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# Dialogic catharsis in standup comedy: Stewart Huff plays a bigot

DOI 10.1515/humor-2016-0026

**Abstract:** This essay investigates the cathartic creative process of a standup comic who recounts, in a video-taped interview with the author, the act of transforming a painful meeting with a bigot in a bar into the stuff of comedy. Through reflexive engagement with his own creative process, Stewart Huff recounts building a scenario that splits his experience into two voices, enacting a breakthrough into performance within the taped interview itself. Taking to heart Bakhtin's insight that parody involves a hostile relation between the speaker and another, and that introducing someone else's words into our own speech results in a double-voiced narrative, I analyze Huff's performance as a classic example of double-voiced parody. The transformation from horror to humor is an empowering performative *re-creation* for the comedian that serves simultaneously as humorous *recreation* for the comedy club audience. This essay contributes to extant scholarship on the efficacious use of parodic double-voicing and the possibilities it opens up for dialogic catharsis in comedic performance.

**Keywords:** standup comedy, double-voiced parody, comedic catharsis, anthropology of humor, United States, Southern masculinity

## 1 Introduction

This essay investigates the cathartic creative process of standup comedian Stewart Huff. Huff is a road comic, a professional standup comedian who plays the comedy club circuit across middle America. Huff has been doing standup for almost twenty-five years, just as long as I have been an anthropologist.

Huff and I became friends during the process of my making a documentary film about road comics.<sup>1</sup> Our friendship developed over the five years during

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<sup>1</sup> "Road Comics: Big Work on Small Stages" (Seizer 2012). The film streams at [www.roadcomicsmovie.com](http://www.roadcomicsmovie.com). Ethnographic research and documentary film production during this period

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which I conducted ethnographic research for this project. I go see Huff's shows whenever he performs within the radius of a roughly five to ninety-five minute drive from my home, which means I see his shows now mostly in Indianapolis and Bloomington, IN. We meet before or after the show to talk. He shares his ideas about his new work with me. I share what I am writing about with him, which is sometimes also *about* him, this essay being a case in point. When we can't meet in person, we text and email or talk on the phone. I send him questions about my ideas, to which he responds with thoughts on my work and further questions about his own. I enjoy all of this immensely; I mention it here right up front to partially explain the quality of vulnerability present in the exchange that follows, though I also suspect that Huff might simply be this way, this open and candid, with everyone.

I mention these relations as well to clarify that as a cultural anthropologist, I understand my work to involve engaging with and intervening in the cultural processes that I study. That is, I do not see being a cultural anthropologist as a hands-off endeavor. Our hands are right in there with our informants' hands, and we both "make stuff" that engages us in our respective communicative acts – even if, as in this case, only one of us can list in his job description "making stuff up"!

The performance text I analyze here is a multilayered passage from a videotaped interview that I recorded with Huff while shooting the documentary. The passage moves through multiple frames. Temporally, it spans the then-present (the interview conducted in July 2010, the narrating text); the recent past (Huff's report of "what actually happened" prior to then, i. e. his experience of meeting a bigot); and the repeatable future of scripted performance (the scenario Huff built to use in shows, a narrated text). All this time-shifting occurs while discussing his creative process, which Huff illustrates by inserting into our conversation an impromptu performance of the comedy bit, thus enacting a classic Hymesian "breakthrough into performance" (Hymes 1975).<sup>2</sup> The bit itself

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was partially supported by Indiana University's New Frontiers Program, funded by Lilly Endowment and administered by the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at Indiana University. The OVPR awarded the project additional finishing funds through a Grant-in-Aid, and the College Arts & Humanities Institute supported it with a Travel and Research Grant. I am grateful to all at Indiana University who extended to me their confidence.

<sup>2</sup> "Bit" is the term Huff most often uses to describe the building blocks that make up the "set" he will perform on any given night; he doesn't tell "jokes" per se. He is what is known as an "observational comic" or, more simply put, a storyteller. To corroborate my own gleaned sense that this term is commonly used among standup comedians I asked Brad Wilhelm, who has emceed comedy shows in Bloomington, IN for over twenty years and has spoken with or overheard countless road comics talk about their work, whether "bit" was indeed a word in

is about meeting a bigot in a bar in Aiken, South Carolina; this paper is about what Huff made from that meeting, and how turning it into comedy, as Huff says, “helped me work through actually meeting that guy.” I analyze such “working through” as an emotional release, and a process of purging tensions. His ability to perform a cathartic transformation of such experiences is the magic of Huff’s creative process, and it affects both him and his audiences.

Theorizing for a moment beyond one single comedian, I would suggest that the dynamic I discuss here is also often at play in the televised direct-address comedy that has proven so riveting to broad audiences in the post-millennium era.<sup>3</sup> The dynamic to which I refer is a two-way cathartic effect that I want to recognize as adding *dialogicity* to classic Aristotelian notions of catharsis.

When theatrical catharsis is mentioned by Aristotle it is as an effect on spectators (Aristotle 1982). Aristotle’s homeopathic theory of purgation saw theater as providing spectators with an inoculating dose of poison. If I see silly-foolish-comedic behavior – or crude, cruel, misanthropic, or in any other way tragic behavior – performed onstage, I laugh or cry. My laughter or tears *purge* me of any inclination I might have to behave in such a way myself. “On seeing worry the spectator may feel a sensation of joy; on seeing anger, one of disgust” (Brecht 1964: 94). The audience, in playing their own role as audience, is thereby unmoored from the emotions presented in the play itself.

Catharsis was Aristotle’s answer to Plato’s fear and loathing of the theater. Plato assumed the audience would *imitate* what it saw onstage: if we watch gun violence, we too will pick up a gun and shoot (Diamond 1992; Barish 1991; Plato 1992). Aristotle instead saw the audience as able to reflect on any such impulses the stage might frame for us. Theater was thus refigured as a place for spectators to learn morality by viewing players as object lessons: they enact how *not* to be

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common use by other comics. Here is Mr. Wilhelm’s reply:

Veteran comics will do what Stewart does and build sets around “bits” or “chunks.” This applies to most all types of comedy. “I’ve got a ‘Trump’ chunk, or it’s my ‘airline’ bit.” That sort of thing. (Wilhelm 2016, personal communication)

3 Late night talk and news satire shows such as “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and its many spinoffs, such as John Oliver’s “Last Week Tonight,” frequently make use of the successful pairing of parodic comedy and cathartic relief (Hariman 2008). Oliver describes his experience writing comedy in terms resonant with those Huff uses: “If it’s a difficult story, then the whole process of writing is to come to some kind of catharsis to make it easier to cope with. And so you just need to go through it again really, that process again in performing.” (“Where Jokes Go To Die, And Other Observations From Comic John Oliver” by **NPR STAFF**, 4/25/14, <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/25/306444154/where-jokes-go-to-die-and-other-observations-from-comic-john-oliver>.)

and what *not* to do. Theater provides us cautionary tales: I *learn* from theater, and attending it inoculates me.

Other influential theorists of the theater, and of comedy in particular, share this orientation. Aristotle's notion of theater as cathartic cure shades easily into Bergson's theory of laughter as a social corrective: we *shame* those who engage in inflexible social behavior by laughing at them (Bergson 1900). Likewise Brecht's prescription for theater was that it could and should offer spectators an opportunity to *judge* human behavior: keep the houselights on, and give them cigars!<sup>4</sup> (Brecht 1964). Applying such an approach to the case of Huff acting the Bigot, we are right to see the narrow-minded, hate-filled, racist and misogynist ravings of that man as ridiculous when put up on stage. We in the audience laugh, immunizing ourselves against such hate, judging it as laughable and shaming its voice while purging ourselves.

Prior to providing us the opportunity for such reflective judgment, however, is Huff's own catharsis, that is, the dramatic effects of his creative act on himself. This consists of his reworking the bigot's hateful words and the experience of "meeting that guy" into *material*. This is the first step in transforming experience into expressive performance. Victor Turner's approach to the anthropology of performance, building on the ideas of the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), usefully recognizes the cathartic relationship that inheres between performance and experience:

"Meaning" is squeezed out of an event which has either been directly experienced by the dramatist or poet, or cries out for penetrative, imaginative understanding (*Verstehen*). An experience is itself a process which "presses out" to an "expression" which completes it. Here the etymology of "performance" may give us a helpful clue, for it has nothing to do with "form," but derives from Old French *parfournir*, "to complete" or "carry out thoroughly." A performance, then, is the proper finale of an experience. [...] An experience is never truly completed until it is expressed, that is, until it is communicated in terms intelligible to others, linguistic or otherwise. Culture itself is the ensemble of such expressions – the experience of individuals made available to society. (Turner 1982: 13–14).

I love this way of recognizing how every form of expressive performance is constitutive of the world we inhabit. Our social world is something we create, through our experiences in and expressions of it. Here performance is *the*

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4 "Brecht was insisting on the need for what he called a 'smokers' theatre', where the audience would puff away at its cigars as if watching a boxing match, and would develop a more detached and critical outlook than was possible in the ordinary German theatre, where smoking was not allowed." This clarification appears in the translator's note to the essay "Emphasis on Sport," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 1964, p.8.

*expressive act that completes* an experience for the performer himself.<sup>5</sup> In the interview I analyze here, Stewart Huff expresses his satisfaction at cleansing himself of the toxic effects of a bad experience through performance. He laughs it off, in the company of a laughing audience.

I suggest here that we see successful performance in standup comedy then as a dialogically cathartic process that is experienced by audience and performer alike, together. By analyzing Huff's creative process as he recounts it in this interview I show that dialogic catharsis deserves a more central place in our understanding of performance as creative play in process.<sup>6</sup> What marks Huff's performances as especially powerful examples of this phenomenon is his reflexive candor, the way he lets us in to his own creative process and his own vulnerability, exposing his need for catharsis as we experience our own.<sup>7</sup>

Note, too, that catharsis in such a shared context engages all three of the major traditional theories regarding humor and laughter: (1) we find *Relief* in escaping a bigoted worldview, as Huff parodies its narrowness and demonstrates a way out of that world by splitting the Bigot off from himself, creating

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5 While there are certainly many contexts in which the goal of a performance is not to complete an experience at all but rather to *continue* it, or in some other way to leave it promisingly incomplete (as is the postmodern aesthetic), even experimental theatre is performed. Turner and Richard Schechner clearly had an ongoing debate over how the 'liminal' aesthetic of experimental theatre could be accounted for in Turner's processual model. Turner sees the expanded liminal moment of rehearsal that Schechner celebrates as key to experimental goals of remaining "in process" as simply a prolonged "'reliving' of the original experience," which is then communicated in performance. Whatever the form, in other words – and "even if the meaning is that 'there is no meaning'" – the moment of communication is a performance that completes the experience (Turner 1982: 18).

6 Word limits preclude my engagement here with the literature that exists on the powers of creativity and play more broadly. For an overview of play theories, see Sutton-Smith (2001). For a useful model of seeing play as a matter of establishing nested semiotic frames communicating "this is play," see Bateson (2000 [1972]). For other ways we demarcate play activity from the anxiety and fear of everyday life, see Csikszentmihalyi (1975). For a valuable discussion of the artistic condensation of heightened experience into "works of affecting presence," see Armstrong (1981).

7 While in this essay I focus primarily on the performer's side of this exchange, I hope to both see and be involved in future studies that treat the audience's role in such dialogic relationships. In the meantime, for those interested in hearing an audience respond to "Aiken, S.C." in performance, listen to track 10 of Stewart Huff's first CD release, *The pressure of your expectations is overwhelming* (On Tour Records, 2011). Tempting as it is to do so, I am not analyzing this performance in the present essay.

two separate characters<sup>8</sup>; (2) in recognizing such narrowness we feel *Superior* to it; and (3) in sharing the comic's astonished despondency at the very existence of such hatred in a world that so clearly needs love, its *Incongruity* and the diminishing returns of its logic (absurdity and condensation are techniques of humor-making that often accompany incongruity) are exposed and astound us in turn (Fisher and Fisher 1981; Morreall 1987; Gray 1994; Critchley 2002).

What follows is my transcription of the seven-minute video interview clip introduced above, in which Huff's only immediate audience was me and a cameraperson. We shot this interview in a comedy club in Louisville, Kentucky, during off-hours.<sup>9</sup> Note however that in addition to this small immediate audience, there are also at least two other imagined audiences at play: the *remembered* audience, that composite of spectators whose reactions Huff recalls (as either laughing or not laughing) as he utters each phrase and locution, and a second *potential future* audience consisting of all those who might at some future time see this videotaped performance, whether in the movie (had this video clip made it into the documentary, which it did not), on the internet (as a link accessible through my website at <http://www.roadcomicsmovie.com/#!video-extras/c23gb>), or in academic venues where I analyze this clip in all the ways I do here.

## 2 An interview performed

In the transcript that follows I have organized this seven-minute narrative into four constituent phases, each with a title derived from a key transitional phrase in Huff's narration of events. These are (A) "I Don't Know What's Changing in Me," (B) "Here's What Actually Happened," (C) "I Built A Scenario," and (D) "Now I'm Thinking a Different Way." In moving through these four phases, Huff demonstrates the power he finds in transforming the vicissitudes of everyday life into comedy.

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Glick beautifully analyzes a performance of Eddie Izzard's in which the comedian accomplishes much the same kind of separation of worldviews by employing alternating footings (Glick 2007; Goffman 1979).

<sup>9</sup> The club was the Comedy Caravan, and Pearl Gluck the ever-inventive camerawoman. Thanks to Tom Sobel for his hospitality over the course of four years of shooting shows in his club.

### A. (Preface) “I don’t know what’s changing in me”

1. HUFF: Sometimes some things happen to you that no matter how many hours  
you
2. devote to thinking about it you cannot find the beauty in it. There’s  
things
3. that I cannot find any light in them at all. So then I write them from  
the other
4. angle, which is: I’m going to show you how stupid this person was.  
And I don’t
5. use the word stupid flippantly. This person – I’ve decided after  
twelve hours
6. thinking about it [*slight ironic smile*] – is indeed stupid. The things  
that
7. I can’t find beauty in I used to just ignore. But I can’t ignore them.  
**I don’t know**
8. **what’s changing in me.** I have no idea. But I cannot ignore them.  
It bothers me.

### B. (Report) “Here’s What Actually Happened”

9. HUFF: Just recently I started talking about this guy that I met and I, I don’t  
know
10. how to deal with him. He, uh ... It was in Aiken, South Carolina,  
and I did
11. just a horrible show that came up way short, payment-wise, on my  
electric
12. bill. Just pathetic! [*cynical shrug*]. **Here’s what actually happened.**  
I did the
13. show. It was horrible. I was miserable. They didn’t like me. I walked  
up
14. to the bar after the show was over, everybody had already cleared  
out, and
15. there was a gentleman – fuck that, he wasn’t a gentleman. There  
was
16. a guy, an adult, sitting at the bar, and the bartender was Hispanic.  
And I
17. walked up to the bar and I said to the bartender, “Hey, I’m totally  
exhausted, can I get a diet Pepsi?” He said “Sure” and he walked
18. off. The

19.       guy sitting at the bar looked at me and said, “I hate Mexicans.”  
That’s
20.       what he said to me. He didn’t say, “hey, I hated your show, hey I  
don’t
21.       like you.” He didn’t even say “Hey, my name is Rat-tail, I hate
22.       Mexicans.” His first sentence to me was “I hate Mexicans.” I went,  
“All
23.       right, good for you, whatever man.” Then I instigated him. I said, “Do
24.       you hate all Mexicans, or do you just hate the bartender?” And he  
said, “I
25.       hate them all. As a matter of fact, if you didn’t choose to be born in  
this
26.       country you can go fuck yourself.” That’s his quote. And I said to  
him,
27.       “All right, well that’s beautiful, thank you.” And I went on with  
him. And
28.       what I’ve done, what I did with it was, I went back to the hotel room  
and I
29.       thought about that guy and he bothered me. He *bothered* me. It’s
30.       depressing, the fact that he had a wedding ring on, he probably has
31.       children, and he’s spreading this! If you walk up to me and say, “I
32.       hate that bartender,” okay! Maybe he’s dating your daughter or  
something
33.       and you don’t like the guy. Maybe he’s a jerk. But you hate him  
because
34.       he’s Hispanic? That’s ridiculous. That doesn’t make any sense at all!  
Ugh!

### C. (Performance) “I Built a Scenario”

35. HUFF: I sat around and I thought about this guy for hours and what I  
ended up
36.       doing to relieve *my* pain from him is **I built a scenario**, which is:
37.       So I said to the guy,
38.       “All right man, all right, so if you didn’t choose to be born in this
39.       country ... . I’m glad I chose to be born here! That’s great. It was a  
good
40.       decision in my life. So we have the world. We have the globe. This is  
all



41. of us, this is all the humans. And everybody outside of this  
(*air-draws*  
42. *with his fingers the outlines of the U.S.*) can go fuck themselves. You  
43. know, Mexico, the former Soviet Union, Lisbon, Madagascar – fuck  
44. themselves.”
45. BIGOT “That’s right man! USA #1. Hell yeah!”
46. HUFF: “All right, all right man. I gotcha. East and West and South and  
North ...
47. BIGOT “Fuck the North! That’s Yankees! That ain’t nothing but a bunch of  
48. Damn Yankees.”
49. HUFF: “All right. So it’s East and West and South, it’s from South Carolina to  
50. California ... .”
51. BIGOT “Fuck California! That ain’t nothing but hippie faggots, that’s all  
that is.  
52. Damn hippie money faggots too, oh shit.”
53. HUFF: “All right man. So it’s South Carolina to Texas to Florida ... ”
54. BIGOT “Fuck Texas! That’s where all Mexican ... that’s where they’re  
comin’ in!  
55. We got a loose valve.”
56. HUFF: “All right man. So it’s just South Carolina, North Carolina, down to  
57. Florida ... ”
58. BIGOT “Fuck Florida! That ain’t nothing but money Jews. Money Jews,  
that’s all.  
59. You ever taste hummus? Fuck a Jew!”
60. HUFF: “All right so it’s North and South Carolina. That’s it for you? That’s  
your  
61. whole world?”
62. BIGOT “Fuck North Carolina! They beat our football team twiced.”
63. HUFF: “All right so it’s South Carolina to you. That’s it man? It’s from like  
64. Charleston to Aiken to Greenville?”
65. BIGOT “Fuck Charleston! That’s nothing but hippies. Sandal wearing  
patchouli  
66. sniffin’ fuckin’ hippies.”
67. HUFF: “All right so it’s from Aiken to Greenville ... ”
68. BIGOT “Fuck Greenville! That’s where my ex-girlfriend’s from. She wouldn’t  
69. suck my dick so she *can* suck my dick!”
70. HUFF: “All right so its Aiken, South Carolina. That is your world is Aiken,  
South  
71. Carolina. From this bar to the railroad tracks and the Piggly Wiggly.”

72. BIGOT “Fuck the Piggly Wiggly! They fired me twiced. Are you kiddin’ me?  
 73. They can kiss my dick!”  
 74. HUFF: “All right so it’s from this bar to the railroad tracks.”  
 75. BIGOT “Fuck the railroad tracks! That’s where I got my 3rd DUI. Told the  
 cop  
 76. ‘technically, I ain’t on the road.’”  
 77. HUFF: “All right, so it’s this bar man, that’s your whole world. It’s me, and  
 you,  
 78. and the bartender.”  
 79. BIGOT “Fuck the bartender! He’s Mexican! That’s how all this shit got  
 started!”  
 80. HUFF: “All right buddy. So it’s me and you. You’ve reduced the whole  
 world  
 81. down to me and you.”  
 82. BIGOT “I don’t know, where the fuck are *you* from?”

#### D. (Conclusion) “Now I’m Thinking a Different Way”

83. HUFF: So that’s what I built. And building it made me *feel good*. And doing  
 it on  
 84. stage, and hearing people laugh, helped me work through actually  
 meeting  
 85. that guy. So now I don’t walk around thinking, “Somebody’s got to  
 get his  
 86. kids! Somebody has got to get his kids, there’s got to be a teacher  
 87. somewhere, or somebody’s got to stop the children ‘cause they’re  
 going to  
 88. spread and it’s going to get worse and worse and worse ... .” I don’t  
 think  
 89. that now. Now what I think is, “He reduced it all down to that! He  
 90. reduced it down to himself.” And I drive around and I think, “Can  
 you  
 91. reduce the world down to yourself? And then can you maybe hate  
 your  
 92. legs? Can you reduce yourself down to nothing? Can hatred get to  
 the point  
 93. where nothing exists?” **Now I’m thinking a different way** [*ges-  
 turing out*]

94.           *wide with his right hand, open palm facing down, poised in the air*  
 95.           *beside him for 2 seconds]. Because I did all that [both his hands now*  
               *held*  
 96.           *in front of him as if holding a small round globe, moving it from L to R*  
               *across*  
 97.           *in front of him, slowly, until it hovers beside him].*

### 3 Analysis

There is a lot going on here that bears our careful attention. The first three lines (line 1–3) serve as a kind of prefatory introduction to what Huff experiences when he meets someone who disturbs him. He used to just ignore such encounters (line 7), such moments of absolute darkness. Huff's earlier work contained celebratory stories of quirky eccentrics, people others might see as failures but who he saw instead as full of ingenuity. Huff celebrated the wit of creative homeless people, for example, or the faith of those who – before the Wright Brothers “took off and ruined it” – tried to fly and failed, spectacularly. Now, however, *meanness* upsets Huff, and blots out all light. So he has begun writing “from the other angle” (line 4), righteous rage leading him to tell stories that will provoke laughter at those he finds morally reprehensible, as well as socially dangerous and deeply unlikable, a combination of qualities for which he reserves the word *stupid* (lines 4–6).

What has changed in him? He doesn't know (lines 7–8). Such vulnerability is a familiar starting point for Huff, whose standard opening line in shows is, “You look disappointed. I'm not too happy with this shit myself, to be honest with ya!” said while gesturing at his own visage. Vulnerability and self-exposure are rich soil for Huff as they are for many comics, and qualities Huff appreciates in others. Conversely, when he comes across a person who shows no awareness of his own vulnerability, it depresses him. Intuitively and in ways loosely comparable to the kind of talking cure for which persons in a higher income bracket might pay a psychoanalyst, Huff's narrative grows from there: “Just recently I started talking about this guy I met that I don't know how to deal with” (line 9). Here the empty stage is both office and couch.

Huff admits to us (line 12) “what actually happened:” a man spouted some hateful racist opinions and Huff couldn't help but provoke the guy to keep him talking (line 23), a bit like picking at a scab. At this point he “went back to the hotel room and thought about that guy” (line 29), obsessed with the way this

bigot's attitude shrank and splintered the world into tiny shards of hatred, the potential unchecked spread of which Huff found terrifying. It is at this point that Huff's own creative processes begins to come into play and the next phase of his account begins.

"I thought about this guy for hours" (line 35) until "to relieve my pain ... I built a scenario" (line 36). I love Huff's use of the theatrical term here. It alerts us to what will indeed play out: a staging of a recreated scene, a dialog in two voices and between two *dramatis personae*, Huff v. The Bigot. The scene's interactional dynamic is built on a question and answer series. Huff questions each statement the Bigot makes, drawing out of him an ever-narrowing picture of the smallness and meanness of his internal world, the geographical map shrinking as he speaks to the point where it eventually includes only him.

To show us how he went about transforming the all-too-real experience of meeting this guy into Comedy, Huff embeds a performance into the frame of our conversational interview. His telling has in it a classic example of what sociolinguist Dell Hymes terms a "breakthrough into performance" in which a teller shifts from *reporting* his knowledge of an event to willingly assuming the identity and role of one who can *perform* that event (Hymes 1975: 19). The breakthrough moment occurs when Huff says "what I ended up doing to relieve my pain from him is, I built a scenario, which is 'So I said to the guy, "All right man, all right, so if you didn't choose to be born in this country ... .'" (lines 35–39). Through this double-framing device Huff slips directly into the thick of performing the bit for us, and for the camera and its imagined audience as well. There is generosity in this switch from mere reporting to authoritative and exemplary performance. He shares a story with us that he made to tell in performance in order to clarify his own process of dealing with what bothers him. He shows us how he has rewritten meeting "this guy" by making it an alternating double-voiced parody that simultaneously conveys his own subjectivity and comments on the Bigot's by exposing, through embellishment, what he found lurking in the deep recesses of America.

The method of Huff's parody is to give full voice to the villain, willingly ventriloquating the hate-filled voice of a man whose attitudes scare and bewilder him. See the man who spouts regional stereotypes! Watch as he closes himself off from human interaction! Hear the Bigot who lives in a hate-filled world sustained by his own attitudes! Behold his villainous practices! Huff walks right up to the devil, grabs his throat, and steals his voice. In so doing he manages to flip the sentiment of hatred around so thoroughly that hate speech suddenly serves the purpose of ridiculing itself.

The use of “fuck” marks this for comedy, so exaggerated and stylistically “standup.” But it is also known as a cheap move among comics: anyone can get a laugh by inserting the word fuck into an otherwise uninspired bit.<sup>10</sup> Note in this context that only the Bigot swears. He alone spews potty-mouthed bitterness. Huff’s separation of the identities of his two characters is as extreme, again, as a ventriloquist’s act: if the puppet curses the puppeteer can play the straight man, thus managing to remain a “clean” comedian unbesmirched by the foul language he keeps at arm’s length (Goffman 1979).

Analyzing the poetics of form in this dialogic interchange we see that each of the Bigot’s lines starts with the consonant-heavy explosion that is the word “fuck.” His words are awash in a poetics of repetition in alternating lines, beginning with line 47. While “poetic” may not be the first word that comes to mind when considering a dogged utterance of the word “Fuck!,” nonetheless this curse functions rhythmically in the formulaic repetition of the text to sonically and socially convey the frustrated intolerance that Huff characterizes as *stupid*. Each expression of intolerance exposes a hatred that descends geographically by stereotype, from the Yankee North to the Hippie West, across to border-troubled Texas and East again to Jew-y Florida, fleeing to the Carolinas, first North then South. But he can’t even settle there: within South Carolina the Bigot’s potty mouth traces an ever-narrowing path from Charleston up to Greenville then back down to Aiken, dotted with embodied local landmarks: the Piggly Wiggly, the Railroad tracks, the Bar with its Latino bartender, and finally “you” – his interlocutor.

What we realize, as the Bigot descends from larger to smaller and from the generic (line 47: “Fuck the North! That’s Yankees!”) to the intensely specific (line 59: “You ever taste hummus? Fuck a Jew!”) is that the Bigot hates *everybody*. Nothing is as simple as it seems; this is not “simply” racism. He hates for all kinds of reasons: ethnicity, gender, religion, style of shoe, taste in food, and the smell of a particular perfume – you name it, he hates it. We must not be fooled by appearances though: he’s stupid, but even stupidity can be complex. His recurrent use of “Fuck” as a kind of catechism and mnemonic cue is brilliant, and especially funny when it passes notable in/tolerance thresholds on the way. Oh, he hates Yankees. Well, who doesn’t? Oh, he hates Jews. Yuck, he’s an anti-Semite. He hates North Carolina, and Charleston too. As he gets increasingly specific, we listeners recognize all kinds of in/tolerance that exempts or implicates ourselves at every step. This provides contrast and relief, another reason that it is funny – and cathartic.

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**10** For further discussion of the meanings and markers conveyed by the use of obscenity in live standup comedy, see Seizer (2011).

For the Bigot it's hate all the way down and all the way back up again. While his hatred cascades down to the level of the individual, it easily balloons back to even whole groups of whom he initially seemed to approve. For example, the Bigot's fist-pumping cry of "USA #1. Hell yeah!" in line 45 does not preclude all the grotesqueries he wishes upon his ex-girlfriend in lines 68–69, or on his ex-employer in lines 72–73.

Against such wildly ballooning and contracting hatred, Huff's straight-man in this dialogue is the picture of calm: his repeated utterances seek to ratchet down and quell the flames bursting from the Bigot's mouth. In alternating lines, beginning with line 46, Huff's repetition of "all right, all right man" creates a sonic and social terrain of rolling l's, r's, m's and n's.

I mentioned these differences to Huff over dinner recently and he confessed that he used what I am identifying here as a strategy of opposing word-sounds because he has "difficulty doing accents." The origins of this poetic dynamic were thus pragmatic: Huff wanted to make sure that his voice was immediately distinguishable from the Bigot's, and since they both have "Southern accents" he hit on this sound strategy to differentiate between them.

But note that their shared accent significantly adds to the complexity of the bit: here are two very different White men from the South. "White Southern male" is an ocean of a category that gets reduced to bigot in the North.<sup>11</sup> By staging a dialog between these two very different Southern white men, Huff is playing to and against stereotype when he travels, both giving it and taking it away. Not one to cut himself off from his regional home just because it carries a stigma, Huff messes with the stereotype instead. He carves it up and cuts it down to size. Because the two men share the same 'lazy, slow' drawl of the South, Huff *must* spar with the Bigot to distinguish his own sensibility from assumptions about all Southern men. This is a duel of marked men and the reputation of a whole region is at stake.

Comedy may trade on its reputation for being light stuff, drawing audiences in for a fun night at the bar, but as Huff's "Aiken, SC" bit shows, comedians often take on some of life's heaviest subjects. *Oceans of categories* – the world and all the different ways we carve it up – give figure to comic play. The Q & A sequence ends with a reversal, the most aggressive question of all coming from the Bigot's mouth (line 82): "Where the fuck are you from?"

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<sup>11</sup> I am indebted to Andrew Shyrock, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, for sharing with me his many insights regarding the complexity of Huff's rendering of the Bigot's character, including the sentence "*White southern male* is an ocean of a category that gets reduced to bigot in the North." (Shyrock 2014).

## 4 Interiority/exteriority

Psychologists Seymour & Rhonda Fisher, co-authors of the wonderfully titled *Pretend the World is Funny and Forever*, put the point succinctly: “It is the comic who most frequently speaks of taboo things and elaborates on them with gusto rather than shame” (1978: 70). A primary finding of their study is that the desire to make comedy is linked to the desire to remake the world. I see this insight as relevant to the kind of comedy Huff creates through his *re-creation* of scenarios like the one I consider here. A desire to remake the world feeds into performances that create their own worlds on stage.

Another common finding of the Fishers’ is that comedians are curious about everything: “Unless you have a curious mind, you cannot be a comedian.” (Joey Bishop, in Wilde 1973; as cited in Fisher and Fisher 1981: 8–9). The Fishers put their finger on the importance of curiosity to critical thinking in the arts just as in the social and natural sciences: “The scientist is curious, observes, and takes nothing for granted. The comedian is like a social scientist who prowls around looking for new patterns and new insights about how people behave.” I would add that “prowling” is perhaps most necessary when one is dealing with the history of science; Huff’s newest show features a long bit in which he recounts the many truly gruesome instances, across cultures and epochs, in which fundamentalist mobs have attacked and killed scientists for their novel ideas – not an obvious topic for comedic treatment.

For all their insights into personality study and the psychology of comedians, however, the Fishers did not look at comedians in performance nor at the performances they create. Their study is based instead on what comics report of their lives, either in face-to-face interviews the authors conducted with forty clowns and comedians, or on data they gleaned from published biographies and autobiographies of another forty (generally the more famous) comedic performers.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast my own lens is trained on performance, on what and how standup comics create. So while I find personality studies relevant, my aim is to focus on the interconnected nature of artists’ on- and off-stage lives as a way into understanding comic creativity as both a social-cultural and an interpersonal process. Therefore my own methods are ethnographic: I observe comedians in performance; I talk with them offstage about their works and lives; I meet their friends and families whenever possible; we talk about what we each mean

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to qualitative interviews, the Fishers administered psychological tests – namely the Rorschach Inkblot test and the Thematic Apperception test – to interviewees.

by “making work,” and especially about what being involved in the world of comedy-makers is like for them.

In the case of Huff, whose comedic creativity now measures in years rather than minutes, personality and biography is fully relevant to his creation of a piece like “Aiken, SC.” His comedy grows from his life experiences. Huff was born in Campbellsville, Kentucky, and has lived all his life in the South. His parents are both from small towns in Tennessee, where his aunts, uncles, and cousins on both sides still live. His mother is the second of eight children, his father the second of six. His mother’s side of the family was what Huff describes as “a beehive of energy,” “chaotic but a lot of fun,” where swearing, arguing, and cussing out of control intermingled with highly creative impulses. A maternal great-uncle was a professional jazz drummer whose son then became a professional jazz guitarist; another cousin is a playwright, another a photographer, and another a furniture maker and potter. But alcoholism and addiction run deep; his grandfather “was a serious alcoholic” and some of his cousins have “extreme addiction problems,” as Huff put it; the flip side of the creativity on his Mom’s side of the family was “horrible, destructive behavior.”

His father’s kin, on the other hand, are quiet and “small town religious,” in Huff’s words. His father’s older brother is a Southern Baptist preacher. Huff didn’t spend much with them as a child. He recalls:

I’m 10 years old, a man I don’t know that well walks up at Thanksgiving and says, “Do you know what happens to the souls of children who die without accepting the lord Jesus Christ into their hearts?” I say “no.” He says, “They burn in hell forever. Their flesh forever burning and falling off their skeleton forever until the end of time.” I said “ok.” That’s my Dad’s side of the family.

Huff’s father was embarrassed by his redneck family and wanted to shield his kids from them. Stewart is the eldest of three children, and the only son. Once he had two daughters, Dad decided to move the family out of Kentucky “because he didn’t want his daughters pregnant at thirteen,” he tells me. They should “have choices rather than regrets” in their lives. Huff is proud of his father for this. His relatives on both sides, however, saw such moves as “uppity.” The family eventually settled in Florida, via stints in Georgia and Tennessee. His father had graduated college and held a steady job with a large tobacco company, and all their moves were within the company. His mother never went to college. In fact, none of the women on either side of the family did. The only exceptions were one maternal aunt, who married well and moved North, and the older of his sisters. Huff himself “dropped out of college to tell jokes to drunk people” as he often tells audiences, a self-deprecating line that always gets a self-deprecatory laugh.



Huff generally introduces his family background onstage by saying: “One of my sisters is a lesbian, and the other is mentally handicapped. And I’m a standup comic. My parents aren’t real happy.” Speaking with me offstage about his parents Huff says, “They are both moderate people, very Southern, and very polite: I have never once heard them argue, swear, or yell.” Huff himself is quiet: in conversation, for example, he never interrupts. I’ve been with him at a long, casino steakhouse dinner party where he never said a word. Onstage however he is altogether different: the stage transforms him and unleashes a font of stories. His sets regularly go longer than their allotted time and one has the sense that he could go on forever, that’s how easy he seems in his onstage skin.

The conversation that turned up all this biographical data stemmed from a question I asked Huff regarding when he first used the redneck voice he uses in his comedy now. He told me that in school he would do impressions of his uncles to friends:

I did impressions of a collection of various people. This was in high school. Sometimes it was an impression of family members. Sometimes it was some guy I heard at the gas station. But a lot of the actual redneck sound of the impression came from various uncles and boyfriends from my Mom’s side of the family.

He experienced the beehive of that family as fun. As a child, when things got too raucous there in the hive, Dad would say “now get your things and let’s leave” in an attempt to shield his kids from this family, just as he did from his own. Huff was interested in it all. He observed it all. And his creative buzz was all his own and never alcohol-dependent; he credits his grandfather’s annual reading of *The Night Before Christmas*, breath stinking and completely wasted, with keeping him away from drink.

In his current life as a road comic Huff spends a good deal of time traveling the back roads of America. He gains material much as would an anthropologist, through observation and conversation; both comedians and anthropologists tell stories that aim to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Fisher and Fisher 1981; Critchley 2002). He is confident in his ability not just to meet, talk, and write, but also to draw laughter from any material, given enough time. In discussing new material recently his patience with this process – and his stubbornness – come across clearly:

My contract between the audience and to lesser extent the bookers/club owners is I must make the audience laugh. The problem comes from me wanting to say things that aren’t necessarily funny. Because I’m stubborn, I’m going to say whatever I want to say. That means I’m going to have to figure out how to generate laughs. [...] I rarely know why anything is funny. I write what I want to say. I analyze the words and put them in an order that makes sense to me. Then I go on stage and say them into the microphone. The audience let’s me know their opinion by their reaction. I take this new information and

rewrite parts, maybe move some material to another spot in the show etc. I adjust based on their opinion but I never stop doing material based solely on their opinion. When the material is brand new, sometimes a lot of work is needed to find common ground with an audience. I work on each sentence and then do it on stage again. Hopefully over time I get closer to a tight well-written piece that the audience finds funny. Sometimes this only takes a few times on stage and sometimes it takes months. I think of it as my stubbornness vs. their stubbornness. I'm going to win. That's not a question. The question is, How am I going to win? That's what takes time to figure out (Huff 2010–2016, *personal communication*).

I love the confidence here, and Huff's sense of being on a mission. He will pursue the point he wants to make, matching the audience's stubbornness with his own. Eventually, he trusts, audiences will laugh.

Given that the Bigot is an all-too-familiar character in the American landscape, then, the question for the writer/anthropologist/comedian becomes: how to make *him* strange, how to alienate *him* rather than having him alienate us? As discussed above, "ignorant Southern bigot" is already a laughable stereotype easy to dismiss from afar. It is a different and much more difficult matter to figure out how to tamp down the power of such a man when he is a member of your audience, let alone of your own family. When Huff performs in the South he is often surrounded by such men. The patrons of bars and clubs in small town America share the same working-class background as the road comics who perform there.

In the "Aiken, SC" bit we see Huff intensely troubled by meeting a man whose voice, mouth, body, world, and worldview are filled with hate. This is a voice Huff knows all too well from growing up a White male in the South, surrounded by other White men who say just such things and assume that he will agree. "What I don't want is knee-jerk anger and hatred; I don't like people who respond to new ideas with anger and hatred." Today, this same voice now shouts angrily at him from audiences in Kentucky, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama. More than occasionally the shouts are accompanied by a full can of beer thrown directly at him.<sup>13</sup> Bits like "Aiken, SC" make it perfectly clear that he does not agree

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<sup>13</sup> On Mar 27, 2014, Huff emailed me some thoughts on his perseverance in the face of such animosity. Responding to an essay of mine on how comics assess a crowd in the first few minutes of a set (Seizer 2014), Huff wrote "[Your piece was] very detailed about the process of sizing up a crowd. I was thinking while I was reading that my 'goal' of sizing up a crowd has dramatically changed since you and I started working together. Years ago I was sizing them up hoping to figure out what material they would like best. I guess hoping to maximize the laughs. Now I'm sizing them up to figure out how much resistance I will encounter. The audience does not have near the say so in material that they used to have. I guess I haven't thought about that change in me until I was reading your piece." Clearly, beer cans don't dent Huff's resolve. Rather, he views such expressions of audience "resistance" as something to dig into.

with a Southern machismo *status quo*. Yet to perform this hate-filled voice Huff must re-experience its visceral discomforts, and his dislike of embodying this voice often expresses itself through a kind of shaking rage that I always find remarkable in Huff's performances. Experiential knowledge here turns to exorcism; Huff performs what he has had to internalize in order to externalize this enemy.

## 5 Formal considerations

We have seen that the parodic dialogue Huff sets up between “himself” and “the Bigot” in “Aiken, SC” takes the form of a question and answer session whose tone is that of a more-vulgar-than-usual Socratic exchange between two world views. In thinking about the form and method Huff uses in crafting this scenario, I found one particular passage in Bakhtin's writing on the double-voicing inherent in parody particularly useful. In his 1963 essay “On Dostoyevsky's Poetics,” Bakhtin writes that in parody

voices are not only isolated from one another, separated by a distance, but are also hostilely opposed. Thus in parody the deliberate palpability of the other's discourse must be particularly sharp and clearly marked.[...] Someone else's words introduced into our own speech inevitably assume a new (our own) interpretation and become subject to our evaluation of them; that is, they become double-voiced.[...] The transmission of someone else's statement in the form of a question already leads to a clash of two intentions within a single discourse: for in so doing we not only ask a question, but make someone else's statement problematical. (Bakhtin 1994: 106)

By problematizing the Bigot's statements, Huff takes the burden of meeting him off of himself and transforms this recreated Q&A into something more like a public trial.

Why, we may ask, does questioning serve this purpose so well? Huff is interrogating the bigot with all the associations of power that such a position entails. Richard Bauman, in an essay from a volume the title of which, *A World of Other's Words*, itself takes inspiration from Bakhtin, points out that “interrogation vests significant control in the hands of the interrogator” (Bauman 2004: 42). Not only is a question meant to elicit a verbal, informational response but indeed it “compels, requires, may even demand” such a response. Given that Huff is an outsider here – a traveling performer, a visitor, feeling vulnerable after doing a bad show – and the Bigot a local, possibly even a regular at this bar, Huff's use of the Q&A format is effectively a hijacking of the inherent power dynamic of the interrogation scenario in which insiders normally police

outsiders. Here Huff is an outsider putting local bigotry on the stand. Interrogation in this flipped scenario becomes a kind of “weapon of the weak,” through the use of which the underdog gets the upper hand (Scott 1985; Bauman 2004). Huff alienates and reframes the bigot’s statements by turning them into questionable propositions. In answering them the bigot digs himself further into his own muck.

Writing on “wisdom questions” (questions that test the knowledge of the person to whom they are posed) and riddle tales originally performed by masters of the Scottish storytelling tradition, Bauman discusses the compelling nature of questioning routines. “Such routines highlight, intensify, and formalize interactional skill and the cleverness that underlies it. [They] offer themselves as mechanisms for the accomplishment of the transformation” from lowly subject to victor (Bauman 2004: 44). In the riddle tale Bauman analyses, the subject ends up beating the king at his own game.

How does Huff’s sequential question-and-answer narrative end? The double-voicing already present in this sequence takes a reflexive turn as the last question turns itself back onto Huff the interrogator. The Bigot’s final “Where the fuck are *you* from?” (line 82) hangs unanswered in both the recounted, narrated text (the scripted exchange he performs) and in the active narrating text, the videotaped interview addressed to my camera.

This open question hanging at the end of both narrated and narrating texts effectively bridges two footings: one an exchange between two men, the other an address to a simultaneously present and imagined future audience. With this culminating question the focus shifts back onto Huff: Who is he? Where is he from? Where does he live? His answer animates the second footing, the narrative he spins for us regarding his own interconnected relationships with creation, recreation and re-creation: he lives in his work. He *makes his living* by making and enacting just such scenarios. This is what enlivens him. He lives here, onstage and on the road, in his car, driving and thinking about how to make a certain idea funny.<sup>14</sup>

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**14** Huff discusses driving and thinking about how to make a certain idea funny in the very first frames of *Road Comics*. After viewing the film’s exposure of the difficulties inherent in a life on the road, audience members frequently ask, “Why would anyone make these kinds of sacrifices?” But we must not assume a value system in which the chosen lifestyle of *Road Comic* is a sacrifice. Rather, the sacrifice for Huff would be if he were to *not* do this, if instead he were forced into more conventional employment. Doing comedy is what Huff lives for, as is the case for so many other comics I’ve met.

## 6 Thinking through creativity

And here we enter the fourth and final phase of Huff's explanation of his creative process. Why rewrite the story of what actually happened? First, because it makes Huff feel better. The opening lines of this coda (lines 83–85) sum up beautifully Huff's sense of completion through performance: "So that's what I built. And building it made me *feel good*. And doing it on stage, and hearing people laugh, helped me work through actually meeting that guy." His own joy at ridding himself of this demon reflects right back at him in the form of laughter. They hear him tell his story, and he hears them laugh; they got it! and now he's got them instead of that guy.

This transforms him. Lines 93 & 95: "Now I'm thinking a different way. Because I did all that." This expansive feeling is accompanied by a wide expansive gesture: his hand soars out and hovers there, a bird, humming. He is now *above* the unpleasant narrowness he experienced in actually meeting that guy. That experience is finally done, completed, understood ("*Verstehen*"), a thing now separated from himself, carved out, *objectified*, turned around and *manipulated*. The unpleasantness of the experience has become a site of contemplation and commentary upon which the comedian can now look philosophically. Huff has resituated the Bigot in a context of his own making, a scenario he can "deal with."

In this final phase we are introduced to the transformative pleasure Huff receives from reworking painful events into comedic bits. Such pleasure has two important entailments, each of which seems to carry equal weight for Huff.

As he put it at another moment in the same interview shoot, the first pleasure is akin to relief: "I am no longer crying from meeting that guy." The work has a personally therapeutic and restorative effect on Huff, which may well be one of the reasons he is so remarkably prolific. A most impressive feature of Huff's cathartic creative process is that once he has transformed something, brought it out of the realm of private experience and into public performance, he moves on.<sup>15</sup> Once he has done the big work of re-creation on a bit like "Aiken, SC" he is indeed done with it. He'll perform the bit for a few weeks, maybe as

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**15** Other comics often comment on how astonishingly prolific Huff is, amazed at the fact that "every time I see him he's got something new." It's true. Most comics have a slower burn rate. I realize that I risk overgeneralizing terribly here, but my sense is that most comics hone their work to glossy perfection over a period measured in years, not weeks (see Jonah Weiner's interview with Jerry Seinfeld on his joke writing process for an example of this at [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/magazine/jerry-seinfeld-intends-to-die-standing-up.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/magazine/jerry-seinfeld-intends-to-die-standing-up.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)).

much as a month or two, as he works on it through that trial and error process with the audience's laughter that he detailed above. While it is still in his show, he'll record the bit on his next CD. Then he'll move on, to the next transformed and transformative bit; transformation is Huff's ongoing practice.

The second cathartic, transformative pleasure is that he can now share his personal victory with an audience. No longer upset, now he is a comic engaged in a meta-discourse, in a critique of bigoted ways of being and thinking. Reaching this point of critical commentary allows Huff both to unburden himself of the horrors of the original meeting and to share with others the pleasures of re-creating that meeting as a comic narrative. The appreciative laughter of strangers replaces the alienation Huff felt originally with a much more enjoyable experience of the public sphere.

Through quotative, parodic use of the Bigot's own words and worldview, Huff has turned a hateful experience of hate speech into a vehicle for expressing his own way of thinking. And though he doesn't expect that everyone will agree with him, or even that they will like the bit – especially when he performs it in Southern bars and clubs – he relishes such provocations. Difficult audiences represent possibility: perhaps he will, even slightly, be able here to crack open the encrusted armor of a habit of hatred. In Huff's words: "Maybe someone in the audience changes just a little bit; my ultimate goal is to take a stubborn asshole and make him a tad less stubborn asshole."<sup>16</sup> It is an admirable goal.

Overall, by discussing in this interview what he did with the experience of meeting a bigot in a bar in Aiken, SC, Huff shows us not only how necessary and powerful the act of re-creation is for him personally but also its value as public performance, framing it as "recreation" for an audience of strangers. I like thinking of "re-creation" in this double-edged way. The act of re-creating the world to make it more how we want it to be is here both a survival strategy for comics and a good night's fun for their audiences. At least part of the *recreational* pleasure of seeing an act like Huff's at a club lies in appreciating the *re-creative* abilities of a comic confronting his own vulnerabilities and bringing them into dialogue – with whoever shows up, with whoever watches the taped interview, and with whoever reads this essay.

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<sup>16</sup> On his 2011 CD, Huff introduces the Aiken, SC bit by saying, "I've been a comedian for 15 years and I've bombed hundreds of times, literally hundreds, and I've felt dislike from a crowd. And to be honest with you guys? I kinda like it. There's something about it! Like when a crowd doesn't like me? I'm like, 'Yeah, I don't like you either!' There's something about it that keeps me going."

## 7 The reception Huff gets

This essay effectively began where the film I completed in 2012 left off. In its final scene (a reflective epilogue, really) Huff talks about how his career aims are shifting: he is no longer angling for fame, or to be “discovered” and plucked out of road comedy obscurity to be swooped up into that higher echelon of broadcast media fare that plays into the dominant Hollywood-dream rescue narrative. Huff’s goals have become much more immediate and interpersonal; as he puts it, “This is what I do, and this is what I want to say. I know that the consequences of what I do tonight are: I’m happy and they’re happy, and it’s going no further than that.”<sup>17</sup> His primary aim is to enjoy what he does onstage and to make it meaningful both to himself and to his audience.

In this he is, judging from what I have witnessed over the years of audience responses to his performances, hugely successful. For example many people, strangers mostly, come up to Huff after his shows and thank him profusely, sometimes loudly and sometimes in a whisper, often shaking and holding his hand as they tell him how much his work affected them, or giving him big bear hugs that express how grateful they feel for what he does. Huff inspires an I-just-met-my-soul-brother kind of feeling in many, and a number of my female friends speak of him as their ideal-imaginary husband.<sup>18</sup>

At other shows, in places that are not liberal college towns (e. g. Bloomington IN or Lexington KY) or edgy fringe festivals (e. g. Indianapolis IN or Orlando FLA), Huff regularly encounters audiences who clearly do *not* appreciate him or what he does. In small town bars in the Alabama or Georgia, Huff is not the usual fare. His set is not what audiences expect. For example, in a recent bit he posed the question of whether as a nation America really trusts in god, as is printed on our money. He exclaims, “I have seven airbags in my car! If god has a plan for me on the road, I just messed it up.” When he performed this bit in Macon, GA recently an audience member tried to set things aright with his own provocation, “flipping the bird” at Huff when he’d been onstage about ten minutes and then holding that posture (a feat in itself) through the rest of Huff’s entire hour-long set.

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<sup>17</sup> View the epilog at minute 52:33 of this 53 min. film: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-h5vmiOX\\_8&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-h5vmiOX_8&feature=youtu.be).

<sup>18</sup> Not only have I observed such affection coming Huff’s way after performances, I have also spoken with audience members at shows and at screenings of *Road Comics* who report feeling this way. A friend who saw Huff perform live for the first time wrote me afterwards that Huff “ROCKED the show tonight! It was so much fun and he was just great. My wife has a new favorite person in the world and I suspect she’ll be talking about him for weeks if not longer:-)” (Malitsky, *personal communication*, 7/29/13).



Huff marvels at this, and admits that he has been slugged on stage twice in addition to being pelted with cans of beer, and asked to leave the stage mid-show. A drunk audience member once stormed the stage and vomited on Huff's feet. Another went outside and shat on Huff's car. He laughs whenever he tells these stories.

As relaxed as the standup comedy genre may appear – a studied effect, to be sure, about which I have previously written (Seizer 2014, 2011) – confidence in one's own creative work is, as we all know, never easy. Huff's mind is always going: thinking about what he wants to say, thinking through language, writing and rewriting, working and reworking to find the sweet spot, the perfect phrase, and the exact moment to pause.

## 8 Collaborative dialogue

Finally, the dialogic qualities I explore in this essay pertain not just between comedy club audience and standup comic, but also in the mutual creative “flow” between me and my consultant, the cultural critic and comedian Stewart Huff (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Turner 1982). As I noted at the start of this essay, Huff and I openly discuss what I make of his work. I shared an earlier version of this essay with him, to which he replied:

I really enjoyed your paper. It is strange reading about you talking about me to other people. But I liked it a lot. I didn't feel like you stretched the truth at all. As I have mentioned to you before, I have insecurities about the material I am doing now but deep down I believe it is the right path. Having you dissect it in order to explain it makes me have a clear vision of what I am trying to do. In my head the reasons and material and fear and insecurities are all tangled up in a big ball. It helps me to get a better handle on the monster (Huff 2012).

I am of course delighted to hear that my own thinking about Huff's creative process is able to give something useful back to him. People often assume that the analysis of humor kills it. I don't agree, and clearly Huff doesn't either. Comics are observers of themselves as well as of others; good ethnographic scholarship requires the same of us. This essay not only observes but also participates in Huff's creative process, just as his creativity fuels my own.

Huff's response also makes me realize how creativity works on multiple levels. One is the rational: figuring out what will work best where, calculating which joke or story to tell next based on lighting-quick readings of the tenor of a room. On another level are the comic's own feelings, desires, fears and wishes, all of which are notoriously resistant to calculations based on external factors.



Neither rational nor planned, here affect must be harnessed to drive a working road comic's professional life. As I have shown throughout this essay, for a comic who speaks from the heart this is an ever-expanding terrain. To work it requires channeling and sublimating one's psychic, emotional, and experiential life into a comedic form that, while somewhat more malleable and open to experimentation than the majority of mainstream American performance genres for which audiences pay an admission fee, must nevertheless readily translate into tangible commercial results such as repeat hires at the same club the next year. For Huff, this means wrestling to pull something that will make people laugh out of that big ball, that unformed affective sphere he calls "the monster."<sup>19</sup>

Oceans, monsters, beehives and tangled balls: the craft of professional calculation required by the life of a road comic lends necessary form and structure to the ineffable inexplicability, and irrationality, of laughter itself. When it works, bringing these two levels of comic creativity together infuses a live, co-created space of communicative desire with communicative possibility. Indeed, the experiential world for seasoned road comics who perform for different audiences every night is built of encounters that accumulate through "traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between bodies (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect)" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 2). This is dialogic catharsis.

Here I have attended closely to how his experience of intense displeasure at an offstage interaction with a bigot at a bar irked Stewart Huff enough to forge a way, using double-voiced parody, to re-create onstage a world that would offer him, me, and his broader audiences a recuperative – funny and restorative, but also complex and disorienting – affective cathartic experience. In this mixing and meshing of competent craft and distressing content, Huff re-creates his world. I write primarily to document his enlivening and transformative process, cheering loudest at the moments when Huff becomes the subject of his own story rather than the abject of someone else's. Parodic embodiment is one way to deal with hateful people and their actions. Huff's cathartic process involves parodying the hateful, thereby purging himself of the poison such people inject, and replacing it with the balm of audience laughter.

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<sup>19</sup> Huff's language and imagery here resonate with the portrait of affect itself as an ever-in-process in-between-ness, "the affective bloom-space of an ever-processual materiality," as deliciously described by Seigworth and Gregg (2010).

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**Supplemental Material:** The online version of this article (DOI:10.1515/humor-2016-0026) offers supplementary material, available to authorized users.

## Bionote

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