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Black Skin, White Laughter:
W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Pryor, and Comedic Double-Consciousness

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Laughter and its present forms represent ... the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation.

– Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.ⁱ

Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno outline a powerful account of the cultural politics of late capitalism in their famous chapter on “The Culture Industry” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). They hold out some hope for the emancipatory potential of art – its capacity to generate critical reflection on existing social and political institutions and news ways of seeing the world – but emphasize how the popular culture produced by the culture industry largely reinforces existing capitalist relations of power and inequality. As the basis for a critical theory of contemporary capitalist societies, however, their account of cultural politics has notable limitations. They see little room for meaningful artistic expression and resistance within the culture industry, underestimating moments of art and resistance. Furthermore, they have an overly reductive, uncomprehending, and somewhat elitist view of popular culture, which leads them to misrecognize (and, thus, miss) forms of resistance already apparent in some forms of popular culture in their time. (This is strikingly evident in Adorno’s dismissal of jazz, which was pioneered by Black Americans).ⁱⁱ

This blind spot is particularly serious regarding the cultural politics of racism, which they address too narrowly. They illuminate how the psycho-dynamics of anti-Semitism reinforce existing class divisions and how fascist propaganda generates and feeds anti-Semitismⁱⁱⁱ; yet, they fail to consider how subaltern racialized groups, such as African Americans, Native Americans, and European and American Jews, sometimes produce art that challenges prevailing forms of racist culture and racism.

Here we locate the promise of what we call Du Bosian critical theory. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) addresses the cultural politics of modern capitalist societies with an eye toward a radical social-political transformation involving “the ultimate triumph of some sort of Socialism the world over.”^{iv} He rightly understands these societies as deeply *racialized* and capitalist. He focuses particularly on the racist cultural politics of the Jim Crow era United States, but always with an eye to what in 1900 he called “the problem of the twentieth century[,] ... the problem of the colour line, the question as to how far differences of race ... are going to be made, hereafter, the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilisation.”^v While Du Bois’s thought is not free of elitism, he offers a more capacious understanding of art and transformative cultural politics than Horkheimer and Adorno.

Most importantly for present purposes, he explores possibilities for “Negro” Americans, given their subjugated racialized status, to produce art as a tool of cultural-political resistance and liberation. In this way, Du Bois complements Horkheimer and Adorno’s account of the restrictive cultural politics of the cultural industry in capitalist societies – of how “[t]he industry bows to the vote it has rigged” (i.e., the desires it has manufactured) and how commodified “mass culture” routinely excludes “the new” through “the reproduction of sameness.”^{vi} Without undercutting their basic framework, Du Bois illuminates the other side of cultural politics: the prospects for racialized (and

other) subaltern groups to use artistic expression as a means to oppose racism and to advance antiracist, emancipatory social and political change.

In what follows we will sketch some key elements of a Du Boisian critical theory of anti-racist cultural politics.^{vii} We will focus chiefly on what Du Bois's account of popular cultural politics adds to Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the culture industry with respect to a particular area of artistic-popular cultural production: Black stand-up comedy as represented by the groundbreaking work of Richard Pryor (1940-2005) in the late 1970s and early '80s. Pryor's comedy meshes well with Du Bois's ideas about white supremacy, racism, cultural politics, and the emancipatory possibilities of "Negro art." In fact, against the backdrop of pervasive anti-Black racism, Du Bois even discusses "Negro" humor and suggestively distinguishes Black laughter from white laughter. Meanwhile, Pryor's comedy exemplifies how Black comedy, even at its best, can be a double-edged sword: its emancipatory potential can be undermined by the oppressive character of "white" laughter. The spectre of a "white" laughter – immediate, revelatory, somatic, and dominating – works to reassert the normative white citizen.

To develop these points we will outline Du Bois's ideas about "Negro Art," Black laughter, and white laughter. Then we turn to Pryor's stand-up comedy to consider the promise of Black art and comedy and the dangers and ambiguities of white laughter. It is not our purpose to provide a comprehensive account of either Du Bois's cultural and political theory or Pryor's comedy; rather, by examining Pryor's comedy in light of Du Bois's ideas about Black cultural politics and Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of the culture industry, we hope to indicate the promise of Du Boisian critical theory.

Regarding Black and white laughter, we do not mean the laughter of different biological races.^{viii} Instead, we regard Black and white identities, among others (e.g., Asian, Latino/a, Native American), as *racialized* identities – artifacts of political processes of *racialization*, or "race"-making. Processes of racialization involve the ideological representational processes whereby "social significance is attached to certain (usually phenotypic) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct [racial] collectivity."^{ix} The *whiteness* underlying white laughter, then, has nothing to do with a "white race" of people in a biological sense. As Charles Mills says, "Whiteness is not really a color [or biological race] at all, but a set of power relations." It corresponds to a privileged and empowered mode of racialized social identity in societies marked by histories of white supremacy.^x Likewise, Blackness does not refer to a distinct biological race but to a politically formed social collectivity that has had a particular racialized social position and status the white-dominated modern world racial system.^{xi}

I. Du Bois on Negro Art

In relation to his larger project to overturn US and global white supremacy and achieve an inclusive democratic socialism, W.E.B. Du Bois persistently examined and pursued forms of Black cultural expression. His aim here was to enhance Black "race pride" and political mobilization and to upend white racism.^{xii} David Levering Lewis argues that while Du Bois developed an increasingly sophisticated account of "race and class ... as mutually reinforcing constructs," he considered "race pride" among Blacks a key "building block in group advancement; true emancipation – psychic affirmation – was impossible without it."^{xiii} Eric Sundquist adds that Du Bois "turned the 'problem' of color, of being black, into a source of historical empowerment and creative

inspiration.”^{xiv}

This work of cultural politics was necessitated by the fact that, as Michael Omi says, a “crucial dimension of racial oppression in the United States is the elaboration of an ideology of difference or ‘otherness.’”^{xv} The political history of the US, including its citizenship and naturalization laws (beginning with the 1790 Naturalization Law, which declared that only free *white* persons could qualify), always has had a racialized ideological character: “the equation in popular parlance of the term ‘American’ with ‘white,’ while other ‘Americans’ are described as black, Mexican, ‘Oriental,’ etc.” Popular culture “has been an important realm within which racial ideologies have been created, reproduced, and sustained. Such ideologies provide the framework of symbols, concepts, and images through which we understand, interpret, and represent aspect of our ‘racial’ existence.”^{xvi}

Du Bois develops his view of the cultural politics of race, including his understanding of “Negro” art and Black and white laughter, in response to racialized status of “Negro” Americans in the era of Jim Crow segregation. While African Americans were not the country’s only oppressed racialized group, their positioning was uniquely that of anti-citizens in contrast to the normative “white” citizens.^{xvii} In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois takes the measure of this subaltern status view by pondering the question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” He answers famously with reference to the “double-consciousness” of “Negro” Americans:

Between me and the other [i.e., the white] world there is an unasked question:
... How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience...

... After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and the Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness, – an America, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.^{xviii}

This strange experience of being racially regarded as “a problem” frames Du Bois’s cultural criticism and, furthermore, illuminates Richard Pryor’s distinctly *Black* and *American* comedy.

Du Bois sketches out the white side of this terrain in “The Souls of White Folks,” a chapter in *Darkwater*. His appraisal of “white folk” updates and elaborates Frederick Douglass’s account of the “colorphobia” of “those sallow-skinned Americans who call themselves white.”^{xix} Du Bois understands the claiming of a white racial identity as a modern power play – a “social performance,” George Yancy explains, “that occurs within the interstices of the web of social interaction between whites and Blacks.”^{xx} In Du Bois’s time, other ethnic groups, particularly European immigrants, learned to negotiate their new American identities by positioning themselves as “white” people “vis-à-vis Black people.”^{xxi} Concerning the recent influx “of ‘new’ white people” to the US, Du

Bois said, “[O]f Irish and German, of Russian Jew, Slav, and ‘dago’ [America’s] social bars have not availed, but against Negroes she can and does take her unflinching ... stand. ... She trains her immigrants to this despising of ‘niggers’ from the day of their landing.”^{xxii}

Regarding whiteness, Du Bois writes, “The discovery of personal whiteness among the world’s people is a very modern thing... This assumption that all the hues of God whiteness alone is inherently and obviously better than brownness or tan leads to curious acts.” He speaks of a “new religion of whiteness”; and in trying to grasp “what on earth whiteness is,” he finds that it amounts to a colonizing ethos of racial supremacy and global dominance and propriety: “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!”^{xxiii} It involves the pernicious racial theory that “every great thought the world ever knew was a white man’s thought; that every great deed the world ever did was white man’s deed. ... Slowly but surely white culture is evolving the theory that ‘darkies’ are born beasts of burden for white folk.”^{xxiv}

This is not all. Whiteness is a cross-class alliance that obscures exploitive class divisions among “white” people in “modern white civilization.” It offers a “loophole” that could help to sustain “the subjection of the white working classes,” which otherwise “cannot much longer be maintained.”^{xxv} This loophole is “the exploitation of the darker peoples” of the world on a vast scale. This promises considerable “profit, not simply to the very rich, but to the middle class and to the laborers” of the white world.^{xxvi} Du Bois argues further in *Black Reconstruction* (1935) that white working people, although subordinated at work *as workers*, nonetheless gain certain advantages – psychological, material (i.e., better jobs and wages), and social status – insofar as they identify themselves and their interests *as white*.^{xxvii}

These ideas are integrally related to Du Bois’s historical and political understanding of the race concept. He entertains notions of racial essentialism, or racial essence, in early writings (notably, “The Conservation of Races,” 1897; *The Gift of Black Folk*, 1924), when such views were widespread.^{xxviii} Yet even there he emphasizes cultural and historical dimensions of racial identity. A race, he says then, “is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses.”^{xxix} Gradually he develops a more thoroughly socio-historical constructivist view of race. In *Dusk of Dawn* (1940) he revises his earlier views regarding race and his own racial heritage by pondering the question, “What is Africa to me?” His connection to African ancestors, he notes, is evident in his “color and hair”; yet these things are “of little meaning in themselves; only important as they stand for more subtle differences from other men.” There is no clear evidence of such deeper differences, but what is certain

is the fact that since the fifteenth century these ancestors of mine and their other descendents have had a common history; have suffered a common disaster and have one long memory. ... [T]he physical bond is least and the badge of color relatively unimportant save as a badge; the real essence of this kinship is its social heritage of slavery; the discrimination and insult; and this heritage binds together not simply the children of Africa, but extends through yellow Asia and into the South Seas.^{xxx}

In short, the “children of Africa” share a profound affinity based chiefly on their common

history of racist oppression. When he adds that this experience also binds them to the colonized peoples of Asia and the South Seas, he arguably overestimates the affinity between the various “subject races.”^{xxxix}

Regarding cultural politics, Du Bois characteristically includes “a revival of art and literature” in his 1915 program of action for “the American Negro,” written as editor of the NAACP’s journal *The Crisis*. Along with economic co-operation, political action, education, and organization, he maintains that “we should try to loose the tremendous emotional wealth of the Negro and the dramatic strength of his problems through writing, the stage, pageantry and other forms of art. ... [W]e should set the black man before the world as both creative artist and a strong subject for artist achievement.”^{xxxix} In another essay, he surveys the cultural “renaissance of Negro genius, which is bringing a new and peculiar turn to what we call the ‘Negro problem.’”^{xxxix} “To American Negroes long deprived of the importance of a past, save that which meant humiliation and despair, this renaissance of knowledge has brought the new and growing enthusiasm for self-expression.”^{xxxix}

Du Bois outlines the emancipatory potential of Black art programmatically in a 1926 address to the Chicago NAACP, “Criteria of Negro Art.” Acknowledging that his topic might seem far removed from the struggle “of black men to be ordinary human beings,” he insists that it “is part of the great fight we are carrying on.”^{xxxix} Negroes in the United States “want to be Americans, full-fledged, with all the rights of other American citizens.” More than that, they occasionally glimpse “some clear ideas, of what America really is. We who are dark can see America in a way that white Americans cannot.” He joins aesthetics and morality in a theory of the gift of collective liberation that Negro Americans offer to the entire United States and “for all mankind”: “a vision of ... a really beautiful world ... a world ... where [men] realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world that we want to create for ourselves and for all America.”^{xxxix} Black Americans could usher in this world “for we have within us as a race new stirrings ... of a new appreciation for joy, of a new desire to create.”^{xxxix} Negro artists can illuminate “the solution to the color problem.”^{xxxix} In this way the Negro artist as “the apostle of beauty thus becomes the apostle of truth and right.” “Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be,” he declares, “despite the wailing of the purists.”^{xxxix}

Negro artists can guide the way toward beauty, truth, and justice in a manner unavailable to white artists. The latter are constrained because the white public “today demands from its artists ... racial pre-judgment which deliberately distorts truth and justice, as far as colored races are concerned.”^{xl} The emerging black public is not yet so different: it “still wants its prophets almost equally unfree [as the white artists]. We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down ... [from] white patrons. ... Our worse side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying we have or ever had a worse side.” Even so, “[w]e can afford the truth. White folk today cannot.” Thus, the art of “black folk” is uniquely positioned to “compel recognition” of the humanity of black folk.^{xli}

II. Negro humor, Black laughter, and white laughter

Given these considerations, Du Bois locates Negro humor and the racialized asymmetry of Black laughter and white laughter within the history of anti-black racism in the US. In a 1920 essay Du Bois relates one aspect of Black laughter to what he calls the most pitiful of “all the pitiful things of this pitiful race problem,” the various “types of

Black people that “the white world has caricatured”: “‘grinning’ Negroes, ‘happy’ Negroes, ‘gold dust twins,’ ‘Aunt Jemimas,’ ... – everything and anything to make Negroes ridiculous.”^{xliii} This shared backdrop generates an embarrassed Black laughter that, in one instance, he himself witnessed at a talk in Chicago. The speaker, John Haynes Holmes, said, “I met two children – one fair as the dawn – the other beautiful as the night,” but had to pause at that point because “the audience guffawed in wild merriment. Why? It was a colored audience. Many of them were black. Some faces there were as beautiful as the Night. Why did they laugh? Because the world had taught them to be ashamed of their color.”^{xliiii} Du Bois recalls five hundred years of Black people being “despised and abused” and remarks, “And now in strange, inexplicable transposition the rising blacks laugh at themselves in nervous, blatant, furtive merriment. They laugh because they think they are expected to laugh – because all their poor hunted lives they have heard ‘black’ things laughed at.”^{xliiv} Yet this situation is not hopeless:

A mighty and swelling human consciousness is leading us joyously to embrace the darker world, but we are afraid of black pictures because they are cruel reminders of the crimes of Sunday ‘comics’ and ‘Nigger’ minstrels.

Off with these thought-chains and inchoate soul-shrinkings, and let us train ourselves to see beauty in black.^{xlv}

He reflects on another aspect of Black laughter in *Dusk of Dawn*, in a dialogue with an imagined white friend who is “impossible” to deal with when gripped by his “obsession with his race consciousness.” Du Bois declares that “race talk is, of course, a joke, and frequently it has driven me insane and probably will permanently in the future; and yet ... we black folk are the salvation of mankind.”^{xlvi} Concerning this “joke,” he contrasts Black laughter, as one of the “greatest gifts of God,” with white laughter:

If you will hear men laugh, go to Guinea, ‘Black Bottom,’ ‘Niggertown,’ Harlem. If you want to feel humor too exquisite and subtle for translation, sit invisibly among a gang of Negro workers. The white world has its gibes and cruel caricatures; it has its loud guffaws; but to the black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle.^{xlvii}

He considers the challenges confronting Negro comedy in his 1921 essay, “Negro Art.” “Negro art is today plowing a difficult row chiefly because we shrink at the portrayal of the truth about ourselves.” Going somewhat against the grain of his thoughts in “Criteria of Negro Art,” he says, “We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one.”^{xlviii} It is wrong to judge the Negro community “by our criminals and prostitutes.” But “we face the Truth of Art. We have criminals and prostitutes, ignorant and debased elements just as all folk have,” and when the artist depicts “us he has a right paint us whole.”^{xlix}

Racist stereotypes pose particular difficulties for Negro comedy. “We fear that evil in us will be called racial, while in others it is viewed as individual. ... The more highly trained we become the less we can laugh at Negro comedy – we will have it all tragedy and the triumph of the dark Right over pale Villainy.”¹ Such self-censorship has some “positively bad” effects: “our own writers and artists fear to paint the truth lest they criticize their own and be criticized in turn for it.” In this context Du Bois suggests that some white artists, if they are “wise and discerning,” may “see the beauty, tragedy, and

comedy” of “the colored world ... more truly than we dare.”^{li}

Finally, in “The Humor of the Negroes” (1942), he rejects the common perception “among most Americans that the Negro is quite naturally and incurably humorous.” One only had to glimpse the seriousness of “the African in his natural tribal relations,” he says, to be disabused of this prejudice.^{lii} In contrast, “in the United States and the West Indies, the Negroes are humorous”:

they are filled with laughter and delicious chuckling. They enjoy themselves; they enjoy jokes; they perpetrate them on each other and on white folk. In part that is a defense mechanism; reaction from tragedy; oppositions set out in the face of the hurt and insult. In part it supplies those inner pleasures and gratifications which are denied in broad outline to a caste ridden and restricted people. ... There is an undercurrent of resentment, of anger and vengeance which lies not far beneath the surface and which sometimes exhibits itself at the most unexpected times and under unawaited circumstances.^{liii}

Thus, confronted with racist oppression, the Negroes of the US and the West Indies responded in part with humor.

Focusing on the US, Du Bois notes that it is difficult to classify “the kinds of humor, the variety of jokes,” characteristic of the “American Negro.” Certain types of humor, however,

have been exaggerated and emphasized among [US] Negroes; for instance, the dry mockery of the pretensions of white folk. ... Many is the time that a truculent white man has been wholly disarmed before the apparently innocent and really sophisticated joke of the Negro, whom he meant to berate.

Then among themselves Negroes have developed a variety of their own humor. The use of the word ‘nigger,’ which no white man must use, is coupled with innuendo and suggestion which brings irresistible gales of laughter. They imitate the striver, the nouveau riche, the partially educated man of large words and the entirely untrained.^{liv}

He concludes “that to the oppressed and unfortunate, to those who suffer, God mercifully grants the divine gift of laughter. These folk are not all black nor white, but with inborn humor, men of all colors and races face tragedy of life and make it endurable.”^{lv} This remark reflects his mature race thinking: the gift of laughter is not merely a “gift of black folk” but a gift of oppressed people more generally in the face of life’s absurdities. Still, Black people often use humor in unique ways in relation to their distinctive circumstances.

III. The racialized politics of American stand-up comedy

Much like Du Bois’s critical theory, Richard Pryor’s comedy and the history of stand-up comedy in the United States are remarkably intertwined with the broader US history of “race,” identity, and social status. Stand-up, which generally involves a single, (usually) standing comedian, unassisted by props or costumes, saying things *to* an audience that are intended to elicit that audience’s laughter, certainly existed before 1966 – but this arguably is when the term came into existence.^{lvi} At this point, stand-up

appeared to be the vocation of a particular subset of a particular ethnicity; its primary practitioners were distinctly “Jewish,” male, and heterosexual. Surveying the comedy scene of the late 1960s, Albert Goldman notes that Jews had dominated it for fifty years. Famous Jewish performing comedians in film, radio, television, and nightclubs in these years included Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers, Eddie Cantor, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, Samuel “Zero” Mostel, Henny Youngman, Mort Sahl, and Lenny Bruce. Jews, Goldman says, had long supplied much of the “comic talent in the entertainment business.” What was new by the 1960s was that Jews now also provided much of the “comic material.” “Jewish culture ... [now] serves as the frame of reference for much of contemporary American humor.”^{lvii} Jack Limon suggests that around 1960, “Jewish [and, for all intents and purposes] heterosexual men formed the pool of American citizens that produced most American stand-up comedians. 80 percent of nationally known stand-ups at the time were Jewish men.”^{lviii} This prominence certainly does not provide evidence of some stereotypical Jewish predisposition for being funny, but rather, as Mel Watkins suggests, that at this point, America’s comedy scene was “as segregated as Woolworth’s luncheon counter in Selma, Alabama.”^{lix}

Significantly, Goldman observes that in the mid-1950s “the style of American humor began to undergo [a] radical transformation” exemplified by the increasing pervasiveness of Jewish-oriented material. At this time, “the Jewish comedian first dared to be explicitly Jewish before a Gentile [i.e., non-Jewish] audience.” Comedians like Lenny Bruce, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, and Mel Brooks now “made their Jewish identity paramount”; American Jewish comedians and novelists “found a voice for their anger and self-pity in a potent new humor.” This marked a stark change from performance style of earlier Jewish comics. Jack Benny (1894-1974, born Benny Kubelsky), for instance, “never allowed the audience to glimpse his Jewish identity and ... even used as his foil a grotesque stereotype called Schepperman.”^{lx} Goldman notes the new Jewish comedians who emerged in the 1950s, like Bruce, connected their Jewishness “with the problem of identity faced by any alienated group.” Jewish humor had a “special, ambivalent ... tone” in response to “the confusing dilemma of assimilation.”^{lxi}

This marginality no doubt explains the wider resonance of Jewish comedians of the 1950s and 1960s.^{lxii} Goldman, however, glosses over an important feature of the rise of the self-consciously Jewish comedy of comedians and writers like Bruce, Brooks, Woody Allen, and Philip Roth: in contrast to earlier Jewish comics like Benny and Burns, they were able to display their Jewishness before Gentile audiences (and find the latter willing to listen^{lxiii}) because in the 1950s Jews effectively were becoming accepted as full-fledged white people. When millions of European immigrants came to the US between 1880 and 1920 (Slavs, Jews, and southern Europeans, including Italians and Greeks), they were treated as racially different than more established so-called “white Anglo-Saxon” or “Nordic” Americans.^{lxiv} This racial identification changed over the next two decades, partly due to the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which stopped the wave of immigrants, as well as in response to the Nazi horror, which spurred changes in prevailing modes of race thinking after WWII. By the late 1940s and 1950s, the various European immigrant groups came to be reclassified as “white ethnics” and members of the presumably pan-European “Caucasian race.” These shifts reinscribed the “racial” difference of “nonwhite” persons, such as those of Asian and African descent, who were classified “as being in the Negroid or Mongoloid race.”^{lxv} In effect, the newly achieved

whiteness of European-American Jews in 1950s and 1960s enabled them comedically to perform their Jewishness. As *white* persons, their Jewishness was no longer a major “problem” in the US context.

Meanwhile, being a “Negro” continued to mean being regarded racially as a “problem.” Indeed, in the development of American comedy from the start of the twentieth century to the start of the twenty-first, “Negro” and later Black comedy has always been troubled by the spectre of being “a problem.” This can be traced from the white laughter at “black face” minstrelsy in the 19th century through similarly white scripted “comic” representations of Blacks in the early 20th Century in radio, film, and TV. These white-directed comic portrayals of “blacks” reached something of a nadir in the film persona of Stepin Fetchit, created by the Black character actor Lincoln Perry, who (in Gerald Early’s words) was “the lazy, complaining, slow-moving black who avoids doing work,” and in the radio and then TV show “Amos ‘N’ Andy.”^{lxvi} These representations did not circulate without resistance. Through the NAACP and *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper, Black America succeeded in the symbolic fight to remove Amos ‘N’ Andy from the air. As a consequence of the show’s cancellation in 1953, cultural critic David Marc observes, “no sitcoms concerning black Americans appeared on the air at all for fifteen years... Domestic situation comedy narrative was thoroughly dominated by professional, college-educated WASPS.”^{lxvii}

But if whites from the late fifties through the mid sixties were increasingly hesitant to portray blacks in mainstream comedy, they were equally hesitant to allow blacks to self-portray. Black entertainers played nearly exclusively to black audiences, and those who managed to cross over to white audiences, such as Sammy Davis, Jr. and Nat “King” Cole, maintained comfortably “white” personas.^{lxviii} In comedy, more confrontational Black comedians like Red Foxx and Dick Gregory found it difficult to gain white audiences; Gregory, for his part, concludes that whites, when “comfortable and secure” in their own environment, did not laugh at “racial material that they didn’t want to hear.”^{lxix} Consequently, at the point in the mid-sixties when Jews had become widely accepted as “white” people and Jewish comedians were prominent, the “black” comedian was banished from mainstream white America.^{lxx}

But as the US politics of “race” was transformed through the anti-Vietnam protests, the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., so was the politics of stand-up comedy. With the rise of the Black Power and Black Arts movements and related radical insurgencies (such as the American Indian Movement, the Chicano Movement, the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement), subordinated groups vigorously asserted their claims in relation to a predominantly white male heterosexual world. Yet this era in the US has also been marked by a white backlash to the 1960s civil rights initiatives.^{lxxi} By the seventies, a decade that began with substantial political and cultural energy and mobilization by Black Americans, the blockade separating belligerent, confrontational “black” entertainment from the white mainstream was beginning to crack. Richard Pryor, with a brand of comedy that developed to be uniquely and simultaneously Black and American, would smash that blockade altogether.

After a period of career breakthroughs and personal turmoil in the mid- to late 1960s, Pryor re-emerged in 1972 with a new stand-up act.^{lxxii} Two major 1972 Black

events typified this moment of Black cultural politics in the US: the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, March 10-12, and the Wattstax concert – the “Black Woodstock” – in Los Angeles, August 20. The Convention brought together as delegates a disparate group of elected officials and revolutionaries, integrationists and black nationalists, Baptists and Muslims to advance a National Black Political Agenda.^{lxxiii} Wattstax was the biggest musical event of the Black Power era. It featured performers mostly from the Memphis-based Stax Records label, including Isaac Hayes, Albert King, Rufus and Carla Thomas, and the Staple Singers, along with civil rights leader Jesse Jackson. Pryor was not part of the original event, but he was linked to it in “Wattstax,” Mel Stuart’s 1973 documentary of the event. Stuart wanted to convey a deeper reflection of the Black experience. This led him to film the then relatively unknown Pryor, who took aim at the absurdities of race relations in Watts section of LA and in the country, at a small club in Watts, to give the film a unifying perspective.^{lxxiv} At one point in the film Pryor says, with reference to Watts, “They accidentally shoot more niggers out here than any place else in the world. Every time I pick up the paper - ‘Nigger accidentally shot in the ass’.”^{lxxv}

III. Richard Pryor’s Comedy

Pryor became a major success in the US entertainment industry in the mid-1970s, through million-selling records, on TV, and in popular films.^{lxxvi} Much of his comedy can be understood as a subversive response to Du Bois’s question, “How does it feel to be a problem?,” and Du Bois’s comment, “being a problem is a strange experience.” Du Bois addressed this question, as Sundquist notes, “at the height of white America’s denial of equality to blacks through segregation and vigilante violence,” when the promise of the Reconstruction (1865-77) had given way to systematic Jim Crow segregation.^{lxxvii} The continuing Black marginalization to which Pryor responded in the post-Civil Rights era was notably different from the Jim Crow racial regime that Du Bois fought, but the reality of being racially regarded as a problem had not abated.

Pryor speaks to the changes that had occurred when he reflects back on the identity crisis he had in 1967: “I was a Negro for twenty-three years. I gave that shit up. No room for advancement.”^{lxxviii} Around this time he develops his own distinctive comedic persona and answers the question of “how does it feel to be a problem” at an opportune moment. Pryor’s “Du Boisian” critical theory potential stems from his powerful comedic prowess and his double existence as a distinctly Black, distinctly American performer. To say that Pryor is a distinctly Black comic is not to essentialize the intrinsic significance of his skin color, but, rather, to speak of the underground comedic tradition that finds its source form a shared, lived experience of oppression. Here, comedy, often using Black vernacular modes of expression, becomes as much a mechanism of coping, empowerment, and subversion as a form of ‘mere’ entertainment.^{lxxix} Ralph Ellison argues that the “special tragicomic perspective” taken up and used by African-Americans is a result not of skin colour, but “cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament.”^{lxxx} So, the tradition of black comedy, with roots in slavery, minstrelsy, and vaudeville, sprouted with Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby and Moms Mabley.

Ron Jenkins argues that Pryor pioneered a “directly confrontational style of Afro-American humor that made it clear he wasn’t going to forget [in Pryor’s words] ‘two hundred years of white folks kicking ass.’”^{lxxx} Laurie Stone suggests that “Pryor’s

concert films of the seventies sway over the scene of subversive comedy like sheltering palms.”^{lxxxii} The racial satire in his humour was not new, but as Watkins suggests, Pryor’s exposure of racially based attitudes and cultural eccentricities that were often “embarrassments to the black middle class and stereotypes in the minds of most whites” was a novel technique of both comedy and criticism.^{lxxxiii} Thus, there is a painful self-awareness over the “it’s-funny-because-it’s true” insights Pryor provides about the difference between the everyday experiences of Blacks and whites. These include, for example, interaction with the police on his 1974 live album *That Nigger’s Crazy*:

See, white folks get a ticket they pull over... “Hey officer, yes, glad to be of help, cheerio!” Niggers got to be talkin’ ‘bout, “I am reaching into my pocket for my license, ‘cause I don’t want to be no motherfuckin’ accident.”^{lxxxiv}

And during his 1979 *Live In Concert film*:

Police got a choke hold that they use out here, man, they choke niggers to death. That means you be dead when they’re through. Right, did you know that? Niggers [i.e., Blacks in the audience] goin’ [in a “black” voice] “yeah we know”; white folks [“white” voice] “no, I had no idea.”^{lxxxv}

Pryor also aims at the relative sterility, both figuratively and literally, of white life when compared with Black, both during the *Live on Sunset Strip (1982)* concert and on his 1975 album, ...*Is It Something I said?*:

I love when white dudes get mad and cuss, you all some funny motherfuckers... you be sayin’ shit like [with “white” delivery] “come on, peckerhead! That’s right buddy.” [Pryor’s normal delivery] ... Niggers be talking about [black voice] “buddy this” (grabs crotch).^{lxxxvi}

White folks date different than we do. ... [white voice] Good night, dear... been a pleasure being with you ... [black voice] Nigger spend thirty-four dollars... somebody givin’ up something!^{lxxxvii}

This did not mean he avoided controversial “internal” issues from within the black community. After his bit about interracial relationships on *That Nigger’s Crazy*, the (presumably multi-ethnic) audience boos audibly:

Don’t ever marry a white woman in California. A lot of you sisters probably sayin’, “Don’t marry a white woman anywhere, nigger. Shit! Why should you be happy?” ... Sisters look at you like you killed your momma when you go out with a white woman. And you can’t laugh that shit off, either.

The confrontational edge of Pryor’s comedy is thus distinctly Black. Through his character-heavy comic approach, Pryor forces whites to (at the very least) acknowledge the disparities and injustices of black life while simultaneously forcing blacks to confront potentially problematic attitudes and practices within the Black community. The characters he personifies in *Richard Pryor Live in Concert (1979)* – mostly but not exclusively Black character types – include winos, junkies, prostitutes, street fighters, blue-collar drunks, and pool hustlers.^{lxxxviii} Limon writes that “only Lenny Bruce had ever made his audience this self-conscious; but Bruce had assumed a pervasive Jewishness and maleness, so that even the audience at its most affronted was unified against him as a

sort of mirror inversion. Pryor's case is a degree of complexity beyond that."^{lxxxix} Pryor brought to light the Black humour that had been segregated throughout the past decades from the white mainstream, and by the 1976 movie *Silver Streak* (in which he co-starred with Gene Wilder), was "fast becoming a cross-over star" with a "hard-core African-American following as well as a scattering of hip, young white devotees."^{xc}

Yet, there is a more troubling "American" aspect to some of Pryor's comedy that relates to Du Bois's question for "Negro" Americans: "How does it feel to be a problem?" Blacks may often be constructed as a "problem" in the US, but Pryor's occasional racial triangulation through jokes about Chinese and Vietnamese served to buttress Black credentials as genuinely *American*. He seems to say, "I may be a problem, Jack, but at least I'm still a bona fide American. Now these *other* folks, they're something else..."

At moments like these, Pryor effectively "others" the "other others." He does this, significantly, in *Live on the Sunset Strip* by mocking the Chinese language and what it might sound like for a Chinese man to stutter. While he parodies a stuttering Chinese waiter, his impression of another non-stuttering Chinese waiter draws equal laughs. Chinese, as a language, can sound quite alien to (North) Americans, and people rooted in European (romance) languages; a "stuttering Chinese" sounds *really* strange to us, or we imagine it to be so. The joke works, insofar as it does, at that level, playing on those expectations and intersubjective understandings, shared in the US by Black *and* white folks.^{xc1} While some of the white audience members doubtless struggle (however self-consciously) with Pryor's "black" slang and references, or simply fail to recognize the subtleties of his delivery, Pryor's joke here reminds both Blacks and whites that they can, at least for the most part, understand each other. Thus, he ends the bit by commenting offhandedly, "Chinese people be fucking with you."

Vietnamese immigrants (and, by association, Vietnamese Americans), suffer a comparable attack on Pryor's *...Is It Something I Said?* album. He gives a pointedly working-class "American" commentary on the inflow of Vietnamese in general, albeit from a markedly Black standpoint: "We the motherfuckers got to give up the jobs for 'em... Got all the Vietnamese in the Army camps and shit, takin' tests and stuff, learnin' how to say 'niggers' so they can be good citizens."^{xcii} He lambastes the trend of whites adopting Vietnamese children: "People in Mississippi, white folks in Georgia... adoptin' babies. Shit goin' last for about a year. Then that racism goin' come out. [White voice] Goddamn! What the hell we got here, Margo. Ain't his eyes ever going to round out? Then he'll just look like the neighborhood coon." Pryor, despite being painfully aware of what it feels like to "be a problem," nonetheless sometimes creates and attacks stereotypical other "problems" for being distinctly non-American.

IV. Pryor and Du Boisian Critical Theory

Horkheimer and (especially) Adorno would likely be skeptical of the suggestion that much of Pryor's comedy operates as a mode of social criticism.^{xciii} Regarding the commodifying and disciplining structures of late capitalism, they suggest that "culture has always contributed to the subduing of revolutionary as well as barbaric instincts."^{xciv} In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they see analogous effects produced by the fascist culture industry of the Nazis and the liberal capitalist culture industry of the US. In each case, the

mass production of ‘culture’ serves to minimize and homogenize the individuality and autonomy of citizens who, like the products they consume, become increasingly uniform and interchangeable. Elsewhere, concerning fascist propaganda, Adorno asks: “What, now, does the fascist, and in particular, the anti-Semitic propaganda speech wish to achieve? To be sure, its goal is not ‘rational,’ for it makes no attempt to convince people, and it always remains on the argumentative level.” He adds, “Fascist propaganda attacks bogies rather than real opponents, that is to say, it builds up an imagery of the Jew, of the Communist ... without caring much how this imagery is related to reality.”^{xcv} Fascism “regards the masses not as self-determining human beings who rationally decide their own fate ... but ... as mere objects of administrative measures.”^{xcvi} Thus, aside from (perhaps) some “serious” or “high” art that is produced mostly outside of the culture industry, there is no space in which art can serve a critical function.^{xcvii}

Horkheimer and Adorno are similarly pessimistic about laughter in general and, more specifically, about the potential for laughter to be anything more than “terrible”:

There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about... Laughter about something is always laughter at it... The collective of those who laugh parodies humanity. They are monads, each abandoning himself to the pleasure – at the expense of all others and with the majority in support – of being ready to shrink from nothing. Their harmony presents a caricature of solidarity.^{xcviii}

If, as Adorno suggests, “cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,”^{xcix} a corollary, with reference to the history of the Black Atlantic that Du Bois and Pryor confronted, would be, “To do comedy after the middle Passage is barbaric.” Du Bois and Pryor, however, compellingly challenge Horkheimer and Adorno’s view of cultural expression and criticism. Du Bois, during most of his life, did this within a political economy of cultural politics quite different than the one within which Pryor worked. Pryor, for his part, operated largely within the terrain of the culture industry; yet, he still demonstrates possibilities for resistance even within that domain in ways that hook up to Du Bois’s ideas about propaganda.

Du Bois sometimes uses the term “propaganda” in the same conventional sense as Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance in “Negro Art,” where he questions the Negro community’s desire for “our Art and Propaganda be one.”^c Elsewhere he uses the term more subversively. In *Dusk of Dawn*, he suggests that

the present attitude and action of the white world is not based solely upon rational, deliberate intent. It is a matter of conditioned reflexes; of long followed habits, customs and folkways; of subconscious trains of reasoning and unconscious nervous reflexes. To attack and better all this calls for more than appeal and argument. It needs carefully planned and scientific propaganda; the vision of a world of intelligent men with sufficient income to live decently and with the will to build a beautiful world.^{ci}

In relation to race politics, then, he sometimes conceives of propaganda as a kind of truth-telling for which Negro Americans are uniquely positioned. And in “Criteria of Negro Art,” as we have noted, he says that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists.” That is, serious art routinely propagates a doctrine or viewpoint.^{cii} Still, there are points of contact between Du Bois and Adorno with regard to the “subconscious” aspects of the task of changing public opinion:

There is no way in which the American Negro can force this nation to treat him as an equal until the unconscious cerebration and folkways of the nation, as well as its rational deliberate thought among the majority of whites, are willing to grant equality.

In the meantime of course the agitating group may resort to a campaign of countermoves.^{ciii}

Thus, a Du Boisian critical theory supplements Horkheimer and Adorno’s critical challenge to the unconscious injustices of anti-Semitism and of late capitalist life more generally. For Du Bois, art, or propaganda, reveals to the members of a political community – full citizens and disqualified subalterns alike – difficult truths that they must come to terms with if they hope to achieve a “really beautiful world ... a world ... where [men] realize themselves and where they enjoy life.”^{civ} Such truths (however local they may be) would encompass the degrading and exploitive features of their capitalist economy; in addition, they would pierce through “the Veil” of subordination and marginalization behind which the lives of Black Americans have lived.^{cv} The latter would involve, crucially, laying bare the ravages wrought by the “new religion of whiteness” and foolish pretensions of white people as well as the shortcomings of Black folks.

The truth-content or critical facility of art as propaganda does not come from its relative situatedness within or external to the culture industry, although the culture industry and “white public” may well impede it. Instead, the truth-content of art comes largely from its success in advancing a moral-political vision or program that embodies beauty, justice, and liberation.^{cvi} While this is quite different from how Horkheimer and Adorno used the term propaganda, it gels with what they looked for in “high” art.^{cvii} So, while Horkheimer and (especially) Adorno retreated inwards in search of an aesthetic untainted by the culture industry, Du Bois calls for a truth-telling, artistic propagandist to reveal and challenge “the complaint[s] of those human beings today who are suffering most from white attitudes, from white habits, from the conscious and unconscious wrongs which white folk are today inflicting on their victims.”^{cviii}

Pryor is archetypal in this regard. He performs a double-move through his Black stand-up, which operates as a Du Boisian sort of propaganda. First, operating like an ethnographer of US racial mores, he reveals the Black and white worlds to each other’s inhabitants. Second, by exposing the position of subordination into which white Americans have put Black Americans, Pryor contributes to a campaign of countermoves that challenges this arrangement. Granted the comedian’s traditional license for “deviant behaviour and expression,”^{cix} he simultaneously enables a black audience to celebrate blackness *and* forces a white audience to confront its whiteness in the face of an uncompromising attack by an “Other” who is *literally standing-up* in front of them.

Pryor does not assail white folks (or Black folks for that matter) for rational or deliberate racism; nor does he attack their personhood. Rather, he lays into the conditioned reflexes, long followed habits, customs, and folkways, subconscious reasoning and unconscious reactions that Du Bois pinpoints as the basis of the “attitudes and action” of the white world. In doing so, he sometimes lifts the veil that Du Bois saw as hanging over the troubled situation and status of Black Americans.

Pryor does this in a way that squares with Du Bois’s critical impulses. He not only revalues Blackness, but also pulls down the veil with respect to “white” people’s pretensions to whiteness and what Du Bois calls their “curious acts” as *white* people. This segmentation of the audience is significant because it runs counter to the expectations of typical stand-up, which recognize that winning the attention, approval, and laughter of a large assembly of people is much easier if the audience can be made to feel homogenous.^{cx} Yet Pryor, greeted by an audience unified into a whole by their applause and attention, makes it clear to the audience that they must either be Black or white, at least in the immediate context of seeing his show that night. He reverses the traditional arrangement of the stand-up comedy moment, which finds the audience observing a comedian; instead, he is on stage observing the audience, relishing the division, and forcing the audience members to look around and identify as either Black or white.

Pryor uses the difference between the Black world and the white world to unveil the basic, assumed, socially-consented “Racial Contract” that organizes his audience and their country.^{cx} It is on this manipulation and strengthening of subjectivities that his ultimate transformative move turns. If he can *unite* the audience by fusing together and homogenizing a view of the world through an affirmation of the original split, then there is some potential for the audience-community collectively to challenge the basic racist conventions unearthed during the act.^{cxii} Pryor aspires to such an ultimate audience (and American) coalescence without shying away from jokes that at least temporarily divide his audience. Consider his opening to *Live in Concert*:

Jesus Christ, look at the white people rushing back from the bathroom!

This is the fun part for me, when the white people come back after intermission and find out niggers done stole their seats.

[White voice]: “Uh, weren’t we, uh, sitting here dear?”

[Normal voice]: “Well you ain’t sittin’ here now motherfucker!”

The hope is that an audience (no matter the racialized identities of its constituent members) becomes “engaged in some reflexive stocktaking as the comedian exposes the alienations, injustices, incongruities and immoralities that contaminate human life.”^{cxiii}

Following from Du Bois, insofar as Black audience members see themselves in everyday life from both inside and outside a predominantly white American national identity and society, Pryor’s racial dissection offers a way to deconstruct white Americanness and to reconfigure a heterogeneous and egalitarian American national community.^{cxiv} Forced to confront whiteness as well as blackness through Pryor’s jokes, the white audience members get a chance to see themselves from the outside – an experience more common to Black Americans – but do not feel threatened because of the ‘comedic’ nature of the event. The Black segment of the audience is allowed to enjoy and revel in how they are seen by “whites,” and also to laugh at the pretense of whiteness, if

only for the duration of the comedic moment. In this way, Pryor may reveal whiteness (even to the white folks) to be a contingent site of power and status, if only momentarily. The result is (ideally) a common framework with which to renegotiate the legacy of American racism.

At the very least, it is significant that Blacks and whites are laughing at Pryor's comedic propaganda at the same time. Limon suggests, somewhat problematically, that "Blacks" and "whites" "occupy the same position as subjects gazing at Richard Pryor as object."^{cxv} This may be the case in one sense; however, they are probably not laughing at (or with) Richard Pryor from the same standpoint. This is not to suggest that there is an insurmountable epistemological and essentializing cleft between "whites" and "Blacks" that no amount of communicative interaction or fusion of horizons can overcome. Indeed, like Charles Mills, Linda Martin Alcoff, and Mary Maynard, we argue that although these categories still matter a great deal in structuring human experiences in various contexts, there are no essential racialized identities, whether white, black, or any other. Regardless of the diversities of Pryor's audience members, they are, in a general sense, one audience; their shared laughter (at least spatially and temporally) provides hope for Du Bois's vision of an American national community with the will to build a "beautiful world." This recalls Horkheimer and Adorno's rare conciliatory laughter, an "echo of escape from power," rather than an "echo [of] the inescapability of power."^{cxvi} Pryor, operating as a Du Boisian critical theorist, aims to liberate his audience from the grip of racist (il)logic, contra Horkheimer and Adorno, by giving them some worthy things to laugh at. In this way, Pryor's comedy realizes one of Du Bois's key "criteria of Negro art": shedding light on "the solution to the color problem."^{cxvii}

Significantly, understanding Pryor's comedy as a Du Boisian project highlights the limitations of Du Bois's too-quick notion of how a common heritage of "discrimination and insult... binds together ... the children of Africa" with the colonized peoples of Asia and the South Seas. As we noted earlier, Pryor's racist "Chinaman" and Vietnamese jokes position Black Americans as authentically *American* compared with Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. This is so despite the historical marginalization and double consciousness of Black Americans, and despite the sense that whiteness – the racial standard of a full-fledged "American" identity – has been closed, by definition, to Black Americans aside from those who could pass as white. Meanwhile, in contrast to the experience of Black Americans, various off-white and "model minority" ethnic groups in the US (for instance, the Irish, Jews, Italians, and, more recently, Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian immigrants) have been accepted as Americans partly by becoming accepted as white or nearly white. Pryor himself alludes to this during *Live In Concert*: after an audience member shouts out "talk about Mexicans," Pryor responds that Mexicans can "look" white and, therefore, *are* white for all intents and purposes.

At the same time, however, Pryor's comedy comes up short in certain respects when considered in relation to the guiding spirit of Du Boisian critical theory. Du Bois sought not only to boost Black self-respect and political mobilization, but also, ultimately, to unite and liberate all oppressed peoples, Black, white, brown, and "yellow," men and women. In a typical essay, in 1922, for instance, Du Bois looks forward to a "great alliance ... between the darker people the world over, between disadvantaged groups like the Irish and the Jews and between working classes everywhere."^{cxviii} Elsewhere he called for self-organization and "group action" by "Negro" Americans to

achieve equality and social recognition against the backdrop of systematic anti-black racism in the US even as he appreciated ideas of “Inter-nation, of Humanity, and the disappearance of ‘race’ from our vocabulary.”^{cxxix}

Pryor’s racial triangulation is problematic; however, it may be somewhat understandable given Du Bois’s point (which Pryor echoes) about how new immigrants are taught to speak of “niggers” when they land in the US to secure their status as Americans in good standing.^{cxx} Furthermore, Pryor’s comedy still maintains a critical edge over the contemporary contributions of Chris Rock and Bill Cosby (the latter of whom has enjoyed considerable fame pre- and post-Pryor). These comedians somewhat uncritically address the class fragmentation of the Black community. Richard Iton targets the “explicit critique of black lower income constituencies” in Rock’s “Blacks versus niggas meta-narratives.”^{cxxi} In 1996’s *Bring the Pain*, Rock comments “Shit, a black man that’s got two jobs going to work everyday hates a nigger on welfare. Nigga, get a job, I’ve got two, you can’t get one?”^{cxxii} Cosby, in a 2004 speech to the NCAAP at a commemoration dinner for the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, attacks “the lower economic people”:

These people are not parenting. They are buying things for kids - \$500 sneakers for what? And won’t spend \$200 for ‘Hooked on Phonics’... They’re standing on the corner and they can’t speak English. I can’t even talk the way these people talk: ‘Why you ain’t’, ‘Where you is’... Everybody knows it’s important to speak English except these knuckleheads.^{cxxiii}

As Iton says, “Every effort to distinguish ‘those people,’ as Cosby would put it, without disrupting the citizen versus nigger frame itself, would also reinscribe the distance between the citizen and the black body.”^{cxxiv} In short, Rock and Cosby continue the trope of Black folks as “a problem.” They just suggest that it’s only “those” Black folks. Pryor, in contrast, *does* seek to disrupt this frame in a way that is more resolutely Du Boisian: everyone is ultimately welcome in the inclusive, egalitarian political community/audience of Du Bois and Pryor; and everyone is a potential target of comic art, of at least the latter if not the former.

In sum, Pryor’s comedy exemplifies two key facets of Du Boisian critical theory. First, Pryor sought to disarm the perils of white laughter and whiteness for Blacks. He worked to provoke white people into a new, self-effacing kind of white laughter that would, in effect, deflate or deconstruct their whiteness.^{cxxv} At the same time, like Du Bois, he discerned a sense in which white Americans, like Black Americans (although quite differently), are also “imprisoned” by the veil of racial oppression. Du Bois spoke of this situation as follows: “I suffer. And yet, somehow, above the suffering, above the shackled anger that beats the bars, above the hurt that crazes there surges in me a vast pity – a pity for a people imprisoned and enthralled, hampered and made miserable for such a cause, for such a phantasy [i.e., white people’s illusory whiteness]!”^{cxxvi} Second, Pryor recognized implicitly that the cultural advance of Black Americans – their advance in public recognition and self-respect – was integral to the redemption of America, if not humanity. Du Bois, the critical theorist, stated this idea explicitly, in 1944, in terms of Black and human emancipation: “It is the duty of the black race to maintain its cultural advance, not for itself alone, but for the emancipation of mankind, the realization of

democracy and the progress of civilization."^{cxxvii}

ⁱ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4.

ⁱⁱ Lorenzo C. Simpson, "Musical Interlude: Adorno on Jazz. Or How Not to Fuse Horizon," in *The Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 42-59.

ⁱⁱⁱ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1947] 2002), 140-53; Theodor W. Adorno, "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda," in *Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth and other essays on the irrational in culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 162-71.

^{iv} W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940), 321, quoted in Eric J. Sundquist, "Introduction: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Autobiography of Race," in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 29. Du Bois's ultimate ideal shifted over time in terms of how he related racism and class domination and in terms of his thinking about Black nationalism, Marxism, socialism and communism. He eventually joined the Communist Party, in 1961, at age 93, and moved to Ghana, where he died in 1963, having become frustrated with (in Eric Sundquist's words) "the failed promise of American democracy" (Sundquist, "Introduction," 4, 34). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine Du Bois's political theory in detail, he summarizes a couple of central threads of his mature political theory in his 1920 anti-colonial work, *Darkwater*. He writes that "the right to vote is not merely a privilege, not simply a method of meeting the needs of a particular group, and least of all a matter of recognized want or desire. Democracy is a method of realizing the broadest measure of justice to all human beings." He affirms the socialist ideal of achieving "the direction of individual action in industry to secure the greatest good of all." Yet, regarding prevailing white European Marxist and socialist approaches to this goal, he says, "modern European white industry does not even theoretically seek the good of all, but simply of all Europeans." See Du Bois, *Darkwater*, in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 554, 552.

^v W. E. B. Du Bois, "To the Nations of the World," in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 625.

^{vi} Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 106.

^{vii} This project is closely related to recent efforts to map out Du Bois's contribution to critical race theory. See, for instance, John Shuford, "Four Du Boisian Contributions to Critical Race Theory," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 37 (Summer 2001), 301-37; Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr., "Conserve Races? In Defense of W.E.B. Du Bois," in Outlaw, *Critical Social Theory in the Interests of Black Folks* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 139-62; Tommie Shelby, *We Who Are Black: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

^{viii} We will use the term “Negro” when Du Bois uses it and to convey accurately the racialized status order of his time. We capitalize Black but not white because, as Joel Olson notes “Black is a cultural identity as well as a political category.” “White,” however, for reasons that will soon become clear, is a political category and identity but not a comparable cultural identity. See Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xix.

^{ix} Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989), 74.

^x Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 127. In this way, Mills, like Du Bois, indicates that whiteness as a system of power can in principle be detached from “white” understood as the racialized designation of certain groups of people historically so that “in a parallel universe [i.e., not the modern world racial system shaped by European colonialism, the Atlantic slave trade, and ‘Black’ slavery] it could have been Yellowness, Redness, Brownness, or Blackness. Or, alternatively phrased, we could have had a yellow, red, brown, or black Whiteness” (Ibid.).

^{xi} Howard Winant, “The World Racial System,” in Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 94-107.

^{xii} In some of his works, notably *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *Darkwater*, and works of fiction and poetry, Du Bois participates directly in the development of “Negro art.”

^{xiii} David Levering Lewis, Introduction to Part I: “Race Concepts and the World of Color,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 15.

^{xiv} Sundquist, Introduction to Chapter 1: “Concepts of Race,” in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 38.

^{xv} Michael Omi, “In Living Color: Race and American Culture,” in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 114.

^{xvi} Ibid., 114-15.

^{xvii} See Du Bois *Darkwater*, 509; and W.E.B. Du Bois, “On Being Ashamed of Oneself: An Essay on Race Pride,” in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 72; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised edition (New York and London: Verso [1991] 1999); Mills, *The Racial Contract*; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Olson, *Abolition of White Democracy*.

^{xviii} W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Dover Publications, [1903] 1994), 1-2. Curiously, Du Bois leaves indigenous Americans out of this account of the racialized world.

^{xix} Frederick Douglass, “American Colorphobia” (1848), in *Frederick Douglass: The Narratives and Selected Writings*, ed. Michael Meyer (New York: The Modern Library, 1984), 273.

^{xx} George Yancy, “W.E.B. Du Bois on Whiteness and the Pathology of Black Double Consciousness,” *APA Newsletter – Philosophy and the Black Experience*, vol. 4 (Fall

2004), 10. Yancy gives a more complete account of Du Bois's view of whiteness than we can give here.

^{xxi} Yancy, "W.E.B. Du Bois on Whiteness," 13.

^{xxii} Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 508-09.

^{xxiii} *Ibid.*, 498.

^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, 498, 505, 503.

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, 504. Joel Olson aptly uses the term 'cross-class alliance' to characterize Du Bois's view of whiteness. See Olson, *Abolition of White Democracy*, 3.

^{xxvi} *Ibid.*, 504-05.

^{xxvii} David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, revised edition (New York and London: Verso [1991] 1999), 12.

^{xxviii} Du Bois, "Conservation"; Du Bois, "Negro Art and Literature" (from *The Gift of Black Folk*, 1924), in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 311-24.

^{xxix} Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races," in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 40. In early formulations he tended to suggest that "race differences have followed mainly physical race lines" and each race has a particular "gift" to offer humanity. See Du Bois, "Conservation," 41; Sundquist, "Introduction," 18-19. For differing accounts of the development of Du Bois's view of race. See Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985), 21-37; Outlaw, "Conserve Races?"; Joel Olson, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Race Concept," *SOULS: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 3-4 (Summer-Fall 2005), 118-128.

^{xxx} W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Concept of Race," in Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Millwood, NJ: Kraus-Thomson Organization, 1975; reprint of the 1940 edition, New York: Harcourt, Brace), 117.

^{xxxi} Sundquist, "Introduction," 25.

^{xxxii} W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Immediate Program of the American Negro" (April 1915), in *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, ed August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, and Francis L. Broderick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, [1965] 1971), 71-72.

^{xxxiii} Du Bois, "A Negro Art Renaissance" (1925), in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 506.

^{xxxiv} *Ibid.*, 507.

^{xxxv} Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 509.

^{xxxvi} *Ibid.*, 509-10. Despite his repeated use of the pronoun "men," Du Bois's inclusive vision of human emancipation included some feminist concern. For a discussion of his nascent awareness of the intersections of race and class and race and gender, see Ange-Marie Hancock, "W.E.B. Du Bois: Intellectual Forefather of Intersectionality?," *Souls* 7, nos. 3-4 (2005): 74-84; and Du Bois, "The Damnation of Women" (in *Darkwater*), in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 564-580.

^{xxxvii} *Ibid.*, 510.

^{xxxviii} *Ibid.*, 512.

^{xxxix} *Ibid.*, 514. Du Bois's view of art as propaganda was contested by other Black writers. Alain Locke, for instance, separated aesthetics from propaganda. Yet, like Du Bois, Locke maintained that "a reawakening of an oppressed people is spiritually impossible without restored pride and cultural self-respect." Locke, "The Drama of Negro Life,"

quoted in Tommy L. Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 93.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xli} Ibid., 514-15.

^{xliii} Du Bois, "In Black," *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 60.

^{xliiii} Ibid., 59.

^{xliv} Ibid.

^{xlv} Ibid., 60.

^{xlvi} W.E.B. Du Bois, "The White World," in *Dusk of Dawn*, 140-41.

^{xlvii} Ibid., 148.

^{xlviii} Du Bois, "Negro Art," in *The Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 310.

^{xlix} Ibid.

^l Ibid., 310-11.

^{li} Ibid., 311. One white artist he regards as exemplary is playwright Eugene O'Neill.

^{lii} Du Bois, "The Humor of the Negroes," *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 342-43.

^{liii} Ibid., 343.

^{liv} Ibid. This observation parallels his account of the sorrow songs of Blacks in the southern US, where racist oppression generated a particular kind of musical response. See Du Bois, *Souls*, 155-64.

^{lv} Ibid.

^{lvi} See Robert A. Stebbins, *The Laugh-Makers: Standup Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-Style*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990. The term first appears in both *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1966.

^{lvii} Albert Goldman, "Boy-Man Schlemiel: The Jewish Element in American Humor," in Goldman, *Freakshow: Misadventures in the Counterculture, 1959-71* (New York: Cooper Square Press, [1971] 2001), 170.

^{lviii} Jack Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, Abjection in America*, (London: Duke University Press, 2000), 1.

^{lix} Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 480.

^{lx} Goldman, "Boy-Man Schlemiel," 171.

^{lxi} Ibid., 172-73.

^{lxii} Goldman adds: "The American Jew, whose roots are basically lower-middle-class, is forced to adapt himself to a society whose values are set by upper-middle-class Gentiles" (Ibid., 180).

^{lxiii} Ibid., 172.

^{lxiv} Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Henry Yu, "Ethnicity and Race," in *Encyclopedia of American Culture and Intellectual History*, vol. 3 ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribener's Sons, 2001), 113-14.

^{lxv} Yu, "Ethnicity and Race," 113-14; Jacobson, *Whiteness*, 91-134, 171-99; Bruce Baum, *The Rise and Fall of the Caucasian Race: A Political History of Racial Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 162-91.

^{lxvi} Gerald Early, "Pee-Wee's Plantation: The Rise and Fall of the Black Character Actor Stepin Fetchit," *Bookforum*, (October/ November 2005), 30. Early notes that Perry's biography, Mel Watkins, has characterized Stepin Fetchit as a trickster who "might be considered a heroic figure by people who had been forced for a few hundred years to work very hard against their will, often at the threat of violence, for someone else's gain" (Early, 30). See also ; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "TV's Black World Turns – But Stays Unreal," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1989 (accessed May 23, 2008, at: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE0D61239F931A25752C1A96F948260>).

^{lxvii} David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 178

^{lxviii} Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 486.

^{lxix} Dick Gregory, with Robert Lipsyte. *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1986), 130-3.

^{lxx} The deviations from this rule, such as Bill Cosby, who starred the popular TV series "I Spy" from 1965 to 1968, only further underline our larger argument; at least part of Cosby's appeal to a white audience was, arguably, much like that of Sammy Davis Jr. or Nat "King" Cole.

^{lxxi} See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Racism and the White Backlash," in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

^{lxxii} He also had a supporting role in the film *Lady Sings the Blues*, with Diana Ross, which earned him an Academy Award nomination. See Dennis Russell, "Richard Pryor," *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, vol. 4 (Farmington Hills, MI: St. James Press, 2000), 127.

^{lxxiii} The Agenda included the following note on ideals and possibilities: "At every critical moment of our struggle in America we have had to press relentlessly against the limits of the 'realistic' to create new realities for the life of our people. This is our challenge at Gary and beyond, for a new Black politics demands new vision, new hope and new definitions of the possible. Our time has come." See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesonthepize/milestones/m13_nbpc.html, accessed May 15, 2008.

^{lxxiv} <http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2004/wattstax/about.html>, accessed May 15, 2008. Mel Stuart says that Pryor called "Wattstax" "a soulful expression of the living word" (Ibid.)

^{lxxv} Pryor, quoted in James Maycock, "Loud and Proud" (on Wattstax, 1972), *The Guardian* (Weedend Pages), July 20, 2002, 30, accessed May 15, 2008 at: <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/auth/checkbrowser.do?ipcounter=1&cookieState=0&rand=0.5902689170904101&bhcp=1>

^{lxxvi} 1974's *That Nigger's Crazy* marks a turning point in both Pryor's widespread popularity and mainstream success; ...*Is It Something I Said?* (1975), *Wanted: Live in Concert* (1978), *Holy Smoke!* (1980), *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982), and *Supernigger* (1983) continued the trend. 1979's *Richard Pryor: Live In Concert* and 1982's *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* are still considered by many critics to be standard-setting live comedy concert videorecordings. For an example see Taylor Carik, "Richard Pryor: 1940-2005," in *Flak Magazine Online*, <http://www.flakmag.com/opinion/ryor.html>, accessed May 15, 2008.

- ^{lxxvii} Sundquist, "Introduction," 5.
- ^{lxxviii} Richard Pryor, quoted in Hilton Als, "A Pryor Love," *The New Yorker* 75 (September 13, 1999), 75.
- ^{lxxix} On Black vernacular, see Lott, *Invention of Race*, 84-110.
- ^{lxxx} Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage Press, 1972), 131-2.
- ^{lxxxI} Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: the liberating power of comedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 182.
- ^{lxxxii} Laurie Stone, *Laughing in the Dark: A Decade of Subversive Comedy* (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Echo Press, 1997), xvii.
- ^{lxxxiii} Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 544.
- ^{lxxxiv} Richard Pryor, *That Nigger's Crazy* (Memphis: Stax/Partee Records, 1974).
- ^{lxxxv} Richard Pryor, *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert*, Jeff Margolis, dir. (MPI Home Video, 1979).
- ^{lxxxvi} Richard Pryor, *Richard Pryor: Live on Sunset Strip*, Joe Layton, dir. (Columbia Pictures, 1982).
- ^{lxxxvii} Richard Pryor, *...Is It Something I Said?* (Reprise/Warner Brothers, 1975). The gendered aspects of Pryor's comedy call for further analysis.
- ^{lxxxviii} Russell, "Richard Pryor," 127.
- ^{lxxxix} Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory*, 84.
- ^{xc} Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 549.
- ^{xcI} Pryor's usage also presumes an audience of fellow Black Americans who fit Orlando Patterson's category of "Afro-Americans": "persons of African ancestry who identify themselves with this ethnic group. ... Afro-Americans are not Africans; they are among the most American of Americans." Patterson reserves the term "African-American" for "the increasing immigration of Africans to the United States" that followed the 1965 Immigration Law, which produced major demographic changes in the U.S. See Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment I America's "Racial" Crisis* (Washington, DC: Civitas/ Counterpoint, 1997), xi.
- ^{xcii} Pryor, *...Is It Something I Said?*
- ^{xciii} In Horkheimer words, "popular entertainment ... has little to do with art, least of all where it pretends to be such." See Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others, New York: Seabury Press, 1972, 288.
- ^{xciv} Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 123.
- ^{xcv} Adorno, "Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda," 165.
- ^{xcvi} *Ibid.*, 164.
- ^{xcvii} Even "high" art, for Horkheimer and Adorno, is quickly commodified and stripped of any edifying character: "A jazz musician who has to play a piece of serious music, Beethoven's simplest minuet, involuntarily syncopates, and consents to start on the beat only with a superior smile." Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 101.
- ^{xcviii} *Ibid.*, 112.
- ^{xcix} Theodore W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, [1981] 1997), 34.
- ^c Du Bois, "Negro Art," 310.

^{ci} Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 172. Shannon Sullivan clarifies Du Bois's shift from an early liberal rationalist perspective, whereby he thought that scientific analysis of rational argument could overcome white racism, to his later post-liberal view that science and rational deliberation alone were insufficient to overcome white racism. He never completely abandoned the idea that scientific analysis (e.g., history and social science) could contribute to human betterment. See Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006),

^{cii} One of the definitions for "propaganda" in the *OED* is, "The systematic dissemination of doctrine, rumour, or selected information to propagate or promote a particular doctrine, view, practice, etc." See *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1973] 1993), 2378.

^{ciii} *Ibid.*, 194.

^{civ} Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 509-10.

^{cv} Du Bois uses the image of "the Veil" famously in *The Souls of Black Folk*, where he seeks to sketch "the two worlds within and without the Veil," and again in *Darkwater*, which is subtitled, "Voices from Within the Veil." See *Souls*, v; *Darkwater*, 483.

^{cvi} Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 512.

^{cvii} For instance, Horkheimer affirms the view of art expressed by art critics Walter Payter and J. M. Guyar as follows: "Great art, says Pater, 'must have something of the human soul in it,' and Guyau declares that art occupies itself with the possible, erecting a 'new world above the familiar world ... a new society in which we live.'" Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," 274.

^{cviii} Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 172.

^{cix} Mintz 1985, 74

^{cx} See Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings*, (London: Routledge, 1975), 92-5; Paul McIlvenny, Sari Mettovaara, and Rivta Tapio, "I Really Wanna Make You Laugh: Stand-up Comedy and Audience Response," in *Folia, Fennistica & Linguistica*, eds. Matti K. Suojanen & Auli Julki-Nieminen, (Tampere: University of Tampere Press, 1993); Danielle Russell, "Self-depractory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?" *thirdspace* 2, no. 1, (2002), online. Available: http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/pr_drus.htm. Accessed May 10, 2008.

^{cxⁱ} Mills, *The Racial Contract*.

^{cxⁱⁱ} This assumes, with Nancy Fraser, that the goal is at least partly unification, not just the recognition of difference.

^{cxⁱⁱⁱ} Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (1984), 70.

^{cx^{iv}} This has long been the goal of African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison. Baldwin spoke, for instance, of "achieving our country."

^{cx^v} Limon, *Stand up comedy in theory*, 84.

^{cx^{vi}} Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 112.

^{cx^{vii}} Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 512.

^{cx^{viii}} W.E.B. Du Bois, "Americanization," in *Oxford W. E. B. Du Bois Reader*, 384.

^{cx^{ix}} Du Bois, "On Being Ashamed of Oneself," 74.

^{cxx} Ralph Ellison observed that being a "Negro American" involves, among other things, "a special attitude toward the waves of immigrants who have come later and passed us by" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 131).

^{cxxi} Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), [manuscript version, 232].

^{cxxii} Chris Rock, *Bring the Pain*, dir. Keith Truesdell

^{cxxiii} Richard Leiby, "Cosby, Saying the Darndest Things" *The Washington Post*, Wednesday, May 19, 2004, C3.

^{cxxiv} Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, [manuscript version, 250]. Du Bois's observation that Black people sometimes use the N-word in humorous ways does not mean that all such uses by Black people, including Black artists, are creative and commendable.

^{cxxv} We do not mean to suggest that he completely succeeded in this project.

^{cxxvi} Du Bois, "Souls of White Folks," 499-500 (*check text, pg*). The non-equivalence of these different kinds of "imprisonment" is clear when we consider the disproportionate number of Black Americans still impoverished and actually in prison in the US.

^{cxxvii} W.E.B. Du Bois, "My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom," in *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 618.