Democratic Rhetorics and Anti-Black Realities in US Improv Comedy

Michel Büch, PhD.

Abstract: Improvisational theater and democratic political practice share the assumption of a universal, Humanist egalitarianism. However, improv's overwhelmingly white demography and recurring instances of on-stage anti-Blackness suggest there are specifically anti-Black modes of exclusion that cannot be grasped within this idealist framework. The essay recognizes the urgency of a more profound and structural theoritization and argues in the Afropessimist tradition that anti-Blackness is structurally constitutive of modern Human subjectivity, which is required for egalitarian play in improv as well as political participation. It also addresses the (un)conscious and embodied structures of feeling that govern the white, intuitive decision-making so essential to the performances and practices of improv and democracy. Engaging with three accounts of anti-Black instances on the improv stage, the essay zooms in on the racial epistemological and affective ground for Humanist intuition, reveals the shortcomings of concepts like "stereotype" or "misrepresentation", and suggests different routes for analyzing the presence of (anti-)Blackness in improvised performance in and against the dehumanizing paradigm of modernity. Analyzing improv as a *pars pro toto* case study, this essay reaches far beyond its immediate object by addressing its core political assumptions, questioning the liberal belief system of teleological and hopeful improvement of (and naming its complicity in) the anti-Black condition in which Western subjects and non-subjects continue to exist.

Résumé : Le théâtre d'improvisation et la pratique politique démocratique partagent l'hypothèse d'un égalitarisme humaniste universel. Cependant, la présence majoritairement blanche des acteur.rice.s du théâtre d'improvisation et les exemples récurrents de racisme anti-noir sur scène suggèrent qu'il existe des modes d'exclusion spécifiquement anti-Noirs qui ne peuvent être compris

au sein de ce cadre artistique idéaliste. L'essai reconnaît l'urgence d'une théorisation plus profonde et structurelle et soutient, dans la tradition afropessimiste, que l'anti-Noirceur est structurellement constitutive de la subjectivité humaine moderne, qui est pourtant requise pour un jeu égalitaire dans le théâtre d'improvisation aussi bien que dans l'engagement politique. L'article aborde également les structures (in)conscientes et incarnées des affects qui régissent la prise de décision intuitive fondée sur la blanchéité qui est si centrale pour la représentation de la pratique du théâtre d'improvisation et de la démocratie. En explorant trois récits anti-Noirs joués sur une scène d'improvisation, l'essai se concentre sur le fondement épistémologique et affectif racialisé de l'intuition humaniste, révélant les lacunes de concepts tels que le "stéréotype" et la "distorsion représentationnelle" afin de suggérer différentes voies pour analyser la présence de la (anti-)Noirceur sur scène, à la fois au sein et contre le paradigme déshumanisant de la modernité. Analysant l'improvisation comme une étude de cas *pars pro toto*, cet essai dépasse son objet initial en questionnant ses présupposés politiques fondamentaux et en remettant en question le système de croyance libéral et sa foi en l'amélioration téléologique et optimiste (et en dénonçant sa complicité avec celle-ci) de la condition anti-Noire dans laquelle les sujets et les non-sujets occidentaux continuent d'exister.

Keywords: Antiblackness, Humanism, critiques of Modernity, improv comedy, popular culture, intuition, democracy, play

Mots-clés : Anti-noirceur, Humanisme, critiques de la modernité, comédie d'improvisation, culture populaire, intuition, démocratie, jeu

Author's Note and Trigger Warning

The following is a condensed version of the book-length study *Whiteface*, an extensive anti-racist academic examination of anti-Blackness in improv (Büch). *Whiteface* addresses how the fundamentally racial axioms of modern Western Humanism[1] play out in US popular culture generally and improv comedy specifically. Based

on interviews with practicing improvisers, the multidisciplinary work mobilizes neuroscience, psychoanalysis, Afropessimist theory, humor studies, popular cultural studies, performance studies, Frankfurt school critical theory and several other disciplines to lay out how global anti-Blackness functions discursively and affectively as a structuring principle for the continual, lasting, and autopoietic procedures of re-making the white modern subject as enslaver.[2]

This essay discusses racist acts on the improv stage. They are reproduced here as related and authorized by the Black-racialized performers who suffered them.

Introduction

Theater is often described as a democratic art form. The aesthetic links up with the political based on a shared sociality constituted by equal subjects both on the stage and in the audience. Further, it provides an aesthetic space for the negotiation of conflicting ideas among those political subjects, facilitates a communal experience, and trains the audience in empathy for different viewpoints, as Oscar Eutis, Artistic Director of the Public Theater (New York City), has stated in a widely received TED talk: "The idea that truth comes from the collision of different ideas and the emotional muscle of empathy are the necessary tools of democratic citizenship" (2:43). This relates to post-postmodern theorists like Rancière, who describes aesthetic experience as

> a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are 'equipped' to adapt to it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. (72)

Improv as a genre claims to have stepped up to the democracy game since the 1950s, and this ideal remains part of its self-image today. Consider this description from Paul Sills, founder of The Compass Players and The Second City:[3]

> Improvisational theater is the closest thing you'll find to democracy in the theater. It opens up the possibility of play between the people in the group, and play is an expression of our equality. The crowd I work with regard themselves as equals. (qtd. in Sweet 20)

Differing from aesthetics aimed at direct political impact—like Brecht's or Müller's—improv mobilizes a more traditionally Humanist notion of a democratic practice that does not immediately prompt a Ranciérian pluralism. Rather than foregrounding the ideal of conflicting ideas or staging multiplicity, improv practice is built around the concept of agreement: actors are to say yes to each other to the point where they appear to achieve what improv guru Del Close has called "group mind" (92), which is believed to lead to deeper and more substantial truths than an individual could know or articulate. Sills describes improv as an attempt "to go into the possibilities of human development," stating that "theater is responsible for the image of the human [and] the concerns of the artists are the concerns of the people" (qtd. in Sweet 17-18). This image of the Human includes the possibility of play and holistic development among equals, linking Humanism and democracy ("the people") via improv.[4] But who makes up "the people" with whom "the artists" are concerned, and which bodies qualify as Human? Seham asked this long ago: "When the group works as one mind, whose mind is it? How does the seeming rightness, inevitability, and spontaneity of improv mask the unmarked power of hegemony" (65)?

In this essay, I discuss how US improv comedy mobilizes democratic-theatrical idealism to continuously manufacture white ignorance of an observable, racially exclusive reality. I reroute the debate about onstage racialization beyond (mis-)representation or stereotypification to address the axiomatic discursive frameworks and libidinal economies of improv as a social practice. Improv's ongoing racializing practices (on and off the stage) can be read as symptoms of the theater-as-democracy ideal itself, and racist reality sometimes irrupts on the stage. Dewayne Perkins, Black improv artist, shares one such experience:

> I did a show … in which a guy initiated a scene with me. He was a white male. He initiated the scene by, "Ok, now put on this noose." And I was

> like "Whoa, in real life how would I respond to this?" And I was like … "I don't think you're being really sensitive to my cultural background, so I am not gonna do this." It was a response in character but also like, "How would I as a human in this situation respond to this?" (personal conversation)[5]

Drawing on Perkins and two other accounts from Black improv artists in the US, I argue that improv offers a case study of the dehumanizing anti-Blackness that structures modern artistic and political subjectivity. At the center of this discussion lies the concept of a culturally specific white intuition that governs white people's imagination and immediate perception of as well as their reactions to the world—often beyond conscious intentions. In the first half of the article, I lay out the axiomatic and affective ground for intuition not as a conduit of higher truths or social alternatives, but a pathway into "the same universal consciousness" even enabling "prophecies" as improv producer Charna Halpern expressed it (93). I read it rather as a vehicle for the structural anti-Blackness inherited from US theater history and modern subjectivity per se. I then consider the three accounts by practicing improvisers that demonstrate its appearance on the stage.

Black Absence, Democracy, and the Primal Scene of US Theatrical Entertainment

Despite its association with art forms specifically marked as Black (jazz, stand-up comedy), improv has always been overwhelmingly white. Black absence poses an intricate problem for contemporary improv because the latter's discursive autopoiesis thrives on seemingly non-racial concepts like equality, a welcoming community, relatability, the assumption that marginalized voices can be made equal via humor, and even the possibility of social healing. The (putatively paradoxical) Black absence in improv has long been a source of occasional unease for its white practitioners. When asked in 1976 why there were "so few Blacks in improvisation," Roger Bowen, an early producer of improvised theater, described improv as a "cosmopolitan phenomenon" and improvisers as "sufficiently liberated from their

ethnic backgrounds to identify with whatever is going on throughout the world," whereas Black people were "not at that point yet [because they were] more ethnic in their orientation" (qtd. in Sweet 40). Bowen's statement exemplifies both how improv's whiteness is configured—namely, through the propagation of a general Humanity from which Black-racialized bodies are excluded—and how an essentialist blaming those absent for their ascribed insufficiencies serves to maintain improv's integrity. Such immediate insight is rare today: left and liberal sentiment, moralism, and investments in redemptive politics veil the view of the *a priori* anti-Blackness that not only structures US popular theater practice but also creates the sociopolitical grid which makes it possible to be left, liberal, or both in the first place.

Building on Hartman, I read "the theater of the marketplace that wed festivity and the exchange of captive bodies" as the primal scene of US popular theatrical entertainment (Hartman 1997: 37). The spectacularized staging of enslaved, Black-racialized bodies predetermined the use of Black bodies in the two theater genres of the time, minstrelsy and melodrama:

> Despite differences between their respective conventions and stylistic devices, the uses made of the black body established continuities between minstrelsy and melodrama that surpassed their generic differences … The terror of pleasure – the violence that undergirded the comic moment in minstrelsy – and the pleasure of terror – the force of evil that propelled the plot of melodrama and fascinated the spectator – filiated the coffle, the auction block, the popular stage, and the plantation recreations in a scandalous equality. (Hartman 1997: 26-32)

In recognition of the fact that anti-Blackness transcends genre and moralist intentions, all US popular performance must be read in this historical trajectory. This holds especially true for the niche of amateur theater: in 1930, Carl Wittke, "an unabashed minstrel enthusiast," lamented the disappearance of the American minstrel show "except as a vehicle for amateurs" (qtd. in Watkins 98). If improv communities today were to understand their doing as part of this trajectory, Black absence would appear less paradoxical to them.

The same blind spot applies to democracy as a concept, which presupposes that those participating in it regard themselves (and qualify) as political subjects—a status from which modernity has always already precluded people racialized as Black. Ever since ratio-centric modernity invented *race* to fill "the matrix slot of Otherness," which had been occupied by infidels and heretics in the theocentric descriptive statement of the Middle Ages, Blackness served as the reassuring (b)order against which the white, bourgeois, political, Western subject could define itself (Wynter 2003: 265-67). The modern self cannot be separated from the violent, colonialist, and enslavist dehumanization of its colonized and racialized Others and requires their banishment from civic society up to this day:

> through chattel slavery the world gave birth and coherence to both its joys of domesticity and to its struggles of political discontent; and with these joys and struggles the Human was born, but not before it murdered the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks. (Wilderson 2010: 20-21)

If it is suggested nowadays that theater may help "to educate the demos in the deliberative reason, critical judgment, and civic values that undergirded political life" (Halpern 545), this "political life" has no bearing whatsoever for those positioned as socially dead within the anti-Black enslavist regime that is Western modernity.

White subjectivity rarely recognizes itself as being of and representing a specific cultural context, failing to see that whiteness is not universal and—though it *entitles* them—does not *enable* its subjects to undergo universal experience or speak universal truth. Yet, improv discourse abounds with ideas of "breaking down barriers" of cultural limitations (Frost and Yarrow 199), of an imagined *subjectlessness* (Lösel 172). The assumption that a subject can voluntarily transcend the laws of its own subjectivity is symptomatic of the ways in which Western Man "overrepresent[s] itself as if it were the human itself" while making this historically specific modality invisible to those who understand and experience themselves through it (Wynter 2003: 260). Humanism has diminished the modern discursive framework

to a "racial fantasyland" (Mills 18) in which white subjects feel, think, speak, act, emote, intuit in their culturally specific ways.

Race, then, does not denote a feature or avenue for discrimination. As a structuring principle of the very Human sphere that white people inhabit politically, emotionally, and psychologically, race and Blackness are "fundamentally the issue of the genre of the [modern] human" (Wynter 2003: 288). Blackness is a pre-social, pre-political structural marker that divides the civic space of modernity from its non-civic surroundings and thus *creates* that political space by delimitation. It does not refer to a cultural core with an origin and telos but is an arbitrary signifier of an abject space outside of civil society. Accordingly, when we speak of democracy or political negotiability in general, we are rhetorizing in a specifically anti-Black tradition that grants status, capacity, and democratic participation to whites only.

Play, Performance, Intuition

These enslavist, capitalist affective configurations shape social, political, and aesthetic practices that are never just "in themselves," as David Pasquesi, a well-known, white-positioned improv veteran suggests:

> inclusion, acceptance, and embracing differences are helpful in improvisation … so I think the problem with discrimination in improvisation lies more in the administration and business hierarchy and not in improvisation itself. (personal conversation)[6]

Yet improv, like other forms of performance art (or play), realizes itself only through practice or content. It does not exist *in itself* as an abstract or ideal in any meaningful way, given that this ideal is always already undermined by its own actualization. And because improv thrives on free, on-the-spot decision-making, that content is predisposed to re-present modes of being in the world that its mostly white actors embody, thus undercutting its abstract democratic ideals. Improvisers do not have the time to carefully weigh the pros and cons of a specific decision but rely on what their intuition makes them feel and do. This means that by necessity they draw on affective and discursive configurations always already in place within and without them.

Neuroscience has shown how intuition helps us short-circuit the complex rationale our body goes through when deciding on "the next best thing to do" (Claxton 10). Before a thought reaches consciousness, the whole body has always already decided upon the best behavior in any given situation. Damasio names various biochemical processes operating "outside consciousness [as] the source of what we call intuition, the mysterious mechanism by which we arrive at the solution of a problem without reasoning toward it" (191-92). Claxton reminds us that intuition is based on experience and is therefore fallible (278). *Experience* here refers to any acquired knowledge or language system and does not mean that, for example, phobic Blackness is based on actual experiences white subjects had with Black-racialized people. It does, however, involve the fact that by way of embodied cultural codification Blackness both structures and is being mapped onto the abjective sensation in the white body. The white subject experiences itself "a good man or woman of one's kind" (Davis qtd. in Wynter 2003: 271) through anti-Black abjection. The desire to know and feel oneself as this *good, white, coherent, sociable, and fully Human subject* is achieved *qua* anti-Black abjection and can predetermine the "next best thing to do" vis-à-vis Blackness in the heat of the improv stage. I am following Broeck's use of the term *abjection*

> in the post-Fanonian vein in which it appears in Saidiya Hartman's and Hortense Spiller[s]'s work [as] a theoretical concept to discuss the underside of white Western modernity's terms of human sociability and subjectivity. (13)

White subjects do not passively undergo abjective states—as Kristeva's use of the concept implies—but act as agents of anti-Black abjection in all its violent and dehumanizing forms for their own jouissance as well as biopsychological maintenance. Anti-Black abjection is, then, central to the "libidinal economy of civil society" that structures and drives the psychosociality of white modernity writ large (Wilderson 2010a: 15).[7] The axiomatic framework and affective ground of this psychosociality shape white, intuitive reactions to and imaginations of Blackness on and off the stage fundamentally.

Because white improvising subjects are psychologically predisposed to anti-Black abjection to maintain their coherent "sense of self" (Wynter 2001: 54) as a homeostatic ideal, their repertoire for encounters with people racialized as Black cannot be fully addressed within the rhetorics of stereotypification, misrepresentation, or discrimination. Instead, a more vertical analysis of the affective structures that lead to dehumanizing improv scenes with Black performers is required. The white improviser's sense of self is tied to the non-subjectivity of bodies racialized as Black. It must actively remind itself of its codified but biologically marked anti-Blackness by imagining, addressing, or acting against Blackness within the terms of the conclusively anti-Black modern matrix of sociality, among them propertization, enslaveability, killability, and materiality. White intuition does not "stereotype" Blackness but continually dehumanizes it through these terms for its own self-preservation.

Audience, Actors, and the Abrogation of Polysemy

Improv's aesthetics differ from those of scripted theater fundamentally because there has been no prior planning in terms of content—no motion, gesture, sentence is premeditated. Lacking this planning and usually performed on a bare stage with no props, improvised acts are "both *specific*, defining itself by its own parameters . . . and *polysemantic*" (Frost and Yarrow 208): it is assumed that at the top of a scene, anything can happen and anybody can signify anything. Frost and Yarrow argue that to allow for and make use of this assumed polysemy of onstage bodies and events, "the practice of improvisation works initially to *free* the producer of meanings, both as an individual and in the network of relationships in which he or she operates" (187). Describing the improviser's ideal state of mind, Frost and Yarrow draw on Lecoq's *disponibilité*:

> a charged and sensual state [in which] the actor is fully inhabiting the world outside and within his body . . . *poised* between all possibilities [and thus has] more chance of avoiding the trap of cliché. (197)

Not only is the improvising self putatively "liberated both psychologically and semiotically" (204) but the improv audience "is active,

too – more than usually when watching something improvised" (208). While it is a truism that aesthetic reception in general involves "the creation of new, often unsuspected or unintended, meanings from the signals received," improv is indeed a special case. In a neuroscientific study Engel and Keller (2011) have shown that audience knowledge (or assumption) of a performance being improvised changes brain activity in comparison with the reception of preconceived ones: the audience quite literally plays along with the performers as they always see and know as much as they do. This leads to a heightened identification with the performers on the level of play. Therefore, the ideal of *disponibilité*, the acceptance of fluid, dynamic, and unstable meaning-making also applies to the audience. However, such claims for "neutral" perceptive states are a luxury entailed by the white default of modern Humanism; when it comes to Blackness, the much-cherished potentiality and polysemy are abrogated immediately.

In the following, three anecdotes by Black-racialized improvisers demonstrate the need to reconfigure how we think about Humanistic play as performance beyond stereotypical misrepresentation.[8] They also provide entry points into different ways of theorizing what happens on the improv stage when white performers rely on intuition. Consider this first example, related by improviser and comedian Joel Boyd:

> There will be scenes where just because one person in the scene is black, it changes the tone of the entire scene. I definitely know there are scenes that I have done, in which I got a laugh—or not a laugh—because I was black. I remember a scene in a freeze tag jam. I tagged out somebody who was on the ground, and I was on my knees. The first line from the other two people, who were my friends, they didn't mean to do this, but they said: "Oh, he's ours now." And I thought I was being an animal. I wasn't even thinking a racist thing; I was being an animal that they found. And then immediately, the crowd goes "Ooooooooooh." And then we realized what they saw. They thought it was a slave scene. It just comes up in weird situations like that. (personal conversation)[9]

Black enslavement enters this scene although the players are unsuspecting, even unconscious of it. When Boyd, as an improvising Black body, enacts an animal on all fours and white improvising bodies lay

property claims to that Black body (however fictional), the scene becomes something different. For the audience in this setting, it is more plausible that Boyd is portraying an enslaved person than a dog. The enslavist interpretation of this scene makes the most immediate or "intuitive" sense, regardless of what the actors intended to signify. The audience feedback determines what they have seen and immediately minimizes the polysemantic potential the scene had in theory. The "democratic" assumption that everyone can be everything in improv, the "increased capacity for meaning, which means that additional levels or possibilities of significance are opened up" (Frost and Yarrow 208) present themselves as false in view of a Black body's a priori overdetermination actualized on the stage. While white improvisers can act as trees, spoons, tables, or dogs, Black performers—by way of white, collective intuition—most immediately represent "being owned." Even if unintended and only realized through the audience reaction, the intuitive framing of a Black character as literal property is not a stereotype about the character, but a self-reassuring, solipsist gesture for and by the white subject. Restaging the figures of the Black slave and white master reenacts the racial distinction necessary for the white subject's continued autopoiesis. In a regime that conflates personhood with un-ownability, performing ownership over Others is a mode of self-actualization.[10]

The notion of propertizing bodies also resonates at frequencies other than Boyd's overt example of enslavement. In improvised theater, "making somebody a prop" means exercising control over one's scene partner, reducing their creative options, constraining them to an unchangeable function in service of the propertizer's creative interests, rendering the former inflexible, foreclosing their potential agency as improvisers. Very much like the actual, theatrical prop, which "never loses contact with its materiality" (Rokem qtd. in Sofer 14), making someone a prop in improv often happens by way of foregrounding the materiality of the body, thus diverting attention away from its cognition and creativity. The improviser is treated as mere matter without the capacity to control their own signification, stripping them of the autonomy so essential to democratic free play. Consider this anecdote from Black-racialized improviser Kimberly Michelle Vaughn:

> I did a jam at Second City . . . with teachers and new students. We did a scene, and it was in German, we were all doing German accents and whatever. I was the main person, and apparently, they were scientists. Then they said: "Ok, we're going to strip off your skin, and put a white skin on." These are teachers. White teachers, telling me they were gonna put someone's white skin on me. You could already feel the audience gasping. I was like, "You are not going to strip off my skin as a white person." And the white doctor scientist was like, "No, we're going to strip off your skin because we want you to be no longer insecure. We want you to blend in with society." This is going on onstage. And then I was going on: "No. It must be so hard to be white, with all that privilege." And one of the other scientists went on: "Oh, it's so hard being vite, because ze guilt, ze guilt…" (personal conversation)[11]

In Vaughn's experience, the intuitive default of treating a Black-racialized scene partner exclusively in terms of Black flesh speaks to Wynter's elaboration of the anti-Black matrix, in which Blackness becomes pure matter without the rationality or spirit of a fully-endowed Human being. When a Black body is "made a prop" in improv, it becomes a "will-less actant" in Saidiya Hartman's term (1997: 62), manipulated by white, creative agency. Because the Black body is "seen as paradigmatically a body" (Mills 51), Black improvisers are always at risk of being "made a prop" *qua* the foregrounding of their bodies' materiality as it is *constantly intuited by white subjects*. More, the foregrounding of this specifically female body has nothing to do with stereotypification. It is an act of male anti-Black abjection that lacks the core necessary for a stereotype: a potentially non-stereotypical subject beyond anatomy. Spectacularizing a female racialized body, this scene speaks instead to the obsession of white people with Black physicality, and evokes the use of Black bodies as matter by and for Western (white) science without consent (see Savitt; Davidson). Whether in these cases or on the contemporary improv stage, anatomy and materiality are not stereotypes, because they explicitly do not assume (or require) a stereotypable, i.e., simplifiable or reducible, but principally complex Human being or character behind or within that anatomy.

Grounded in what can be termed *white, intuitive play*, improv proves a dangerous field for Black performers and audiences. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott conceptualizes "play" as an essential mode of identity formation and maintenance. Central to his theory is the concept of "transitional objects." Transitional objects function as the first *possessions* of a child and are "both created and discovered [yielding] freedom and joy to babies and *all who were once babies*" (Winnicott xi-xii, my italics). Play, for children and adults alike, involves aggression and can be related to fantasies of self-making through fantasies of destruction and ownership claims. I suggest that in adult play, the terms and objects for those claims are tied up with modern anti-Black subjectivity: given the cultural specificities of the *languaging*, adult, white modern subject, Blackness is discursively mapped onto this fantasy of possession, linking the jouissance of play as embodied by the infant to a cultured abjective jouissance *qua* dehumanizing, propertizing, anti-Black abjection. This has little to do with Humanist imagination of play among equals. White, adult play is the culturally specific performance of personal self-assurance based on the destruction of ownable, killable, and fungible (Black) transitional phenomena.

The introductory anecdote from Dewayne Perkins exemplifies how this self-assurance plays out in improv. Right at the top of the scene, when allegedly anything is possible, the presence of a Black improviser causes his white scene partner to open with a fictional lynching, the most brutal and horribly iconic element in the US "cultural repertoire" (Markowitz). Once again, what Sills calls "possibilities of play" are not evenly distributed, and the level playing field of democracy proves a fiction. Moreover, consider the uncanny summary Winnicott gives of the special qualities in the relationship between the individual and the transitional object-phenomenon: "the infant [white subject] assumes rights over the object, and we agree to this assumption" (7). In this scene, property claims are made by a white subject over the Black improviser's body, which he assumes is available as an unowned resource and site for gratuitous violence. This imagined and ascribed lack of autonomous will on the part of an otherwise externalized transitional Black phenomenon enables the white subject to experi-

ence that object's dehumanization, propertization, and destruction: "The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you,' … 'I love you.' 'You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you'" (121). Whiteness creates a transitional Blackness not only to imagine itself in omnipotent, magical control over these external "me-extensions" (135), but to be able to imagine itself at all. Both the violent abjection and its affective effect are sociogenically inscribed into the subject-bodies of the modern West as their subject-making principle. Within the sociability thusly created, a Black-racialized body can only exist "as fungible object" (Wilderson 2010a: 56), not as an agent of play. Approached with the opening statement, "Now put on this noose," Perkins is not stereotypically depicted as a representative of another culture. He is imagined and treated as an enslaved, propertized, thingified, and killable body, as "that walking destruction which became known as the Black" (Wilderson 2010a: 20). Death is not a stereotype. There are no stereotypes outside of Humanity.

Improv stages do not always feature examples like the above, even though such moments do occur with disturbing repetitiveness. What matters in these moments is their very possibility and their intelligibility: they can happen at any time and are immediately intelligible within the anti-Black default of white, modern meaning-making, spontaneous or not. They are no more absurd, grotesque, or violent than what Black-racialized people endure every day in different shapes and forms. And again, they transcend concepts like stereotypification, which are still mobilized to address such events. When Boyd is intuitively and collectively interpreted within the enslavist imagination politically and libidinally grounded in the auction block, when Vaughn is told she will have her "skin stripped off" by white German scientists, when Perkins is defined as a lynchable body at the top of the scene, these are not matters of a culture being misrepresented. These moments are caused by the neurological and biophysical experience of culturally prefigured on-the-spot intuition through which white subjects approach bodies that they read intuitively as non-Human entities available for gratuitous violence of all sorts, as Black first and nothing second.

It cannot be stressed enough, however, that the epistemological pessimism driving this analysis addresses Black-racialized improvisers' discursive capacity for agency, not their individual *capabilities*. Sexton reminds us "that nothing in afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and the world that the world lives in." (28) In each of these examples, the performers can be understood to persevere: Boyd *endures* a situation that perhaps no one enjoyed but everyone was caught up in. Vaughn says "no" to an offer by a fellow improviser and is satisfied in hindsight that she "stood [her] ground" even though it was *uncomfortable* (in a world that proclaims mutual support and safety).[12] Perkins calls out the racism and reminds himself of his own being human, *laboring* extra hard to prove it to the present audience. What meanings do these performances of refusal hold for "the world that the world lives in?"

When Winnicott talks about the ongoing destruction of the transitional object, he notes that the subject's ongoing re-creation of itself "depends on the object's capacity to survive [which] in this context, means 'not retaliate'" (120). Whenever Black improvisers speak back, "stand their ground," and reject propertization and dehumanization, this to some extent does qualify as retaliation and thus transgression against the white sociality that can imagine this kind of agency only under the oxymoron of "rebellious property" (Judy 225). Self-possessed property does not make sense in any Humanistic way. More, it fundamentally threatens the subject of Humanism because, as Judy writes, it "exhibits the groundlessness of the sovereign individual [indicating] the identification of human with thing, that the human can only be among things, cannot be beyond or abstracted from things" (225). However, for the white subject, whose existence is tied up with the presence of its negation, this recognition is both unbearable and necessary. It thrives on the very existence of this paradox, which they—we—work hard to both ignore and uphold (Mwambene).

Obviously, the argument proposed here takes into focus the white perpetrators of anti-Black abjection and thus applies primarily to

encounters between white improvisers and audiences with Black improvisers (or imagined Blackness among whites only). Positioned as a white scholar, I cannot meaningfully speak about what it might mean to live Blackness, about strategies of refusal and survival in a world that holds no place, structurally. Only this: in the last decade, there have been a growing number of all-Black groups on the scene, most prominently Astronomy Club (NYC), whose self-titled Netflix series brought them to global attention, and 3Peat, who have long been performing in Chicago, some of its members having gone on to greater success in the comedy and entertainment business—Perkins being one. I have had the pleasure to see both high-quality groups perform live and them playing to their collective strengths rather than having to deal with racist lines thrown at them by white improvisers is great to watch. However, the roles that these groups have vis-à-vis the mainly white community at large mirror those of individual Black-racialized improvisers in an otherwise white group: they stand out, are perceived on racial grounds, and cannot afford to fail.

In conclusion, then, improv is certainly highly reflective of both democracy and Humanism, albeit in ways other than the ideal traditionally imagined. For Black improvisers, the improv scene in general does not provide safer spaces than the world outside it. Engaging with or existing within improv comedy's anti-Black structures cannot exceed the analyses of and "wallowing in the contradictions" (Wilderson 2010b). Structurally speaking, it offers no alternative spaces or stretches the limits of racialized culture. In fact, Perkins treats improv practice as a training ground for the racism within and without the scene:

> I know that certain of my peers get so mad about it – but I understand why people of color progress quicker. Because they have to do more work, but it's not even spoken about … You have to be quicker. If I am always constantly paraded with these race things, I have to be able to counteract quickly. That just makes me quicker at responding. (personal conversation)

So when white improvisers cherish improv for being *like life*, this holds also true for Black improvisers in the very different ways highlighted here. Improv performs the *longue durée* of enslavement,

including its anti-Black dehumanizing and propertizing gestures. Instead of changing "the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible" (Rancière 72), it crystallizes the ways in which the culturally specific, axiomatically anti-Black foundation of modern subjectivity—especially its affective dimension—predetermines what white subjects' bodies are capable of saying, seeing and signifying. The onstage results of modern intuition demonstrate the epistemological limits of what Humanism and democracy mean in civic society today.

WORKS CITED

BROECK, Sabine. *Gender and the Abjection of Blackness*. SUNY P, 2018.

—. "Legacies of Enslavism and White Abjectorship." *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, edited by Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker, Campus Verlag, 2014, pp. 109-28.

BÜCH, Michel. *Whiteface: Improv Comedy and Anti-Blackness*. De Gruyter, 2022.

CAILLOIS, Roger. *Man, Play and Games*. Translated by Meyer Barash, Illinois UP, 2001.

CLAXTON, Guy. *Intelligence in the Flesh: Why Your Mind Needs Your Body Much More Than It Thinks*. Yale UP, 2015.

~~COLEMAN~~, Nathanial A. T. "My Journey In Our Struggle (Guest Post)." *Biopolitical Philsophy*, 3 June 2020, biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2020/06/03/my-journey-in-our-struggle-guest-post/. Accessed 29 May 2023.

DAMASIO, Antonio R. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Vintage, 2006.

DAVIDSON, James M. "'Resurrection Men' in Dallas: The Illegal Use of Black Bodies as Medical Cadavers (1900-1907)." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2007, pp. 193-220. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/20853130. Accessed 27 May 2023.

ENGEL, Annerose and Peter KELLER. "The perception of musical spontaneity in improvised and imitated jazz performances." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 83, 2011, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00083.

EUSTIS, Oskar. "Why Theatre is Essential to Democracy." *YouTube*, uploaded by TED, 25 Jun. 2018, youtube.com/watch?v=-5foou7mIA0w. Accessed 28 May 2023.
FROST, Anthony and Ralph YARROW. *Improvisation in Drama*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
HALPERN, Richard. "Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, pp. 545-72.
HARTMAN, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Oxford UP, 1997.
—. *Lose Your Mother*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.
HUIZINGA, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Angelico P, 2016.
JUDY, R. A. T. "On the Question of Nigga Authenticity." *boundary 2*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1994, pp. 211-230. *JSTOR*, doi: 10.2307/303605. Accessed 26 Marc. 2020.
LÖSEL, Gunter. *Das Spiel mit dem Chaos*. Transcript, 2013.
MARKOWITZ, Jonathan. *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory*. Minnesota UP, 2004.
MILLS, Charles. *The Racial Contract*. Cornell UP, 1997.
MWAMBENE, Mbene. "White Promise: Performance Artist Mbene Mwambene in Conversation." Interviewed by Michel Büch, *De Gruyter Conversations*, 31 May 2022, blog.degruyter.com/white-promise-performance-artist-mbene-mwambene-in-conversation/. Accessed 25 July 2023.
PATTERSON, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Harvard UP, 1985.
RANCIÈRE, Jacques. *The Emancipated Spectator*. Translated by Gregory Elliot, Verso, 2009.
SAVITT, Todd L. "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South." *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1982, pp. 331-48. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/2207450. Accessed 27 May 2023.
SCHILLER, Friedrich W. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Translated by Reginald Snell, Dover, 2004.
SEHAM, Amy. *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City*. Minnesota UP, 2001.

SEXTON, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism". *InTensions*, no. 5, Nov 2011, doi: 10.25071/1913-5874/37359. Accessed 11 December 2023.
SOFER, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props*. Michigan UP, 2003.
SWEET, Jeffrey. *Something Wonderful Right Away*. Limelight, 2004.
WAISANEN, Don. *Improv for Democracy: How to Bridge Differences and Develop the Communication and Leadership Skills Our World Needs*. State U of New York P, 2021.
WASSON, Sam. *Improv Nation: How We Made a Great American Art*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.
—. "Improv Nation – Sam Wasson." Sam Wasson. www.samwasson.com. Accessed 29 May 2023.
WILDERSON, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Combined Academic Publishing, 2010a.
—. "Wallowing in the contradictions." Interviewed by Percy Howard, *A Necessary Angel*, 9 July 2010b, percy3.wordpress.com/2010/07/09/frank-b-wilderson-"wallowing-in-the-contradictions"-part-1. Accessed 20 July 2023.
WINNICOTT, Donald W. *Playing and Reality*. Routledge, 2005.
WYNTER, Sylvia. "Toward the Sociogenic Principle." *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, edited by Antonio Gómez-Moriana and Mercedes Durán-Cogan, Routledge, 2001.
—. "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 257-337. Project MUSE, doi: 10.1353/ncr.2004.0015. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.

---

[1] I use the upper case for Human, Humanity, and Humanism when I refer to the cultural specificity of the modern subject, drawing attention to its status as a semiotically arbitrary and politically motivated discursive construct that can be historicized. Even though I am not interested in a universally applicable biological (or other) category with truth value, following Wynter (2003), I do not capitalize when I refer to "being human" as a praxis. In this logic, modern racialized Humanism is a culturally specific "genre" of being human (307).

Similarly, I capitalize Black, Blackness, and terms that include these words

to mark their reference to a discursive construct rather than an empirical existence, which is not to say that those do not reciprocally affect each other. I refer to a signifier created by white people that, in my usage, has no ontological or essentialist content value and denotes no empirical referent. Again, this is not to say that people racialized as Black (Nathaniel ~~Coleman~~'s formulation) are somehow unreal or that this racialization means nothing in reality—quite the contrary. It is a situated decision: as a white scholar, I am epistemologically restricted to analyzing the creation and functioning of the signifier, not those signified. I do not intend to make existential or ontological statements about what it might mean to live Blackness. I can, however, make such statements about whiteness, so I use lower case for white or whiteness.

2 Using terms like *enslaver* or *enslavism*, here borrowed from Broeck (2014), to denote white subjects today (or the regime that creates them) forces us to keep in mind and reckon with the longue durée or "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2008: 6), i.e., the many ways in which what is commonly framed as a historically distinct period in American history has been actively maintained and is still inhabited today—economically, politically, philosophically, libidinally.

3 Paul Sills (1927 – 2008) was one of the most influential improv coaches and producers, so the way he understood, described, and institutionalized improv greatly affects how it is perceived and performed today.

4 See, for example, Huizinga and Caillois, and of course, Schiller's Enlightened dictum that "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly Man when he is playing" (80). Contemporary treatments that link improv practice to democracy include Waisanen (2020) and Wasson (2017). The latter is advertised with an excerpt from a *Publisher's Weekly* review that reads, "Wasson makes a thoroughly entertaining case that improvisational comedy has 'replaced jazz as America's most popular art' and represents the best of democracy" (see Wasson's webpage). See Chapter 4.1, "Circulating aesthetics of vitalism" in Büch (2022) for a more thorough treatment of the complex but no less violent, abjective, and obliterative ways in which improv in general fashions itself after both the practice and the language of jazz improvisation while at the same time presenting itself as less "ethnic" and more "American."

5 Dewayne Perkins is an improviser and comedian. He has written for *The Break with Michelle Wolf* (2018, Netflix), *Saved by the Bell* (2021, Peacock), *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2021), and *The Amber Ruffin Show* (2021). His feature film *The Blackening* was theatrically released in 2023 and became a box office success (Lionsgate). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Perkins authorized the material used here via email on 7 October 2019.

6 David Pasquesi is an improviser, actor, and voice-over artist. The most recent of his many film and TV credits include *She-Hulk* (2022, Disney+), *Book of Boba Fett* (2021, Disney+), and *VEEP* (2013-19, HBO). Together with his partner TJ

Jagodowski, Pasquesi has been performing the award-winning fully improvised *TJ & Dave* show for many years. Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. The authorized material used here is drawn from a follow-up email exchange in October 2019.

7 Wilderson defines libidinal economy with Sexton as "the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious" (49), further arguing that "whiteness is parasitic because it monumentalizes its subjective capacity, its lush cartography, in direct proportion to the wasteland of Black incapacity" (2010: 45).

8 By *Humanistic play* I refer to play as a social practice that is culturally specific to modern Western Humanism rather than to an assumed anthropological constant.

9 Joel Boyd is an improviser, writer, and stand-up artist. His writing credits include *Hot Date* (2017, PopTV/Netflix), *Earth to Ned* (2020, Disney+), and *The Many Saints of Newark* (2021, HBO Max). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Boyd authorized the material used via email on 15 November 2019.

10 Hartman asks rhetorically: "If white independence, freedom, and equality were purchased with slave labor, then what possibilities or opportunities exist for the black captive vessel of white ideality?" (1997: 62)

11 Kimberly Michelle Vaughn is an improviser and actress. Her acting credits include *Chicago Med* (2019, NBC), *North of the 10* (2022, BET+), and *Unseen* (2023, Paramount). Our conversation took place in March 2015 in Chicago. Vaughn authorized the material used in this project via email on 8 October 2019.

12 Vaughn's "no" resonates all the more in an improv world that cherishes the agreement of the "yes, and-" principle, which advises the improviser to agree to what has previously been established ("yes") and then add more information or advance the scene in another way ("and"). Improvisers will state that the "yes, and-" rule still applies to the word *no* if it maintains the base reality of the scene and integrity of the character, but in this case, Vaughn's "no" forestalls the advancement of the scene at the moment of utterance, so even an apologetic reading would have to reckon with this moment of irritation.