, and the developed persona helps in establishing a relationship with the audience. This relationship between the audience and stand-up comedians has customarily pointed out pretentiousness within the status quo (Henkle, 1980). It is this relationship that brings audiences back to see their favorite comedians over and over. It is also from this relationship that later, we begin to see how humor and invitational rhetoric functions as a rhetorical device.

## 2. Method

Stand-up comics provide unique perspectives about daily occurrences to audiences. The goal of making an audience laugh is to make the joke universal and invite the audience to join in on the experience so that the audience can relate to the joke. Stand-up is one of the few forms of entertainment that provides a symbiotic experience between a performer and the audience. "Humor is often a tool for dealing with taboo topics, issues of social inequity, and subjects that in any other circumstance would be perceived as offensive" (Pacheco & Nelson, 2015, p. 145). A comedian is unlikely to change the opinion on an issue, but humor can present an alternative perspective on the issue without making the audience member feel attacked, and "by making sense of these humor uses, the audience begins to understand the messages and develops a deeper, more nuanced view of "what is being said" versus "what is seen or heard" (Pacheco & Meyer, 2012, p. 312). In order to see this process more clearly, we will employ samples from the works of four commercially successful comedians whose style functions as that of a social critic. To see how rhetorical effects function within audiences, we employ jokes by comedians Greg Giraldo, Hannibal Buress, W. Kamau Bell, and Wanda Sykes and examine them through the lens of Foss and Griffin's notion of invitational rhetoric. These are four comedians who have strong opinions about social issues and use their styles to present jokes that do not alienate the audience but asks them to consider alternative perspectives. Samples from Bell, Buress, Giraldo, and Sykes are analyzed as they examine various social differences that are often perceived as offensive, and present them to audiences in a funny, yet thoughtful joke. It is in these rhetorical jokes that the audience is invited to rethink their own opinions on social differences.

### Invitational rhetoric

Language can create moments, control and describe situations, and persuade others. Foss and Griffin (1995) posit that individuals exert a large amount of time and energy to influence others and their actions. Examples of this kind of persuasive situation include trying to influence a group of friends on where to eat, what movie to see, or getting a group of people to support a new policy at the workplace. Traditional definitions and views of rhetoric are "characterized by efforts to change others and thus to gain control over the self-worth derived from and measured by the power extorted over others, and a deviation of the lifeworlds of others" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4). Traditional rhetoric has been limited

to the use of domination over others and is limiting to an audience. With invitational rhetoric, Foss and Griffin present an alternative rhetorical strategy based upon three principles. First, they wanted a rhetoric that was based upon creating relationships of equality and reject ideas of dominance. Second, they created a rhetoric that understands and values all living beings, and finally, respect for others' right to make their own decisions and allow for self-determination. Invitational rhetoric is about asking the audience to examine a viewpoint, idea, or thought through the lens of the rhetor. For a rhetor to be invitational they need to understand what roadblocks could occur between them and the audience and minimize them to generate understanding between the two (1995). When dealing with the taboo a primary roadblock is often the acceptable social norms. People are not "supposed" to talk about these things. By doing so in jest, these taboo topics become digestible. The result creates a reciprocal understanding of an issue or idea. Invitational rhetoric opens the door to marginalized groups, ideas, and shares them with an audience. It allows the rhetor to recognize speaking situations where they will "seek not to persuade others but simply create an environment that facilitates understanding, accords value and respect to others' perspectives, and contributes to the development of relationships of equality" (p. 17). In the case of the comedian/audience relationship, the understanding of the environment can be assumed because the person in the audience chose to attend the performance. Does this mean an audience member cannot be offended? No, however, for an audience member to willfully attend a comedy performance, they are acknowledging their expectation of being entertained, and of finding humor. This expectation functions as the audience member's invitation.

As a rhetorical approach, invitational rhetoric provides multiple viewpoints in a civil fashion to an audience and invites them to be a part of the process. Invitational rhetoric has real-world agency and can create understanding with the audience through dialogue, not through "change, competition, and domination" (Foss & Griffin, 1995, p. 4). Invitational rhetoric's flexibility allows it to work in a variety of settings (Bone, Griffin, & Scholz, 2008). It is not limited to any particular issue, it can be used to examine rhetoric that is used by teachers, speakers, or entertainers. Invitational rhetoric is "valuable because they broaden our perspective on what kinds of communicative actions can be considered rhetorical and turn our attention to process rather than end product" (Delaure, 2008, p. 6). Foss and Griffin propose that rhetoric can be used as a starting point for audiences to discuss an issue or issues within a public sphere. Invitational rhetoric is not focused on immediate results. Inviting audiences to participate in the rhetorical process of understanding the nuances of an issue and identify with it (Foss & Griffin, 1995). The rhetor and the audience have then created a relationship of understanding.

The relationship between the rhetor and the audience is created through presenting different personal perspectives. Rhetors are not advocating for support or pursuing acceptance; the goal of invitational rhetoric is to share stories with the audience. This helps the audience relate to the rhetor by constructing an atmosphere of understanding, safety, value, and freedom (Foss & Griffin, 1995). This understanding provides a viewpoint that is inviting and is not about hierarchical values but understanding that multiple perspectives should be considered.

### 3. Result

#### 3.1 Hannibal Buress

Comedian Chris Rock described Hannibal Buress as “if Steven Wright, Mos Def, and Dave Chappelle had a baby” (Brownstein, 2013, para. 1). He has been featured on numerous talk shows including *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* (Bio, 2013). He was also a staff writer for *30 Rock* and *Saturday Night Live* and had a Comedy Central special in 2012 (Burgess, 2013). He is incessantly on tour doing his observational comedy pointing out everyday absurdity happening in his life.

#### 3.2 Greg Giraldo

Greg Giraldo started performing stand-up in the early 1990s in New York City. Even though had he had several appearances on late-night talk shows, television pilots, and a short-lived situational comedy. He garnered the public’s attention with his appearances on Comedy Central’s *Roasts* where he became a regular fixture (O’Conner, 2010). His humor can be described as clever and full of furious rants (2010).

#### 3.3 W. Kamau Bell

Laughspin.com pronounced that W. Kamau Bell is “one of our country’s most adept racial commentators with a blistering wit and a willingness to say what you quickly realize you’ve always thought” (Keller, 2010, para. 2). He is a self-described socio-political comedian, community activist, and TV host of *Totally Biased* (About Kamau, 2013). In 2007 he developed a one-man show *The W. Kamau Bell Curve: Ending Racism in About an Hour* which was well-received by audiences and critics (2013). Bell’s act covers topical issues of race, sex, political policy, class, and culture.

#### 3.4 Wanda Sykes

Wanda Sykes started her comedy career in the late 1980s in Washington DC area before moving to New York City to further her stand-up career (Katz, 2010). She was a regular on the Chris Rock Show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and has had stand-up comedy specials on HBO and Comedy Central. Her comedy has been described as energetic and honest.

#### Analysis

##### *Hannibal Buress-Apple Juice*

In this particular joke Buress narrates a story about his love for apple juice.

I realize recently my judgment gets messed up more by food and juice than it does by drugs and alcohol. Like I love apple juice, I think it’s delicious. I want to start my own apple juice company. I don’t know how you go about doing it. I tried emailing Mott’s for advice, they’re not really accessible so I have to keep being a consumer.

Me and my girl go to the grocery store. Mott’s fresh-pressed natural apple juice \$1.79 for a half gallon, that’s a great sale so we get 8 bottles. Eight bottles is all we have on the belt. In front of us is an old man looking back shaking his head like “nah, nope”. “I’m like what’s wrong old man you mad cause we got all this apple juice cause you could go get some too it’s over there in aisle 4 but if not, stop judging us cause hell yeah we’re hoarding this juice taking advantage of this sale before this store

realize what a horrible mistake they made and you know we're back here, happy with our apple juice and you're up there lonely with your Hormel chili, you lonely Hormel chili eating old man."

It took me a minute to realize he wasn't shaking his head cause of the apple juice; he was shaking his head cause my girlfriend was white and he didn't agree with that. I was so caught up in the euphoria of having all that apple juice that for like a minute I lived in a world where racism didn't exist. I was like, it's obvious this old man is just an apple juice hater. He's just really mad cause he can't acquire all the apple juice." (Buess, 2010)

In narrating this joke Buess describes how passion for something can cloud a person's judgment. He compares it to the ways drugs or alcohol can alter ones' perception or decision-making. When making the comparison it helps create an understanding of his problem, because drugs and alcohol can impair ones' judgment and lead to poor choices. Buess goes on to talk about going to the grocery store a common activity that we can safely assume each member of the audience has done before. While making a particular trip to the store, he found his brand of apple juice is on sale and decided to stock up on it. In making these assumptions, he is relating the story to the audience. He is inviting the audience to "be him" in this situation, an experience that will elicit a specific thoughtful experience later during the joke. When in the check-out line with his apple juice, an old man is glaring and shaking his head while staring at Buess and his girlfriend. He feels that he is being judged on the amount of apple juice he is purchasing and asserts there is nothing wrong with finding a good bargain. Buess then takes the audience on a journey of his internal thoughts of him justifying to the old man who is judging him for buying a lot of apple juice. During this stream of consciousness rant, he realizes that it is not about apple juice. The old man is staring because he is a black man and his girlfriend is a white woman. This introduces the rhetorical plot of this particular narrative. It was the fact that his girlfriend is white and Buess is black and the old man did not find that acceptable. With the rhetorical plot introduced and the audience invited to the messages, Buess delivers the punch line; "I was so caught up in the euphoria of having all that apple juice there for like a minute I lived in his world where racism didn't exist. I was like it's obvious that this old man is just an apple juice hater" (Buess, 2010). The incongruity of this message shocks audiences into a different train of thought, and way of thinking about the subject at hand. The shift of the joke's focus invites the audience to think of a world that is not free of judgment or racism. Rather, a world where these issues are so commonplace that the audience would immediately get the joke. This incongruent shift is the rhetorical message. He does not ask the audience to agree with him but presents the audience a story to entertain them with a perspective to help them understand what it is like to be in an interracial relationship. Once he has the audience drawn into the story, the incongruity of the punchline forces audience members to see his perspective. This is the necessary kernel for rhetoric. The premise of the joke creates a setting for the audience to relate to and the punch line presents the twist and perspective on the joke. The joke is not going to cancel racism, but the joke lets the audience visualize, for a very short time and on a very small scale, what racism does to a person. It is from this embedded joke that audiences can continue thinking about this issue presented to them,

beyond their time at the show.

Buress's approach to racism is couched in wit and absurdity and is accented by his measured dry delivery (Zinoman, 2011). This style emphasizes the "everyday experience" factor for the audience. Having a non-confrontational approach is not off-putting to the audience, nor does it put the audience in a defensive mindset. He works against cultural expectations and stereotypes of what a black comic is supposed to be (Maron, 2011, 2013). His laid-back approach presents the audience with a different perspective and encourages them to consider sometimes it is bigger than the "apple juice".

#### *Greg Giraldo - Happy Birfday*

We see a similar pattern emerge from Greg Giraldo's "Happy Birfday" joke where he rants about one of his pet peeves; adults who go out to eat to celebrate a birthday and then request that the employees of the restaurant sing some version of "happy birthday" to the special guest.

When did we become such a nation of such self-important narcissistic douchebags? That you know when it's your birthday now you can go to any restaurant and make the waiter sing happy birthday to you? When did that trend start? That's the most irritating, that used to be for children at Chucky Cheese and now you can go to any restaurant, "Oh is my birthday dance around or something, give us a little song would you, give us a little song. Go get me a piece of cake it's my birthday". You go to restaurants now they got to break out in song every 5 minutes.

I was in a restaurant the other day the waiters had to go four separate times to different tables and sing happy birthday and holy shit even the owner comes out, even the dishwasher is out there saying (in a stereotypical Latino accent) "happy birfday to ju, happy birfday to ju. (as a conscious thought: *Is my birfday too but no one is singing happy birfday to me cause I am in the back washing dishes for 50 cents an hour but somehow, I am the bad guy for taking away American jobs. What fucking job am I taking away? Who wants to wash a fucking dish for 50 cents an hour? Ok, yes arguably all of us coming over like this collectively lowers the labor rates in the country, we could debate it on those merits, but no you're taking my job you're taking my job you're taking my job, what kind of fucking ignorant bullshit is that? You have to ask yourself, are you willing to pay the increased cost of paying a more valuable wage for a fucking slob to stand back there washing dishes? If it's such a fucking problem, why don't you just penalize the employers who hire us? Ohhh because that would be politically unpopular!*) How old are ju know?"

Giraldo expresses his frustration that this singing has become an "expectation" amongst adults on their birthdays. He pushes this further when he compares these behaviors to what children expect at Chuck E. Cheese, (a popular children's entertainment restaurant) but finds it irritating that adults have this same expectation in all restaurants. His description is accented by the change in his voice as his delivery punctuates his frustration with this happy birthday situation. Even if the audience cannot relate, they can hear his position through the delivery. This intense delivery is a tool for engaging audiences in his frustration as he sets up the joke. His conviction to this one instance pulls the audience into the situation as he helps understand the problem, then the joke takes a turn towards its rhetorical plot,

illegal immigrants in the workplace. In setting up the joke, claiming that “all” employees are expected to come out and sing, the audience is now faced with “the dishwasher” and a stereotypical voice that exaggerates the pronunciation of words with a heavy accent. With this, Giraldo has now shifted his focus from having other adults sing to the real issue in this rhetorical plot, illegal immigrant workers. By signing happy birthday from the dishwasher’s perspective, the lyrics shift to the dishwasher’s job and how much he makes an hour. The implication being that the dishwasher is an illegal immigrant who has “taken an American job” washing dishes for \$.50 an hour. In this incongruent punchline, he argues the point that people complain about illegal immigrants taking jobs from Americans, but ask if it is a job that Americans would do for the same pay. As “the dishwasher” he offers a critical perspective by highlighting the number and kinds of jobs illegal workers do.

Another theme that emerges in this joke centers around American employer’s willingness to pay a living wage to American employees, thus resulting in more immigrants. This brings into focus the heart of the intended rhetorical plot, illegal immigrant workers only exist because employers exploit them as cheap labor.

The joke never asks the audience to consider and understand the illegal worker’s point of view. It works to draw in the audience and then suddenly the incongruent shift forces them to see the joke’s rhetorical plot for what it is, a critique of an accepted social norm, illegal immigrants are exploited by employers who choose to hire illegal immigrants, rather than paying a decent living wage. “Ethnic humor works to help defuse the tension in the stereotypes, allowing the audience the opportunity to hear and accept the message, think about and process the message, and in that reflection find the critically rhetorical intent hidden in the message” (Pacheco & Nelson, 2015, p. 144). The joke does not ask the audience to choose a side on the issue, rather it forces the audience to see the issue in a new light and encourages them to think about alternative perspectives.

#### *W. Kamau Bell - Has America Become Post-Racial?*

W. Kamau Bell scrutinizes how words are created when it comes to race and it does not change the reality of racism or how it is viewed by the media and particularly the made-up term “post-racial”. Bell builds up what is post-racial through examples to relate his point to the audience. His delivery is cheery and upbeat, which is incongruent to the premise of the joke, racism in America. The term post-racial was used in relation to Barack Obama being elected as President of the United States and was used to insinuate that the United States has now entered a new era without racial divisions. He is confused by the term “post-racial” and argues that made-up words like “post-racial” have no real meaning. To exemplify this, he asks the audience to consider the term ‘soccer mom’ and argues that it too has no real meaning because what a soccer mom does is the same as what any mom can do.

It is not just the media that creates non-words according to Bell, pointing how black people use the word “conversate” and how skillful the black community is at reinventing language. Bell takes pride in providing the audience with a black perspective on black culture while poking fun at the ridiculousness of crafting non-words. Using cultural tropes explains this phenomenon within our culture of inventing



words that have no meaning. The term “post-racial” assumes that there is no longer racism, prejudice, or discrimination. The premise of the joke asks the audience to consider if America is post-racial just because Barack Obama was elected President. Bell sets up the punchlines that America is not “post-racial” with, “I can disprove the idea of post-racial America in two words”, he then pauses for a few seconds and then utters, “Atlanta Braves”, “Washington Redskins”, and “Cleveland Indians” (Bell, 2012). Bell asks the audience if America can consider itself post-racial while still having sports teams named after offensive Native American stereotypes. To demonstrate this idea he shows the logo of the Cleveland Indians which is a stereotypical caricature of a Native American.

This use of sports culture asks the audience to consider if America is in a word post-racial, thus pointing out the hypocrisy and asks the audience consider just because words are created and used to describe a situation as it does not mean is reality. He asks the audience to think about the language used to describe an event and consider if it is accurately defining the moment. Language can create a false reality whether it is trying to sound smart by using the word “conversate” or suggest that racism has been eradicated through the use of ‘post-racial’. His use of sports as a metaphor questions the intrinsic value of the term post-racial and in doing so, the joke asks the audience to consider if America is truly post-racial. He invites the audience to contemplate if the election of Barak Obama as President can mean that the United States has reached a state of racial equality?

#### *Wanda Sykes - Dignified Black People*

Sykes’ “Dignified Black People” explores expectations and stereotypes of being black and how the election of Barak Obama was perceived to have eased some of those social pressures.

First black president. I am so happy cause now I can relax a little bit. You know I can loosen up. Don’t have to be so black all the time. Don’t have to be so dignified. Cause you know we did it, black folks we always got to be dignified because we know if we fuck up we just sent everybody else back a couple of years. We should’ve killed Flavor Flav like 10 years ago. He has been holding us back, but we didn’t.

I can relax a little bit. I can do some shit. I can dance on camera. I couldn’t dance on camera before. When I was growing up my mother, she wouldn’t even let us dance in the car. You know, we sitting in the car, good song come on the radio, my mother was like she would stop the car. “Ahh, do you want to dance or do you want to ride? Cause you ain’t dancing in my car. White people are looking at you.” I was like “huh”? “White people are looking at you” I’m like (turns head to side) “Oh damn”. She was right. I hit that shit in my head couldn’t do it, couldn’t dance, couldn’t dance on camera but now shit I could dance. We got a black president. Now I can dance! I can tap dance. Know what dignified black people hate, tap dances. Hate that shit. Look at damn Bojangles just sitting us back. How are we going get ahead if she up there looking like Bojangles.

Hey I can dance; I can do some other shit. I can buy a whole watermelon now. I no longer have to grow them in my closet under my weed plant. Before I was going to the grocery store and I would look at a whole watermelon, and I say “Damn they look good. You know I would like to get a whole watermelon,

but look at all these white people looking at me. Fuck you, whitey. I ain't buying a whole watermelon for your enjoyment. I am going to the salad bar. Take my dignified ass to the salad bar. Get this sliced watermelon. Let me camouflage this shit with some cantaloupe. Good day sir."

Now I got a black president. You should see me, I am walking out the grocery store with the watermelon on my shoulder, "Yeah! Obama bitch". Shit, I hope he gets a second term then I am going to Popeye's. You'll see me in the Popeye's drive-thru dancing and eating watermelon.

First black president man, there's some changes. Even when I did the White House Correspondents Association dinner, when I did that, they had to make some changes. They had to adjust. Yeah, it was before my performance and my publicist comes to me, she goes "Wanda, they want me to give you this note". I am like alright what is it? She says, "Well, they said please don't use the f-word or the n-word". Well, I said, "Hmmm, I got a feeling they didn't give this note out last year. I didn't see it last year, but did Rich Little go out there and say fuck you n\*\*\*\* to George Bush?" (Sykes, 2010)

She opens by expressing joy with the United States electing its first black president, Barack Obama. "I can relax a little bit, you know loosen up, don't have to be so black all the time" (Wanda Sykes, *Dignified Black People*). The setup to the joke helps the audience understand her perspective that there is pressure to act "dignified" in front of non-blacks because her actions and behavior are viewed as a representation of all black persons. She then talks about how and uses rapper Flavor Flav as an example of a negative persona often associated with black people. This is the lead-up into the rhetorical plot in this joke and inviting the audience to understand where this idea of acting "dignified" comes from. Sykes makes the audience aware of social pressures from within her family to be aware that white people will judge her actions and see it as a representation of how all black people act. Her mother's words stuck with her for years, but the election of a black President, it seems to have eased social pressure to act "dignified" and now she "feels free to dance in public or on camera". Sykes sets up the joke to invite the audience to consider how freeing it is as a person of color, to see another person of color elected to the highest position in the country. That moment of his election allowed to her be free and not self-conscious, or question whether she was accidentally enforcing racial stereotypes. This is different from the Bell argument because his "post-racial" joke looked at a term developed by the dominant culture and Sykes is using the image from within the black culture. The joke explores more than just the social pressures and racial stereotypes of people of color. Her rhetorical plot asks the audience to consider the stereotype and stigma attached to being black and doing simple tasks like buying a watermelon in public. Before Obama being elected she states:

"I would go into the grocery store and I would look at the whole watermelon, and I would say damn they look good. Boy, I would like to get a whole watermelon. Look at all these white people looking at me. Fuck you whitey. I ain't buying a whole watermelon for your enjoyment" (Sykes, 2010).

She presents a point of view for the audience to consider how empowering and freeing it was for her that Obama was elected. She punctuates this feeling with the tag line to the joke, "Now I got a black President, you should see me. I'm walking out the grocery store with a watermelon on my shoulder.

Yeah! Obama bitch” (Sykes). The election of Obama allows her to publicly reclaim something she enjoys but had to hide due to negative stereotypes. To help the audience understand her point of view she explains it, using an embellished lens that is relatable to others.

She closes the joke by sharing with the audience that even though she feels this new freedom, the status quo needed to make some changes. To exemplify this, she talks about getting ready to perform at the White House Correspondents Association dinner and receiving a note asking her to not use the “f word” or the “n word”. Upon receiving the request, she shares with the audience how she reflected upon the request wondering if someone at last year’s dinner used those words to George Bush. The closing punch line of the joke asks the audience to reflect that even though she feels that she has more freedom due to a shift in attitudes and stereotypes are changing, there are still false assumptions based upon stereotypes that people of color must overcome.

#### 4. Discussion

Focusing on the acts of four popular comedians, this essay discussed the rhetorical messages embedded in joke-telling that help make comedians more than just “comedians”, but social critics. These comedians use their performance on stage as an opportunity to challenge social norms and force audiences to see and think about the issues differently. By embedding specific humor embedded within jokes and revealing the rhetorical plot through incongruent humor, comedians express their real message and because audiences invite the messages by attending these shows, rhetorical possibilities exist. Because stand-up comedy is one of “the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present” (Mintz, 1985, p. 71), they present an opportunity for comedians to challenge the power structures in place. The jokes become more than “jokes”, they become critical critiques of the social norms that exist. Giraldo, Buress, Bell, and Sykes offer four very different commentaries on contemporary social issues in the U.S. This practice of pointing out social and political issues goes back to Shakespeare where the fool was used to talk about taboo topics (Mintz, 1985). The jokes developed by these comedians offer an experience to one of the many views which are possible for the audience to uncover. Can a comedian bring about change on social issues? Probably not universally, but at the audience level they can by presenting the audience with jokes that help them to consider other points of view. This task is complicated by the audience’s expectations of being entertained but enhanced by the incongruity of the messages forcing them to think. These skilled comedians have unintentionally used the precepts of invitational rhetoric to help foster change.

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