

The Dissent of Man: Stephen Colbert and the Evolution of Recursive Parody

Jacob Alfredo Hutchison

A dissertation
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2018

Reading Committee:

O dai Johnson, Chair

Christine Harold

Stefka Mihaylova

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Drama

©Copyright 2018

Jacob Alfredo Hutchison

University of Washington

Abstract

The Dissent of Man: Stephen Colbert and the Evolution of Recursive Parody

Jacob Alfredo Hutchison

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Odai Johnson

School of Drama

The interactive character-driven television performances of late night political parodist Stephen Colbert, and the similarly interactive, similarly character-based performances of alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos have much in common stylistically, but are worlds apart in their goals and effects. Colbert deployed his parodic character to interrogate and reveal the ways those in power use public performance to distract and deceive the citizenry, while Yiannopoulos and others have adopted and adapted Colbert's tactics, using them to perpetuate those deceptions and to weaken public trust in any political claims.

Through an examination of these two figures, this dissertation tracks the evolution of a discursive tactic it terms "recursive parody": a satire that results from the sustained interactions between a parodic character and a non-fictional person. As a rhetorical and theatrical tool, recursive parody is simultaneously a response to and an accelerant of a

widespread social anxiety over the legibility of political intentions. Twenty-first century American citizens, constantly surrounded by performative speech acts, regularly experience this sociopolitical anxiety, which manifests as a grave uncertainty about the reliability of any claimed or perceived intention from any public figure. Consequently, American discursive spheres and publics have become fertile ground for parodies (and other speech acts) that make political intentionality a key part of the performance. This is because both the anxiety and the parody have developed in an environment in which intention is always in question.

Ultimately, no matter whether a particular act of recursive parody is meant to illuminate or to obfuscate, the cumulative effect of the form itself is societally destabilizing.

Recursive parody responds to uncertainty and instability by replicating them, and can thereby create a negative feedback loop: exacerbating intentionality anxieties, weakening the public trust in discourse, delegitimizing discourse, and eventually eroding the possibility of meaning itself.

Acknowledgments

I am gratefully indebted to the members of my reading committee, Odai Johnson, Christine Harold, and Stefka Mihaylova, without whose generous guidance and encouragement this project would not have been possible. Working with them has been a great privilege. I also am grateful to all of my colleagues, particularly Jyana Brown, Liz Coen, Jeanmarie Higgins, Sarah Marsh, and Sebastian Trainor. Their camaraderie has been a guiding light throughout the writing process. Without their readiness to read drafts and to discuss arguments, this project would have been greatly impoverished. I would like to acknowledge and thank the faculty and staff of the School of Drama, especially Sue Bruns. Thanks to all my friends and family, and to my parents, Don and Claudia.

Above all, my gratitude and love go to Raeanne and to Joris. You are my two favorite people, and it is a joy to have each of you in my life. Raeanne, you amaze me every day and I am excited to see what our future holds. Joris, you are a smart, thoughtful, and kind young man – I am proud of you.

This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it's a marvelous moral, I just happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

– Kurt Vonnegut

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Stephen Colbert's Game of Truth	47
Chapter Two: Colbert Super PAC	111
Chapter Three: The Unframing of Milo Yiannopoulos	161
Conclusion: Putting the Coarse in Public Discourse	239
Bibliography	251

Introduction

He was a larger-than-life figure from a popular television program. Loud and arrogant, he defied convention and categorization, and now he was going to run for president. Or so he claimed, but the truth behind his professed intention was unclear – an uncertainty that sits at the heart of this dissertation. No single explanation for his candidacy seemed adequate. Perhaps his purported presidential aspiration was simply part of his self-promotional media strategy, a temporary posturing designed to further the cultural cachet of his personal brand and on-screen persona and to be discarded immediately once it outlasted its usefulness. One supposed that it was possible that he would actually mount a candidacy to raise awareness of his personal or political agenda, and that once he had gotten sufficient attention his campaign would be suspended and forgotten. Even his most devoted followers could not say for certain.

The candidate in question here is Stephen Colbert, a political parodist who attempted to get on the ballot in the 2012 South Carolina Republican Party primary election, but the reader will immediately see the parallels to the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in 2016. During his work on *The Daily Show* (1997-2005), Stephen Colbert developed his eponymous parodic character: a high-status, poorly-informed, vociferously opinionated conservative political commentator. This persona became the focus of Colbert's groundbreaking satirical television program *The Colbert Report* (2005-2014), which he hosted entirely in character. Donald Trump similarly has developed a public persona, partly through having appeared as himself for years on his own television program, *The Apprentice*. His successful

presidential campaign, like Colbert's parodic one, relied on his flamboyant personality and distinctive performance style. The parallels between Colbert and Trump are not coincidental. As the reader will see, they were both responding to cultural anxieties about intention, albeit in decidedly different ways. This study examines rhetorical tactics that combine parody with the real world, like Colbert's run for president, arguing that they are simultaneously a response to and an accelerant of the destabilization of interpreting intent in early twenty-first century America.

Intentionality Anxiety

In this dissertation I argue that American political satirist Stephen Colbert, while performing a parodic character also named Stephen Colbert, uses parodic interactions with real-world people and events to illuminate the many ways that people in power deceive the American public. Colbert's performances are particularly noteworthy because they help to lessen his audience's anxiety about the hidden intentions of the political figures that he targets. This is a marked contrast to the effects achieved by other satirists who deploy similar tactics for the opposite purpose: that of perpetuating the invisibility of real political intentions and thereby heightening anxiety about them. There is minimal technical difference in the performances of satire that achieve these dramatically disparate effects. The differences are so slight, in fact, that Colbert himself occasionally accomplishes the opposite of his aim. In this way, Colbert's style of political parody is simultaneously a response to and a catalyst for the destabilization of the public's perception of real political intent in American culture.

Political parody is one manifestation of an incessant public performance of intention that, along with the threat of terror attacks and the delegitimization of credible political discourse, has created a radical new uncertainty in interpreting intent. This uncertainty, fundamentally different from the inherent unknowability of intent, is fostering a cultural anxiety about intention, which I am calling intentionality anxiety. The uncertainties and anxieties about intention feed back on themselves, not only weakening our trust in discourse, but eroding the possibility of meaning itself. Every public utterance in our hyper-mediated internet-fueled discourse is subject to intense scrutiny, and every individual engaged in discourse, particularly online discourse, is relentlessly bombarded by speech acts of all kinds. The discursive space in which Americans learn about, discuss, and process important issues – that is, our public sphere¹ – encompasses a confounding range and quantity of material: news stories, opinion pieces, social media posts, blog entries, celebrity gossip, advertisements, internet comment sections, and other bits of speech and discourse, many of which update in real time, reference one another, and present to the audience a subjective view on objective reality, often while trying to obfuscate their subjectivity. The average American dedicates more mental processing to discerning true versus stated intentions than ever before, simply because we are surrounded by an ever-increasing number of speech acts to interpret. In 2004 science writer Hans Christian von Baeyer argued that humanity and its machine proxies had produced a greater quantity of information during the first three years of

¹ As articulated by sociologist Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is the discursive space where individuals discuss and process the important issues and ideas of the community. It is within this discursive space that public opinion is formed. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989). For fuller discussion of the model of the public sphere that I use in this project, see Chapter Two.

the new millennium than they had produced in the entirety of previous human existence.² Or, as arts and technology author Richard Wurman vividly encapsulated the idea: “a weekday edition of *The New York Times* contains more information than the average person [in seventeenth-century England] was likely to come across in a lifetime.”³ Several studies have attempted to quantify the data available to or consumed by contemporary Americans, and while there is not an agreed-upon standard for measurement, there is a consensus that the amount of information consumed is increasing and that the amount of information available is increasing even faster.⁴ The present moment is saturated with media and performance, producing a discursive environment in which participants are continuously evaluating the sources and intentions of all those speech acts and assessing how the intentions of their own speech acts will be perceived. In other words, the sheer volume of intentions to interpret has brought a heightened awareness of how

² Hans Christian von Baeyer, *Information: The New Language of Science* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 4.

³ Richard Wurman, *Information Anxiety 2* (Indianapolis: Que, 2001), 5.

⁴ In 2003, Berkeley-based information scientists Peter Lyman and Hal R. Varian conducted their second study attempting to measure newly created information. One of their primary findings was that creation of new information had increased by nearly a third annually since their first such study in 1999. Peter Lyman, Hal R. Varian, et al, “How Much Information? 2003” (October 2003), <http://groups.ischool.berkeley.edu/archive/how-much-info-2003/index.htm>. A study of information consumption based on 2008 data found that the average American over the age of two received nearly twelve hours of information, exclusive of work, and calculated an annual increase rate of 5.4% from 1980 to 2008. Roger Bohn and James Short, “Measuring Consumer Information,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 980-1000, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>. There is not consensus even on the units used to measure information consumption, since “each of these units of measurement emphasizes some aspects and silences others.” Martin Hilbert, “How to Measure ‘How Much Information’?: Theoretical, Methodological, and Statistical Challenges for the Social Scientist,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 1042-1055. There is general acknowledgement at least since the 1970s that the supply of data is increasing faster than data use – and that supply now vastly outstrips possible use. While “there might not be a technical limit on supply, [...] there are only twenty-four hours in a day – a clear-cut limit on individual consumption.” W. Russell Neuman, Yong Jin Park, and Elliot Panek, “Tracking the Flow of Information into the Home: An Empirical Assessment of the Digital Revolution in the United States, 1960-2005,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 1022-1041, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>.

intentions are performed in public. In this way the public performance of intent has become one of the central aspects of our discourse.

The threats of terror attacks and mass shootings has similarly brought an increased awareness of the performance of intentions in public. People in public spaces with murderous intentions are indistinguishable from everyday non-violent people who pose no threat. By concealing their plans to cause harm, they elude detection and are more likely to be able to carry out those plans. But because they are indistinguishable from other members of the public, they have an effect even more grievous than the bodily harm they cause. Despite its unlikelihood, the knowledge that terrorists or mass shooters might be with us in public drives us to evaluate the hidden intentions of each individual who shares our public spaces, and makes us aware that others are similarly evaluating us. Even more than the damage done by public attacks or the potential for such damage to occur without warning, the indistinguishability of the perpetrators of such violence from innocent civilians radically destabilizes our trust in public spaces and in those who inhabit them.

This dissertation aims to convince the reader of three things. First, that American citizens in the twenty-first century encounter intentions in media almost constantly, knowing that those speech acts are constructed to be consumed by particular publics and to have particular effects, and that a resultant anxiety about intention is a defining characteristic of twenty-first century American culture. Second, that the current state of the American public sphere is especially fertile ground for parody that incorporates this anxiety by making intent part of the performance. Third, that such parody can exacerbate intentionality anxieties by creating a negative feedback loop. While this can happen by accident even when

attempting to arm an audience to view political discourse and performed intentions with a critical eye, not all aggravation of intentionality anxiety is so benign. Both the parodic form of Stephen Colbert and the election of Donald Trump are simultaneously responses to and accelerators of intentionality anxiety. Colbert's work has brought the destabilization of the once-stable media environment and the increasing anxiety over intention into focus, but at the same time his signature tools have added to the instability and anxiety that he addresses.

The omnipresence of intentionality anxiety is reflected in unprecedented levels of public distrust in media and in public institutions. Surveys have reliably shown a steady decrease in trust of major public institutions and of one another. Gallup Research reports that Americans' "trust and confidence [...] in the mass media – such as newspapers, T.V. and radio – when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly" has fallen precipitously since they began surveying on the topic in 1972. In 1976, 72% of those polled expressed "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust. That level decreased to a bare majority, hovering between 51-55% through the late 1990s until 2003. Since 2003 public trust in mass media has declined further, to a low of only 32% in 2016.⁵ In 2017 that number had increased to 41%, but there was no change among self-identifying Republicans, only 14% of whom indicated any degree of trust in mass media to report news fully, accurately, and fairly.⁶ The public is demonstrably getting their news from non-traditional news media – for example, Pew Research found that over two-thirds of American adults

⁵ Art Swift, "Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low," *Gallup News*, September 14, 2016, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>.

⁶ Art Swift, "Democrats' Confidence in Mass Media Rises Sharply from 2016," *Gallup News*, September 21, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/219824/democrats-confidence-mass-media-rises-sharply-2016.aspx>.

consumed at least some news through social media – which has destabilized previously reliable journalistic standards, which in turn fuels further distrust.⁷

Trust in government has similarly receded. Pew Research found in 2015 that a record low of 19% of American surveyed “say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right ‘just about always’ (3%) or ‘most of the time’ (16%).”⁸ For comparison, the combined figure reached an all-time high of 77% in 1964, and climbed up through the late 1990s to a short-lived high of 60% immediately after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.⁹

Even the public’s trust in itself has evaporated. The non-partisan and objective research organization [NORC] at the University of Chicago has run the General Social Survey [GSS] since 1972 to monitor social changes and to facilitate the study of American society. In each survey they have asked about public trust with the question, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?” The data indicate an overall decrease in respondents’ trustfulness over time. From 1972-1986, 45% of those polled expressed trust in others. This number has trended lower and lower, reaching only 34% in the years 2006-2016.¹⁰

⁷ Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2017,” *Pew Research Center*, September 7, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/>.

⁸ Pew Research Center, “Beyond Distrust: How Americans View Their Government,” November 2015, <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/>, 18.

⁹ *Ibid*, 18-19.

¹⁰ NORC at the University of Chicago, “Can People Be Trusted?” General Social Survey Data Explorer, <https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/variables/441/vshow>.

The decline in general trust of others is mild when compared to Pew Research's findings about Americans' trust in their own collective political wisdom. In 1964, Gallup asked respondents:

In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions? A very great deal, a good deal, not very much, or none at all?

Of those who expressed any opinion, 79% had a good deal or a very great deal of trust and confidence in their fellow citizens' political wisdom. Pew posed the same question in some of their more recent surveys. As late as 1997, a combined 64% had a very great or good deal of such confidence. By 2007 that number had dropped somewhat, to 57%. The results in 2015 reveal a catastrophic decline in the American peoples' confidence and trust in their own collective political wisdom, with only 34% of respondents selecting a very great or good deal, and a combined 63% telling pollsters that they had either "not very much" confidence in the American public or "none at all."

Mistrust of and lack of confidence in one's fellow human beings is not a uniquely twenty-first century phenomenon. In René Descartes' *Meditations*, the philosopher argues that the only known truth is that nothing is certain. He postulates the example of watching passers-by from a window.

[Take the] instance of human beings passing on in the street below, as observed from a window. In this case I do not fail to say that I see the men themselves, [...]; and yet what do I see from the window beyond hats and cloaks that might cover artificial machines, whose motions might be determined by springs? But I judge that there are human

beings from these appearances, and thus I comprehend, by the faculty of judgment alone which is in the mind, what I believed I saw with my eyes.¹¹

Descartes' epistemological solipsism casts doubt on the personhood of the figures outside. They appear to be human, they claim human identity by dress and behavior, and Descartes, sitting at his writing desk, perceives them to be human. But no evidence exists which can objectively prove their personhood to Descartes; no matter how like human beings these figures are, accepting them as such requires belief in the accuracy of his senses and of his cognitive judgment.¹²

Modern social and political worlds hinge on a similar uncertainty. Political figures speak in ways that make discerning their true intention difficult; even when one seems clear, their statements are not always founded in truth. Of course, the potential disjuncture between a person's self-performance and their actual intentions has always existed, but in our hyper-mediatized world there is more self-performance than ever – every event and appearance of any moderately important social or political figure is staged to a greater or lesser degree – and so there is more anxiety about what lies behind those crafted images.

While performed and perceived intentions are relevant to the development and cultural importance of Stephen Colbert's parody, it is important at the outset to acknowledge the basic fact that intention is unknowable. In no way does this project

¹¹ René Descartes, "Meditation II," in *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy of Descartes*, trans. John Veitch (New York: Tudor, 1901), 232, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/descartes-the-method-meditations-and-philosophy-of-descartes>.

¹² The central question of this thought experiment – how can one determine with certainty the humanity of others – takes on a very different sheen when artificial machines can and do take the shape of human beings, and take on human personae in textual or spoken communications. The question then becomes not only how to determine humanity, but also how to identify it and how to define it.

attempt to identify, discern, or differentiate real intentions from stated ones, nor does it suggest that such a task can be accomplished. Instead it argues that the everyday public performance and perception of intention, due to this indeterminateness, has become a source of a pervasive anxiety of twenty-first century American life.

In every interaction with others, whether mediated or in person, one must navigate the possible disjuncture between individuals' stated intention and their actual goals. The persistent awareness of potential deception and the constant vigilance and effort expended to discern true intentions cause intentionality anxiety. This anxiety is not new, but it is newly central to typical lived experiences. Average citizens in today's world are put into contact with orders of magnitude more mediated speech, and thus more performed and disguised intent, than ever before in human history. Intentionality anxiety has a uniquely influential role in the twenty-first century American context at least partly because of three phenomena central to twenty-first century American culture: the overwhelming quantity of public discourse as discussed above, the threat of terrorism, and the delegitimization of credible political discourse.

The specter of terrorism is one important way in which the unknowability of intent has become central to American culture at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The September 11, 2001 terror attacks caused a significant increase in Americans' awareness of asymmetrical warfare and the potential for such attacks. Insofar as terrorism has discernible goals, the stress created by the possibility of violence in public and the fear that an attack can come from any person at any time

are among them.¹³ The unsettling effects of the ongoing threat of organized terror are exacerbated by the peculiarly American domestic terrorist tactic of mass shootings, many of which have no clear motivation.¹⁴ Every day we carry with us the certain knowledge that integrated amongst and indistinguishable from the innocent people who surround us in public may be people who are planning deadly attacks, and it is this mistrust, rather than the potential violence, that rattles the public's confidence in one another.

Another major influence in the increasing role of intent in the public sphere has been the American right's devastatingly effective tactic of discrediting public political discourse. Claims that media from television news to print journalism has a liberal bias has fueled conservative activism at least since William F. Buckley in the 1960s. This tactic of "working the ref" — that is, complaining about every call that goes against your team in the hopes that the referee will be more lenient with you in future — has recently evolved from a way to extort more favorable coverage (and to explain away any unfavorable coverage) into an aggressive delegitimization of any and all otherwise credible news sources, as documented by media critic and historian Eric Alterman.¹⁵ The result is that for an increasing segment of the population the ideal of journalistic principles, which hitherto guarded over the facts of the public

¹³ Political scientist John Mueller observes that terror remains a persistent internalized fear, with as many as a third of Americans expressing concern about becoming a victim of terrorism themselves, despite the astronomically low probability. The exaggerated fears caused by the perceived threat of terrorism, in Mueller's view, makes moderate political action less possible, and creates a political atmosphere in which policies compete to address a minimal danger with increasing harshness. "Reacting to Terrorism," in *Coping with Terrorism*, eds. Rafael Reuveny and William R. Thompson (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2010), 369-383.

¹⁴ Mother Jones magazine reported that there were 48 mass shootings between 2006 and 2012. The investigation defined mass shooting as incidents in which a single perpetrator killed four or more victims in a public location. Mark Follman, Gavin Aronsen, and Deanna Pan, "A Guide to Mass Shootings in America," *Mother Jones*, July 20, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/07/mass-shootings-map>.

¹⁵ Alterman, *What Liberal Media?* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

sphere, have no authority. Media activists of the American far right have framed every public statement and action of their ideological opponents as corrupt, and have attempted to discredit journalistic coverage of their opponents as equally corrupt politically motivated lies. This activist work is done every day on television and radio by such figures as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, and by Trump administration officials like Kellyanne Conway and the press secretary du jour. The media bias and corruption narrative became big business for the publishing industry in the early 2000s, with the publication of seminal books by Bernard Goldberg and Ann Coulter, and similarly combative defenses by liberal authors like Al Franken. There have been scores of similar political tomes on the *New York Times* bestseller lists since 2003.¹⁶ With this the case, all discourse becomes a battle to establish intent — one’s own, and one’s opponents’. Terrorism brings the safety of physical public spaces into question, and the delegitimization of news media raises uncertainty about the integrity of discursive public spaces.

One significant result of the delegitimization of journalism has been the mainstreaming of conspiracy theorizing. When no source is perceived as reliable, alternate explanations can thrive. Conspiracy theories are not a new phenomenon — *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has been used in anti-Semitic propaganda for

¹⁶ The prototype for these books was S. Robert Lichter, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter, *The Media Elite* (Bethesda MD: Adler and Adler, 1986), and the standard was set by Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2001) and Ann Coulter, *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (New York: Crown, 2002), and Al Franken, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* (New York: Plume, 2003). More recent entries in the same vein include Bernard Goldberg, *A Slobbering Love Affair: The True (and Pathetic) Story of the Torrid Romance Between Barack Obama and the Mainstream Media* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2009), Ben Shapiro, *Primetime Propaganda: The True Hollywood Story of How the Left Took Over Your TV* (New York: Broadside, 2011), James O’Keefe, *American Pravda: My Fight for Truth in the Era of Fake News* (New York: St. Martins, 2018), Kirsten Powers, *The Silencing: How the Left is Killing Free Speech* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 2015), and Sharyl Attkisson, *The Smear: How Shady Political Operatives and Fake News Control What You See, What You Think, and How You Vote* (New York: Harper, 2017).

over a hundred years — but in the past twenty years they have become an integral part of American politics. Political scientist Brendan Nyhan’s work on misinformation and motivated reasoning has found that perceived scandal is both a cause and an effect of partisan mindset, and that increased party polarization could be a cause of the apparent increase in presidential scandals over time.¹⁷ The Clinton presidency was plagued with scandal, at least some of which was entirely the product of the kind of unabashed say-anything tactics, personified by conservative provocateur and radio host Rush Limbaugh.¹⁸ In the years following the September 11, 2001 terror attacks an online cottage industry sprang up, offering conspiratorial explanations for the events of that day.¹⁹

The feedback loop caused by conspiracy theories wears down the authority of truth. One effect of conspiracy theories in discourse is the delegitimization of authoritative factual explanations of evidence. Once trust in authoritative factual explanations is weakened, alternates like conspiracy theories can thrive. Historian Richard Hofstadter’s work on conspiracy in American politics, which he calls “the paranoid style,”²⁰ raises the concern that the nonrational behavior of populist

¹⁷ Brendan Nyhan, “Strategic Outrage: The Politics of Presidential Scandal,” PhD diss., Duke Univ., 2009, ProQuest (304873807), iv.

¹⁸ Part of the right-wing strategy was to bring up so many allegations against President Clinton that, regardless of their truth or staying power, Clinton would have to expend a lot of his energy fighting them. As early as 1989, Republican operative Lee Atwater began preparing for the possibility of Bill Clinton’s presidential candidacy, telling allies, “We’re going to [...] throw everything we can think of at Clinton — drugs, women, whatever works. We may or may not win, but we’ll bust him up so bad he won’t be able to run again for years.” Joe Consason and Gene Lyons, *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2001), 3.

¹⁹ The 9/11 conspiracies ranged from gross incompetence by the Bush administration in preventing the attacks, to the administration’s malign complicity, to a wide-ranging conspiracy that involved planting explosives in the World Trade Center towers. Legal scholar Mark Fenster provides analysis of these and other American conspiracy theories. Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 2008).

²⁰ Style is, “above all, a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself” that is concerned with “the way in which ideas are believed and advocated rather than with the truth or falsity of their content.” Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style In American Politics, and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf,

movements would fracture the legitimacy of consensus.²¹ But it is not only populist movements that are nonrational, and not only the politically unsophisticated who are affected. Fully half of American adults subscribe to at least one conspiracy theory, which by definition does not have conclusive evidence.²² Perhaps even more surprisingly, when individuals evaluate contrary arguments about contentious political issues, it is those with the highest levels of political sophistication whose attitudes are most strongly polarized.²³

Conspiracy theories raise a second question of intent: whether the people disseminating them truly believed in their stories, or had some other motive. One of the most successful 9/11 conspiracy theorists, Alex Jones, has professed a belief that the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School was entirely staged by the federal government as a pretext to confiscate citizens' guns.²⁴ Whether or not Jones truly believed this, it was an undeniably effective way to shift the conversation away from the tragedy and to put gun control advocates on the defensive. Perhaps even more to the point, the publicity and notoriety generated by Jones' claims helped him attract a large following, which has made him quite wealthy. This performative aspect of conspiracy theory belief may overlap with satire, as many of those who

1965), 4-5.

²¹ "Consensus is, in other words, the limited field within and upon which any (thus limited) conflict takes place; it does not play the role of a general theory that functions outside of historical context and circumstance, but instead works best as a measure of the degree of legitimacy and acceptance a political system or specific issue achieves among 'the politically active public.'" Richard Hofstadter, *The Progressive Historians* (New York: Knopf, 1968), 452-53.

²² J. Eric Oliver and Thomas Wood, "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014) 952-966.

²³ Charles Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006), 760-1.

²⁴ Jones has claimed that this shooting was a "fake massacre" several times, even when pressed on the issue during the 2016 election, when his support for Donald Trump brought more attention to his views. Alex Jones, "Alex Jones' Final Statement on Sandy Hook," *InfoWars* (blog), November 18, 2016, <http://www.infowars.com/alex-jones-final-statement-on-sandy-hook/>.

promote them – including Jones – have made claims that their on-air performances are a kind of satire.

Successful conspiracy theories are collaborative projects and are never at rest. Instead, they grow more complex as participants in the public sphere add to the collective narrative – a dynamic exponentially accelerated by internet communications. Thus, one useful tactic for aspiring weavers of conspiratorial narratives is to make allegations against the supposed conspirators regardless of their plausibility and let the marketplace of ideas decide which accusations survive. This tactic came further into the mainstream in the 2004 presidential election. Until then, the authoritative and factual story of Democratic Party nominee Senator John Kerry was that he was a Purple Heart veteran who used his lived experiences to speak out against the war when he returned from Vietnam. With no evidence whatsoever, a Political Action Committee named “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” alleged that John Kerry had faked his heroics and sabotaged the war effort. Through what political journalist and media analyst Farhad Manjoo describes as “reality shifting” – that is, by arguing a non-disprovable interpretation of events, regardless of evidence and provable facts – the Swift Boat campaign redefined Senator Kerry for a non-negligible portion of the electorate in a way that proved difficult for the Kerry campaign to counteract effectively.²⁵

The triumph of the 2004 “swiftboating” of Senator Kerry foreshadowed a rise in the political use of transparently untrue rumors in mainstream media. Beginning in the 2008 presidential election, the allegation that Barack Obama was born in

²⁵ Farhad Manjoo, *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-fact Society* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 27-38.

Kenya, and so was not a natural-born American citizen and therefore was ineligible to be president, has been widely circulated. It spread rapidly, retold by Obama's political opponents for its agitprop value and by his supporters as a kind of self-evident satire. Absurd as it seemed, this story threatened to become a plausible alternative reality in the minds of a significant portion of the public. One explanation for the enthusiasm with which these transparently untrue rumors were embraced by some of his political opponents – and for his supporters' defensiveness about them – was the triumphant success of the virtually identical strategy four years earlier against Senator John Kerry. The tactics of what one might punningly call the Jonathan Swift Boat Veterans' *Modest Proposal* were devastatingly effective in 2004; it is hardly surprising that the opponents of the 2008 Democratic Party candidate for president would attempt to replicate that successful rebranding.²⁶

Enough doubt was sown during the 2008 election and through Obama's first few years in office that a 2011 Gallup poll showed that twenty-four percent of Americans believed – or claimed to believe – that the president had “definitely” or “probably” not been born in the United States.²⁷ The iterations of demands for the “real” birth certificate reached a zenith with Donald Trump's brief tenure atop the field of candidates in the 2012 Republican primary election, when he openly called for the president to provide his “long-form” birth certificate from the state of Hawai'i. As soon as the Obama campaign got the state of Hawai'i to release a

²⁶ By August of 2008, one of the primary funders of the SBVFT ad campaign backed a similar ad buy, attempting to solidify an alleged link between Senator Obama and Bill Ayers, a former member of the Weather Underground and a rehabilitated domestic terrorist.

²⁷ Frank Newport, “Americans' Beliefs About Obama's Birth,” *Gallup News* (blog), 27 April 2011, <http://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/169724/americans-beliefs-obama-birth.aspx>.

certified copy of this document, Trump's 2012 campaign collapsed.²⁸ Whether this was a sincerely held belief is almost immaterial, because the existence of the rumor served to delegitimize Obama's presidency regardless.

I emphasize that twenty-four percent of polled Americans *claimed* to believe in Obama's foreign birth, even as late as 2011, because this narrative was a site of partisan struggle. Whichever of these two competing versions of reality a voter claimed to subscribe to had become more important as a performance than as a genuinely held belief. I suggest that there were many individual voters who recognized the patent and absurd falsity of the non-American Obama conspiracy theory who nevertheless responded affirmatively to polls asking whether they believed it. This weaponization of feigned belief made questioning Obama's citizenship or religion an act of political protest. As with terrorism, this tactic makes those who would intentionally inflict harm on the public sphere indistinguishable from innocent (albeit tragically uninformed) people.

The momentary capstone on the tactics of fact-denial, delegitimization, and conspiracy spinning has spelled success for Donald Trump. One wonders whether voting for Trump was in this way akin to claiming to believe that President Obama had been born in Kenya. Did at least some people vote for Trump not because they actually believed that he should be president, but because it was the clearest, most visible protest they could make against progressive politics? The intent of any individual Trump voter is inscrutable, to say nothing of a national intent, but it may be productive to discuss the performative aspects of supporting or claiming to

²⁸ See Jaclyn Howell, "Not Just Crazy: An Explanation for the Resonance of the Birther Narrative," *Communication Monographs* 79, no. 4, 2012 (428-447) for a more detailed look at the "birther" movement.

support a cause or candidate. At the time of his election and inauguration there was a profound uncertainty regarding Trump's intentions and policies as president. As a candidate, Trump tended not to deal with policy specifics, preferring to speak about issues broadly, bombastically, and often self-contradictorily. Trump has denied objective facts, ridiculed those who have opposed him, and made unverifiable allegations that can charitably be called fabrications. His campaign was the very essence of disguised intent for political gain. It may not be a coincidence that the 2016 election also saw a large number of false news stories shared broadly on Facebook and other online media.

The Trump campaign tapped into the two primary factors of intentionality anxiety: terror and delegitimization of discourse. By offering a strong response to terrorism, Trump appealed to and stoked Americans' uncertainty and fear. By positing himself as a corrective force set against a biased and dishonest media, Trump undermined any public discussion of his policies or his qualifications. After all, if his fabrications were frankly described as such, that was evidence for the news media's fundamental dishonesty, and if he was treated with kid gloves, that only showed how far the media failed on other occasions.

In a September 2016 article, journalist Salena Zito made a compelling observation about candidate Donald Trump's rhetoric and how he was interpreted by his supporters and by the media. She noted Trump's repeated claim that unemployment among black youth was at fifty-eight percent, a claim that is statistically true only if it counts full time high school and college students as unemployed. Zito characterized the responses to Trump's statement: "When he makes claims like this, the press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters

take him seriously, but not literally.”²⁹ In other words, at least some Trump supporters recognize that he is taking a performative stance, making claims that resonate emotionally even if they happen not to be factual. The failure of Trump’s critics, and of media coverage of his campaign and administration, has been to analyze Trump’s speech purely as rational-critical discourse. The effectiveness of Trump’s rhetoric has little to do with its facticity, and much to do with its affective appeal. Trump communicated to his supporters in a way that did not depend on the literal, factual content of his words. The dynamic that Zito identifies raises the immediate questions of how one can tell whether to take a claim literally, and what it means to American discourse that such an obfuscatory tactic has been so successful. Because the performance of intention is so central to American political power, it is crucial to examine the critical tools that have developed to examine that performance.

Recursive Parody

I argue that Stephen Colbert’s signature form, which I call recursive parody, is simultaneously a response to and an accelerant of intentionality anxiety. Before I can explain how this is so, a description of this form is necessary. Recursive parody is a many-layered satire that results from sustained interactions between a parodic character and a non-fictional person or environment. While parody is a discrete product of satiric imitation of some target – an individual politician, a literary genre, a particular text – recursive parody emerges from a process of reincorporation. It repeatedly folds its target’s response to it into further parody, continually playing

²⁹ Salena Zito, “Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally,” *The Atlantic*, September 23, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>.

with, combining, and blurring the lines between parodic and authentic elements in the aftermath of the initial intervention.³⁰ As with all satire, the audience must interpret and differentiate the separate intentions of the performer and the character, but recursive parody also assimilates its non-fictional targets' intentions into the performance. In this way, recursive parody forces a target to participate in his or her own satiric critique.³¹ In Stephen Colbert's work this is achieved most clearly in his interviews with powerful cultural and political figures.

We have seen that the contemporary public sphere necessitates constant awareness and evaluation of intention, and that fully evaluating – or even being fully aware of – the intentions behind all speech in one's orbit is impossible because, in

³⁰ Here, by “authentic” I mean nothing more than “conveying the impression that the self expressed is substantially the same as the understanding of the self” – in other words, that the individual is being honest and not playing a character. Psychologists Michael D. Barnett and Jeremy T. Deutsch correlate authenticity with lower “discrepancies between the true self, the noticed self, and the expressed self.” “Humanism, Authenticity, and Humor: Being, Being Real, and Being Funny,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 91 (March 2016), 107. In terms of public persona, authenticity is the congruity of what one says to varying audiences. When counterposed with parody, authenticity is the congruity between the self as presented and the true self. As Amber Day articulates, this does not mean that parody cannot be authentic in the sense of substantively engaging in civic and social issues. *Satire and Dissent* (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011), 24-42.

³¹ Several scholars have done work on aspects of the relationship between satiric characters and the reality into which they are thrust. The scholar whose argument that most closely parallels mine is Jonathan Gray, who theorizes satire as part of a complex intertextuality. *Watching With “The Simpsons”* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 43-51. His concept of “indirect viewing” entails observing a text *through* the text of its parody. In this way, Gray concludes, the parody renders visible the contingent, interrelatedness of all meaning. Recursive parody similarly helps its audience to see what they might otherwise naturalize as the “real world” as a text. It does so not by indirectly viewing a text through its parody, but by directly viewing a text alongside a satiric character who navigates it, usually in real time. Other scholars have traced and theorized ways in which a satiric character can illuminate the larger world to an audience and how contemporary satiric forms function to construct public spheres and to influence public debate. Amber Day argues convincingly that satire is an effective way not only to talk about politics, but to interact with it. *Satire and Dissent*, 39-45, 53-71. An essential and influential aspect to Day's analysis is that the fragmentation and democratization of media has facilitated the use of irony to enter into public discourse. Uniquely among scholars, Jeffrey Jones establishes a dynamic fundamental to my analysis of recursive parody. *Entertaining Politics* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010) 185-204. This dynamic, which he calls the “‘real/unreal’ game,” challenges viewers to discern the interwoven threads of parody and reality. Gilbert Highet notes that any satiric impersonation of authority has the potential to transcend art and commentary and become a form of political action. *Anatomy of Satire* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962) 92-3. Joel Schechter builds on Highet's observation, marshaling examples of political parody that brings the legitimacy of authority and the credibility of narrative history into question. *Satiric Impersonations* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994) 2-5.

simple quantitative terms, an American in 2018 is confronted with a vastly greater number of speech acts than was the case fifty or one hundred years ago. Public discourse has achieved near-total penetration of daily American life, and the public's finite capacity for evaluating intent has been confronted with a limitless need for such adjudication. Our processing abilities are taxed by the sheer quantity of interpretive tasks and by the certain knowledge that in public, as we have seen, intention is performed strategically – often for commercial gain or for political effect. Because it is simultaneously central to our public politics and impossible to know, the uncertainty of these intentions is a pervasive source of anxiety. Recursive parody thrives in such an environment – and not only in one political camp, because, as theorist Linda Hutcheon observes and as is demonstrated in Chapter Three, irony can be used in support of any ideological position.³² Recursive parody not only responds to and thrives in, but also perpetuates and exacerbates, our culture of intentionality anxiety.

Because recursive parody plays in the space between claimed and hidden intentions, it reveals the distance between them, which lends it particular resonance to the intentionality anxiety of the present cultural moment. But because recursive parody contains the ambiguity of intent so characteristic of satire and because it repeatedly folds itself back into discourse, it can have the effect of aggravating intentionality anxiety. The intentionality anxiety of contemporary American life has eroded public trust in the institutions of democracy, including in public discourse. When it is not clearly interpretable as parody, recursive parody can accelerate this erosion of trust by manifesting multiple contradictory speech acts in political

³² Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 10.

discourse and obscuring their intentions. In this way recursive parody is doubly recursive: not only does it fold responses to it back into its performance, it reinscribes the very conditions to which it responds back into its performance. This creates a destructive harmonic resonance, a feedback loop in which recursive parody perpetuates and intensifies the condition of intentionality anxiety, which in turn increases the relevance of recursive parody.

While there are earlier examples of satire that could be described as recursive parody because of their looped repeated interactions with the real world — for example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the satiric newspaper letters of Ben Franklin, or the parodic pamphlets of Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift — recursive parody of the contemporary American public sphere is set in conversation with a cultural anxiety about intention that has quietly overwhelmed public life, and speaks to the structural and technological changes that have driven that anxiety. Recursive parody is not new, but new technologies have given it new powers. Recursive parody relies on a back-and-forth interaction between performer and audience. Social media's ability to gather an audience quickly through viral sharing and to facilitate instantaneous interactions between audience and performer make the current public sphere particularly hospitable to recursive parody. People were, it is true, able to share content before 2006, but social media's ability to share content in real time provides discourse with the critical mass of attention necessary to support the cascading chain reaction that is virality, the exponential online spread of ideas. This is what allows recursive parody to fold real-world reactions to it back into itself. It is the difference between radioactive decay over decades and the sustained nuclear fission that, in the blink of an eye, results in a massive explosion. The technology-driven increases in

the speed and connectivity of communications are undeniably changing how discourse is conducted, how participants in the public sphere interact, and how the public thinks about American political discourse. Contemporary recursive parody, seen in the work of Stephen Colbert, is indicative of those changes.

The case studies examined in this dissertation cover the years 2006-2016. This period saw long-simmering cultural tensions and technological disruptions erupt into a significant destabilization of intent. In these years new structures of the public sphere emerged, characterized by abrupt changes in media distribution and new types of connections between ideas and people. The timeline begins with Stephen Colbert's appearance at the 2006 White House Correspondents Association dinner. In his speech, Colbert used parody to confront then-President George W. Bush, who was in attendance, about his administration's performative style. For example, Colbert said of Bush:

I stand by this man. I stand by this man because he stands for things. Not only for things, he stands **on** things. Things like aircraft carriers and rubble and recently flooded city squares. And that sends a strong message: that no matter what happens to America, she will always rebound – with the most powerfully staged photo ops in the world.³³

This parodic praise took Bush's rousing speech in the fresh rubble of lower Manhattan in September of 2011, when Bush's popularity was highest, and fused it with two of the clearest examples of showmanship from Bush's presidency: the May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech aboard the USS Lincoln, and the president's

³³ Stephen Colbert, 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner, April 29, 2006, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?192243-1/2006-white-house-correspondents-dinner>, (51:32-1:15:14).

belated and benighted appearance in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Even though his reception in the dining hall was somewhat chilly, Colbert's speech resonated broadly with a national audience, magnified by the irony of a highly performative satirical character criticizing a political regime for its performativity. The speech was largely ignored or disparaged in press accounts the next day. Colbert's speech accumulated an audience in the days following the event because it was easy to share online thanks to the then-new video sharing website YouTube, where it accumulated a half million views in three days, and because it was easy for fans to find sympathetic groups with whom to share it.³⁴ The video was taken down for copyright reasons, but with C-SPAN's cooperation the audio was released as a download at the iTunes music store, where it was the bestselling audiobook of 2006.³⁵ Partly as a result of his speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, Colbert became an important figure for the American left's opposition to President Bush and, later, its support for President Obama.

The endpoint of the period covered in this project is the 2016 campaign and election of President Donald J. Trump. The Trump campaign unhitched the literal meaning of his words from the candidate's perceived intent. Trump's campaign strategies successfully took advantage of the American anxiety about intent, the performative conventions of celebrity-driven media, and the emerging discursive strategies to create an alternate narrative to mainstream political discourse. The Trump campaign and its supporters masterfully executed an escalated version of the strategy articulated by an anonymous Bush aide, who differentiated the "reality-

³⁴ Greg Sandoval, "Video of Presidential Roast Attracts Big Web Audience," May 3, 2006, <https://www.cnet.com/news/video-of-presidential-roast-attracts-big-web-audience/>.

³⁵ Heather Urbanski, *Writing and the Digital Generation: Essays on New Media Rhetoric* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2010), 91.

based community” of misguided journalists and intellectuals from the new imperial reality of the Bush administration.³⁶ Instead of engaging in a consensus reality, this aide explained, the administration would simply act, and through its actions would create new realities to which the reality-based community would have to adjust.

There are many contemporary politically-engaged satirists whose work mimics or parodies news broadcasts. Many, like Colbert, were protégés of Jon Stewart on the long-running program *The Daily Show* and may have drawn many of the same lessons from that experience: John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Larry Wilmore, and even Stewart’s chosen replacement, Trevor Noah. Even just among this cohort, the trend toward political satire as the basis for full-length shows that engage with current events emerges. Add to that list other late-night hosts whose work also addresses political and cultural issues in depth while maintaining a satiric stance, and the trend is clear. On *Late Night with Seth Meyers* the long time *Saturday Night Live* actor and writer devotes ten minutes or more to an in-depth examination of a single political issue at the outset of more episodes than not. John Oliver similarly devotes half of his hour-long weekly HBO program to bring attention to contentious issues that have been neglected or not fully explored in other popular venues. *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* has found great success by using the model that Stewart developed – creating a narrative story by collating and commenting on clips from news broadcasts – to interrogate the news media and American political discourse. While Larry Wilmore’s *The Nightly Show* did not receive the same ratings success as Bee or Oliver and was cancelled by Comedy Central after only two seasons, Wilmore’s work was every bit as sharp as theirs. He used his program to

³⁶ Ron Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.

tackle serious issues in much the same style as his peers and to host compellingly frank panel conversations about them.

Of all the contemporary satirists whose work is worth examining, it is in Colbert's work from 1997-2014 that one can see the development of recursive parody. From 2005 until 2014 *The Colbert Report* aired four nights a week, with comedian Stephen Colbert hosting the entire show in the role of an identically-named cable news opinion show host, in a parody of highly partisan personality-driven cable opinion-news programs — Fox News hosts Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity were the primary source-targets, and later Glenn Beck became a major influence. Colbert's on-screen persona — an affable, blithely ignorant, mildly belligerent and highly opinionated news-opinion show host, once described by an out-of-character Stephen Colbert as “a well-intentioned, poorly-informed, high-status asshole”³⁷ — unwittingly serves to critique his role in American media and his own politics. On the first episode of “The Colbert Report,” he introduced the term “truthiness,” a central organizing concept that provides a key insight into the Colbert character and the criticism of media that underlies it. Truthiness is a truth that feels correct, although it may not be supported by objective fact nor tied to discernible reality. The Colbert character was in this way a direct response to the anonymous Bush aide's repudiation of the “reality-based community,” and a prelude to the even more brazen Trump campaign.

Colbert maintains a clear and consistent fictive parodic character in productive conversation with the public sphere. His show was a major pillar of the disaffected American left, particularly after the Jon Stewart's retirement from *The*

³⁷ Gavin Edwards, “Colbert Country,” *Rolling Stone*, November 3, 2005.

Daily Show. Colbert's character made occasional and impactful appearances outside of the frame of his program, including in testimony to the U.S. Congress. Colbert is also the best contemporary example of a popular satirist playing deliberately with intention in a variety of ways in a setting that evokes live performance. *The Colbert Report* replicated theatrical immediacy by incorporating a live studio audience not only into the performance but into the fiction of the performance, and by staging Colbert's in-character interviews as theatrical performance. Other satirists play characters interacting with the real world, but not with the same high level of differentiation from self as Colbert. For example, Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* often affected hopefulness about the integrity of politicians, only to be disappointed, to the viewers' amusement. This optimism was performative, but nothing about it indicated a character named Jon Stewart who was significantly different from the "real" Jon Stewart. The Colbert character was significantly different from the perceived "real" Colbert. This disparity, part of a lineage that includes avant-garde performance artists like Andy Warhol, Andy Kaufman, and Alfred Jarry, brings into question the "reality" of any media figure and of performed and perceived intentions. Colbert's character forced a conversation about intent wherever he appeared.

Colbert introduced his audience to tools for engaging with culture that they might not have been using before. The American electorate is demonstrably getting news from comedy shows and other alternatives to traditional mainstream news sources. During the 2016 presidential campaign, a quarter of Americans surveyed reported having learned about the election from late night comedy programs in a

given week.³⁸ In a similar survey in 2014, ten percent reported having gotten news specifically from *The Colbert Report*.³⁹ Americans have not lost their connection with substantive news — rather, the ability to communicate across time and space in a way that fifty years ago was barely thinkable (and was utterly incomprehensible a century ago) has transformed both how citizens interact with news and what constitutes news. In both form and content, news media have been shaken to their core. Colbert’s contribution is bringing analytic tools into popular discourse that address some of the consequences of the new communications paradigm.

The Trump strategy did not operate on Colbertian truthiness, or at least not entirely. Nor was it quite lying. While truthiness relies on confirmation bias, in which one interprets reality in a way that never contradicts one’s existing beliefs, a liar’s orientation to truth is an intentional replacement of particular facts with non-facts. A liar cares deeply about the facts, even if he doesn’t want those facts known. A third possible orientation to truth, in which the speaker is indifferent to truth, is described by scholar of philosophy Harry Frankfurt as bullshit.⁴⁰ None of these quite captures the Trump campaign’s highly effective orientation towards facts and truth: outright hostility.

The Trump campaign’s most effective strategy was to shake the foundation of fact, to overwhelm consumers of media with such a volume of disinformation and contradictory claims that determining fact has become an impossible task for many citizens. The effect was not so much to obfuscate particular facts as to create an

³⁸ Jeffrey Gottfried et al, “The 2016 Presidential Campaign – a News Event That’s Hard to Miss,” *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/02/04/the-2016-presidential-campaign-a-news-event-thats-hard-to-miss/>, 7.

³⁹ Amy Mitchell et al, “Political Polarization and Media Habits,” *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>, 66.

⁴⁰ Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005).

environment in which the existence of any objective fact was cast in doubt. Trump had annihilated Aristotelian Logos from American political rhetoric, destroying the possibility of American citizens engaging in politics on the basis of truth. Individuals in such a situation might give up on evaluating comparing truth-claims on their merits and instead rely on political identification to decide who to trust. By transforming politics from a question of truth into a question of allegiance, the Trump strategy advances the tribalization of American citizens' participation in politics.

This Dissertation within Contemporary Scholarship

The political satires of Stephen Colbert, of his erstwhile colleagues Jon Stewart, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and Larry Wilmore, and similarly situated satiric performers, are addressed by an increasing number of scholars in an increasing array of academic fields. These scholars' works rely, of course, on a deep lineage of thought on the subject of satire – a lineage which is explored more fully in Chapter One. In this section I will briefly overview a few of the ideas developed in this current scholarship that intersect with or that will be expanded on in the following pages.

Media and journalism scholar Geoffrey Baym writes about the merging of news and entertainment. Baym insists that the boundaries between “legitimate” news programming and satiric news parodies are breaking down, perhaps irretrievably. We are witnessing, he argues, the demolition of the network age, effected first through the multiplication of television channels, and continued through the socialization of media. The post-network age is characterized by

“discursive integration”: the increasing porousness of boundaries, leading to the hybridization of all content.⁴¹ This hybrid content is essentially what Amber Day, a scholar of satire and political performance, calls “emergent genres,” which are constantly appearing as new forms. Day discusses an array of these hybrids to convincingly insist that a more generative, more vibrant discourse is emerging from satiric discourse than from traditional “serious” outlets.⁴²

Baym’s integration of genres is influenced by the work of Jeffrey Jones, who is himself influenced powerfully by Henry Jenkins’ media and culture criticism. Any current discussion of media technology must include *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, in which Jenkins articulates his model of media convergence: an in-flux state in which media contents, systems, and agents collide and coexist. Convergence – an ongoing process rather than a particular structure – results in media content that transcends channel, device, time, and location. The public sphere, one immediately grasps, is not merely changing its location or method of transmitting ideas.⁴³ Rather, it is shedding any need for particular location, and its limitation to any specific form.

What Jenkins terms the “convergence” of media overall is a critical and specific product of satire: by pulling unconnected ideas together, satire breaks down barriers between genres. Through this quality, and its playfulness, satire can also foster community building – a key effect of media convergence, as Amber Day and

⁴¹ Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication* 22, no. 3, 262.

⁴² Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 2.

⁴³ Social theorist Michael Warner has offered a further development of Habermas’ model. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner rejects a settled, monolithic public sphere; in its place, he suggests a field – a network, one might say – of overlapping discursive communities constantly in motion. And of course, the more easily these discursive communities can move and interact, the more fluid is the network of the public sphere.

communication scholar Christine Harold have both observed.⁴⁴ Owned culture and the ossification of expression, Harold argues, can be countered through the uncontrolled decentralized community-building power of group satiric performance, such as subversive culture jamming and pranking.⁴⁵ One example, briefly noted by literature scholar Sophia McClennan, is the phenomenon of the “Colbert Nation” community.⁴⁶ “Colbert Nation” started as a fictional audience identity that Colbert occasionally referred to. It was given existence by Colbert’s actual television audience, who reciprocated and furthered Colbert’s performance. Colbert spoke about this in an out-of-character interview with *Rolling Stone*’s Neil Strauss in 2009:

STRAUSS. It's interesting how by joking about the Colbert Nation, you made it exist.

COLBERT. Yeah, they want in on the fun. That was something we didn't expect, because we joked about the Colbert Nation and then we said, "Oh shit, it's real." That's an interesting thing, and that's another improvisational aspect — that discovery is better than invention. We invented the Colbert Nation, but then we discovered it was real. We didn't make it happen, they self-organized it. I love that relationship. We can't always have it, and you can't force that. You just have to

⁴⁴ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 145-46.

⁴⁵ The spontaneous creation of these communities is not so much a special property of satire or (for lack of a better word) fun: it is a natural result of increasing the fluidity of the discursive network. Communities centered around an ironic figure or idea are not new – the Dadaists, Guy Debord’s Situationist International, and Abby Hoffman and the Yippies are three such communities spanning the past century. The factor that gives more recent ironic communities more influence is largely technological. Instead of relying on firsthand audiences or print newspaper coverage or mimeographed manifestos, Billionaires for Bush can enlarge its community and its social footprint through online video sharing and small mentions in countless blogs and social media feeds. The potential audience, and thus the discursive community, is thus exponentially larger. Christine Harold, *OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007), 2-7, 87-92, 113-116.

⁴⁶ Sophia McClennan, *Colbert’s America* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 156-7.

acknowledge it. We're always planting seeds with the show, and the challenge is, will we notice when a flower blooms, and then pick that flower? [...] Our actions plant seeds, and then we'll go, "Oh look, someone responded to that in a way we hadn't intended, let's acknowledge that." Because the game is in the acknowledgement of their acceptance — that's what's improvisational about it.⁴⁷

The back-and-forth dynamic that Colbert describes between the performer and the audience, in which both entities collaboratively contribute to building a parodic reality, is the core of what is meant by recursive parody. By getting “in on the fun,” Colbert’s audience catalyzed the interactions between Colbert’s parodic character and the outside world. Colbert would perform in character, and the audience would take action in the world external to *The Colbert Report*, magnifying the performance’s impact. For example, Colbert instigated one of his most effective and insidious audience-participation events on the July 31, 2006 episode. He posited that what he termed “wikiality” was fast becoming the dominant paradigm of the kind of “information management” that the Bush administration was then using to insinuate that ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein had possessed weapons of mass destruction despite all evidence indicating the contrary – in other words, propaganda.⁴⁸ The exemplification of this new paradigm, per Colbert, was Wikipedia, the free user-edited online encyclopedia. Colbert praised the new paradigm and exhorted the Colbert Nation into action:

⁴⁷ Stephen Colbert, interview by Neil Strauss, “Stephen Colbert on Deconstructing the Colbert Nation,” *Rolling Stone*, September 2, 2009, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/stephen-colbert-on-deconstructing-the-news-religion-and-the-colbert-nation-20090902>.

⁴⁸ Stephen Colbert, “The Wørd: Wikiality,” *The Colbert Report*, July 31, 2006, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/z1aahs/the-colbert-report-the-word---wikiality>.

[On Wikipedia] any user can change any entry, and if enough other users agree with them, it becomes true. [...] If only the entire body of human knowledge worked this way. And it can, thanks to tonight's word: Wikiality. [...] We should apply these principles to all information. [...] What we're doing is bringing democracy to knowledge. [...] If you go against what the majority of people perceive to be reality, you're the one who's crazy. [...] Find the entry on elephants in Wikipedia, and create a page that says the number of elephants has tripled in the last six months.⁴⁹

His viewers did just that, editing many of Wikipedia's references on elephants to reflect this fictional population explosion. Wikipedia's volunteer editors corrected, recorrected, and eventually had to lock the affected pages, and the surge in activity crashed the site's servers.⁵⁰

Another work that is foundational to this project is Jeffrey Jones' *Entertaining Politics*, which traces the techniques and influences of three television programs, including *The Colbert Report*. Jones identifies a fundamental dynamic of *The Colbert Report* that this dissertation explores further. Jones observes that Colbert challenges his viewers "to keep up with the moving shell game of 'truth.'" Jones calls this the "real/unreal" game.⁵¹ This game asks viewers to question Colbert's construction of reality, and to read the political talk shows that Colbert is reconstructing through the lens of his parody. This is precisely what television and

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Melissa McNamara, "Stephen Colbert Sparks Wiki War," *CBS News* (blog), August 8, 2006, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/stephen-colbert-sparks-wiki-war/>.

⁵¹ Jeffrey Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Rowman: Lanham, 2010), 18.

pop-culture scholar Jonathan Gray describes as “indirect viewing.” In his 2006 book, *Watching with “The Simpsons,”* Gray assesses the long-running cartoon sit-com with particular note of its satiric play with form. There is a Bakhtinian intertextuality created through what Gray terms “indirect viewing,” or the critical analysis involved in observing some text *through* the text of a/its parody. Because all meaning is inescapably interdependent, satiric play with the web of meaning destabilizes the appearance of permanence, and the power, of the primary text. For Gray, parody is active: by “watching with *The Simpsons*,” the viewer examines a host of cultural tropes and structures through the lens of their parodies.⁵²

To speak of satire as a component in a discursive system, to discuss the effect of technology on satire, or to examine the structure of satire all have a function in this project, but equally important to this work is the human element of satire. The real/unreal game that Colbert practices forces any analysis of his work to account for the very human element of intention. Several scholars have recognized a blurring or changing of intent behind satire. Amber Day describes the tone of satiric activist Reverend Billy, whose protests and faux church services clothe earnest concern for humanity in a parodic form, as “ironic authenticity,” a simultaneous play(ing-with) and sincerity.⁵³ The Church of Stop Shopping, led by Reverend Billy and featuring a robed choir, challenges its audience to disentangle the sincere anti-consumerist proselytizing from the parodic presentation – a genuine challenge for the audience, whether they happened across a Church of Stop Shopping protest service in a public space, or attended a performance of the church’s service at a theater.

⁵² Gray, *Watching with “The Simpsons,”* 4-9, 45-6.

⁵³ Day, *Satire and Dissent*, 178-182.

In his 2006 study *Cracking Up*, communications scholar Paul Lewis uses the term “intentional humor” to describe the work of those who seek to accomplish something beyond amusement with their comedy.⁵⁴ Lewis’ examination of intention in political satire and comedy includes Stewart and Colbert, but also Rush Limbaugh, a bellicose talk-radio host, and Jay Leno, a highly commercialized late night talk show host who insisted to his writers and to his audience that his political jokes should and did remain free from any discernable editorial stance. Despite claims of non-intentionality by these figures – in Lewis’ shorthand, their claims of “only kidding” – Lewis draws on several empirical studies to argue that, though the intentions of a particular joke or comedian may be indeterminable, the effect of accumulated jokes is observable.⁵⁵ The deflection that one is “only kidding” is a denial of the existence of an impact, whether it is Leno denying that he has any meaningful impact because his jokes are supposedly without political agenda, or talk radio host Rush Limbaugh denying that inaccurate or misleading statements in his spiel are anything but joking. This tactic now has a place in the Oval Office. During the 2018 State of the Union Address, Democratic members of Congress in attendance frequently sat in stony, unresponsive silence while their Republican colleagues applauded President Trump’s speech, a longstanding custom for whichever party is in opposition. Speaking to a crowd of supporters at a public event few days later, Trump characterized the Democrats’ behavior as “un-American” and

⁵⁴ This may be related to what renowned pioneer of psychology Sigmund Freud, in his analysis of jokes and humor, called “tendentious jokes”: those jokes which, under the guise of the enjoyment they afford through their technique, also allow socially unacceptable hostile, aggressive or sexual impulses to be expressed. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1960).

⁵⁵ Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006) 157-159, 122-123.

“treasonous.”⁵⁶ When asked about it by reporters, a White House spokesman dismissed any misgivings: “The president was obviously joking.”⁵⁷ Intent may not be certain in any of these cases, but the existence of impact – though, Lewis is careful to observe, not persuasion – is undeniable.

Political communications researcher Heather LaMarre points out that the kinds of work that Jeffrey Jones, Geoffrey Baym, Amber Day, and other scholars have done on the influence of the Colbert Super PAC project on his audience have not been subjected to quantifiable study. “Such conjecture,” she argues, “has yet to be empirically tested, leaving open the question as to whether Colbert’s super PAC parody significantly influences audiences’ issue knowledge or opinions.”⁵⁸ Here LaMarre has very clearly stated the objective of almost every empirical study on Colbert: to confirm or quantify the effect of his satire on individuals. If this is remotely possible, it is probably worthwhile, even though the totality of discourse cannot be meaningfully measured. One wonders if the centuries-old debate on the nature of the effect of satire on its audience is expanding to include an equally unresolvable debate over whether said effect can be observed and measured.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jessica Taylor, “Trump: Democrats 'Un-American,' 'Treasonous' During State Of The Union,” *NPR News*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/05/583447413/trump-democrats-un-american-treasonous-during-state-of-the-union>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Heather LaMarre, “When Parody and Reality Collide: Examining the Effects of Colbert’s Super PAC Satire on Issue Knowledge and Policy Engagement Across Media Formats,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), 395.

⁵⁹ The effects of satire on culture and discourse are notoriously difficult or impossible to measure. Satire can potentially affect either individuals or the totality of discourse, or both, or neither. Effects on individuals can be isolated and measured, which is why social scientists have focused on measuring these individual effects through observation and experimentation. These studies have provided any number of interesting results, but Colbert’s impact on the totality of discourse is not measurable – discourse is much too vast and has far too many variables to quantify meaningfully. Over the past few decades, empirical studies have researched this aspect of satire. Quantitative examination does not and cannot give a full picture of satire’s total effect.

Amber Day has documented how Colbert's work leads to news coverage of the subjects of his critique, as well as about the character himself – resulting in articles and discussions that would not have existed without Colbert's parodies. She argues:

[Colbert's Super PAC] project has had a marked effect on the larger cultural conversation, through both traditional journalistic reportage and the ensuing popular cultural discussion. [...] If we believe that anything is to be gained from political debate and discussion (and indeed, the idea of deliberative democracy is predicated on it), then it would follow that increased access to information and broader terms of debate work toward a richer, more informed conversation.⁶⁰

Day is only one of a number of scholars who have observed that Colbert's satiric projects instigate wider discussion of their targets. As Day, Jeffrey Jones, and Geoffrey Baym have written: "Colbert is literally performing the debate. [...] By performing the process, therefore, Colbert has been able to spark wider interest and reaction from the political and journalistic establishment, constructing a spectacle that licenses journalistic attention and provokes response."⁶¹ Colbert's parody spreads an idea and communicates that idea's constituent parts to his audience. Many of those individual audience members will respond to this new idea by developing and expressing their own ideas about it. The Colbert PAC project, examined in Chapter Two, took campaign finance law – an area of thought shrouded in intentional obscurity – and through its parody integrated it into more and more discourse, creating a self-expanding sphere of influence. Recursive parody keeps

⁶⁰ Amber Day, "Shifting the Conversation: Colbert's Super PAC and the Measurement of Satirical Efficacy," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), 13-14.

⁶¹ Jeffrey P. Jones, Geoffrey Baym, and Amber Day, "Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box," *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 50-51.

hitting the same target in different ways, a tactic that effectively seeks out weak points to exploit.

With this line of thinking, Day problematizes a supposition that is central to questions of satiric efficacy. She posits that the effects of Colbert's satire should not be limited to the reception of particular segments by individual viewers. Those individual responses are measureable and can be catalogued, and so are of particular interest to the social scientists who devised the studies, but Day argues that this narrow focus leaves out "the larger-scale impact on the cultural conversation as a whole, either through viewers, critics, or further press coverage."⁶² In other words, Day wants to take the totality of discourse into account, rather than evaluating the speaker-audience relationship between Colbert and his viewers as isolated one-directional exchanges with no repercussions further than the single viewer.

While scholar of postmodernist literature Kirk Combe praises the work of Day and others on Colbert, he finds that even their qualitative analyses are too quantitative. Combe asserts that many prominent scholars who have addressed Colbert have done so from what he criticizes as "an oddly essentialist approach to the genre" of satire. By this, he means that these scholars – in particular Jeffrey Jones and Geoffrey Baym – have argued that Colbert attempts "to replace a false Truth with a true Truth," and so have neutered his satire of much of its power.⁶³ In other words, in addition to pointing his audience to facts that have been obscured by political discourse, Combe argues that Colbert's work serves the broader purpose of critiquing how political discourse is produced.

⁶² Day, "Shifting the Conversation," 3.

⁶³ Kirk Combe, "Stephen Colbert: Great Satirist, or Greatest Satirist Ever?" *International Communication Gazette* 77, no. 3, 306.

Specifically, Baym argues that Colbert “rejects the postmodern logic of spectacle and simulacrum and the now-commonplace assumption that truth is relative and fact a product of power.”⁶⁴ Simulacra, as Jean Baudrillard has observed, are the re-produced signs of the real that precede reality and come to constitute the hyperreal. Everyday reality, Baudrillard says, is “already incorporated the hyperrealist dimension of simulation so that we are now living entirely within the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality.”⁶⁵ In other words, according to Baudrillard the world as we experience it is a hyperreality in that it is a mediated world of self-referential signs masquerading as authentic experience. “Reality,” he observes, “has passed completely into the game of reality.”⁶⁶ Baym finds that Colbert wholly rejects this, but Combe maintains that “satire is an aggressively relativistic form.”⁶⁷ Far from *rejecting* the relativity of “truth,” Combe argues, the particular power of Colbert’s satire lies in its acknowledgment of the multiplicity and constructedness of meaning. This argument follows the same lines as Robert Phiddian, a scholar of satires from Renaissance literature to modern political cartoons, who convincingly contends that parody is a form of deconstruction, by which he means parody reveals the ways in which its target create meaning or power.⁶⁸ Colbert’s Super PAC project, Combe and Phiddian would argue, deconstructed (in Phiddian’s sense of the term) the complex workings of money in politics, making the constituent parts of law and practice accessible to the public.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2010), 126.

⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard, “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” in *Post-Modernism for Psychotherapists*, edited by Del Loewenthal and Robert Snell (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 91.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Combe, “Stephen Colbert: Great Satirist,” 308.

⁶⁸ Robert Phiddian, “Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?” *New Literary History* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1997), 681.

For Colbert, truth is not relative. It is contingent, dependent on one's position in discourse, but there is a such thing as truth, and Colbert's performances seek it in a way that has absorbed the questions of postmodernism. Colbert resists totalizing grand narratives by simultaneously presenting multiple perspectives. Overall, the Super PAC project broadened the popular cultural discussion of campaign finance by revealing the falsity of the grand narratives that are so useful to the machinations of power.

Contribution to the Field

In this project I present recursive parody as a powerful performative tool that cuts to the heart of intentionality anxiety, allowing audiences to see the threads of intention more clearly, or obfuscating intent from view. In this way recursive parody is a tool that can be consciously wielded by skilled performers either for the purpose of attenuating, or for the purpose of exacerbating, that anxiety. The primary contribution of my dissertation to the larger field of media studies is its identification and analysis of the workings of recursive parody as a highly efficacious form of political discourse. This contribution is clarified with two contrasting case studies. First, an analysis of how Stephen Colbert has used recursive parody to engage and sharpen his audience's critical faculties, particularly channeling these faculties toward a careful examination and interpretation of the claims made by people in power (including himself). And second, an analysis of how reactionary satirists like right-wing provocateur and social media personality Milo Yiannopoulos have adopted and adapted the form of recursive parody to undermine these same critical faculties that Colbert strives to develop.

Stephen Colbert uses recursive parody to confront the powerful with their own mendacities, to reveal ways public discourse is shaped invisibly, and to arm his viewers with methodologies for evaluating intentions. His parodic performances on *The Colbert Report* offered audiences an identifiable character, distinct from the performer – a separation that let his audience in on the playful excavation of hidden intentions. While there is not an unmediated “real” Colbert that we can access, the audience is aware that the title character of *The Colbert Report* is a performance, and that nothing he says on camera can be taken at face value without scrutiny. By exposing the chasm between performed and true intentions, and by demonstrating tools for the critical analysis of intention, Colbert’s performances serve to alleviate somewhat his audience’s intentionality anxiety.

But recursive parody has enabled other performers to disguise their own intentions and the intentions of those in power even more effectively by collapsing the distinctions between character and performer. Milo Yiannopoulos simultaneously presents himself as a character and as a performer, without careful differentiation. By stripping away the framing of an identifiable character separate from the performer, provocateurs like Yiannopoulos confound interpretation. This enables them to forge performative speech that can be reasonably interpreted to have white supremacist and eugenicist meanings, while maintaining a quasi-plausible deniability.

The defining characteristic of the Yiannopoulos model is that it blurs the lines between satiric fiction and reality, making it more difficult to engage critically. As a form, this invites misunderstanding and disrupts discourse. The specific content of Yiannopoulos’s work invites misunderstandings about such issues as racial

chauvinism and racial superiority, gender role conformity, and the legitimacy of bigotry in the public sphere. By inviting misunderstanding, Yiannopoulos effectively undermines the trustworthiness of all public discourse, eroding the public sphere in a way that Colbert does not. Colbert's interventions, for example his work on Colbert Super PAC, have an educational function that does not depend on a viewer's interpretation of his intention. Colbert's intervention supports rational – or at least comprehensible – discourse. He does not put the political system itself in danger. He offers a way to laugh at the political system and to argue for change, but not to undermine its existence. Conversely, Yiannopoulos models an intervention that plays on heightened emotions on both sides. He claims to want to effectuate a critical stance, but he never quite arrives there, and in the end he offers annihilation rather than critique.

Much is at stake at this moment. As the election of Donald Trump suggests, there is a disconnect in our public sphere between the meaning of words and the intent of the speaker. Yiannopoulos, like other Trump supporters and like Trump himself, deflects criticism of his speech by appealing to his supposedly misunderstood intention, claiming not to mean what his words literally convey. This was palpable in Trump's expression of his frustrations over the Congressional response to his first State of the Union address. His suggestion that not applauding was "un-American" and "treasonous," was retroactively described as "obviously joking" by a spokesman.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Jessica Taylor, "Trump: Democrats 'Un-American,' 'Treasonous' During State Of The Union," *NPR News*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/02/05/583447413/trump-democrats-un-american-treasonous-during-state-of-the-union>.

The explicit claim of some participants in public discourse, self-described as “trolls,” is that they use the most offensive language and ideas possible not because they mean those things, but to offend the establishment, to agitate for the ideals of free speech, and to provoke thought and discussion about that quintessentially American value. One ought not, of course, take these claims at face value – they are evaluated in Chapter Three – but it does reveal that “trolling” operates in the same field as Colbert. Not only has the boundary between entertainment and news broken down, as Geoffrey Baym observes,⁷⁰ but the Trump phenomenon seems to indicate that the boundary between entertainment and politics has similarly fractured. Facts themselves, as Colbert demonstrated, are dependent for their utility on their acceptance by the public. We indeed seem to be operating in what Baudrillard describes as “the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” in which “reality has passed completely into the game of reality.”⁷¹ Trolling, performance of intention, and the confusion of facticity with performed reality are tools intimately related to those that have successfully landed kleptocrats and crypto-fascists in the center of American power. In order to understand how this has happened and what the consequences are, it is crucial to get a full understanding of these tools.

Chapter Outlines

The first chapter uses the concepts of intentionality anxiety and recursive parody to define the “game of truth,” Colbert’s primary technique for analyzing intention. As discussed above, Jeffrey Jones described Colbert as running a “shell

⁷⁰ Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2010), 5-7.

⁷¹ Baudrillard, ““Symbolic Exchange and Death,” 91.

game of ‘truth’” that he calls the “‘real/unreal’ game.”⁷² While Colbert does operate this game in plain sight, unlike a shell game operator he does not seek to fool his audience so much as he seeks to demonstrate for them how the confidence game works. I combine Jones’ terms and call it Colbert’s “game of truth.” Using this tactic, Stephen Colbert as performer attempts to engage his audiences – live and televisual, appreciative of his satire or not – in an examination of intention. In the game of truth, Colbert plays satiric speech and factual speech with identical deadpan, forcing his audience – and frequently his interviewees – to evaluate each of his statements in an attempt to discern what the Colbert character is trying to accomplish, and to discover the actor’s commentary on the character. The question of which “he” is speaking is unresolvable, and the audience is sometimes unsure whether Colbert’s jokes and his laughter are in character or not.

The second chapter examines Colbert’s interactions with campaign finance law and politicking. In 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Citizens United v FEC* significantly altered the American public sphere by permitting unlimited political advertising by Political Action Committees independent of candidates or campaigns. Throughout the 2012 U.S. election cycle, Stephen Colbert performed the consequences of those changes in *The Colbert Report*’s longest and most visible project. Colbert recruited his audience to fund a bona fide Political Action Committee, and brought the resulting parodic-yet-legitimate super PAC into interaction with the legal structures and boundaries that gave it shape. I show how the Colbert Super PAC project revealed invisible influences on the public sphere,

⁷² Jeffery Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Rowman: Lanham, 2010), 18.

showed his audience their relative position within the public sphere and modeled effective interaction with discourse from that position.

The game of truth technique specifically and recursive parody more widely construed have been adopted and redeployed by performers in the American alt-right. Chapter Three examines how reactionary satirists use the techniques of recursive parody to destabilize discourse and to obfuscate intent. Colbert's performances were always framed – that he is playing a character is always part of the show – but recursive parody has influenced and been influenced by the cultural practice of internet trolling, and trolls do not frame. Milo Yiannopoulos, the embodiment of alt-right trolling tactics and a focus of Chapter Three, took Colbert's game of truth and removed the frame, and he is using recursive parody to subvert rational-critical debate. This has come as a shock to some of the inhabitants of what an anonymous aide to President George W. Bush once derisively called the reality-based community.⁷³ Yiannopoulos folds recursive parody back in on (and against) the public sphere, hacking discourse by adopting the available tools and using them to attack the system.

The dissertation concludes by observing some of the promises and dangers of recursive parody. Recursive parody fuels Colbert's optimistic belief that truth can be accessed and power can be confronted through theatrical performance. At the same time, recursive parody can trap its unwary practitioners in a feedback loop, enclosing them within their own parody as it endlessly amplifies and destabilizes itself. The only escape from that unstable enclosure is disclosure. Framing – the disclosure that acknowledges the performance qua performance – is ultimately what realizes

⁷³ Suskind, "Without a Doubt."

recursive parody's potential to engage critical thinking. A lack of framing allows the performer to attempt to straddle their parodic and genuine selves. The consequence of straddling is getting stranded, getting stuck with responsibility for parodic speech that has legal or other consequences.

Chapter One: Stephen Colbert's Game of Truth

In the summer before the 2014 midterm elections, Democratic House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi appeared on *The Colbert Report* to argue for the Democratic Party's agenda. After outlining a comprehensive agenda, Stephen Colbert asked about the feasibility:

COLBERT: How could you possibly get it done?

PELOSI: Win the election. All we need are 17 votes to take back the House for the American people. Or —

COLBERT: For the Democrats, you mean. Not the American people —

PELOSI: For the Democrats —

COLBERT: — for the Democrats. There's a difference. There's a difference. There's a difference.

PELOSI: Well, for them. For the issues that help them. That meet their needs. But —

COLBERT: But that would make you Speaker of the House again, probably.

PELOSI: Or somebody. Some Democrat.

COLBERT: Some Democrat wearing a blue linen suit. Who cares who it is?¹

Pelosi, the reader will be shocked to learn, was wearing just such a suit.

¹ Nancy Pelosi, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/q8mj7b/the-colbert-report-nancy-pelosi-pt--2>.

In this chapter I define a technique that Colbert has developed – the game of truth – that leverages the uncertainty of intent to bring his audience and guests into an uncomfortable confrontation with their own unacknowledged intentions. Colbert uses the game of truth to particularly excellent effect in interviews with people in power. The game of truth is a bait-and-switch that forces Stephen’s audience and guests to evaluate and respond to unexpectedly coherent arguments from Colbert. Stephen as a performer is generally sympathetic to his liberal guests, as is his audience, and Colbert’s character is prone to speaking in inanities. The unexpectedness of Colbert making incisive arguments or cogent commentary trips up his guests and audience, and forces them to evaluate his argument and to articulate their own more clearly.

Colbert’s game of truth uses unexpected criticism to exploit the uncertainty of intent. Frequently, especially with liberal guests, he does this by making in-character statements that can be interpreted either as a critique of the style of conservative talk show host he parodies, or as a critique of his guest. By making these sorts of ambiguous jokes, he keeps his guests and audience uncertain as to whether or not they themselves are the butt of his jokes. In the above example Colbert uses the game of truth’s double-voicedness to critique his liberal audience’s sympathies and his guest’s political ambitions. Colbert drew polished answers from Pelosi’s well-practiced media persona – vague and inoffensive responses with a well-established tradition in American political discourse. By drawing out her safely bland political rhetoric and combining it with the observation that the political process is a power-hungry partisan undertaking, Colbert identified and deflated a typical political claim,

here made by Pelosi, but not unique to her nor to the Democratic Party: that one political party is somehow more representative of the American people than the other. This little nudge from the host forced Pelosi to admit abashedly that “the American people” and the Democratic Party were not precisely interchangeable. The context of Colbert’s show primed his audience to laugh at the juxtaposition of a serious politician’s performance getting punctured by a comedian playing at sincerity, but through that laughter he achieved something more. By getting Pelosi to step back momentarily from such a sweeping claim, Colbert prevented the audience from accepting it and helped them to notice that such a claim was being made at all. In this way, Colbert exposes his audience to a deconstruction of one kind of political rhetoric.

Further, Colbert forced Pelosi and his audience, which is largely sympathetic to Pelosi’s politics, to confront the uncomfortable fact that to enact an agenda of equality and social justice still requires amassing — and the ambition to amass — political power. In a double-voicedness characteristic of satire, Colbert’s observation that retaking the House would re-elevate Pelosi to the position of Speaker serves two purposes. It reminds his audience that the stakes of the election are control of the levers of governance, which they cheer, but it also acknowledges that Pelosi is asking voters to put her into a position of power. Pelosi deftly deflected the assertion about her personal ambition, which Colbert gave her the time and opportunity to do, but there was a moment of uncertainty, a moment in which Pelosi’s guard was rattled. As a liberal woman in power, Pelosi is used as a boogeyman by conservative activists and knows that everything she says can be turned against her, so she is vigilant about

the image she projects. Pelosi is cautious not to say anything that could be construed as openly embracing desire for power — not for its untruth, but for political expedience. Colbert’s open recognition that Pelosi’s path to passing her proposed legislation would require her to wield power brings her into direct confrontation with her intentional softening of her public image. Colbert’s harping on it against Pelosi’s protestations helps the audience to recognize that politicians, too, are playing characters to some degree.

In defining Colbert’s game of truth, this chapter will look more closely at the concepts of recursive parody and intentionality anxiety, as touched upon in the introduction. To lay a foundation for that work to come, a brief differentiation of satire and parody is needed. Satire is the playful engagement with and critique of serious discourse through fun, intentionally ambiguous distortions. This working definition is a synthesis of the works of Dustin Griffin and George Test to theorize and define satire. The second part of this chapter addresses the history of satire’s definitions and the current state of theories of satire. I draw on theorist Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody: “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity,” as opposed to “the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions [of parody] that are rooted in eighteenth-century definitions of wit.”² The difference is that the former creates a dialogue with the parodied text, a tension between the text as we know it and what the parodist does with it, which furthers a critique – but not necessarily ridicule, and not necessarily of the imitated text. In this project, I use *parody* to refer to works

² Linda Hutcheon, “Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” *Cultural Critique* 5 (Winter 1986-1987), 179-207, 185.

that use imitation, characterized by ironic inversion, to give new contexts to what they imitate – what Hutcheon refers to as trans-contextualization. Parody, she writes, “is a way of creating a form out of the questioning of the very act of aesthetic production.”³ Through ironic inversion and trans-contextualization, Hutcheon argues, parody is able to critique a system in which it is itself implicated. In brief, satire offers a critique through distortion, while parody’s critique is manifested in its repetition of and connection to its host, which necessarily foregrounds the social and historical contexts of both texts. Satire believes in access to truth, while parody shows the structures of power and the contexts of representation, but does not make a claim about truth. Hutcheon insists that parody is central to postmodernism, and Colbert uses parody to bridge the postmodern and neoliberal worlds, simultaneously playing with representation and optimistically seeking access to truth in a world that boils truth down to market value.

Don Quixote and Recursive Parody

While this project examines recursive parody as a characteristic of contemporary American satire, recursive parody itself is not a phenomenon unique to this historical moment. Colbert’s methods parallel his predecessors, while also ultimately harnessing recursive parody to make sense of the changes to discourse and culture in the inflection point between postmodern and neoliberal rationalities. To illustrate recursive parody using one of Colbert’s familiar antecedents and to adumbrate later discussion of Colbert, I turn briefly to Miguel de Cervantes’s early seventeenth-century novel, *Don Quixote*. Despite their different cultural and

³ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (XXX), 10.

historical contexts, Colbert's methods parallel Cervantes's, and Quixote is very like the Colbert character, not only in his endearing cluelessness and inappropriate bravado, but also in the fundamental uncertainty surrounding each character. Both characters are at the center of many competing layers of intentionally confusing claims of reality.

A clarifying instance of the layered narrative occurs at the end of Chapter Eight of the first part of *Don Quixote*.⁴ Immediately following his defeat at the hands (or rather, arms) of a windmill, Quixote instigates a fight with a group of travelers headed by two Benedictine monks on mules. Quixote imagines that they are “monstrous spawn of Satan” and that the woman in the coach behind them is a captive princess.⁵ After Quixote charges and scatters the monks, a Basque horseman comes to the defense of his fellow travelers. He and Quixote draw their swords and fight. In the midst of their battle, the eponymous Manchegan and the Basque are momentarily separated, the former rattled and the latter gasping. Brandishing their swords, they are about to charge one another for what each intends to be the final, fatal confrontation. The narration builds the tension: “All the bystanders stood trembling in fearful suspense, dreading the result of those prodigious blows.”⁶ But at precisely that moment and utterly without warning, the narrator leaves off both the tale and his authoritative position, abruptly inserting himself into the story for the first time since Chapter One's opening sentence. The narrator tells the reader that he

⁴ *Don Quixote* was published as two separate novels, the first in 1605 and the second in 1615. The first novel was divided into four parts. Chapter Eight was the final chapter of the first of those four parts.

⁵ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote of La Mancha*, trans. Walter Starkie (New York: Signet Classic, 1964), 102.

⁶ Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, 105.

does not know how the fight ended because the historical documentation for the incident ended at that point:

At this critical moment the author of this history leaves the battle in mid air, with the excuse that he could find no more exploits of Don Quixote than those related here. It is true that the second author of this work refused to believe that so curious a history could have been consigned to oblivion, or that the wits of La Mancha could have been so lacking in curiosity as not to possess in their archives or in their registries some documents referring to this famous knight.⁷

What seemed to the reader to be a straightforward novelistic story has suddenly begun to fracture into a confusing metanarrative morass – layers of signification that are not easily separable. Even among Cervantes scholars, the above passage is problematic: the identity of “the author of this history” and of “the second author of this work” are subject to fierce, and occasionally fiercely personal, debate. In Chapter Nine the narrator of *Don Quixote* explains that, following the completion of the previous part of the novel, he found a manuscript that completes the interrupted tale, but that it is in Arabic. Luckily, a translator is easily procured; unluckily, since this translator is a *morisco* (that is, a Spanish Moor) the narrator – whomever he may be – does not entirely trust his work. The remaining forty-four chapters of the first part are, according to the narrator, almost entirely derived from this Arabic manuscript. This pivotal moment at which the narrator makes the reader aware of the instability of authorship is deeply recursively parodic. The layers of

⁷ Ibid.

claims of authorship – including Cervantes’ prefatory framing – play endlessly off one another as the reader attempts to piece them together.

At least eight layers of signification are contained in just this one moment: (1) Quixote is known by the reader to be a fictional character in a fictional novel written by the author Miguel de Cervantes; (2) at another level, Quixote is the alter-ego of the equally fictional Alonso Quijano, who appears as himself, rather than in the persona of Don Quixote, only at the very beginning and the very end of the novel; (3) the narrator of the novel is not quite the non-fictional Cervantes, since this narrator rejects authorship, and to the contrary he claims that he is merely recording the adventures of Quixote, whom he treats as a once-living person, from historical documents; (4) in the prologue, which in Spanish literature of the time served as a means for the author to speak directly to the readers and to provide context for them to understand the novel properly,⁸ Cervantes has already entered into the fictional construct to some degree, claiming to have consulted with the Manchegan archives in assembling – not writing – the novel;⁹ (5) Quixote himself cannot distinguish reality from fiction, and his mind creates giants of windmills and, less iconically, Satanic monsters of Benedictine monks; (6) within the fiction of the novel, this confrontation is recorded in the Manchegan archives to which the non-fictional Cervantes referred; (7) the end of Quixote’s fight is recorded in an Arabic manuscript, attributed to the fictional historian Cide Hamete Benengeli; (8) this manuscript is translated by the narrator’s new acquaintance, who, according to the

⁸ Elias Rivers, *Quixotic Scriptures: Essays on the Textuality of Hispanic Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 108.

⁹ Whether the narrator of this prologue is the historical Cervantes or a fictional character is another subject of debate.

narrator, is not entirely trustworthy. This shift in narratorship is surprising, sudden, and ambiguous. The reader is confronted by fictions within fictions, often disguised as – and overlapping with – realities. The narrative shift causes confusion for the reader, who must ask, “whose story have we been reading and who is interrupting it?” – and it has equally caused much scholarly dispute.¹⁰ *Don Quixote*’s unique voice, its power in its time and today, and its position as a seminal satiric novel are due in part to its complex layering of narrative positioning. Through this layering, recursive parody completely undermines its own authenticity and authority, and by doing so, calls all other claims to authenticity and authority into question.

Cervantes wrote in an age of intellectual crisis not entirely dissimilar from our own – a historical moment characterized by a crisis of faith driven partly by scientific and industrial progress and partly by shifting economic and power structures.¹¹ The exploitation of the Americas, the use of the telescope to dislodge the Earth from the center of the cosmos, and the immense structural change in the dissemination of new ideas by the invention of moveable print had shaken the stability of established political processes throughout Europe. As Jeremy Robbins, a scholar of Spanish literature, has argued, by the start of the seventeenth century, the culture of Spain –

¹⁰ Cervantes scholar Howard Mancing argues that the prologues should be understood as written by the real, historical Cervantes, even if he occasionally “fictionalizes himself” and engages in a “playful, metafictional search for sources.” Mancing, “Cervantes as Narrator of Don Quijote,” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 121, 130; see also *The Chivalric World of Don Quijote: Style, Structure, and Narrative Technique* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982). Another Cervantes scholar, James Parr, describes the voice of the prologue as belonging to a “dramatized author,” one of eleven distinct narrative voices he identifies in the novel. James Parr, *“Don Quixote”: An Anatomy of Subversive Discourse* (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 1988). However one defines the narrative voice in *Don Quixote*, even Mancing acknowledges that it requires a non-binary understanding of Cervantes as simultaneously author of and actor within his fictional construct.

¹¹ B.W. Ife, “Cervantes and the Credibility Crisis in Spanish Golden-Age Fiction,” *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 26, no. 1 (January 1982), 52-74.

its political power faltering and the spread of Protestantism threatening the stability of its Catholic worldview — was being redefined by an emerging skepticism in the certainty of human knowledge.¹² As a result, Robbins suggests, many artistic and literary works of the period explored the tension between reality and fantasy.

Cervantes's novel is the gold standard for recursive parody, and its playful and almost impenetrable layering of realities has helped make it an enjoyable *divertissement* across time and place. Recursive parody is not a phenomenon unique to the present moment, but it does lend itself to our own moment of instability, cultural change, and crisis in faith, just as it did in Cervantes's Spain. Because it resonates so powerfully with our present discursive moment, recursive parody is increasingly used in our discourse, particularly in discourse about our politics and culture, and discourse about discourse itself. Rather than exploring the tension between fantasy and reality, as Jeremy Robbins observes in early seventeenth-century Spain, early twenty-first-century American recursive parody explores the tension between performed public selves and the authentic selves they conceal.

Recursive Parody and Stephen Colbert

As evident in *Don Quixote*, a defining characteristic of recursive parody is a tendency to bury itself within layers of signification and purported authorship, creating so many folds in the fabric of what is commonly understood to be authenticity and reality that the audience can only penetrate it with some exertion. Stephen Colbert used recursive parody's multiple layers of signification to play with authority and authenticity, and nowhere was this clearer than in *The Colbert*

¹² Jeremy Robbins, *The Challenges of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature* (London: Duckworth, 1998), 44-45, 79.

Report's recurring segment “The Wørd.” This segment juxtaposed the Colbert character’s blustery rhetoric with a split screen on which text and images appear, undercutting his message. Colbert appeared either blithely unaware of the split-screen’s content, or he misunderstood it to be bolstering his message.

This bit took its inspiration from Fox News opinionator Bill O’Reilly’s “Talking Points” segment. While introducing his show, O’Reilly would discuss the day’s issues and various news items. He gave the viewer a specific interpretation of those issues and events – one would say that he gives each issue a particular spin, but as proclaimed at the outset, his show was a “No Spin Zone” – and these talking points were reinforced by text summaries which share a split screen with him. These summaries could be quite lengthy, often displaying O’Reilly’s words verbatim; there was of course no question of the text undercutting his point, as it did on Colbert’s program.

On *The Colbert Report*, “The Wørd” is an exaptation of O’Reilly’s “Talking Points” that highlighted the disparity between the power of the opinion-show talking head and the unasked questions and unmade responses that might, if given voice, disrupt the smooth veneer of the presentation and uncover some of the political or cultural assumptions being made and some of the interests being ignored. The text-box that shared the screen with Colbert dared to subvert the master narrative by mentioning inconvenient facts or raising difficult questions about the political talking points, or by underscoring Colbert’s own self-contradictions. The text box is not the only element of the segment that undermined Colbert’s alleged point; Colbert

undercut himself at every turn, using a double-edged rhetoric, making an argument that folded in upon itself.

To begin “The Wørd” segments, Colbert would typically introduce a word or phrase that would frame his treatment of the major news issue under discussion. This word or phrase frequently served a double duty, part of Colbert’s overall double-edged rhetoric. It segued Colbert’s conservative umbrage into the beginning of the segment; but by the end, it conversely helped to undercut the thrust of his argument. Colbert undercut his own arguments, in character, and the text box served to reinforce his self-contradictions and to heighten the absurdity of his claims. For example, in one episode’s “The Wørd,” Colbert defended Senator John McCain from his past involvement in the Keating Five Savings and Loan scandal by saying, “that was not cheating; that was just helping Charles Keating cheat. Totally different.”¹³ This thin defense condemned McCain more effectively than no defense at all.

Colbert’s reflection and augmentation of O’Reilly’s technique in “The Wørd” engaged the viewer in a Brechtian disruption of a familiar news media trope – not only the endless reinforcement and repetition of conventional wisdom, as with O’Reilly’s “Talking Points,” and the condensation of news to context-free sound bites, but more broadly the shrouding of opinion in robes of journalism. By undercutting the host’s long-winded diatribe with questions and facts that devastate and provide a legitimate alternative to his argument, “The Wørd” encouraged the viewer to develop similar skills. The disruption caused by the text-box on *The Colbert Report* was an exercise in media criticism: it attempted to spur the spectator

¹³ Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, September 15, 2008, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/fgho1l/the-colbert-report-the-word---how-dare-you->.

to question what the narrator says and to engage the content of his argument with critical thinking, to ask questions about framing and about how Colbert has arrived at his conclusion. In contrast, the inspiration for this segment made no such demands on its viewers, and rather served to eliminate any questions and smooth over any inconsistencies or illogic.

An unusual edition of “The Wørd” appeared in December of 2014, just days from the series finale of *The Colbert Report* while filming on location before a raucous audience of George Washington University students. Sitting president Barack Obama appeared as Colbert’s guest, part of the president’s campaign to encourage Americans to register for health insurance through the Affordable Care Act [ACA] website. As a performer, Colbert seemed to be more cautious to allow the president speak without interruption than he was with other guests, but after Obama’s answers Colbert did disrupt the flow of conversation with parodic interjections, forcing President Obama to adjust accordingly:

COLBERT. Let’s talk about the Keystone XL pipeline. You’re going to sign that, right? (The audience boos.)

OBAMA. Obviously, these young people weren’t polled.

COLBERT. No, they’re chanting “dooooo it!”

OBAMA. Keystone is going through an evaluation process now, being held up by a court in Nebraska, making a decision about whether the route is legal or not. [...] I don’t make the initial decisions. The state department evaluates it.

COLBERT. But you’re going to sign it when the bill comes to you?

OBAMA. What I said is, I'm going to make sure that if we look at this objectively, we've got to make sure that it's not adding to the problem of carbon and climate change. [...] We've got to measure [the benefits] against whether or not it is going to contribute to an overall warming of the planet that could be disastrous. (cheers and applause)

COLBERT. Can I make a suggestion? I have a suggestion that I think might kill two birds with one keystone here, all right?

OBAMA. Go ahead.

COLBERT. This one's free. We don't take it to Louisiana. We take it [...] over the Mexican border [...] with a sign that says "mucho jobs-o." The people take the thing all the way over the border, they end up in Canada, and the Canadians are too polite to kick them out, and there's your immigration policy taken care of. (applause)

OBAMA. That sounds like a ridiculous idea. (laughter) But that's why you're where you are and I am where I am.¹⁴

Obama was not only responding to Colbert's parodic character, but also to his perception of Colbert as performer and to the audience's responses. Meanwhile, Colbert was similarly reacting to Obama's adjustments, and neutralizing the president's attempts to maintain control of, or even solid footing in, their interaction. Each time Obama adjusted, Colbert assessed and entered in to the changed rules of engagement, folding them in to his performance and changing them again as he did so – in other words, creating recursive parody. For example, when Obama

¹⁴ Barack Obama, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/i14vel/the-colbert-report-president-barack-obama-pt--1>.

acknowledges the audience's negative response to the pipeline, Colbert immediately responds by redefining their response and challenging Obama on signing the controversial bill.

Conventionally, interviews on *The Colbert Report* are the final segment, and Colbert's much-publicized interview with President Obama was no exception. Before that interview began, while Colbert was doing the lead-in for "The Wørd," President Obama entered the stage behind the host, to the delighted cheers of the live audience. The president told Colbert that he was going to take over the show for the segment, and, gesturing to the teleprompter, said "How hard can this be? I'm just going to say what you were about to say."¹⁵ Colbert relinquished his desk – he fled offstage, actually – and Obama began the segment, reading the text as putatively prepared for Colbert. This resulted in Obama speaking from Colbert's subjective position: "As you know, I, Stephen Colbert, have never cared for our president. That guy is so arrogant, he probably talks about himself in the third person. [On-screen text: In between those long pauses.]"¹⁶ This identity switching is almost unavoidably funny: the carnivalesque reversal of power, the transgressive delight of a powerful leader making (admittedly mild) jokes at his own expense, and the juxtaposition of Obama's seeming sincerity about ACA sign-ups with Colbert's playful text are each amusing on their own.

Combined with multiple jokes about the identity of the program, the identity switching becomes more and more difficult to sift through. President Obama,

¹⁵ Barack Obama, "The Wørd," *The Colbert Report*, December 8, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/88p9oh/the-colbert-report-the-word---president-barack-obama---to-health-in-a-handbasket>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

appearing for and performing the words of Stephen Colbert, who appears as an alternate version of himself, acts in Colbert's stead as host for a late-night comedy show that satirically poses as a cable news/opinion program. Obama, reading for Colbert, ironically opposes his signature namesake legislative accomplishment:

There is only one sure-fire way to kill this thing. We have to make signing up for Obamacare unappealing to young people. [...] Most young people can get coverage for less than a hundred bucks. But how is the president going get that message out to the kids? He could try to appeal to them directly through a speech or press conference, but young people don't watch real news shows like this one. [On-screen text: Or fake ones like Fox.] They watch comedy shows, and I don't see the president appearing on one of those. They're beneath his dignity. [On-screen text: But above his approval rating.]¹⁷

Just as with the interrupted narrative of *Don Quixote*, the layering of narrative and intention here provides ground for play with regards to who is speaking whose text in what context and where the intent lies. Obama appeared on *The Colbert Report* in order to encourage young people to sign up for health insurance; Colbert the character plotted to discourage this participation in order to sabotage the ACA. Colbert's text claimed that *The Colbert Report* is real news, not comedy, and that young people do not watch it; as always, the content of the show belied the first claim, and the live audience's raucous laughter laid waste to the second. Colbert's text further speculated that the president would not appear on a

¹⁷ Ibid.

comedy show – a claim that, by giving it voice, President Obama doubly negated: not only did he appear, he himself participated in creating the comedy – although whether it was beneath his dignity is uncertain. In speaking the words that claim the president will be unable to reach young people, the president negated that claim.

The performance was not particularly edgy or dangerous, and it did not challenge authority – quite the opposite – but its visceral appeal does reveal it as more than just an amusing reversal or contrast. By playing with identity, this performance brushed up against our unacknowledged concerns about the true intentions of authority figures, presidents and news show hosts included. By acknowledging these concerns, Colbert’s playing with recursive parody assuages the intentionality anxiety that plagues so many everyday encounters with public speech acts, making it particularly pleasing to a contemporary American audience.

Colbert’s “The Wørd” segments conditioned his audience to read against the claims of a monological voice. Usually that voice is Colbert’s, but even President Obama’s voice was undercut by the on-screen text and by the spoken text that disparaged his dignity. This performance acknowledged that powerful figures speaking in public forums have hidden agendas. Obama’s agenda is revealed, acknowledged, and made explicit: he is there to encourage young people to sign up for health insurance coverage and will do so by appearing on programming that appeals to them. The existence of unspoken agendas – and thus the anxiety that stems from such agendas – is demonstrated to be something that can be dealt with. There is a transgressive pleasure in naming the unnamed, and so the audience gets to laugh at Obama’s agenda while simultaneously participating in it. This makes the

existence of the agenda of a powerful person directed at the audience less intimidating, because it is made transparent and it is the object of ridicule even as it is being enacted.

Colbert, with Obama's cooperation, used multiply layered intentions as a central element of this performance. In Colbert's hands intention becomes a medium, a material that he uses to give shape to his work. He invites his audience to enjoy his playing with intention, and to play with it themselves. In this way, Colbert is cultivating his audience's ability to examine the layers of intentions. Colbert has structured the segment in such a way that is it possible to sift through and separate the layers of intent – those of the Colbert character and of President Obama are legible. Even Stephen Colbert, as the artist behind the show, has his intent revealed, as he has structured the show in such a way as to give Obama a platform that the audience can laugh at while simultaneously supporting. By untangling the various characters and intentions, the audience practices processing intentions critically – a comforting skill in an environment with a high baseline anxiety about intention.

The Contemporary Crisis of Intentionality Anxiety

The early twenty-first century United States is in a state of rapid change. Media and technology scholar Brian Ott argues that the Information Age is host to burgeoning social anxieties that are driven by changes in information production.¹⁸ The reduced cost and the decentering of production have enabled an unprecedented increase in the amount of available information. The increase is startling. In 2004, Hans Christian von Baeyer argued that humanity and its machine proxies had

¹⁸ Brian Ott, *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 47-56.

produced a greater quantity of information during the first three years of the new millennium than they had produced in the entirety of previous human existence.¹⁹ Or, as Richard Wurman vividly encapsulated the idea: “a weekday edition of *The New York Times* contains more information than the average person [in seventeenth-century England] was likely to come across in a lifetime.”²⁰ Several studies have attempted to quantify the data available to or consumed by contemporary Americans, and while there is not an agreed-upon standard for measurement, there is a consensus that the amount of information consumed is increasing and that the amount of information available is increasing even faster.²¹ Meanwhile, technological advances have resulted in “the collapse of the temporal-spatial relationship between the [...] production, transmission, and processing” of communications.²² “The opportunity is that there is so much information,” writes Wurman, “the catastrophe is that ninety-nine percent of it isn’t meaningful or

¹⁹ Hans Christian von Baeyer, *Information: The New Language of Science* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 4.

²⁰ Richard Wurman, *Information Anxiety 2* (Indianapolis: Que, 2001), 5.

²¹ In 2003, Berkeley-based information scientists Peter Lyman and Hal R. Varian conducted their second study attempting to measure newly created information. One of their primary findings was that creation of new information had increased by nearly a third annually since their first such study in 1999. Peter Lyman, Hal R. Varian, et al, “How Much Information? 2003” (October 2003), <http://groups.ischool.berkeley.edu/archive/how-much-info-2003/index.htm>. A study of information consumption based on 2008 data found that the average American over the age of two received nearly twelve hours of information, exclusive of work, and calculated an annual increase rate of 5.4% from 1980 to 2008. Roger Bohn and James Short, “Measuring Consumer Information,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 980-1000, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>. There is not consensus even on the units used to measure information consumption, since “each of these units of measurement emphasizes some aspects and silences others.” Martin Hilbert, “How to Measure ‘How Much Information’?: Theoretical, Methodological, and Statistical Challenges for the Social Scientist,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 1042-1055. There is general acknowledgement at least since the 1970s that the supply of data is increasing faster than data use – and that supply now vastly outstrips possible use. While “there might not be a technical limit on supply, [...] there are only twenty-four hours in a day – a clear-cut limit on individual consumption.” W. Russell Neuman, Yong Jin Park, and Elliot Panek, “Tracking the Flow of Information into the Home: An Empirical Assessment of the Digital Revolution in the United States, 1960-2005,” *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 6 (April 27, 2012), 1022-1041, <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>.

²² Ott, *The Small Screen*, 32.

understandable.”²³ In other words, the time gap between production and processing has been eliminated, and in fact information is produced much faster than it can possibly be processed.

Ott argues that information over-saturation causes a variety of social anxieties. In particular, he makes a case that individuals in the Information Age can experience feelings of overwhelmingness due to the quantity and speed of information production, loss of identity from the dehistoricization of the present and the disruption of boundaries between previously distinct public and private settings, and self-fragmentation caused by the repetitive exposure to incomplete pieces of ideas and in increasing coexistence and awareness of difference, because “[w]hereas one once found homogeneity and unity in an appeal to national identity, one now finds heterogeneity and difference.”²⁴ To these I add intentionality anxiety, another anxiety caused by information overload.

This present crisis is one of authenticity, intention, and identity, and it has been precipitated by at least four major factors: (1) new discursive strategies and uncertainties borne by social media and technology, (2) the use of dog-whistle political communication and similar tactics that obfuscate intention, (3) the delegitimization of credible political discourse, and (4) terrorist attacks and threats. Each of these four components represents a significant undermining of our trust in the validity of our social and discursive spaces. With this in mind, I refer to the modern intellectual crisis as intentionality anxiety, which refers to a deep sense of

²³ Wurman, *Information Anxiety 2*, 9.

²⁴ Ott, *The Small Screen*, 55.

unease caused by the potential disparity between any person's — perhaps every person's — apparent and actual intention.

Questions of authenticity and intent are epistemologically impossible to answer in any period, but twenty-first century American intentionality anxiety differs from that of other periods both quantitatively and structurally. By sheer numbers, as argued above, a contemporary American unavoidably encounters orders of magnitude more speech acts from more sources each day than, for example, the average seventeenth-century Spaniard, and each of those speech acts must be either ignored or assessed.²⁵ Evaluating context, including intent, is an important part of interpreting information. Every radio advertisement, every newspaper article, every claim by every public figure, every Facebook post and every Twitter tweet has to be evaluated for intention. This cannot help but be a strain on one's logical and emotional faculties.

Information science writer James Gleick acknowledges that the crushing task of evaluating a seemingly endless stream of communication causes “information overload.” The coping mechanisms that exist, he argues, are all in essence filtering and searching. These tasks can be delegated to an editor or curator, either human or digital. The limited selection of information may ease the sense of overload while simultaneously aggravating intentionality anxiety. The thoughtful reader is confronted with deciphering the hidden biases of the editor or determining what

²⁵ Marketing consultants J. Walker Smith, Anne Clurman, and James Wood (*Coming to Concurrency: Addressable Attitudes and the New Model for Marketing Productivity*, Evanston IL: Racom, 2005) identify the vast clutter of advertisements competing for the limited attentive capacity of consumers as the crisis for modern advertisers. In addressing the question of how many advertisements the average person is exposed to, the authors conclude that an exact number is not as important as acknowledging that ad clutter is an issue and that it is increasing with time.

selection biases are present in the computerized system. The consequence of a computerized solution to information overload is that the intent of such a system is indiscernible, but moreover is not even human, and invisible biases may have been built into the structure of the system by accident.

The inherent uncertainty regarding the inner lives of others is amplified by many influences in contemporary life, not only the ones mentioned.²⁶ No single influence causes intentionality anxiety, and no single phenomenon can definitively be said to be causal. Whether the factors mentioned above are causes or symptoms of intentionality anxiety is an open question, but taken as parts of a whole, the pattern suggests that intention is both a contested site of meaning and a focal point of American culture. The confluence of the contestation, politicization, and general interest around intention is a structural feature of contemporary American culture, and this is the dynamic that this dissertation terms intentionality anxiety.

Each of the factors identified has a major and visible effect on the understanding of intention in public spaces and public discourse. Perhaps most straightforward is the effect of the specter of terrorism, from the watershed attacks of September 11, 2001 to the peculiarly American domestic terrorist tactic of mass shootings. While terrorist attacks can cause terrible loss and injury, they are often part of a comprehensive media strategy aimed at causing anxiety. Uncertainty about the next attack, about the motivations of the attackers, and the knowledge that

²⁶ There are innumerable other factors contributing to intentionality anxiety. One such factor is artificial intelligence, which holds a prominent place in our imagined futures, and which is increasingly integrated into our daily lives. The existence of these apparently autonomously-thinking non-human intelligences may eventually trouble the common assumption that the human mind even controls its own intentions, much less knows what they ultimately are. The causes of intentionality anxiety are manifold.

attackers are indistinguishable from innocent people until they strike, are sources of profound apprehension, raising mistrust about all peoples' perceived versus true identities.²⁷ Social media also raises mistrust about intention. In addition to contributing to the exponential increase in speech acts one encounters, social media hides many of the contextual and social cues that would illuminate the speaker's meaning. One cannot be certain of any aspect of the identities of those one interacts with online but does not know personally.²⁸ Other technologies, including the widespread availability of video recording and editing tools, also can disguise intent or force the audience to grapple with the issue of intent. Of the major factors mentioned, this dissertation directly addresses political tactics that delegitimize political discourse or otherwise bring intent into question, as they have a clear performative aspect. The influences of social media and technology and of terrorism on discourse, important as they are, are largely left in the background.²⁹

²⁷ As political scientist John Mueller observes, terror remains a persistent internalized fear, with as many as a third of Americans expressing concern about becoming a victim of terrorism themselves, despite the astronomically low probability. The exaggerated fears caused by the perceived threat of terrorism, in Mueller's view, makes moderate political action less possible, and creates a political atmosphere in which policies compete to address a minimal danger with increasing harshness. John Mueller, "Reacting to Terrorism," in Rafael Reuveny and William R. Thompson, eds., *Coping with Terrorism* (SUNY: Albany, 2010), 369-383

²⁸ As an iconic New Yorker cartoon observed, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." Peter Steiner, [no title], *New Yorker* 69, no. 20 (July 5, 1993), 61.

²⁹ There is substantial overlap of the influence of terrorism on discourse and the delegitimization of political discourse. One extreme example is a film popularized by far-right radio personality Alex Jones. The film *Loose Change*, of which there are six versions, purports to provide evidence that the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 were a government conspiracy and not terrorists hijacking planes. See Nancy Jo Sales, "Click Here for Conspiracy," *Vanity Fair* (August 2006), <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2006/08/loosechange200608>. As an example, one segment of the film uses video footage from outside the Pentagon that did not show the wreckage of American Airlines Flight 77, using this footage to claim that there was no evidence of a commercial airliner, and that the Pentagon attack had been carried out by a U.S. military missile. There is no shortage of film documentation of the wreckage of Flight 77. David Dunbar, *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts* (New York: Hearst, 2006), 62-65. This is one example of the direct destabilization of intent (indeed, of meaning itself) caused by a terrorist attack.

Stephen Colbert's Game of Truth

Stephen Colbert draws on the uncertainty of intent in his use of a character-based intervention that forces his guests and audience to confront their own discomforts caused by intentionality anxiety. I call this tactic Colbert's "game of truth," building on the significant contributions that other scholars have made to understanding Colbert's effects on public discourse. Geoffrey Baym analyses how Stephen Colbert's interview style forces his guests and his audience to consciously confront their thinking. Colbert's ironic duality — the juxtaposition of his spoken intent and the effect of his words — creates "an agora-like setting, a Socratic interrogation in which the guests are forced to articulate and defend their ideas."³⁰ Colbert's guests are given the challenge to enlighten him, knowing he will resist them while giving them opportunity to speak. Other scholars have identified this aspect of Colbert's work. Jeffrey Jones recognizes the way in which Colbert "serves up the opportunity for liberals to make their case while Colbert simultaneously ridicules a caricature [of conservative thinking]."³¹ Amber Day finds that Colbert, in a conversation with a human rights lawyer about the treatment of Guantanamo Bay prisoners, combines his own absurd arguments with his guest's explanations into a piece that presents "a quite lucid analysis of flawed political policy and an appeal for what should be done next."³² All three of these scholars identify a key half of Colbert's Socratic method: each argues that he gives liberal guests a pedagogic platform from which to articulate their views and poses questions to which they can

³⁰ Geoffrey Baym, *From Cronkite to Colbert* (Boulder CO: Paradigm, 2010), 136.

³¹ Jeffery Jones, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Rowman: Lanham, 2010) 200.

³² Amber Day, *Satire and Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011), 93.

respond, and he forces conservative guests to agree to absurd extensions of their own logic or otherwise makes them look foolish. Writ large, this is generally the case, and the game of truth adds another facet to our understanding of Stephen Colbert's intervention on the public sphere.

Jeffrey Jones observes, almost as an aside, that Colbert's interviews comprise "a complicated shell game" in which "the audience must track the voice he is imitating and the voice that is his own."³³ This description is an excellent starting place to define the game of truth. The audience is tasked with tracking Colbert the character's voice, with inferring or articulating counter-arguments to his arguments, and with recognizing when the character is giving voice to arguments that are more difficult to dispatch. The game of truth is the tactic Colbert uses to trip up his guests by forcing them to respond to unexpected questions or comments, and forcing them to evaluate the validity of his interjected arguments. The juxtaposition between Colbert's manifest ignorance and his tenacious arguments necessitate guests and audience alike pay close attention in their interactions with Colbert and to clarify their ideas and beliefs to themselves and to others. Complicating this relationship further is the uncertainty guests can feel over whether or not Colbert is their ally. Whatever their political leanings, guests who rely on Colbert risk opening themselves up to satiric attack. Guests cannot take heart when Colbert agrees with them any more than when he sets up softball questions for them.

Northrup Frye defined the satirist as a defender of the public sphere, one who identifies and neutralizes the obstructions that impede free discourse, such as

³³ Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 199-200.

deceptions, orthodoxies, and oppression³⁴. In that vein, one important effect of Stephen Colbert's satire is the identification of such obstructions. The game of truth challenges Colbert's audience to confront two impediments to free discourse: the disingenuousness of political discourse, and the biases presented by one's own political assumptions. Using the game of truth technique, Stephen Colbert (as performer) forces his audience to evaluate the intention of each of his in-character statements. By doing so, he guides his audience towards self-reflection, engaging them in an examination of intentions and assumptions they have hidden even to themselves.

For celebrated literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, satire accomplishes this cleansing of the public sphere through its multiple voices, which he identifies as heteroglossia, or "differentiated speech." Not only are there so many different sub-languages within each national language that Bakhtin questions the very term "language," but there are also different circumstances for each utterance.³⁵ The tension and conflict between the different voices in this "social diversity of speech types" is dialogic.³⁶ In other words, it is expressed in answer to something, and expects to be itself answered. In Bakhtin's work, the centrifugal, decentralizing force of dialogism is in constant conflict against the centripetal, centralizing force of monologism. This differentiation is an essential way in which meaning is created.

³⁴ Northrup Frye, "The Nature of Satire," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, October 1944, 79.

³⁵ Some of the sub-languages that Bakhtin identifies include "social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour." Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, translated by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 262-3.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 263.

Dynamic forces – a multitude of voices and their centrifugal and centripetal forces – create dialogue through the endless inter-activity of their differences, a dialogue encompassing the unstable, ever-changing relationship between ideas in discourse:

There is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue. At any present moment of the dialogue there are great masses of forgotten meanings, but these will be recalled again at a given moment in the dialogue's later course when it will be given new life. For nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will someday have its homecoming festival.³⁷

The value of dialogic heteroglossia is in its *movement*: its tensions, its shifting meanings, transforming one into another, a swirling mass of voices that momentarily coheres and solidifies before fracturing and dissolving again. Dialogic heteroglossia, like satire, is, in Bakhtin's carnivalistic terms, "the creation of a decrowning double; it is the same 'world turned inside out.' For this reason parody is ambivalent. [... It is] not, of course, a naked rejection of the parodied object. Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death."³⁸ Satire's most essential function, as both Bakhtin and Frye argue, is to engage the

³⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, "K metodologii gumanitarnyx nauk," *Èstetika slovesnogo tvorcestva*, 373, translated by and quoted in Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1984), 348-50.

³⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, translated by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 127.

world in dialogue, and to invite the audience to participate in that open-ended dialogue.

The Colbert character views his show as purely monological. He would claim that his is the only fully valid voice on his program, and that nearly all other voices present – perhaps not always his guests, but certainly the video clips, sponsorships, the voices and applause of the live audience, and the voices formed through camera work and multimedia presentation, personified by his off-camera technician, Jimmy – work solely to support his. However, in practice those other voices frequently serve to undermine Colbert’s voice and to call his assertions into question. Even Colbert’s own voice is sometimes self-contradicting. In this way, *The Colbert Report*, particularly in its “The Wørd” segments, uses its satiric double-voicedness to dramatize the struggle between centripetal and centrifugal forces, and the audience witnesses how contradictory voices slip through even as Colbert attempts to repress them and to dictate his monologic worldview. Those contradicting voices create a reality that supersedes Colbert’s.

Bakhtin suggests that monologic work “pretends to *possess a ready-made truth*.”³⁹ These are works that claim possession of an ultimate truth, and Bakhtin describes this claim as a pretense only in that there is no genuine ready-made truth to be had. An impossible claim, but not necessarily one the monologic work believes to be false. Curious, then, that the essential aspect of Colbert’s satire is the satiric double-voicedness that reveals his monologism to be a pretense in the sense of pretending. Colbert allows his audience to see both sides of his pretense: his

³⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 110.

character's certainty, and the instability of such a truth-claim. In letting the audience see *how* he claims to possess a ready-made truth and how a polyphonic world deflates those truth claims, and in allowing us to observe and participate in the exposure of his own "naïve self-confidence," Colbert's game of truth calls into question all similar claims of "those people who think that they know something," and challenges his audience to expose them, too.⁴⁰

Colbert's work is an act of intervention on the audience's worldview. He challenges their preconceived understanding of reality, and the mental processes through which they filter the world to arrive at a comprehensible externality with which to interact. In other words, his satire intervenes on an individual's naturalized constructions. The satiric impulse of introducing many voices, both internally and externally – that is, of Bakhtinian polyphony, "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses"⁴¹ – and of remaining always open and never finally conclusive is a practice that helps in dealing with the complexities and uncertainties of life and of self. To this end Colbert's work serves a quasi-therapeutic purpose, helping to reconcile his audience with those uncertainties, taming the anxieties without eliding the problems, and making tools available to the audience to address both internal uncertainties and external ones. By revealing the absence of final truths through his satiric double-voicedness and his game of truth, Colbert extinguishes false certainty and gives his audience tools to maintain cognitive and social cohesion in the face of otherwise paralyzing uncertainty.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 6.

The game of truth operates throughout *The Colbert Report*, and is clearest in Colbert's interviews. While interviewing a guest, Colbert makes a variety of arguments in character, all delivered with equal deadpan. While most of these arguments are patently ridiculous, occasionally Colbert makes arguments that — logical or not — stymie his guests. The ridiculous arguments offer guests of any political alignment the opportunity to articulate their positions clearly, as has been observed by Baym and others.⁴² Before each show, Colbert — out of character and off camera — advises his guest on what to expect, preparing them to interact with him in character. "I say exactly the same thing to everyone before the interview: 'I'm not an assassin. I do the show in character — and he's an idiot; he's willfully ignorant of everything we're going to talk about. Disabuse me of my ignorance. Don't let me put words in your mouth.'"⁴³ Fair play, perhaps, but the game of truth subverts even this expectation. The Colbert character, willfully ignorant idiot though he may be, is frequently acutely cognizant of which angles of argument will be most difficult for his guests to extricate themselves from, and is well-practiced at putting words into their mouths.

Colbert's interview style, his perceived political agenda, and the conventions of his show condition his live audience (and by extension his television audience) to support liberal guests vocally against Colbert and to antagonize conservative guests, and reasonably to expect Colbert to facilitate his liberal guests' arguments at all

⁴² Geoffrey Baym, "Stephen Colbert's Parody of the Postmodern," in *Satire TV*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009), 132-133. Jones, *Entertaining Politics*, 199-203.

⁴³ Steven Daly, "The Second Most Powerful Idiot in America," *The Telegraph*, 18 May 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3673509/Stephen-Colbert-the-second-most-powerful-idiot-in-America.html>.

points. Colbert regularly resists these responses and expectations. For instance, if the audience cheered for a point made by a liberal guest, Colbert might resist their cheering, reinterpreting it by thanking them for supporting his argument before he had even made it. He introduces questions that have no easy answers or that challenge his guest's or audience's unspoken assumptions. This forces the interviewee to articulate a defense of ideas and assumptions that seldom rise to the level of conscious thought, and provides a similar opportunity for his audience. By integrating sharply critical questions in his interviews with guests his audience sympathizes with, and by introducing opportunities for antagonist guests to make salient points that conflict with his audience's preconceptions, Colbert forces his audience to maintain a critically engaged attitude throughout the interview — critical not only toward the interaction between guest and host, but toward their own thinking. The same dynamic exists in all *Colbert Report* segments, but is clearest in the interviews. By playing the game of truth Colbert asks his guest and his audience to identify and neutralize his ignorance and to recognize and respond to his shrewder observations.

In order to answer the question of how audiences process the show's satiric interviews, sociologists Heather LaMarre et al have studied viewer responses to Colbert's interviews. Their study concludes that political ideology partly determines a viewer's interpretation of the satire.⁴⁴ The authors' exhortation to exercise caution is a fair one: no matter how perceptive you might be, you have your own political

⁴⁴ One problem with the LaMarre study is that on one hand the authors claim that the material is ambiguous, and on the other they seem to make a definitive claim to knowledge of Colbert's intent and true meaning. The authors seem to claim for themselves the "high levels of cognitive effort [that] are required to determine" a true intention, while mere viewers do not.

biases that are at work to affect your understanding of satire precognitively. Satire is not controllable. It is the very multi-voicedness of satire that renders it powerful. The authors issue a warning in their hypothesis:

[A] biased or errant interpretation of [Colbert's] statements would be consistent with political and social conservatism. [...] [W]e expect that political conservatives are significantly more likely than liberals to interpret Colbert's statements as pro-conservative and/or targeting liberalism.⁴⁵

Unfortunately these authors did not articulate the corollary: that liberals are significantly more likely to interpret Colbert's statements as pro-liberal and/or targeting conservatism. Colbert can and does critique liberals who appear on his show. In fact, whereas Jeffrey Jones sees only a joint critique of conservative values produced by Colbert and his liberal guests, Colbert's critique is of political discourse itself. Audience interpretation of his critique, as the LaMarre study finds, is influenced by already-held political views.

Colbert's critique of conservative guests has been well documented and commented upon, but that is only part of his critical contribution. As his interview with Nancy Pelosi, discussed above, and the following example both illustrate, Colbert's double-voiced game of truth is an effective technique for turning the audience's critical eyes to themselves and to discourse, a far bigger intervention than critiquing that with which they already disagree.

⁴⁵ Heather LaMarre et al, "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2009), 217.

Sometimes Colbert's arguments are straw men, silly claims set up as softball questions for his guests. These capture the (caricatured) essence of a viewpoint to which his guest wants to respond, as when Colbert posed this question to Nobel Laureate and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman:

How is Obamacare not redistribution of wealth? Why should my hard-earned money go pay for Suzie Slut's contraceptive pills? I don't need them, but Sandy Spread-her-legs wants her contraceptive pills, or Lucy Lung-machine — [if] I'm healthy, or I'm a young person — which I am — why should I be paying for someone else's healthcare? That's not how insurance works.⁴⁶

This question has the simultaneous benefits of being outrageous and providing Krugman the opportunity to inform Colbert that that is, in fact, exactly how insurance works. The game of truth becomes more complex once Colbert starts browbeating Krugman on whether Obamacare is a redistribution of wealth:

KRUGMAN: Healthcare when you need it that you can afford.
That's what Obamacare gives you.

COLBERT: Healthcare when you need it that you can afford,
because you're taking my money.

KRUGMAN: No, because we're taking — we're pooling. Insurance.

COLBERT: That's redistribution of wealth. Pooling money is
redistribution of wealth. Okay? You'll admit it. Say it. Say it. It's
redistribution of wealth.

⁴⁶ Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/ze9n7p/the-colbert-report-paul-krugman>.

KRUGMAN: Actually, I'm okay with a little — but you know, life insurance —

COLBERT: You almost said it! You almost gave away the whole game!⁴⁷

“Redistribution of wealth” is a rhetorical cudgel that public conservative figures can deploy against any government action, the twenty-first century version of the previous century’s “tax and spend.” By confronting Krugman and his audience with the plain fact that the Affordable Care Act can fairly be described as a redistribution of wealth, Colbert forces them to acknowledge that some redistribution of wealth may be desirable, which may slightly dull the point of the political pejorative. Colbert can do this because the audience sees him as an ally — the exact same interaction with a hostile host would provoke a defensive response, perhaps even an explanation of why the ACA is not a redistribution of wealth. Here, Colbert forces his guest and his audience to coherently and explicitly address a criticism that, from another source, they might dismiss unanswered. In addition, via this tactic Colbert critiques the model of political discourse that involves partisans trying to score points against one another in a debate that never requires them to address one another’s arguments.

Disconnecting Political Discourse from Facts

Over the past several decades political processes in the United States, from political discourse to elections to governance, have become increasingly performative. Politics is performative not in the sense that those involved create a

⁴⁷ Paul Krugman, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, February 6, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/ze9n7p/the-colbert-report-paul-krugman>.

self through their actions, but in the sense that any public behavior by a conventional political candidate or politician — interviews, press conferences, speeches, debates, etc. — is increasingly managed and staged to achieve a particular effect. Following theorist Marvin Carlson, I define performativity as intentionally patterned behavior that is shaped for an audience.⁴⁸ Political communication theorist Geoffrey Craig argues that despite their performativity, these events are contestable encounters that add to the dialectic of public discourse, but even in his analysis he acknowledges that even just the *perception* that candidates and political figures are performing is a source of “widespread uneasiness” and anxiety that “the performance does not reflect the true thoughts of the individual but is more pragmatically oriented towards political differentiation and advantage.”⁴⁹ Even this sympathetic reading of political performance must acknowledge the intentionality anxiety it engenders. None of this is to argue that there was a pastoral time when politicians were nobler and less manipulative. Rather, the entire public sphere has become more performative. Political figures exist within the public sphere, and use all available tools of discourse to influence voters. As those tools have become more performance-based, the self-presentation of political figures has become more performative.

⁴⁸ Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 3-6. J.L. Austin provides a most entertaining definition: “You are more than entitled not to know what the word ‘performative’ means. It is a new word and an ugly word, and perhaps it does not mean anything very much. But at any rate there is one thing in its favour, it is not a profound word. I remember once when I had been talking on this subject that somebody afterwards said: ‘You know, I haven’t the least idea what he means, unless it could be that he simply means what he says’. Well, that is what I should like it to mean.” “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 235-36.

⁴⁹ Geoffrey Craig, *Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 1-3.

In addition to its performative aspects, American politics has developed discursive strategies that rely on obfuscating or only selectively revealing intention. The examples used in this section are “dog whistle” political speech – phrases that seem vague or innocuous but carry specific meanings for in-the-know groups – and the shifting of the range of publicly acceptable policy proposals referred to as the Overton Window. The Overton Window is the “window of political possibility,” and the further outside this window a policy idea is, the more difficult its enactment.⁵⁰ I examine how these strategies contribute to the delegitimization of discourse, and how they contribute to intentionality anxiety. Then I use media scholar Farhood Manjoo’s analysis of a fractured media environment to argue that intentionality anxiety is exacerbated by the very structure of the twenty-first century American public sphere.

“Dog whistles” are words and phrases in political speech that have clear, specific meanings to certain constituencies, but their meanings are not immediately apparent to listeners outside the target constituencies. American journalist Craig Unger defines dog-whistling as “the art of using coded language and campaign practices that mean one thing to the general electorate but something else entirely to the targeted base.”⁵¹ While this strategy may not have originated with Ronald Reagan’s political career, the effectiveness of Reagan’s dog whistle speech in mobilizing some constituencies while maintaining the pretext of banal moralizing to others is unparalleled. Lee Atwater, deputy director of Reagan’s 1984 campaign and

⁵⁰ Jack McHugh and Joseph Lehman, “101 Recommendations to Revitalize Michigan with an Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibility,” 3rd ed. (Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2011).

⁵¹ Craig Unger, *Fall of the House of Bush* (New York: Scribner, 2007), 172.

campaign manager for George H.W. Bush in 1988, explains the evolving political rhetoric of the Republican Party from the reactionary response to the civil rights movement to the anti-welfare movement of the 1980s. His explanation of the Republican Party's "Southern strategy" reveals the power and origin of "states' rights" as the biggest dog whistle phrase in American politics:

[I]n 1968, opposition to the Voting Rights Act would have been a central part of keeping the South. Now [the new Southern strategy of Ronald Reagan] doesn't have to do that. All you have to do to keep the South is for Reagan to run in place on the issues he's campaigned on since 1964 and that's fiscal conservatism, balancing the budget, cut taxes, you know, the whole cluster. [...] You start out in 1954 by saying, "Nigger, nigger, nigger." By 1968 you can't say "nigger" — that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now [that] you're talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you're talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites. And subconsciously maybe that is part of it. I'm not saying that. But I'm saying that if it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. You follow me — because obviously sitting around saying, "We

want to cut this," is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "Nigger, nigger."⁵²

In 1980, Ronald Reagan kicked off his presidential campaign with a powerful speech expressing support for a “state’s rights” agenda at the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The impression to a casual observer might be that he was maintaining his consistent stand against governmental overreach. Coincidentally, Philadelphia was the cite of the 1964 lynching of three civil rights workers, who were characterized as members of a “nigger-communist invasion of Mississippi.”⁵³ In order to “let those agitating outsiders know where this state stands,”⁵⁴ the local deputy sheriff and a Baptist preacher orchestrated a large group of men to hunt down and murder the three civil rights workers.

Reagan and his team were certainly aware of the racially tinged connotations of the insistence of states’ rights, particularly in the context of this location. In 1979, the Chairman of the Mississippi Republican Party, Michael Retzer, wrote to the national party to suggest that the eventual nominee, whoever he might be, should speak at the county fair, since it “draws a tremendous crowd from typical George Wallace inclined voters. To win Mississippi in 1980 we must do well in the area and attendance at the Fair by our presidential candidate would do far more to accomplish this than any other effort.”⁵⁵ The coded “dog whistle” signal sent by Reagan’s speech

⁵² Alexander Lamis, *Southern Politics in the 1990s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999) 7-8.

⁵³ Don Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970) 103.

⁵⁴ Howard Ball, *Murder in Mississippi: United States v. Price and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2004), 62.

⁵⁵ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007) 327.

and choice of venue served not only to propel the candidate to victory, but to derail productive discussion about the role of race in American politics. Political scientist Robert Goodin describes dog whistle political rhetoric as a “perversity [that is...] fundamentally undermining democratic deliberation,” because “if everyone has a different understanding of what it is they are supporting, then the fact that everyone seems to support the ‘same’ thing will be democratically meaningless.”⁵⁶ Not only do dog whistle phrases have a pernicious effect on public discourse in that they dilute consensus on the fundamental meanings of language, to the detriment of the democratic processes of discourse, they can function as a conduit for toxic ideas to proliferate. By linking innocuous signifiers to unconscionable ideas, dog whistles can appeal to unwitting allies and recruit them to spread those ideas.

One influential theory of political discourse is the “Overton Window,” or the spectrum of acceptable policy ideas. To define the Overton Window, one might imagine all possible policy proposals on a given topic laid out on a spectrum from one extreme to another – Joseph Overton himself identified these extremes as “more freedom” and “less freedom,” but as his only offered definition of freedom is a lack of government intervention, one might choose a less transcendental signifier. For example, one might place the following policy proposals near the restrictive extreme of the gun control/gun ownership rights spectrum: “government confiscation of all privately owned firearms,” “repeal of the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution,” “felony charges for sale or possession of any type of firearm or ammunition,” and “complete disarmament of police and non-military security

⁵⁶ Robert Goodin, *Innovating Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 7.

forces.” On the opposite extreme one might place such ideas as: “elimination of background checks for purchase of firearms,” “ending requirements for manufacturers to give each weapon a unique serial number,” and “remove government regulation as to types of weaponry and munitions that can be bought and sold by the general public.” The Overton Window is the range of ideas that, at any given time, are publicly acceptable, legitimate policy proposals: the “window of political possibility.”⁵⁷ The further a policy is from the window of possibility, the less likely it is to be enactable.

Joseph Overton was Vice President of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market advocacy institute, and in the course of his work he articulated a theory of policy and social change. In essence, Overton argued that changes in policy are the result not of changes in politicians, but of changes in this window of political possibility. One very effective way to advocate for a particular policy, therefore, is to work to shift the Overton Window until the desired policy is among the acceptable proposals, and ideally situated somewhere near the middle of the window. Citizen education is the preferred shifting method identified by the Mackinac Center, but other approaches are more relevant to a discussion of intentionality anxiety. Backers of unpopular ideas can affect a shift in the Overton Window by advocating for even more extreme measures than their desired policies, making merely unpopular ideas seem more acceptable by comparison, or by disguising the intents and effects of those desired policies. The introduction and repetition of publicly unacceptable

⁵⁷ Jack McHugh and Joseph Lehman, “101 Recommendations to Revitalize Michigan with an Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibility,” 3rd ed. (Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2011).

policy ideas in public discourse gives those ideas a nascent plausibility. If competing narratives do not intervene, the Overton Window will likely shift or expand to include the newly introduced idea, and the desired goal is that much closer to enactment. Tactical shifting of the Overton Window turns political discourse into a negotiation in which ever more radical voices come to dominate, despite representing a tiny minority.⁵⁸

There are many other aspects of political discourse that are not primarily performative, but that do aggravate intentionality anxiety. One such aspect is the proliferation of video deceptively edited to misrepresent a political opponent's statements. This relates to the more general tactic of falsely claiming political opponents have said or done things they have not.⁵⁹ Another is the persistent claim by conservative political voices that the American media has a liberal bias — a claim that particularly aggravates intentionality anxiety when the bias is alleged to be deliberate. For the purposes of arguing for intentionality anxiety, it does not matter whether the American conservative movement's persistent narrative about the liberal bias of media is correct. Nor does it matter whether false claims can be disproven. Either way the existence of the idea in discourse has contributed to the destabilization of trust in public speech.

⁵⁸ A left-wing activist guidebook suggests taking the “short, easy way” to achieving mainstream acceptance: “amplify and echo the voices of those who take a position a few notches more radical than what you really want.” Josh Bolotsky, “Use Your Radical Fringe to Shift the Overton Window,” in *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*, ed. Andrew Boyd (New York: OR Books, 2012), 200.

⁵⁹ The Muskie Letters incident is one case of this sort of false claim. During the 1972 primary campaigns, Nixon's Committee to Re-Elect the President began releasing counterfeit letters on Maine Senator Edmund Muskie's letterhead to damage the Muskie campaign. Theodore White, *The Making of the President 1972* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 81-82.

The obfuscations of intent and meaning in political discourse represented by dog-whistle political speech and by attempts to shift the Overton Window have had an effect on our public sphere. The tactical use of performed intent can be a powerfully anti-democratic force, as it sabotages the conduct of good-faith policy discussion. These aspects of performative politics have caused significant harm to national consensus about facts, bogged down public discourse, and created misunderstandings. They have also contributed to a rising skepticism that anyone says what they mean, which is a healthy posture vis-a-vis political rhetoric, but is also a symptom of intentionality anxiety.

Performative politics can be a process in which individual citizens can collaborate. The introduction discusses conspiracy theory and the allegations that President Obama had been born in Kenya, and that Senator John Kerry had betrayed his military unit. Political journalist and media analyst Farhad Manjoo takes this latter case as indicative of the state of the American media environment. Manjoo explores the ways in which technological and psychological factors influence the American media system and contribute to the fragmentation of the media landscape. His analysis of the influential role of the political action committee [PAC] Swift Boat Veterans for Truth in the 2004 presidential election, as discussed above in the introduction, identifies a new phenomenon of political discourse enabled by this new media environment. According to Manjoo, the Swift Boat campaign was not about policy or causality. Instead, it instigated “a fight over two competing *versions of*

reality” –a fight that could only be possible within a fractured media environment.⁶⁰ Whichever of the two competing versions of reality a voter claimed to subscribe to had become more important as a performance than as a genuinely held belief. Certainly some individuals believed the conspiracy about Obama’s foreignness, and certainly some political figures cynically used the conspiracy theory to delegitimize Obama, as a nominee and as the President, in order to appeal to a certain segment of their constituency. I suggest that there were many individual voters who recognized the patent and absurd falsity of the non-American Obama conspiracy theory but who nevertheless responded affirmatively to polls asking whether they believed it. They were taking their cues from their political leaders, from the relatively mainstream conservatism of Fox News to the divisive rhetoric of such figures as the 2008 Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin and Donald Trump during his aborted 2012 presidential campaign. Recognizing that the conservative movement leaders were employing a strategy of intentionally muddying the truth, individuals mirrored the leadership’s strategy by playing the role of concerned citizens, muddying the measurable truth of the electorate’s beliefs.

The payoff was that, as the rumors grew more widespread, news media were forced to address them. This exposed the rumors themselves to a wider audience, sowing doubt in the minds of some low-information voters, and encouraging the relatively few true-believing conspiracy theorists in the fight. The larger the media presence of the rumors of Obama’s birth in Kenya, his covert identity as a practicing Muslim, and various manifestations of his un-American attitudes, the more

⁶⁰ Farhad Manjoo, *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-fact Society* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2008), 21.

professing either a belief in these conspiracy theories or an uncertainty about the truth of the matter became both a practical means to opposing Obama's candidacy (and later, policies) and a way for an individual to join a social movement aimed at manipulating the news media.

The fracturing of the media environment permits the new tactic of what Manjoo refers to as "reality shifting": the creation of and campaign for a newly created interpretation of historical events. This new media environment provides particularly rich ground both for satire and for reality shifting. Satire poses an alternate interpretation of the world, forcing the reader to reinterpret evidence from a new angle, as at the end of Chapter Eight of *Don Quixote*, which challenges its reader to develop an entirely new understanding of the source of the narrative. "Reality" can be said to be purely subjective, merely one's interpretation of all the relationships between people and things that govern one's life. The satiric impulse to create new interpretations of those relationships problematizes and challenges the easy acceptance of existing explanations.

Intentionality anxiety is the effect of a destabilized discourse, and the positive feedback loop of intentionality anxiety might amplify those changes, further destabilizing discourse. Recursive parody resonates powerfully with that instability. It does not restore stability. Instead, recursive parody gives its audience tools to navigate the existing instability. It does this in two ways: by running the audience through the practical exercise of discerning layers of intentions, and by getting the audience to laugh at the predicament of their own confinement within the layers of an unstable system of intentions. The metanarrative folding of layers of identity and

storytelling one within another – Cervantes’ innovation in Chapter Eight of *Don Quixote* – provides an unstable ground of meaning on which recursive parody somehow maintains its footing. This apparent comfort amidst instability gives its audiences reassurance that epistemological instability can be navigated, or at least that it can be survived. Satire allows its audience and practitioners to hold fact and fiction in a productive tension, and recursive parody allows the audience to hold the seeming stability of the discursive world with an acknowledgment that discursive stability is an illusion in a similar productive tension.

By creating multiple layers of intent to make the fictional satiric world impenetrably convoluted, the parodist acknowledges the impossibility of discerning genuine intention, and suggests that a singular authorial intention does not even exist. Paradoxically, acknowledging that one ultimately cannot discern true intent might lessen the negative effects of intentionality anxiety. It is an honest reckoning of the problem, and if we know we cannot ultimately determine intent, we can spend energy elsewhere instead of on worrying about how to make such a determination. Recursive parody is distinctly characteristic of, although not unique to, early twenty-first-century America satire because it speaks to the instabilities and uncertainties inherent in our discourse. However, as I examine in Chapter Three, it is possible that the tactics of recursive parody, popularized in response to these uncertainties, have been weaponized in politics and have unleashed even more profound uncertainties.

Defining Satire

Accounting for the role recursive parody plays in providing tools for its audience to navigate discursive instability necessitates a summary of and then a

departure from the primary traditions of theories of satire. According to John Dryden, that fount of neoclassical theory of satire, “the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction.”⁶¹ The theorists of satire of the 1960s and the lineage they have produced – most prominently Leonard Feinberg, Robert Elliott, George Test, and Dustin Griffin – have concluded that satire is best understood as a critique made via playful distortion of its target, although each has expressed the idea of playful distortion slightly differently. These critics provide useful but not totally sufficient models to account for satire in contemporary American discourse. Satire acts on its cultural environment and is acted upon by it, and a comprehensive model of a form of satire must take the cultural environment into account. This may explain why critics have found themselves overwhelmed by the perplexing, definition-evading crowd of satiric practices across diverse places and times. Satire has so many faces and so many applications it is almost impossible to define it in a way that is both useful and brief. It is less difficult to identify some of the characteristics of satire, and while a description of something is different than a definition, several prominent recent scholars have concluded that this may be the clearest explication of satire that can be easily articulated. This section uses existing theories to create an understanding of satire useful for examining the work of Stephen Colbert.

The legacy of satire includes such titans of Western culture as Horace and Juvenal, François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes, John Dryden and Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift. With such a seemingly stable cultural presence, it is

⁶¹ John Dryden, “Absalom and Achitophel,” *The Poetical Works of Dryden*, George Gilfillan, ed. (1855; Project Gutenberg, 2004), <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11488/pg11488.html>.

surprising that there is no stable, clear, agreed-upon definition of satire among scholars. This is a product of the epistemic evasiveness that is an inseparable aspect of satire. Instead of a stable definition we have, at best, a set of tendencies that satire embraces. Specific forms of satire can be clearly defined, but satire itself is much more evasive, because satire is a tactic or a stance, not a genre. By engaging with the historical and current scholarship of satire this section arrives at an understanding of satire as a tactic which will be useful in examining recursive parody, the particular form of satiric performance that is under scrutiny in this dissertation.

The two key definitions for satire in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are as follows:

- 1a. A poem, or in modern use sometimes a prose composition, in which prevailing vices or follies are held up to ridicule. Sometimes, less correctly, applied to a composition in verse or prose intended to ridicule a particular person or class of persons, a lampoon. [...]
- 2b. The employment, in speaking or writing, of sarcasm, irony, ridicule, etc. in exposing, denouncing, deriding, or ridiculing vice, folly, indecorum, abuses, or evils of any kind.⁶²

These two definitions offered by the OED evince very different influences. According to the first definition, the most correct form for satire is verse, and it should address general vices or human shortcomings rather than specific individuals or types of person. These limiting constraints come directly from John Dryden's thin-skinned defensiveness. The second definition is much more inclusive: the use of

⁶² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "satire."

a variety of methods in a variety of forms to variously reveal or denigrate any perceived fault of any magnitude whatsoever, either abstractly or by targeting the person or persons or groups in whom this fault may be found. This more modern definition accounts for the breadth of satiric practices and targets, but does not account for what satire actually means or how it operates in a given time and place. The value and meaning and forms of satire are determined by its culture, and so the very definition of satire is similarly culturally determined.

The primary foundation for most English-language criticism of satire is the work of seventeenth-century poet John Dryden. It was Dryden who formalized in English-language criticism the classification of gentle Horatian and unrestrained Juvenalian satires as archetypes of two identifiable generic forms, rather than as the products of two individual practitioners of a literary tactic. In Dryden's analysis, Horatian satire is esteemed for its restrained manners and tactfulness, while Juvenalian satire is beloved for its vigor and impetuosity. Horace is gentle and instructive on general virtues, whereas Juvenal is cutting and exposes particular vices. Juvenal "treats Tyranny, and all the Vices attending it, as they deserve, with the utmost rigour," whereas Horace is "a well Manner'd Court Slave [...] who is often afraid of Laughing in the right place."⁶³ The division of satire into Horatian and Juvenalian archetypes only feeds the illusion that satire can be wholly constrained into definition in the first place.⁶⁴ Dryden's redefinition and degradation of many

⁶³ John Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," in *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis* (London, 1693; Project Gutenberg, 2014), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2615/2615-h/2615-h.htm>.

⁶⁴ Dryden himself identifies a flaw with this gentle/vicious polarity. In defending Horace against his own arguments, Dryden remarks: "How easie it is to call Rogue and Villain, and that wittily? But how hard to make a Man appear a Fool, a Blockhead, or a Knave, without using any of those opprobrious

contemporaneous satires as lowly burlesques, lampoons, and other, lesser, forms created a false distinction. Generations of scholars of satire have undertaken the useless task of identifying what is and what is not genuine satire.⁶⁵ This hair-splitting is utterly unnecessary, since Dryden's definition of satire was motivated by a desire to delegitimize satiric critiques of himself and his sphere.

In addition to having composed many satiric verses of his own, Dryden translated both Horace's and Juvenal's satires into English. His forward to Juvenal, titled "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire," was the first critical investigation into the history and theorization of satire written in English. This document has become the canonical foundation of English-language scholarly discourse on the subject, and is the direct source for definition 1a of satire in the *OED*. Dryden's critique came "at a time when satiric theory was still being actively debated."⁶⁶ Dryden's analysis of the genre, scholar of satiric literature Dustin Griffin reminds us, did not describe existing forms satire in seventeenth-century England.

terms?" "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire." Horace, as Dryden observes, uses a seeming gentility to disguise ridicule, masking the laughter directed at his targets. Horace's satire is not particularly gentle, but its viciousness is concealed.

⁶⁵ This type of distinction goes at least as far back as Roman rhetorician Quintilian's *Institutio Oratorio*, which canonized formal verse satire – the *satira* practiced by Horace and others – as the definitive Roman form of satire, while recognizing the existence of an "even older type of satire which derives its variety not merely from verse, but from an admixture of prose as well," a more disparate style encompassing a variety of satires that did not adhere to his generic structure. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. Harold Butler (New York: Twayne, 1974) 10.1.73. Quintilian grouped these older forms together as Varronian satires – also known by the related terms Menippean satire or anatomy – and his dichotomy of true verse satire and generically impure Varronian satire persisted, as did his methodology of tracing traditions of satirical practice back to individual practitioners, to be perpetuated by Renaissance writers, including Dryden. While Dryden did not originate the idea of a "true form" of satire, his insistence on it has ingrained it into the English language tradition.

⁶⁶ Dustin Griffin, "Dryden and Restoration Satire," in *A Companion to Satire*, Ruben Quintero, ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007), 177.

Rather, he prescribed a satire restricted in form and content for the benefit of himself and his political allies.⁶⁷

Dryden's advice on which members of society do or do not constitute appropriate subjects for satiric approbation reveals the self-interest of his proscriptions. Only those who have "become a Publick Nuisance" may "properly be expos'd by Name for publick Examples of Vices and Follies."⁶⁸ This was a rebuke to the writers of what are now known as the "Poems on the Affairs of State" and other burlesques which so rudely savaged those in and around power, including Dryden himself and his friends and allies at court. By delegitimizing these works and redefining satire, Dryden "sought to efface the memory of the 'state poems' and to redirect the attention of English readers."⁶⁹ While Dryden insists that he himself had "seldom answer'd any scurrilous Lampoon," because "in Christian Charity, all Offences are to be forgiven," the amount of energy he expends vilifying their authors constitutes a powerful answer to them and renders his professions of charity unconvincing.⁷⁰ Dryden dismisses the contemporary satire of his political opponents as witless, indecent, and artless invective, and thus no satires at all. He does not so much as mention Andrew Marvell or other writers who, he knew, had contributed much to verse satire. This dismissal has been codified so deeply, it constitutes the

⁶⁷ Dryden's ideal form for satire would be heroic pentameter, which provided "a larger compass" for the poet, as opposed to the burlesque verse's lines of four feet and double rhymes, which "is not so proper for Manly Satire, for it turns Earnest too much to Jest, and gives us a Boyish kind of Pleasure." Dryden's strictures of content included unity of subject -- "it ought only to treat of one Subject; to be confin'd to one particular Theme" and "to give [the] Reader some one Precept of Moral Virtue; and to caution him against some one particular Vice or Folly." Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire."

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Griffin, "Dryden and Restoration Satire," 178.

⁷⁰ Dryden, "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire."

primary definition of satire in the OED. The resultant marginalization has been Dryden's persistent revenge.

Dryden's influence has also had the effect of establishing a significant class hierarchy in satire. The disparaging voices of the political opposition, critiquing the wealthy and powerful figures at court, are characterized in Dryden's analysis as coarse and crass. Dryden, dependent as he was upon the patronage of kings and aristocrats, was much more a well-mannered court slave than Horace. Horace's critiques, though couched in courtesy, show that he was a court slave in fact but not in spirit, but Dryden's intimacy with the court significantly curtailed his liberty and desire to critique those inner circles at all.

Stephen Colbert operates in at least two ways that are similar to Dryden. First, like Dryden, he adopts satire as a means to critique official political power. Second, Colbert resists making his medium invisible by framing his parodic character as a character and by commenting on and undercutting his own performance. Dryden accomplishes this quite differently, by insisting that satire take a particular verse form, but the effect is similarly to mark his satire as satire.

A Modern Theory of Satire Emerges

Dryden did acknowledge that the historical and cultural conditions under which an author worked would have a significant effect on the satire produced, but only by way of observing that Juvenal, in contrast to Horace, lived in a Rome with more corruption and more immorality, and thus had greater opportunity and cause to write satire dripping with scorn and disdain. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that literary criticism finally divorced the critical understanding of satire

from the historical exegesis of satirical works and the task of identifying satire's proper generic form.

In his works on satire, literary theorist Northrup Frye offered no Drydenesque strictures on content or form. Frye was the first scholar to clearly identify satire as a tactic, as "a tone or quality of art which we may find in any form" rather than as a genre that ought to take a particular form.⁷¹ Further, he formulated a definition of satire rooted in cultural specificity and which fundamentally transforms the understood social role of the satirist. In a significant shift from previous theorists' positions, Frye established the satirist as an analyst and liberator of society's rhetoric, not merely as a moralistic scold:

I should define satire [...] as poetry assuming a special function of analysis, that is, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that impede the free movement of society."⁷²

While moralizing does enter into Frye's vision of satire, his moral ground is limited to that of freedom of thought and expression, and free movement of ideas.⁷³ According to him, each culture's satirists are those who use fiction to address the areas of discourse that are ossified or off-limits, regardless of the forms they use or the targets on which they set their sights. Frye's insight is that, whatever issues it

⁷¹ Frye, "Nature of Satire," 75.

⁷² Ibid, 79

⁷³ It should be observed that freedom of expression is a moral ground as culturally-bound as any other moral ideal, but even (or especially) in a culture that claims intellectual freedom as its greatest good, there are censored and suppressed topics.

addresses and whatever forms it takes, satire acts as a lubricant to society's discourse, allowing ideas to be more freely and openly discussed in the public sphere.

Frye's satirist is an analyst of rhetoric, and therefore of culture. As cultural theorist Clifford Geertz writes, "cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses."⁷⁴ In an important sense, "to guess at meanings" is precisely what recursive parody asks its audience to do. Satiric speech is indirect; it does not say precisely what it means. Ambiguity is an inherent component of satire. By confronting his audience with ambiguous speech, a satirist forces the audience to guess at meanings and to play an interpretive game to determine precisely what criticism is being made. Recursive parody asks its audience to become cultural analysts, and recursive parodists like Stephen Colbert situate themselves and their interactions with real world figures as sites for cultural analysis.

In the years following publication of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, a remarkable number of major works of criticism about satire were published.⁷⁵ Many works in this period pursued a rhetorical theory of satire that still hoped to identify satire's generic identity and overall coherence, but at least the period had unhitched the identity of satire as a form from the genre of verse satire. For example, literary scholar Robert Elliott attempts to define and lay out a general theory of satire in his influential 1960 study, *The Power of Satire*. He observed that satire can "designate a

⁷⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 20.

⁷⁵ These works include *The Power of Satire* by Robert Elliott (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), *The Canker'd Muse* and *The Plot of Satire* by Alvin Kernan (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959; New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), *The Fictions of Satire* by Ronald Paulson (1967), and *An Introduction to Satire* by Leonard Feinberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967), as well as *Satire: Theory and Practice*, an anthology of satiric theory edited by Charles Allen, which reprinted Frye's own "The Nature of Satire" (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1962).

form of art and a spirit, a purpose and a tone” and that satiric works include a “staggering diversity of forms, tones and materials.”⁷⁶ He was disappointed with his eventual conclusion that a single definition for satire, in its diversity and depth, is not possible. Later that decade another theorist of satire, Leonard Feinberg, explicitly accepted Elliott’s conclusion, suggesting that:

the best we can do [...] is to look at a number of works traditionally accepted as satire and compare the new work [i.e. the work under present examination] with these examples. If the work we are considering has a reasonable number of resemblances to accepted satires, we are justified in calling it a satiric work. But we should never demand complete conformity to a particular type, and we should accept numerous deviations from familiar practice.⁷⁷

Feinberg’s conclusion suggests that the form of satire shifts over time. This is less problematic than it may seem, as shifting definitions and in-progress thought are at the core of satire.

Feinberg and Elliott both conclude that perhaps no satisfactorily comprehensive definition of satire is possible. What is possible, each argues, is to examine satirical works and to derive general conclusions about the form from them. By doing so, Feinberg arrives at a working definition that “satire is a playfully critical distortion of the familiar.”⁷⁸ Feinberg generally understands satire to be a critique of

⁷⁶ Robert C. Elliot, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960), 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 18

⁷⁸ Leonard Feinberg, *An Introduction to Satire* (Ames: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1967), 19. The similarity in terminology between Feinberg’s satiric critique that distorts the familiar and Brechtian

some target – some person, institution, way of thinking, etc. – and as he observes, satire makes its critique of this familiar target via distortion, a tactic of making it seem suddenly strange and unfamiliar. One distortive method of satiric critique is to carry the target’s rhetoric to its absurd logical extremities, a tactic frequently used by Stephen Colbert. The distortive quality of satire is described by scholars variously as ridicule, play or playfulness, or irony.⁷⁹ The presence of playfulness or irony means these theories of satire must somehow account for the satirist’s intention, and not all of them attempt to. As argued above, intention itself is a major source of anxiety in contemporary discourse, and recursive parody targets that anxiety.

If the identification of satiric speech comes down solely to the speaker’s intent, then there must be some way to identify this intent. Linda Hutcheon, the most prolific and influential theorist to address satire since Frye, points out that even though “there is no such thing as a marker that would allow us to determine *with certainty* the presence (or absence) of irony [...] this doesn’t mean [...] that markers don’t exist and don’t have functions of some kind in signaling the possibility of recognizing or attributing irony.”⁸⁰ In other words, markers of satiric intent exist, but are never conclusive. The form of such markers varies. A satiric marker could be

verfremdungseffekt that defamiliarizes is notable, as each attempts to spark its audience into seeing the world around them in a new way.

⁷⁹ Following the lead of Elliott and Feinberg, George Test accepts that the identification of what precisely constitutes satire is a serious, possibly insoluble, problem. Test proposes that satiric multifariousness is a function of variation in the arrangement, concentration, and combination in each satiric work of four key elements that, he argues, together define satire: aggression, play, laughter, and judgment. Test, *Satire: Spirit and Art* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991). This definition does not specifically identify the critically important element of distortion, which enables satire to intervene on the viewer’s understanding of the object of adjudication. However, Test uses his quadripartite definition to critique the traditionally accepted split between Horatian and Juvenalian satire, arguing that they are variations of the same satiric drive, but only created with different arrangements of his four elements of satire – the former with more play, the latter with more aggression.

⁸⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 149.

contained within the performance, or could be external to it. For example, in “The Word,” the contradictions between Colbert’s voice and the on-screen text serves as an internal satiric marker, and Colbert’s off-stage out-of-character appearances are external markers. These markers serve to frame Colbert’s performance as satire, but as with any performance, the spectator can never be certain about the artist’s intent, and neither can the artist be assured that his irony will be detected. This ambiguity and uncertainty of intention is responsible for various misreadings of satire, and also helps explain why satire is particularly resonant in the age of intentionality anxiety.

So far this section has accounted for the two parts of the *OED* definition of satire: the neoclassical preoccupation with form and genre, and the modernist acknowledgement that satire is a tactic for criticism. But there are two more complex tasks: accounting for the interaction between a satire and the rest of discourse, and investigating why satire is a useful tactic.

Individual and Social Subconsciouses

Intentionality anxiety comes from the unknowability of others’ intentions, and satiric speech plays with this unknowability. Intent is inherently ambiguous because the totality of intention exceeds both the audience’s perception and the speaker’s own awareness. There are subconscious strata to intention that are unknown and unknowable. Satire comes from this unknowable part of the satirist’s mind, and appeals to the same unknowable within the audience’s.

In his 1905 *Wit and Its Relation to the Subconscious*, pioneer of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud interrogated humor to discern how a joker uses humor to fulfill desires that are so deeply hidden that he himself is unaware of them.

Freud describes some jokes as innocent, without an aim other than the pleasure of the pun or play, and others as tendentious, which contain expressions of hostility, obscenity, cynicism, or skepticism. Tendentious jokes, in particular those hostile toward the powerful and toward social institutions, “allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; [...] the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.”⁸¹ Freud here speaks of subconscious obstacles; the fulfillment of these subconscious desires partly accounts for satire’s unaccountable pleasure and its epistemic evasiveness.⁸²

Like any speaker of censorable ideas, a satirist disguises unspeakable criticisms in a way that makes them acceptable. In this way satire evades both internal and external obstacles to freedom of thought and speech. Internalized censorship is repression imposed on oneself subconsciously, and external is censorship imposed by force or other punitive repercussions. Literary theorist and analyst of satiric novels Michael Seidel posits that the satirist fulfills the social function of easing, if not unearthing, the unacknowledged desires and anxieties of a society. Seidel taps into Freud’s descriptions of censorship and sublimation to examine the satirist’s struggle against the naturalization and dehistoricization of her

⁸¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Subconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1960), 103.

⁸² The dreamer, Freud’s ultimate object of inquiry in *Interpretation of Dreams*, is subject to internally imposed censorship. “[A]ccording to the strength and sensitiveness of the censorship [...] finds himself compelled either to merely refrain from certain forms of attack, or to speak in allusions in place of direct references, or he must conceal his objectionable pronouncement beneath some apparently innocent disguise.” Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge, 1965) 142. In other words, in order to express an anxiety despite the dreamer’s own deep desire not to acknowledge it, the hostile or anxious thought is folded within the dream figures or action. The satirist is very like Freud’s dreamer, as is the satirist’s audience. In their need to evade censorship, including that which is internally imposed, each must disguise their hostility or anxiety, expressing it only indirectly.

historical moment. He views satire as a product of interrelated artistic, psychological, and social processes – in fact, so interrelated as to be nearly the same process. Satire causes psychological distress by acknowledging what one might call the “social subconscious” – that is, the aspects of the socio-political world that have been naturalized and dehistoricized. In his analysis satire can be understood as an evasion of society-level subconscious restrictions. These restrictions include the naturalization and thus invisibility of constructed conditions in present-day economic, political, and social spheres. In other words, Seidel finds that satire circumvents the foundations of fossilized dogmas that, according to Northrup Frye, satire breaks up.

By analyzing the critical response to satire and practitioners from Plato to *Tristram Shandy*, Seidel identifies the traces of this distress and of the difficulties encountered by critics in defining what, precisely, we *mean* by satire. This difficulty is in some ways attributable to satire’s ever-changing meanings and methods, but in other ways to its complex social-psychological function and to the psychological distress it causes us.

One reason satire so effectively draws on the social subconscious is that, like the human brain, satire consists of a jumbled juxtaposition of multiple cultural sources. The satirist draws together multiple streams of discourse from the social world and puts this diversity of social speech types into dialogue together, exploiting the resultant tension and conflict for humor and social critique. The interaction of this variety of speech is a dynamic that Mikhail Bakhtin explored throughout his work. In his essay “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin argues that the primary

characteristic of the novel is its use of socially stratified languages within language, which includes various

social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour.⁸³

The coexistence of and dialogue among these languages – what Bakhtin terms heteroglossia – is the defining characteristic of the novel, and a critical part of Bakhtin’s larger theory of language. It is also a defining characteristic of parodic satire.⁸⁴

As Elliot, Hutcheon, and many other theorists of satire have argued, intention is an essential defining component of satire. But looking for intent is problematic, because intent is unknowable. Despite the presence of markers of satire, even satiric intent is never fully recoverable. As culture theorist Roland Barthes observes, the intent of an author is in a very practical sense nonexistent for the reader. Perhaps

⁸³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), 262-3.

⁸⁴ There are striking similarities between Bakhtin’s analysis of the novel as a form and most post-1960 scholarship on satire. As stated at the outset of this section, satire has no agreed-upon definition or canon. Not only is this the case with the novel as well, at least according to Bakhtin, for whom the novel is a form as large as human history, but he argues that the lack of a canon and the inability of most literary theory to adequately address the novel as form stem from the nature of the form itself. Satire resists its theorization and canonization because it, like Bakhtin’s novel, is a form that is constantly in process and continuously evolving. “The utter inadequacy of literary theory is exposed when it is forced to deal with the novel.” Bakhtin, “Epic and the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*, 8. This is partly because the novel has so many discourses pulsing through it, and partly because the novel is always in process and not a “completed genre.” “The novel, after all, has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review. Such, indeed, is the only possibility open to a genre that structures itself in a zone of direct contact with developing reality.” Bakhtin, “Epic and the Novel,” 39.

this distinction between literal and satiric speech is immaterial and irrelevant, if it relies on the intent of the speaker rather than on a discernible objective quality. But there must be more to an analysis of the relationship between the two modes of speech than absolving oneself of the task of distinguishing them. In this case, satire must exist only through interpretation; it does not exist as an object, or even as separated authors and readers. Parodic satire cannot be understood without an imaginary leap into the performer's mind, even though such a leap is not objective.

Conclusion

John Dryden observed that the satirist has a social responsibility, and that there are multiple modes by which the satirist can execute it – Horatian gentility or Juvenalian harshness among them. Dryden believed that the satirist's responsibility was to ridicule vice, but only in a strictly limited way to protect one's allies and damage only one's enemies. Northrup Frye argued that the satirist's social responsibility is to keep discourse as free as possible – indeed, to Frye the protection of free movement of discourse is such a core component of satire that it forms the basis of his definition. By “free movement,” Frye means a discourse not just wherein speech is uncensored and communication is open, but one in which discourse is free from internalized impediments to a rational, forthright exchange of ideas. Frye identifies some of these barriers: “stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions.”⁸⁵ Even if the exchange of superstitions, dogma, and stereotypes is uninhibited, for Frye such a discourse is not truly free because such a discourse would only be more efficient at

⁸⁵ Frye, “Nature of Satire,” 79.

diffusing these pitfalls that result in distorted understanding and biased reasoning. While healthy skepticism is useful, the radical distrust of public discourse that intentionality anxiety fosters represents a serious threat to free and rational discourse, because a fundamental uneasiness about others' claimed intentions forestalls the honest and open communication that rational discourse requires.

Stephen Colbert offers a response to the threat intentionality anxiety poses to discourse. His use of recursive parody, the multiple folding-over of interactions between a parodic character and the external world, is particularly resonant to a contemporary American audience because it responds to intentionality anxiety through identifying and critiquing political discourse that subverts rational exchange and relies on hidden intent. In one example, President Obama read a text prepared for Colbert – his political adversary. This resulted in a double-voiced performance that revealed the fictive intent of Colbert's monologue and the real intent of the president's appearance on the program. The multiple voices in Colbert's recursive parody rehearse the push-and-pull of centralizing monologism and the destabilizing (but productive) forces of Bakhtinian dialogic heteroglossia. The staged conflict between Colbert's monologic authority and the heteroglossia that destabilizes his voice offers one level of critique. On an even greater level, the parodic character's engagement with nonfictional figures from the external world is where claims of possession of an ultimate truth are exposed most effectively for the pretenses that they are.

Colbert uses his game of truth to gesture toward the performativity of all political discourse. In doing so, the game of truth turns the audience's critical

faculties toward discourse and in on themselves and their relationship to discourse. It offers a response to political discourse that relies on hidden intent, like dog whistle rhetoric or Overton Window shifting, as well as to the performativity of politicians' public personae. Several of his most effective interventions used technology and internet media to critique the unreliability of information in a fractured media environment. In this way, the game of truth is a response to intentionality anxiety.

The postmodern problematization of authorship and the stance that intent is indeterminable are related to many of the anxieties that make Stephen Colbert's playing with layers of identity and intention so resonant in twenty-first-century American discourse. The narrative layering that is characteristic of recursive parody, seen in *Don Quixote* and on *The Colbert Report*, depends upon uncertainty of authorship and of intent. Stephen Colbert enters into a political discourse rife with obfuscated intention in a cultural moment that distances authorial intent from interpretation. He practices recursive parody, folding layers of intention to play with authorial uncertainty.

Colbert's playing serves the audience in various ways. His relentless probing of his targets for footholds for his parodic interventions exemplifies a critical viewing stance, and those interventions suggest possible methods of critique. The show implicitly trains the audience to anticipate the critiques that it makes – Colbert's satiric critiques of his guests or of figures in news stories he reviews, or the critiques of Colbert by onscreen text in "The Wørd," for example – and it provides a controlled environment in which to practice these skills. Colbert's "game of truth" challenges his audience to track and decipher the character's voice, to evaluate the validity of his

arguments, and to infer counter-arguments. The audience must pay close critical attention in order to absorb and account for Colbert's manifest ignorance, his tenacious arguments, and the wide spectrum that encompasses them. This provides an environment that is constantly testing the audience, honing their attentiveness and refining their critical viewing skills – and provides the audience with the positive feedback that the critical task is practical, within their abilities, and even enjoyable.

The next chapter examines a series of performances on *The Colbert Report* centered on Colbert's creation and management of a political action committee [PAC]. These performances confronted and interacted with the shifting legal ground of political campaigning by external groups. As a major aspect of PAC financing was the anonymity of its backers, Colbert's journey creating and using a PAC served as a confrontation of intentionality anxiety. The Colbert Super PAC sequence used Stephen Colbert's character and audience to enact a public critique of the changes in discourse engendered by the changes in campaign finance law.

Chapter Two: Colbert Super PAC

A segment of the November 12, 2012 episode of *The Colbert Report* featured the host discussing with his lawyer, Trevor Potter, how to legally hide approximately three-quarters of a million dollars. This was money left over from Colbert's twenty-month-long project exposing and critiquing the role of anonymous money in the American political process, and originally had been raised from his viewers for Colbert's political action committee (PAC). The PAC, which Colbert had run for most of the previous two years, had drawn on its funds to create and air a few commercials and to engage in other political campaigning, but most of the original capital remained. Colbert hinted to his lawyer that he wanted to take the money he had raised for political activism and use it for personal enrichment – but to do so secretly. In the end, Potter advised Colbert that he could create a non-profit organization, the use of which would obfuscate the ultimate destiny of the money and enable Colbert to use it however he wanted. While Colbert in fact distributed the money among several of his favorite charitable causes, the discovery that he could easily and legally reappropriate those funds for his own personal gain was the last in a long series of educational waypoints on this journey exploring possibilities newly opened by a controversial decision by the Supreme Court of the United States.

In 2012, Stephen Colbert was already a major public figure who frequently started or joined in conversation in the public sphere. “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow,” the Colbert Super PAC project which extended across scores of episodes of *The Colbert Report*, gave Colbert the opportunity to turn the processes of creating, funding, and managing a super PAC into a public spectacle, making the

legal structures of campaign finance accessible and memorable through performance. Through this project, Colbert broadened the popular cultural discussion of campaign finance, and exposed how the structure of American political power reinforces existing power and minimizes, if not facilitates, possible corruption. He simultaneously engaged in performance and in politics, using existing structures of the American political system and American discourse to create a spectacle and to articulate a critique of the American political process. In this way, Colbert created new forms of performance that offered his audiences new perspectives on – and a new way to engage with – the political system.

Jürgen Habermas suggests that a genuine rational public sphere was no longer possible by the late nineteenth century, at the advent of mass media and the intervention of state and commercial interests thereupon.¹ As this chapter shows, Colbert's super PAC sequence demonstrates that the creation of a public sphere is possible, even in a media environment that is structurally inhospitable to the formation of such a public. There can still be rational public participation in a media environment that attempts to reduce citizens to consumers, but as Colbert's work evidences, it is not purely rational.

The Public Sphere

The public sphere is the forum in which political discourse occurs and through which public opinion is formed. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, an analysis of the emergence of a rational-critical bourgeois discourse in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jürgen Habermas gave shape

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 191-193, 214-217.

to the idea of a public sphere through which a citizenry – ideally autonomous, rational, and meritocratic – can develop public opinions and thereby influence the state. The public sphere is the sum of all discursive arenas in which private citizens create and influence public opinion; this sphere also communicates public opinions to political and social institutions. Although Habermas was pessimistic about the possibility of a genuine public sphere in a world of mass media, the idea of the public sphere, as articulated by him and refined by later theorists, serves as the foundation of this project’s theoretical model of American political discourse and the interventions of recursive parody. Two major developments of the concept of the public sphere since Habermas are the recognitions that the public sphere is not based solely in rational argument and consensus, and that there are multiple overlapping public spheres summoned into being by discourse.

In her analysis of rhetoric in the late capitalist neoliberal paradigm, Catherine Chaput challenges the traditional division of rhetoric into appeals to reason and to emotion, arguing that affect functions in the rhetoric of late capitalism independently of the reason-emotion divide.² Affect, which includes our critically unchallenged identifications in social groupings, can be manifested in such forms as instinct or gut feelings. Chaput connects the circulation of rhetoric with the capitalist economic processes, suggesting that affect is a measurement of rhetorical value just as money measures economic value. She writes that “rhetorical value has less to do with historical truth or a text’s inherent qualities and more to do the circulation

² Catherine Chaput, “Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43.1 (2010), 3.

process.”³ In other words, a text accumulates affective value – that is, meaning and persuasive power – through its circulation in the exchange processes of discourse.

As performance theorist Janelle Reinelt and others observe, many legitimate forms of argument and discourse that do not follow a point-to-point linearity are dismissed under the rubric of irrational.⁴ Theater scholar Christopher Balme posits that a theatrical public sphere includes both rational and affective-emotional modes, and that it exists partly “as a dialectical resolution of two apparently opposing views.”⁵ The public sphere is also multifarious, with far more than one or two modes or views. These factional counterpublics, as American cultural theorist Michael Warner defines them, are “in tension with a larger public”; each counterpublic draws on its own specific sources. Warner articulates that the public sphere is not unitary, but that discourse calls publics into being, resulting in a fractured public that consists of an assemblage of innumerable overlapping spheres.⁶

Reinelt views the public sphere as a force that is in turns hegemonic and liberating, both “in league with the state and with global capital” and a “space of democratic practice or even resistance.”⁷ Just as Balme recognizes that “today the culturally dominant forms of theatre have effectively ‘privatized’,”⁸ Reinelt argues that performance at most art institutions is constitutionally incapable of political action. To understand why, Reinelt evokes the public sphere in conversation with a

³ Ibid, 14.

⁴ Janelle Reinelt, “Rethinking the Public Sphere for a Global Age,” *Performance Research* 16, no. 2 (2011): 17-18.

⁵ Christopher Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 2014), 12.

⁶ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), 56.

⁷ Reinelt, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 20. Reinelt uses “civil society” and “political society” to help explain the contradictory natures of the public sphere, terminology innovated by Indian historian and political scholar Partha Chatterjee.

⁸ Balme, *Theatrical Public Sphere*, 23.

larger socio-political macrosphere, made up of governmental agencies, global media, and other institutions of civil society and political society. The states and civic organizations that finance art institutions, and perhaps the art institutions themselves, constitute this socio-political macrosphere, and are unlikely to foster public opinion at odds with their own interests or to assist in their own destruction. In a sense, Reinelt identifies that some regions of the public sphere can become captured by the socio-political macrosphere. Feminist theorist Nancy Fraser does not use the term “macrosphere,” but she identifies this same phenomenon when she observes that the state and society have become “mutually intertwined.”⁹ One of Stephen Colbert’s important contributions using recursive parody is to draw focus to this intertwining.

The relationship between the public sphere and the macrosphere is always evolving. In the twenty-first-century United States, oligarchic interests are capturing some of the various pieces that make up the public sphere. In the U.S. Supreme Court’s watershed 2010 decision in *Citizens United v FEC*, the majority found that speech and money are inseparable, and so are equivalent.¹⁰ While it has always been possible to convert the power of wealth into political action, the *Citizens United* decision enshrined in case law the power of the socio-political macrosphere to flood the public sphere with its own messaging.

Political theorist Wendy Brown argues that the *Citizens United* decision reinterprets democratic processes as market ones, transforming the political into the economic. The neoliberalization of all aspects of life – as Brown writes, “the

⁹ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), 59.

¹⁰ R. Sam Garrett, “Seriously Funny: Understanding Campaign Finance Policy Through the Colbert Super PAC,” *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 56, no. 711 (2012), 715.

relentless remaking of political life with market values, not merely by market forces” – poses a subtle but existential threat to democracy itself.¹¹ The *Citizens United* ruling is an acknowledgment that the logic of much of the public sphere is not a Habermasian rationality, but neither is it an affective-emotional mode. Above either of these, it is money. Rhetoric that defends unlimited money in politics equates money with speech, and would conclude that campaign finance is part of the public sphere. But campaign financing is an element of the socio-political macrosphere: peopled by wealth and created and defined by the enshrinement of its rules in law. As Colbert’s performances help his audience to understand, this is not a sphere that is accessible to all and cannot be held accountable by the citizenry, and so in that sense is not public. By creating legal definitions of organizations like super PACs, the United States government empowers those organizations to bring their massive monetary influence directly into the public sphere.

When combined with the unprecedented concentration of wealth and income, the *Citizens United* decision poses a critical problem for the public sphere: how can the public generate well-informed opinions if the discursive space where they must form opinions becomes just another venue for messaging from the macrosphere itself? The Colbert Super PAC and Colbert’s 2012 presidential campaign answer this question with examples of how work within the public sphere can liberate parts of that sphere from this capture.

¹¹ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 155.

Invention of the Super PAC

The creation and evolution of Stephen Colbert’s super PAC “Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” was not only a parody of political ads and other eminently mockable political discourse. It was a direct response to the effects on the public sphere of two decisions from the highest American courts: *Citizens United vs. FEC* as decided by the Supreme Court of the United States, and *SpeechNow.org vs. FEC* as decided by the District of Columbia Circuit Court of Appeals. These decisions created a system of political speech in which the super PAC was an unprecedented political force.

The U.S. Supreme Court decided *Citizens United vs. FEC* on January 21, 2010 by a 5-4 vote, divided along conservative-liberal lines. The court’s majority opinion in this case was that the 2002 McCain-Feingold Act, which reformed campaign spending, violated the First Amendment. Specifically, the court found that corporate and union spending on electioneering was a form of speech and therefore could not be limited. This spending did not include donations to political candidates’ campaigns, which the court maintained could be limited, but rather applied to direct spending by these institutions on commercials or other electioneering activities independent of political campaigns.¹²

On March 26, 2010, the DC Circuit Court of Appeals cited *Citizens United v. FEC* in its own decision in *SpeechNow.org v. FEC*. This appellate court decision lifted the contribution limits for donations to groups that make independent expenditures – that is, that spend money on a campaign’s or candidate’s behalf without coordinating with any political campaign. It also eliminated the requirement

¹² Garrett, “Seriously Funny,” 715.

to identify donors. The ultimate effect of this decision was to create the conditions necessary for a new type of political action committee, which was initially referred to by the designation “independent expenditure-only committees” (IEOCs), but which became better known colloquially as “super PACs.”¹³

In combination, these two court decisions opened new possibilities for pairing political action committees with tax-exempt non-profit 501(c)(4) groups. In theory, the 501(c)(4) could raise unlimited and anonymous funds, and then donate them to the ostensibly transparent super PAC. The super PAC would only need to identify the source of its funding as the 501(c)(4), and not the anonymous donors behind it. Beginning with the 2010 election, and greatly intensifying in the presidential election two years later, super PACs became a major force in American politics. In the lead-in to the 2016 primaries, every candidate had a super PAC associated with him or her – indeed, the formation and funding of a super PAC seems to have become a requirement for a candidate to be taken seriously.

Although criticism of the *Citizens United* decision is frequently expressed as a dismay that it granted personhood to corporations, that is not the most insidious effect. Much worse, as Wendy Brown articulates, is that “individuals as rights-bearing participants in popular sovereignty disappear when speech flows obtain the status of capital flows and all actors are seeking to enhance the value of their capital.”¹⁴ If the only value of public life is private gain, then capital, and not citizens, will be the sovereign power. *Citizens United* recast the public political sphere as a transactional marketplace, and replaced democratic political values – citizens’ rights,

¹³ Garrett, “Seriously Funny,” 716.

¹⁴ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 161.

civil liberties, and equality under the law, among others – with economic ciphers of them.¹⁵ The demos does not, and never has, really ruled directly in liberal democracies. Nor could it. But there has been an understanding that it ought to, and that legislation benefiting the few at the expense of the many should be curtailed. That belief is threatened by neoliberal political rationality, which is expressed quite directly in the economization of political campaigning.

Stephen Colbert's super PAC project raised funds. It produced and aired ads to support or attack political candidates. It also managed its operations by electing officers and transferring stewardship of the fund as necessary. These are technocratic details of campaign finance, and they are critical to how our democracy functions. As sociopolitical issues, they are neither of immediate concern nor accessible to the average citizen. By conducting all its business openly and with an eye toward simultaneously informing its audience and mocking its subject, Colbert's Super PAC project made big political money visible and accessible, and it modeled compelling reasons for concern. As Jeffrey Jones, Amber Day, and other scholars have observed, this is part of the value of Stephen Colbert's lengthy treatment of this emerging facet of American political discourse: by incorporating the actual processes of creating and running a super PAC and 501(c)(4) into his parodic performance, he made memorable and accessible the abstruse and impenetrable mechanics of power in the American political system. His performance pushed back against the inaccessibility of these legal structures – abstruseness is as limiting to discursive freedom as censorship – opening up a topic that had been closed off to his viewers.

¹⁵ Ibid, 155.

Memes and Networks

I suggest that the gradual effect of speech at the edges of acceptability and imaginability is the expansion of what is thinkable. This expansion makes new ideas and new methods of critique imaginable. Institutions of power — government agencies, business interests, religious institutions, etc. — must respond to these changes through control, cooptation, or acceptance. This is what makes recursive parody like Colbert's singularly effective. By staging performances that interact directly with the macrosphere, and then immediately responding to the reactions to and effects of that performance, recursivity intensifies the parody's assault on the limits of thought. It makes an idea thinkable, immediately expresses it, and then continues pushing.

The changes in what ideas are expressible and what is literally unthinkable are a measurement of the changes in culture, what biologist and cultural theorist Richard Dawkins refers to as cultural evolution. While biological evolution is driven by the replication and mutation of genes, Dawkins theorizes that cultural evolution is driven by the replication and mutation of what he calls memes. A meme, according to Dawkins, is a discrete bit of culture that can pass via imitation from person to person.¹⁶ Susan Blackmore's discussion of how memes operate in the evolution of human culture suggests that, just as individuals can have genetic predispositions, cultural development is highly influenced by its memetic contents.¹⁷ The human mind, combined with its cultural surrounding, provides a rich environment for concepts to grow, change, and build on one another. This explains the dynamics by which memeplexes — trans-generational megastructures of memes, such as

¹⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), 192, 352.

¹⁷ Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 24-29.

philosophies, political systems, or religious institutions — undergo organic changes. I argue that the evolution of culture, caused by the interactions of memes and memeplexes, is accelerated by the type of work that recursive parody does. Indeed, Blackmore observes that human creativity is “a process of variation and recombination” that produces new combinations of ideas.¹⁸ Genes with a change that has been newly introduced — a mutation — can, if the mutation is beneficial, spread and introduce new variations to a species’ genetic pool. Similarly, the introduction of difference into memes — not mutations, but deliberate changes spurred by human creativity — can, if the change proves useful, introduce new variation to humanity’s meme pool — that is, to culture.

A dense liquid network is an essential element to the facilitation of creativity. The density puts ideas into conversation to create new ideas; the liquidity allows the network to reshape in response to this creativity, essentially storing the new idea. Any highly productive network — cities, coral reefs, writers’ workshops — is a dense liquid network. Sociologist Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* is in many ways based in her observations of the networked structure of New York city, particularly her own West Greenwich Village neighborhood. The density and liquidity of the city’s networks — transportation, economy, cultural, etc. — provide an environment in which new ideas can emerge and flourish. An art-house theater, for example, relies on the larger population of its city to provide a greater raw number of interested patrons, but this is not enough. The density of urban geography and the liquidity of its transportation systems enable those people to attend the theater’s programming.

¹⁸ Blackmore, *Meme Machine*, 15.

Blackmore's argument that memes replicate through human imitation and that they accrete change in a process akin to evolution suggests that human beings propagate via culture, not (or not just) biology. Biology provides the human form, but culture fills that form with content. It is our relationship with our cultural environment that makes us fully human. This relationship goes both ways. While culture does shape individuals, individuals can also shape culture. One's mind is not merely one's intelligence against the passive background of the cultural environment. The mind interacts with culture, influencing and interpreting it, and so the combination is greater than the sum of the parts. This recursive mutual influence is a characteristic of the relationship between individuals and culture broadly, and also of the relationship between recursive parody and the its cultural environment.

The recursive relationship between individuals and culture is captured by mathematician Ian Stewart and biologist Jack Cohen in *Figments of Reality*. As Stewart and Cohen explain, the sum total of a society's cultural capital is the network of minds present in a culture. Some minds are living and exist in the present moment, while others are present only in the cultural artifacts and ideas to which they contributed – through the memes they created or altered, Dawkins might say. All creations of human minds – all libraries and books, music, recorded history and interpretation of historical events, fairy tales, architectural ideas and the buildings in which they are manifested, philosophies and religious and other ways of understanding human existence, and all other human creations – are discrete threads of the whole fabric of cultural capital. Stewart and Cohen invent the term extelligence to refer to the knowledge that exists outside of one's consciousness (i.e.

one's intelligence) but that can be readily accessed. In other words, extelligence is the set of all existing memes. The two layers of intelligence and extelligence are interdependent, evolving together, each changing the other, with new properties emerging from their interactions.¹⁹ In this view, all cultural development emerges from the recursive intelligence-extelligence system. Stephen Colbert's Super PAC was a result of such recursive interactions between the collective intelligence of Colbert and his co-creators and extelligence, including the legal structures involved and the judicial decisions that led to them, the guidance provided by Trevor Potter, the influence of legitimate politicians and super PACs, and even the funding provided by Colbert's viewers. The project accreted its substance and direction through undirected play between the show creators and the cultural environs in which they worked. Through the following examination of the creation and management of Colbert Super PAC, we will see how Colbert's project benefitted from a dense liquid network of ideas to make the functioning of external campaign financing legible to his audience, reclaiming for public discourse what the macrosphere had kept hidden.

Colbert Super PAC Enters the Public Sphere

The theories laid out in the preceding pages combine to describe the movement of ideas through the public sphere and how they participate in the evolution of culture. The overlapping and conflicting counterpublics of the public sphere are in conversation with one another and with the socio-political macrosphere. The constituent ideas that comprise discourse in the public sphere – memes – are

¹⁹ Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen, *Figments of Reality: The Evolution of the Curious Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1997), 63.

absorbed by various counterpublics, and then are imitated, changed, and redeployed. In this way discourse evolves, with each change opening the way for new combinations of ideas, creating new space on the horizon of possibility. A dense network of ideas increases the quantity of memes that are accessible to the public, and a liquid network enables the recombination of those ideas. In the following section, I examine how these forces are at work at the advent of Colbert Super PAC.

The first hint of Colbert's recursive interventions in discourse that would evolve into Colbert Super PAC was seen on an episode of *The Colbert Report* that aired on March 10, 2011. The majority of the first portion of the show was devoted to two ads from former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty's PAC: one promoting Pawlenty's recently released book, and one voicing Pawlenty's support for Scott Walker, the embattled governor of neighboring Wisconsin, who was at the time facing a recall election in his home state. Colbert's primary target in this segment was the style of the ads, not their funding mechanism. Pawlenty's ads featured rapid cuts between shots, fragments of news clips in shaky extreme close-ups, and distorted audio with a variety of dramatic background noises. Colbert aptly likened it to a would-be blockbuster action film trailer. A secondary target was the implausible stated purposes of the ads: while ostensibly promoting his book and voicing his support for Gov. Walker, when contextualized within Pawlenty's presidential ambitions the commercials' vague positioning of Pawlenty as a figure of authority and consequence was clearly the more important goal. Each commercial ended with a legally required on-screen notice identifying them as products of Pawlenty PAC.

Colbert segued from the Pawlenty PAC ads to his own parody of them. This ad featured the same kinds of video and audio editing styles as the Pawlenty commercials, as well as the same vague hubristic messaging. Using a visual style that directly quoted the Pawlenty commercials, Colbert's parodic commercial ended with an acknowledgment that it was produced by "Stephen Colbert's Colbert PAC: Making a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow." Colbert urged his viewers to visit the PAC's website, and that was the extent of the PAC's semi-official launch, so far as it had any: semi-official because an actual Colbert PAC was as yet non-existent. Visitors to the Colbert PAC website registered their names and email addresses, but there was no indication what exactly it was they were signing up for, if anything.

Step back and observe the cause-and-effect that shifted the horizon of possibilities in this brief sequence. The Pawlenty ads were required by law to run with a message that identified their source as Pawlenty PAC. The *Colbert Report* writers created a parody of the Pawlenty ads. A parody imitates its source while introducing variations – the very qualities that Blackmore identifies as the central characteristics of memetics that drives cultural evolution.²⁰ The system that Colbert's parody emerged from – that is, the combined extelligence and intelligences that it drew on – includes the minds of the creative team, the original Pawlenty advertisement, and the regulations that required the Pawlenty ad to identify its funding source. The Colbert PAC ad that emerged from that system had a similar closing disclosure. The inclusion of the parodic disclosure may have opened the possibility of creating an online parody of the Pawlenty PAC website to complement the Colbert PAC ad, which made getting viewers to sign up for a parody PAC feasible,

²⁰ Blackmore, *Meme Machine*, 29.

which in turn made the rest of the project possible. At each step, it seems, the Colbert team took stock of the assets in their network – their extelligence – and figured out what new combinations they could make with the materials at hand. Viewers signed up, giving *The Colbert Report* their contact information, and only weeks later were they told what they had signed up for; they donated money with no indication of what it would be used for. The blind faith of the Colbert Nation, that community of viewers called into being as a public by *The Colbert Report*, created new tools and opened space for new possibilities, and the entire project seemed haphazardly created through play, but the driving force behind the project was the back-and-forth of intelligence and extelligence that fuels the process of imitation and alteration that defines the process of cultural evolution.

Almost three weeks after the first parodic ad, the *Colbert Report* team had done enough preparatory work to announce the launch of a political action committee. On March 30 2011, Trevor Potter made his first of many appearances on the show as Colbert’s personal lawyer to talk Colbert through the process of establishing an actual PAC. Potter, a former FEC chairperson and the general council for the 2008 John McCain presidential campaign, served both as a partner with Stephen to educate his audience on the structure and capabilities of a PAC, and as Stephen Colbert’s bona fide legal counselor in regard to the factual legal elements of Colbert PAC. During the segment, Potter guided Colbert through what he could do with a PAC and assisted with the actual paperwork he would need to file to create his PAC. Turning to his studio audience, Colbert delightedly asked the “Colbert Nation” whether they wanted to be players in the 2012 campaign (and to receive spam emails

soliciting donations). To their cheers and applause, he announced that Colbert PAC would become a reality.

When Viacom, the parent company of Comedy Central, Colbert's cable station, had legal objections to his founding a PAC, Colbert incorporated those concerns into the show. The media company's legal team was concerned that Colbert PAC, parodic though it was, would create liability for Viacom. Their view was that Colbert's project would involve Viacom in an illegal campaign contribution scheme, a legal concern which could not take satiric intent into account. In response, Colbert had his lawyer, Trevor Potter, back on the show to advise him and to inform his audience. It was this particular obstacle that Colbert leveraged into creating an "independent expenditure only committee" [IEOC] also known as a "super PAC," instead of a mere PAC.²¹ The key legal distinction is that corporations can make unlimited donations to IEOCs. Colbert also petitioned the FEC for a media exemption so that the ordinary activities of his show would not be considered in-kind contributions to his PAC.²²

Colbert PAC appears to have stumbled into existence. It began, as did many of Stephen's interventions into the world beyond *The Colbert Report*, as a pure, playful parody – in this case of Tim Pawlenty's political advertisements. It evolved into a fully legally constructed entity, identical in structure to the very institutions Colbert

²¹ This was achieved through the simple expedience of including a cover letter informing the FEC that the PAC would in fact be an IEOC, consistent with *Citizens United v. FEC*; the category was so new, no official FEC form existed for it.

²² As legal scholar R. Sam Garrett explains, "the issue in the Colbert request was whether the comedian could promote his super PAC on *The Colbert Report*. If so, would doing so constitute in-kind contributions from *Colbert Report* distributor Viacom and related companies? Colbert also asked whether these contributions would be covered by the FEC's press exemption. The FEC determined that coverage of the super PAC and its activities aired on the *Colbert Report* would fall under the press exemption and need not be reported to the FEC." Garrett, "Seriously Funny," 717.

was targeting and serving as a tool for Stephen's sophisticated examination of the mechanisms of American political power. Colbert took advantage of this accretive process by performing each new obstacle or innovation along the way. The obstacles served as additional material that the *Colbert Report* team incorporated into their work. The evolutionary process of the project can be seen in the cumulative changes to the PAC's logo. The PAC underwent significant changes along the way: it became a Super PAC, it gained a companion 501(c)(4), and its executive body changed completely in response to Colbert establishing an exploratory committee for a possible presidential campaign. Each of these changes expanded the horizon of possibilities, making new parodic interventions possible. With each iteration of the PAC, these changes were inscribed onto the PAC's logo – for example, the handwritten word “super” was inserted above the typeset “PAC” – in a manner that reflected the ad hoc nature not only of the parody, but of the structure of laws governing these organizations.

In the creation of Colbert Super PAC, we can see the fertility of recursive parody. Gathering together ideas and actions – memes – in Colbert's show drove the evolution of new ideas, because those memes interact and recombine in new and unexpected ways. Every time a yet-unthought idea was created it opened space in the macropheric amoeba. For example, parodying Pawlenty's commercial made a closing image featuring a Colbert PAC website necessary. Each step opened doors to make the next step possible, widening the horizon of possibilities. The Colbert PAC legal entity depended on its broad donor base for its financial support and to give it a legitimacy that it would otherwise have lacked. Cultural evolution is the reproduction

of memes and their change over time in response to the environment of intelligence and extelligence, which are in constant interaction. New ideas are most fruitfully formed in the fecund environments of dense liquid networks, in which the memetic elements of extelligence can come in contact with a wider range of intelligences more rapidly. Recursive parody creates an environment that pulls in new memetic elements and reproduces new variations of memes through its repeated interactions between parodic characters and the real world.

Systemic Symmetry

Not every parodist has a former FEC chairperson as his or her personal lawyer, nor fans trusting and devoted enough to sign up for (much less fund) an unexplained project by the tens of thousands. Creating and operating PACs and IEOCs are resource-intensive ventures, requiring time, energy, and funds that few can devote to the task. These organizations are important tools that can be used to shape our politics and that are invisible to almost every citizen. That few have access to them is not accidental. By creating and playing with them, Colbert shows his audience their inner workings and gives his viewers some access to tools that they otherwise had neither the ability nor the inclination to wield. Access to the tools and materials of culture is necessary for the creative process that produces new ideas. An environment that allows for freer and wider-ranging interaction with ideas and access to culture-making tools is a necessary part of creating and distributing ideas. Technology has made the network of intelligences and extelligence more accessible – more liquid – and it has done so by democratizing access to information and the means of cultural production, making access more symmetrical across society.

Copyright reform advocate and cultural theorist Lawrence Lessig, himself an erstwhile presidential candidate, has observed that information technologies have democratized citizens' access to the tools and materials of culture creation.²³ During the 20th century, Lessig argues, the age of mechanical reproduction of culture transformed citizenries from culture creators to purely consumers of culture. With the tools made possible via information technologies, we are changing from the latter to a hybrid consumer-creator cultural model.²⁴ Lessig's argument hinges on the ability of ordinary people to work with the tools of culture creation, and draws from Henry Jenkins' highly influential *Convergence Culture*, which broadly paints a similar picture of 19th-century participatory culture partially displaced by 20th-century commercial culture. The changes in communications systems and cultural norms brought about by the internet era have made the coexistence of participatory and commercial cultures more visible. As Jenkins proposes, the ideas of convergence and of participatory culture necessitate thinking of all participants within the total discursive system as acting in accordance with some set of rules – many new or newly altered by communications technologies – that no one fully understands or can understand.²⁵

²³ The equal democratization of access to information is an incompletely realized ideal. Inequalities in access exist, for financial and other causes. Inequalities in terms of which voices are heard abound; that this project mainly examines the work of white men is itself evidence of these inequalities. The technology is not a panacea, but does provide the means for incremental changes.

²⁴ The terminology of RO and RW cultures is borrowed from digital file permissions. With RO permissions, one is able to view, but not change, a file; with RW permissions one can view the file and make changes to it.

²⁵ As Jenkins' highly influential text explains, the technologies of connectivity have created an environment of convergence, an ongoing process that continuously facilitates the movement of content across media systems. The process shortens the distance between any given individual and any given idea or set of ideas. This fundamental force of convergence is a way of describing the increasing symmetry of the discursive system in the internet age. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006) 135-6, 27, 3.

Stephen Colbert's Super PAC project addressed certain tools of cultural creation that, for most, are far too inaccessible to interact with meaningfully: the legal structures of political power. By performing his own interaction with these tools of power, and by recruiting his viewers to participate and to invest themselves in his project, Colbert made it possible for his viewers to see the PAC and IEOC entities as materials of culture-creation that are constructed and mutable, rather than as finished cultural products.

Key to Lessig's analysis is that access to the tools of culture creation in the current distribution system is more democratized. One person's access is very like another's. In other words, access is symmetrical, which results in a higher efficiency represented by more cultural creation by more people. Alan Lightman, Harvard professor of astrophysics and English literature, convincingly explains that any system, natural or cultural, tends to reshape itself, moving toward the lowest potential energy. Since symmetry significantly reduces potential energy, any system will move toward symmetry.²⁶

²⁶ In his essay "The Symmetrical Universe," Lightman begins by explaining the general rule that a system will take the shape with the lowest potential energy, which is to say, the highest efficiency. His simplest example is of dozens of marbles left on a flat table. No matter how carefully arranged they were to begin with, given enough time they will find their way off the edge of the table and onto the floor; on the floor, the marbles have a lower potential energy. Systems tend toward efficiency, toward the lowest potential energy. Lightman then illustrates that symmetrical systems, in which one part can easily take the place of another, have lower energy costs than comparable non-symmetrical systems. A radially symmetrical spheroid planet offers the lowest potential gravitational energy for the planet's mass, just as the spherical shape of a soap bubble is the shape with the lowest electro-chemical energy. This symmetry efficiency also exists in the biological world: the hexagonal shape within the hives of honeybees, for example. This is as true of the structures of human discursive systems as of physical structures. Natural laws governing the molecular structure of soap bubbles and snowflakes and the geometry underlying the most efficient construction of beehives are also applicable to so human a phenomenon as communication. Lightman provocatively insists that natural laws should necessarily be taken into account as a means of analyzing human behaviors, as the human mind is completely contained within and defined by its material reality. It is a part of, not apart from, the material world – a little-understood and much wondered-about part, but part nonetheless. Humankind, and all of our behaviors, are not separate from the world, but contained within it and created by it. Our psychology and aesthetics, although it is not fully understood how, come from the

Lightman uses the analytic framework of symmetry and potential energy to explain the profound economic changes that followed the invention and adoption of currency in the place of a barter system. The symmetry of currency – one dollar can be replaced by any other dollar without disrupting the system – made the economy tremendously more efficient, making it possible to access wealth that was locked away in the inefficiencies of the barter system. Not only was hidden wealth brought to the surface, but the efficiencies of the new system made new economic innovations possible. The fungibility of currency revolutionized commerce, and through commerce, all of human culture. In much the same way, communications technologies are fundamentally reshaping human culture by making information access more symmetrical.²⁷

The efficiency and fluidity of currency in our economic system has had far-reaching effects on civilization. It has certainly created greater overall wealth.²⁸ The currency of our democracy, as it has been said, is information.²⁹ But information has always existed in semi-accessible media at best, and certainly not in a symmetrical system. Access to information has historically been profoundly asymmetrical, and

physiological activities in our brains' neural networks. That activity, Lightman argues, follows natural laws as surely as the formation of ice crystals from water vapor or the economy of wax within a honeybee colony. The question is a matter for philosophy, and perhaps unresolvable, but I raise the point merely to suggest that it is reasonable to discuss as human a phenomenon as political satire using models derived from the natural world. And yes: astrophysics and literature. That dude is my hero. Lightman, "The Symmetrical Universe," in *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew* (New York: Pantheon, 2013) 67-84.

²⁷ Note that this goes both ways. Citizens can access information more equally, but information also has more equal access to an audience, making rumor and news harder to distinguish online. The changes are towards efficiency, but are not necessarily good.

²⁸ An increased concentration of wealth is not caused by currency liquidity; on the contrary, accumulation of wealth is the opposite of liquidity, in Johnson's sense.

²⁹ Sometimes misattributed, understandably, to Thomas Jefferson, it was actually activist and erstwhile politician Ralph Nader who coined this phrase. Nader, "The Underachievements of Congress," *New York Times*, December 23, 1971, <http://www.nytimes.com/1971/12/23/archives/the-underachievements-of-congress.html>.

accessing or exchanging information took lots of time and labor. Information and communication technologies are revolutionizing individuals' relationships to global repositories of information. The democratization of information is a system symmetry that is having a tremendous effect on discourse. Information is not fungible – one bit of information is not equivalent to every other – but an individual's position in relation to information can be. If one's access to any particular piece of information does not depend upon where or who that person is, the system can be described as symmetrical.

The dramatic increase in the fluidity of our information system, and the democratization of information – i.e. the introduction of symmetry to discourse – brought about by technologies of connectivity will have profound effects on civilization, just as did the adoption of currency and abandonment of the barter system. This is the information revolution. A soap bubble is spheroid because in that shape its potential energy is lowest; analogously, discourse as visualized by amoeba theory also tends to reshape itself toward the shape with the lowest potential energy. Just as the innovation of currency led to the release of wealth trapped in inefficiencies, systemic symmetry of discourse results in a reconfiguration of shape to achieve a newer, lower potential energy. The distortions in shape, that which prevents discourse from taking its most efficient shape, have to do with legal and cultural restrictions on speech. One possible analog in discourse for wealth trapped by inefficiencies is the ideas that are unthinkable due to these restrictions. For example, the internet has the power to amplify noxious beliefs by connecting individuals whose views would have been neutralized by their isolation in the pre-

internet era. Increased efficiency does not always result in a desirable outcome. The regulation of speech distorts the shape of discourse and the limits of imaginable thought and speech, but the symmetricalization of discourse must necessarily lead to unknotting these distortions.

We are only now beginning to reach the point at which symmetry and network liquidity in national – and even global – discourse are imaginable. Power tends to reinforce itself, though, and can do so by creating new distortions that limit discursive liquidity. The increased creativity enabled by network liquidity applies to maintaining power and control. To revisit Lightman’s simplest analogy, the marbles want to roll off the table, but someone keeps pushing them back. Those who benefit from the status quo will seek to maintain it. This is the force opposing convergence, liquidity, and increased participatory culture: the agents of network solidification. Stephen Colbert used the Colbert Super PAC project to counter these anti-democratizing elements by deploying new technologies and by mobilizing his viewers to take action. In these ways he gave his audience access to tools and materials of culture production – specifically, the legal and financial tools of political action – that they would not otherwise have had.

A Transparent Move to Obfuscation

Legal structures of political speech that consolidate political influence into wealthy hands – part of what Wendy Brown describes as the “neoliberal rationality [that] recognizes market conduct as the sole principle of action and market metrics as the sole measures for every sphere of human action”³⁰ – are distortions that hinder symmetry and liquidity in contemporary American political discourse. If

³⁰ Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 164-5.

access to political speech is proportional to wealth, then a vast asymmetry is built in to the system. By fostering discussion in an area of discourse filled with regulations that effectively limit the penetration of ordinary citizens' understanding, Colbert's super PAC project worked to make his viewers aware of the existence of asymmetrical access to the tools of political speech. This asymmetrical discursive structure was made particularly visible in the founding of Colbert PAC's 501(c)(4), and the subsequent brief interaction between Colbert and Karl Rove through their respective lawyers.

In the September 29, 2011 episode, Colbert was basking in the glory of his super PAC success, having raised tens of thousands of dollars from viewer contributions. To celebrate, Colbert poured himself a glass of champagne while a list of donors scrolled across the bottom of the screen. Toasting himself as the "king of PACs," Colbert spat out his champagne in shock when he learned that Karl Rove's American Crossroads had increased its fundraising goal for the year to \$240 million. In the guise of Colbert learning about 501(c)(4)s, Stephen presented the basic facts that, following the *Citizens United* and *SpeechNow.org* decisions, this class of so-called "social welfare organization" can be used to raise unlimited anonymous money to spend on electioneering. The presence of this new class of politically engaged organizations, with little accountability to the public, aggravates the intentionality anxiety already inflamed by political discourse. "Clearly," Colbert laments, "these (c)(4)s have created an unprecedented, unaccountable, untraceable cash tsunami that will infect every corner of the next election. And I feel like an idiot for not having one." Envious of Karl Rove's super PAC fundraising success, Colbert turned to his

guest and personal lawyer Trevor Potter, who would help make Colbert's transition "to obfuscation and secrecy completely transparent."³¹ By acknowledging the secrecy, and observing some examples of where that secrecy occurs, Potter and Colbert gave the audience at least some sense that the workings of the anonymous system could be revealed.

Potter pulled from his briefcase a one-page legal form, which would transfer a 501(c)(4) that Potter had created to Colbert's stewardship. The rest of the segment consisted of Potter advising his client on the features and legal restrictions of his new organization, which was at first named, aptly, "Anonymous Shell Corporation," and then changed to "Colbert Super PAC SHH Institute." Colbert registered his 501(c)(4) by signing the form, and then immediately gaveled in a meeting of the board of directors, of which he was the only member, and elected himself president, secretary, and treasurer. In this moment, the casual and arbitrary assignment of the 501(c)(4)'s officer positions stripped these organizations of their formality, but the audience is simultaneously compelled to observe the asymmetrical power and access held by those in charge of such organizations. The dynamics of the American political campaign season are largely created by these types of organizations, and this segment reveals how they are used as tools not only by individuals who want to sway election results, which the viewer likely suspected, but also those who might be interested primarily in profiting from the tremendous sums of money involved in the commodification of political speech – a motive that Colbert repeatedly claimed as his own.

³¹ Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, aired September 29, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/3yzu4u/the-colbert-report-colbert-super-pac---trevor-potter---stephen-s-shell-corporation>.

Through Potter's guidance, Colbert made an important discovery. Not only would he be able to use the (c)(4)'s money to take out political advertisements supporting or opposing candidates, but his (c)(4) could play a much more nefarious role in his burgeoning political finance empire:

COLBERT: Can I take this (c)(4) money and then donate it to my Super PAC?

POTTER: You can. [The audience oohs; slow zoom on Colbert, whose grin widens conspiratorially.]

COLBERT: But wait – wait. Super PACs are transparent –

POTTER: Right. And –

COLBERT: And the (c)(4) is secret.

POTTER: Mmm-hmm.

COLBERT: So I can take secret donations from my (c)(4) and give them to my supposedly transparent Super PAC.

POTTER: And it'll say "given by your (c)(4)."

COLBERT: What is the difference between that and money laundering?

POTTER: It's hard to say.³²

Colbert pointed out that American Crossroads, Karl Rove's Super PAC, raised only \$200 in May of that year, and that Crossroads GPS, Rove's associated 501(c)(4), raised \$5.1 million in June, the month it was founded. Colbert insinuated that Rove's 501(c)(4) would allow American Crossroads to evade totally any unwanted transparency. That this was possible is entirely true, but Rove's organizations did not

³² *ibid.*

do this. Colbert created, probably intentionally, the misleading impression that Rove was using Crossroads GPS as a funding source for American Crossroads.³³

This portrayal of the relationship between Rove’s super PAC and 501(c)(4), combined with the characterization of the alleged financial maneuvering as money laundering, led Rove’s attorney to contact Trevor Potter. Potter – and thus Colbert – received an email demanding that Colbert clarify that Crossroads GPS had never made and would not make any transfers to American Crossroads. This appears to be the case, as data from the Federal Election Commission on spending in the 2012 and 2014 elections supports.³⁴ Colbert did apologize, but it was a typically double-voiced apology. Colbert claimed that he was not describing “Rove’s shadowy unaccountable organizations,” but merely his own identically structured (and identically shadowy and unaccountable) organizations. Colbert framed the assurance that Crossroads GPS would not transfer money to its sister organization as a promise from Rove himself that no money will be laundered. Thus, according to Colbert, Rove had promised that “if there is any dirty money, it will stay dirty” – an indictment not of Rove specifically so much as of the political system which permits unlimited anonymous money.³⁵

Colbert was deliberately misrepresenting Rove and his lawyer, exaggerating and mocking Rove’s attempts to maintain control over how his super PAC was portrayed. In introducing the email from Rove’s lawyer, Colbert read an excerpt:

³³ Federal Election Commission, “Detailed Files about Candidates, Parties, and Other Committees,” <https://classic.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/ftpdet.shtml>. These data files have been downloaded and made more accessible by *OpenSecrets.org*, a project of the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, aired on October 6, 2011, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/yarfv2/the-colbert-report-colbert-super-pac-shh---apology-to-ham-rove>.

“copying, future distribution, or use of this communication is PROHIBITED.”³⁶

Colbert appeared concerned, but assured himself that it said nothing about reading the email on television. The full text of the email reveals that this threatening excerpt was from the boilerplate text in Tom’s signature line, and applied only “If you are not the intended recipient.” Colbert’s distortions of Rove and his lawyer might not be fair, but they do break apart discursive stagnation by using campaign finance rules to critique the political system they help create, and they also increase discursive fluidity by exposing the mechanisms of political discourse.

Self-Curated Media Environments

As discussed in Chapter One, Farhad Manjoo describes the current public sphere, with its easily isolated and portable components, as a fractured media environment. The atomization of media might make for a more liquid network, except that, ironically, the technological innovations that Lessig and others claim have enabled the revival of participatory culture and the increased liquidity of discourse can be deployed for the opposite result: to stunt political and discursive innovation. It is not even primarily that political agents use technologies to lie more effectively to more people (although this undoubtedly happens), but that human psychology predisposes individuals to surround themselves with media sources that confirm their existing worldviews, and to dismiss those that do not, all while believing in their own neutral objectivity. Individuals and their digital proxies solidify a media sphere around themselves that is more rigid and in many ways more impenetrable than ever before. Farhad Manjoo persuasively argues this point by analyzing what he names the fractured media environment.

³⁶ Ibid.

By “fractured” Manjoo seems to mean something very similar to “more liquid.” He describes a news media environment which has been decentralized and, in the sense that news media sources are more equally accessible, democratized. The media landscape is so vast and so heterogeneous that individuals can or must assemble a collection of sources to create their own media environment. Manjoo observes that, as a product of well-documented aspects of human psychology, individuals tend to resolidify the liquid media environment into hermetic media spheres that continuously reinforce their existing worldviews. Two such aspects of human psychology that are important to Manjoo’s argument are cognitive dissonance — the presence of and mental discomfort caused by simultaneously holding contradictory ideas or values — and selective exposure — the tendency to favor information that supports one’s existing beliefs and to avoid contradictory information.

Continually reiterating a particular point of view was once the province of political parties in the context of a media system in which mainstream journalists drew on a variety of sources to create a dialogue accessible to a full citizenry. Then, as Geoffrey Baym observes, cable news channels began exploiting for profit the niche of offering continuous reinforcement of viewers’ existing worldviews — the collapse of the broadcast model. But now the media system has passed through the narrowcasting characteristic of cable television and into a realm wherein each citizen has ever-increasing control and influence over the kind of journalism they are exposed to — and their active and passive choices tend not to expose them to anything that does not confirm in some way their already-existing beliefs. The

existence of these cable news channels and of narrowcasting online media outlets that speak directly to tiny niches of a highly fragmented national audience are not the causes of but rather the results of the fractured media environment dynamic.³⁷

Small groups of individuals, including communities comprising of hard-line politicians and their die-hard supporters, can exist in media worlds of their own construction, shutting out dissenting voices and solidifying the discursive liquidity. All the while, they believe that they are assessing all available information objectively. To summarize Manjoo, people *claim* that they want objectivity – but really they want is an ‘objective’ view that concords in all respects with their subjective views, and this is precisely what they create. Jean Baudrillard observed that, given the obliteration of meaning through saturation, people come to desire the sense of meaning offered by hyperreality, in which reality is subordinated to media representation.³⁸ From this phenomenon, the media ideologue is born. Objectivity does not *seem* objective to human perception, if that person is invested in something contrary to the objective facts.

In other words, individuals gather media sources that reinforce their own desired social reality, which Manjoo, drawing on psychologist and sociologist Kurt Lewin’s work, uses to mean group beliefs that are held as facts by members of that group. If, as Manjoo puts it, “what we understand to be acceptable for us [...] is defined through our interactions with other people,” it then follows that the changes in how people define and create their social groups, made possible by information

³⁷ “Narrowcasting” is the ability to use modern communications technologies to find a critical mass audience for very niche programming, which allows a media outlet to address issues of interest only to a very small number of people spread out across the nation or world.

³⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “The Implosion of Meaning in the Media and the Implosion of the Social in the Masses,” in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Madison, WI: Coda, 1980), 137-148.

technology, have resulted in changes to the variety of social realities that exist within society as a whole.³⁹ Social reality, Manjoo argues, used to be based on propinquity – physical proximity to others – which was neither homogenous nor usually a choice. In the current media environment, social reality is partly self-created through one’s individually curated media environment. The ultimate effect is that, for a growing subset of the citizenry, political voices are no longer engaged in any kind of dialogue. This is not to suggest a mythical past in which people were more civic-minded and listened to opposing viewpoints more openly. The difference is not in the individuals but in the system: before the internet began changing the possible patterns of media consumption (and thus cognitive organization), individuals had a harder time totally eliminating non-conforming viewpoints from their discursive environment (and thus from their internal dialectics).

Another factor in the creation of hermetic media spheres is what information technology writer Eli Pariser calls “the filter bubble.” The algorithms of major internet companies — Facebook, Google, etc. — provide users with personalized content, which automates the process described by Manjoo. In Pariser’s analysis, this practice sets up a filter-identity feedback loop, in which one’s identity shapes one’s media, and one’s media shapes one’s identity. Computer algorithms, executed on a superhuman scale using petabytes of data, perpetuate and exacerbate this process by tracking individuals’ online activities and using that information to offer users advertisements, products, entertainment, social media content, and – through news media – the very worldview that is calculated to appeal most. The filter bubble shows

³⁹ Again, Manjoo does not use the terminology, but this can be understood as increased creativity fostered by increased liquidity and democratization. In this case, the creativity is manifested as constructions of social reality. Manjoo, *True Enough*, 52.

some articles and hides others, opens some possibilities and never reveals others, giving the user a distorted understanding of the world while seeming to present a representative view. The filter bubble shapes the identity of the person whose identity supposedly informs the personalization filters. In giving users what they are most likely to want, even if they do not yet know it themselves, the architecture of the online media environment perpetuates and exacerbates the echo-chamber reinforcement of individuals' existing viewpoints and ways of thinking about the world.⁴⁰

Although neither Manjoo nor Pariser use this terminology, both conclude that these self-curated media environments are a major obstacle to discursive liquidity and symmetry. By stifling network liquidity and systemic symmetry of discourse, self-curated media spheres and filter bubbles operate to stifle the emergence of new ideas. By definition, innovation is a disruption of the status quo. The surest way to prevent innovation, as Lightman, Jenkins, and Lessig would each agree, is to stymie the liquidity of communication networks, which can be achieved through regulation or other interventions on discourse to make it less efficient. These attacks do not result in the cessation of discourse, nor of speech, nor of hearing. It is impossible to eliminate discourse. Rather, the desired end result is to retain the status quo by preventing innovation.⁴¹ While algorithm-driven media distribution might not similarly desire to prevent innovation, the end result is the same.

⁴⁰ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 109-113.

⁴¹ As a brief example, the Democratic and Republican parties benefit tremendously by attacking the network liquidity of political discourse and processes. So long as nothing changes politically, each either holds power, or has the reasonable expectation of attaining power soon. This shared interest shapes the proceedings of Congress into what might be the most solidified network in the country: "deliberative bodies" that deliberate nothing.

By disguising itself as legitimate serious discourse and testing discourse for a variety of points of entry, satire can force its way into these spheres eventually, whether like lightning cracking open a tree trunk in an instant, or like dripping water carving caverns in stone mountains over millennia. Rigorously rooting out and breaking apart those parts of public discourse that are not critically sound, as Northrup Frye observed, is satire's primary function, the one thread of continuity that connects the diversity of satiric practice. Colbert Super PAC offered Colbert a way to break through some of these spheres by intervening directly in the electoral process, forcing some of his own narrative into a wide range of hermetic media spheres.

Colbert's Direct Interventions on the Electoral Process

Colbert Super PAC existed not only as a parody, but as a real PAC fund attempting to break into voters' insular self-curated media spheres and to influence the results of real elections. The organization's first two ads were released in the Des Moines, Iowa media market in August 2011, in the lead-up to the now-defunct Iowa Straw Poll.⁴² This event was an important and highly visible fundraiser for the Iowa Republican Party, but not an election of any kind nor a poll with any real consequence. The television advertisements produced and aired in Des Moines by

⁴² From 1979 until 2011, the Iowa Straw Poll was held in August in years preceding a presidential election, except when an incumbent Republican president sought reelection. Part of the long build-up to the Iowa primary caucuses, held in January of the election year, the Straw Poll was a festive fundraiser, with an atmosphere much like a state fair, which served as a publicity event for the candidates and for the party. At the Straw Poll, each candidate's campaign paid the state party for space to set up a pavilion on the grounds. There was a nominal entrance fee for voters to enter the fairgrounds (\$30 per person in 2011); each participating campaign bussed in participants and provided food and entertainment in addition to paying for their entrance. Despite not having any electoral consequence, not being a representative sampling of Iowa voters, and not even attracting the participation of all major Republican candidates, the results of the Iowa Straw Poll reliably found a place in the national discussion in years it was held, and poor performance in the poll was even cited by some candidates as the coup de grâce that ended their campaigns. For example, Tim Pawlenty's 2012 campaign ended immediately after the Iowa Straw Poll.

the Colbert Super PAC had a measurable effect on the discourse surrounding the Straw Poll and on the results of the poll itself. Due to the importance of their state's first-in-the-nation primary caucus, one might imagine that the typical Iowa resident, regardless of political association, experiences a quadrennial fatigue brought on by the volume of political advertising each primary election season. For the 2012 election, that season began in the summer of 2011 and lasted through the primary caucuses in January of 2012. The Colbert Super PAC critiques of the commercialization of politics and the inanity of political advertising would have resonated with this kind of viewer.

The first Colbert Super PAC ad implicitly restated the critique of unlimited campaign spending that was at the heart of the Colbert Super PAC project. Taking a farcical position against the out-of-state groups that were running commercials ceaselessly in support of various candidates, Colbert Super PAC's commercial protested that these well-funded special interests were having an undue influence on Iowa voters. With the hypocrisy and egomania typical of Colbert, the ad's farcical stated objection to outside influence on Iowan voters was that it limited the ability of Colbert Super PAC itself to influence them. To express their discontent at the barrage of predictable political advertising, the Colbert Super PAC commercials encouraged Iowans to participate in the Straw Poll and to vote for a write-in candidate: Rick Parry. This was an intentional misspelling of Rick Perry, the Texas governor, who was not an option on the Straw Poll ballot because he had not yet announced his candidacy for the Republican Party nomination for president.

The mainstream press coverage of Colbert’s advocacy of “Rick Parry, with an A for America” ranged from confusion to condemnation for the disinformation.⁴³ As it turned out, due to state regulations the Iowa Republican Party vote counters did not differentiate between Parry and Perry votes, and credited any satiric Parry votes for the genuine candidate.⁴⁴ Of the 16,892 votes cast in the Straw Poll, 718, or 4.3%, were write-in votes credited to Rick Perry.⁴⁵ We will never know how many of those were written as “Parry,” but by intervening on the Iowa Straw Poll, the Colbert Super PAC arguably broke through into the self-curated media environments of Iowa voters – and by extension on those of that part of the broader American electorate that was paying attention to the Iowa Straw Poll and the media hype surrounding it.

By claiming a variety of intentions for its own agents, the Colbert Super PAC intervention clouded the intention of all voters, and therefore of the meaning of the results of the straw poll. This is fairly representative of satiric activism in general. In a typically double-voiced satiric tone, the Colbert Super PAC political ad – on its surface indistinguishable from other such ads – asked viewers to cast a vote that was on its surface indistinguishable from other such votes. This is where intention becomes the crux of Colbert’s satire. If satiric and non-satiric speech are outwardly identical, it is only through discerning intent and context that they can be differentiated. Colbert’s directive to Iowa Straw Poll voters created confusion about

⁴³ For example, UC Irvine law professor Rick Hasen expressed concern about Colbert’s interference, and said he would have found Colbert’s project “troubling” if it had been done in a real election. Rick Hasen, interview by Adriene Hill, *Marketplace*, August 11, 2011, <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/economy/first-moves-colbert-super-pac>.

⁴⁴ Rick Hasen, “I’m on ‘Marketplace’ Talking About Colbert’s “Rick Parry” Gambit,” *Election Law Blog*, August 11, 2011, <http://electionlawblog.org/?p=21790>.

⁴⁵ Kevin Diaz and Rachel E. Stassen-Berger, “Bachmann Wins Iowa Straw Poll,” *Star Tribune (Minnesota)*, March 21, 2013, <http://www.startribune.com/bachmann-wins-iowa-straw-poll/127665788/>.

the intent of voters. Had its goal been to clearly express voter intent, the Parry action would have been a failure, but as an intervention aimed at sowing confusion and positing an alternative narrative of the Straw Poll into news coverage, it was a limited success. Indeed, by calling the intent of all Perry votes into question, Colbert significantly delegitimized whatever showing Perry would otherwise have had.

Following his moderately successful intervention at the Iowa Straw Poll, Colbert leveraged his media presence and super PAC to engage with the actual primary election in South Carolina, where he had another small but measurable impact. In January 2012, Colbert briefly flirted with running in the Republican presidential primary election in South Carolina. As with the Iowa “Parry” push, Colbert’s brief attempt to get himself on the Republican primary ballot in South Carolina relied on his use of active audience engagement. Each project may have had the effect of intervening on self-curated media environments, both for Colbert’s audience and for the unsuspecting larger public; as Amber Day argues, this effect is essentially not quantifiable.⁴⁶

Colbert’s 2012 parodic candidacy (and, to a lesser degree, his similar experiment in 2008) tapped into a rich lineage of American satiric candidacies. Will Rogers ran on the Anti-Bunk Party platform in 1928, promising to raise any of his opponents’ promises by at least 20%, and, if elected, to resign immediately.⁴⁷ In 1968, Pat Paulson’s campaign, begun on the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, promised to act on the stagnation in the nation’s capital. His campaign slogan: “We

⁴⁶ Amber Day, “Shifting the Conversation: Colbert’s Super PAC and the Measurement of Satirical Efficacy,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013), 417.

⁴⁷ Joel Schechter, *Satiric Impersonations: From Aristophanes to the Guerrilla Girls* (Carbondale IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994), 42-45.

Can't Stand Pat.”⁴⁸ Lily Tomlin led a presidential campaign for one hour in 1987, using a television special to satirize the role of celebrity in American politics.⁴⁹ One assumes the current reality outstrips her parody. Colbert's parodic candidacy critiqued the role of unregulated money in American elections, using his own super PAC.

On the 12 January 2012 episode of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert announced that he would be “forming an exploratory committee to lay the groundwork for [his] possible candidacy for the President of the United States of South Carolina.” Colbert, a native of South Carolina, would only attempt to get on the ballot for that state's primary. But just before this announcement, Trevor Potter advised Colbert that his exploration of candidacy necessitated he give up control of his super PAC. According to the Supreme Court opinion in *Citizens United*, only independent spending on behalf of a candidate does not require the donation limits put in place to avoid corruption or the appearance of corruption. The FEC's interpretation of this opinion only mandates that candidates cannot communicate privately with independent expenditure organizations about their spending or strategy — almost any other contact between the candidate and the organization is permissible. With the loose rules about coordination as a target for this part of the performance, Colbert thus ceded chairmanship and transferred control of his organization to Jon Stewart, his colleague, close personal friend, and — at least within the fiction of the Colbert Super PAC performance — his business partner. The Colbert Super PAC intervention in South Carolina was thus a play on and critique of the non-coordination mandate for

⁴⁸ Peter M. Robinson, *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, The President, and the Performance of Political Stand-up Comedy in America* (Amherst: Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 176-181.

⁴⁹ Schechter, *Satiric Impersonations*, 167-68.

PACs and IEOCs. Once in control of the newly-christened “The Definitely Not Coordinating with Stephen Colbert Super PAC,” Jon Stewart began issuing communiqués to the Colbert Super PAC’s email list and developing commercials to air, all ostensibly without collaborating with Colbert, whose announced exploration of candidacy had a real legal impact despite its satiric intent.

In his brief tenure as head of the Colbert Super PAC, Stewart released several commercials in the Charleston media market. The first, “Attack in B Minor for Strings,” which aired on 14 January 2012, targeted eventual nominee Mitt Romney. Seizing on Romney’s vociferous and well-publicized insistence on the personhood of corporations, the Colbert Super PAC ads attempted to turn Romney’s business experience into a comic liability.⁵⁰ Under Romney’s leadership, the Bain Capital investment firm routinely bought out struggling companies, dissolved them, broke them down into pieces, and sold the assets – a history made relevant to the campaign by Newt Gingrich, who derided Romney as a “vulture capitalist” who profited by cutting jobs and killing local businesses. “Attack in B Minor for Strings” combined the logic of corporate personhood with the tenor of Gingrich’s attack to reach the absurd conclusion that Romney, acting through Bain Capital, was a serial killer.

Unfortunately for Colbert, he decided to explore the possibility of running in the South Carolina Republican Presidential Primary only nine days before the election. It was impossible from the start for the character to get his name on the ballot, and South Carolina did not provide for write-in candidates in the primary, but

⁵⁰ Corporate personhood was an underlying assumption of the Supreme Court’s majority opinion in *Citizens United v. FEC* case, and so this ad was remarkably consistent with the Colbert Super PAC’s original project.

an actual electoral candidacy was never the performer's aim. Instead of folding entirely upon discovering that getting onto the ballot would be impossible, Colbert shifted his focus to get his voice heard in other ways. On the episode in which he discovered that he would not be President of the United States of South Carolina, Colbert pivoted and encouraged his followers to express their desire for a Stephen Colbert campaign by voting for Herman Cain, a Republican primary candidate who had already terminated his campaign but whose name remained on the ballot, and who Colbert had endorsed the previous fall.⁵¹ South Carolina runs an open primary, meaning that any voter could participate in any party's primary regardless of that voter's party affiliation; thus all of Colbert's audience in South Carolina, including those who were not Republicans, would be able to participate in his proposed action.⁵² In this way Colbert took advantage of the dense liquid network, taking cultural detritus – Cain's place on the ballot, abandoned by his defunct campaign – and recombining it with other elements into a new intervention on the American political system.

On the same day as this announcement, the second commercial run by Stewart aired in Charleston. This ad, "Not Abel," heralded Colbert's cooptation of the Herman Cain campaign. Following a fairly generic structure and voiced by iconic American cowboy-film actor Sam Elliott, the ad's entire narration was:

The people of South Carolina are frustrated. It's less than a week before the election, and there's still no candidate for us. Plus: the economy.

⁵¹ Colbert's frequent collaborator Jon Stewart explained to voters that the South Carolina vote scheme would "make your voice heard in the form of Stephen Colbert's voice in the form of Herman Cain's voice." Jon Stewart, "Dear Super PAC Super Voters," *Colbert Super PAC* blog, January 12, 2012, <http://www.colbertsuperpac.com/archive/012112.html> (site discontinued).

⁵² Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, aired 16 January 2012, <http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/uh4wcy/the-word---raise-cain>.

Thankfully, there is one name on the ballot that stands for true American-nymity: Herman Cain. Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow believes a vote for Herman Cain is a vote for America. He's not a career politician. He's such a Washington outsider he's not even running for president. Send them a message. On January 21st, vote Herman Cain.⁵³

Other than the acknowledgment that Cain was no longer running, and the two parodic verbal tics of “Plus: the economy” and “American-nymity” – the former unsupported by argument or context, and the latter vapid nationalistic meaninglessness – the text reads as a straightforward advertisement trying to persuade the viewer to vote for Cain. Even visually there is almost nothing that overtly reads as satire. However, a voter with a modicum of awareness of the candidates would realize something seriously amiss about the ad: Herman Cain does not appear in it at all. The first time Cain is mentioned by name, a picture of Colbert appears onscreen, with small-font text reading “This guy” and a simple red arrow connecting the words to Colbert’s face. The second time it happens again, but this time the text reads “Seriously, this guy.” The third time Herman Cain’s name is used is the last narration of the piece, and the commercial ends with a 10-second slow-motion shot of Colbert breaking into a grin, an echo of one of Cain’s much-mocked campaign commercials. Since Herman Cain was bald and black, and Colbert overly-coiffed, white, and nineteen years Cain’s junior, the visual difference was unmistakable. Colbert Super PAC bought limited airing for “Not Abel” in the

⁵³ Colbert Super PAC, “Not Abel,” television commercial, aired 16 January 2012, www.cc.com/video-clips/dyktip/the-colbert-report-colbert-super-pac-ad---not-abel.

Charleston media market; as with any modern political ad, part of the strategy was to get local and national news programs to run it as part of their coverage and to get it viewed online, thus magnifying the ad's audience and effect and potentially entering voters' self-curated media spheres.

In addition to its commentary on the quality of political advertisement, "Not Abel" was a continuation of Colbert Super PAC's satire on and critique of the relationship between PACs and IEOCs and the political campaigns they support or oppose. Colbert made a major point of handing control of Colbert PAC over to Jon Stewart and of the total lack of collaboration between them on this project, but for casual South Carolina viewers unfamiliar with *The Colbert Report*, the commercial spoke less about the relationship between Stewart and Colbert than about the relationship between the Colbert PAC and Herman Cain. How is it, they might wonder, that a comedian could not only enter the conversation surrounding the primary election, but that he could with impunity co-opt a real candidate's name? The Colbert PAC commercial took Herman Cain's name on the ballot and twisted it to make it mean something that Cain's campaign and Cain himself had not authorized or agreed to: Colbert would tally Cain's votes as his own, while Colbert's viewers might interpret the casting of such a vote as a way to speak out against the influence of unregulated money on the electoral process. By staking a claim on Cain's name, Colbert opened space on the horizon of possibilities for voters to cast such a protest vote.

Colbert's project directly models an influence larger than introducing a topic into the national political conversation or even than directly influencing a

candidate's words or actions. The Colbert Super PAC project satirically redefined Herman Cain's entire candidacy, albeit after it had been abandoned by its candidate. That this was possible suggests that the cumulative influence of actual super PACs and IEOCs, with orders of magnitude more money to spend than Colbert on candidates proportionally more viable than Cain, are similarly redefining those candidacies, and the political process as a whole. This revelation, unearthed through Colbert's recursive parody, is important and disconcerting enough to justify all the effort of the Colbert Super PAC project, even had nothing else resulted from it.

Recursive parody takes existing media resources that serve to further the aims of institutionalized powers, reappropriates them, and causes them to speak against themselves. In this case, Colbert picked up the abandoned candidacy of Herman Cain and turned it into a means by which his audience could make their voices heard. Whether those voices were expressing a deep dissatisfaction with the financial structure of American politics or whether they came from a more general discontent with a political system unmovable by their voices and votes or whether they were merely driven by Colbert's puckish spirit is not determinable. To highlight and play with the impossibility of knowing intent is at least in part the point of recursive parody.

Colbert's cooptation of Herman Cain's candidacy won the attention of an unlikely admirer: Herman Cain himself. Soon after Colbert recruited Cain as an ally, the two forged an unlikely alliance with Cain's active participation. Whether Colbert coercively recruited Cain or whether Cain was as enthusiastic about the collaboration as he portrayed himself to be, Cain agreed to join Colbert for a political rally on

Friday January 20, 2012, the day before the primary – an election which, ironically, was held on the second anniversary of the *Citizens United v. FEC* decision. This “Rock Me Like a Herman Cain” rally featured many of the familiar trappings of political rallies: cheerleaders, a marching band, a pep band, and a gospel choir. After the national anthem, Colbert stepped up to the podium, spoke briefly, and introduced Cain, who himself was there to introduce Colbert. After Cain’s speech, Colbert returned to speak again – the recursive parodic character interacting with the ripples in discourse that he himself had made.⁵⁴

As a would-be politician, Cain was certainly sensitive to the benefits to his public image that playing along with Colbert might earn. At least this is the most plausible explanation for his participation. At the rally, Cain displayed a tenuous grasp on his position in the performance – or perhaps it was a healthy disregard for the audience’s expectations. In his brief appearance, he rejected Colbert’s endorsement, and said, “Stephen Colbert asked you to vote for Herman Cain. I’m going to ask you to not vote for Herman Cain and here’s why: I don’t want you to waste your vote.”⁵⁵ In addition to not playing along entirely, Cain encouraged his audience – mostly liberal young people – to explore joining the Tea Party – a political movement largely made up of older conservatives. The suggestion was mostly met with awkward silence.

But Cain was also able to engage the youthful crowd by reciting from a Pokemon movie. It is difficult to separate the parodic from the authentic in this interaction. Cain had, on the campaign trail, recited what he then referred to as the

⁵⁴ “Stephen Colbert & Herman Cain -- Full Speeches,” YouTube video, 39:14, posted by College of Charleston, January 23, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rscZ5JYaTqs>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

words of a great poet. Upon fact-checking, various reporters discovered that the poem was in fact the lyrics to a song from a Pokemon movie. No explanation was proffered for this peculiar recitation; one imagines Cain enjoying the cartoons with his grandchildren. The Pokemon poem became a knock against Cain, and occasionally referenced on *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. By openly embracing Pokemon as the source of the poem Cain simultaneously made himself the object of ridicule and took power over that ridicule.

The last parodic action of the Colbert PAC project leading up to the South Carolina primary election was their engagement of the services of Marist, a highly respected political polling company, to conduct a poll in South Carolina. Like any satiric action, this poll had two purposes: the stated purpose of gauging voter interest in Colbert's potential candidacy, and the implied mockery of the entire political process. The dynamics are characteristic of recursive parody, in which the parodic action inserts itself into what it parodies, and can then interact with the results. The subjects and questions of the poll may have been satiric, but the responses and the data were every bit as legitimate as any other political poll. This parody of polls was administered by an actual polling company and in accordance with the industry's best practices, but Colbert and his PAC, recursive parodists that they are, reintegrated the non-satiric poll output back into their satires.

Colbert's Marist poll required active participation from the poll respondents. This is not merely a matter of course, but an example of satire's effects on participative discourse as described by Amber Day. When the polling firm completed interviews with nearly two thousand voters, almost half of them potential Republican

voters, and asked them questions that take the form of well-known polling questions but with a satiric twist, those voters participated directly in the recursive parody project. Their participation in the poll was a near relation to being a *Colbert Report* audience member in that they had to exist within a recursive parody maelstrom, responding to serious and silly simultaneously. The ridiculousness that the Colbert Marist poll asked the respondents to take seriously likely colored their perception of future electioneering and polling. Even those who simply read about the poll would have experienced a similar, but less personal, effect. Whether this coloring took the shape of a future critical stance regarding political polling, enabling the Colbert PAC poll's respondents and audience to see poorly defined terms and ulterior motives in ordinary political polls, or whether it merely situated political polls as things that could be made fun of, the Marist Poll commissioned by Colbert PAC forced its respondents and anyone who read much into the poll results to think about political polling in a new way.

The poll, conducted over January 15-16, 2012, asked respondents to rate their impression of Colbert, their support for Colbert's potential candidacy and whether certain factors would increase or decrease that support, and for their opinions on a few matters related to the Colbert PAC project. Mixed among the questions were some that were on their face completely serious ("Are you currently satisfied with the candidates who are running for president of the United States or would you like to see someone else run?"), some that combined serious and facetious ("Which statement comes closer to your view: Corporations are people, or only people are people?"), and some that were absurd ("Would you be more likely or less likely to

vote for Stephen Colbert [...] if he were a woman named Stephanie Colbert?”).

Respondents were asked to measure potential support of a Colbert campaign with the familiar polling hierarchy of very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, or not likely at all, but with the added level of “kinda somewhat likely.” This all kept respondents, and those reading or reporting on the poll results, on their toes.⁵⁶ The Colbert Super PAC performance surrounding the South Carolina primary election ended with one more parody of the financial boondoggle Super PACs could represent to their founders, when Jon Stewart refused to relinquish control of the PAC to Colbert. After a few episodes in which the two argued over the fate of the PAC, Colbert wrested it, literally, from Stewart by chasing him from the set of *The Daily Show* and into the *Colbert Report* studio.

Colbert Super PAC had a significant measurable effect on an insignificant aspect of the 2012 South Carolina Republican Party primary election. The election was won by former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, with 40% of the vote, which garnered him twenty-three out of twenty-five state delegates at the Republican National Convention. Eventual nominee Mitt Romney earned 28% and the remaining two delegates, while also-rans Rick Santorum and Ron Paul received 17% and 13%, respectively. Of the candidates who had dropped out of the race but whose names remained on the ballots, only Herman Cain received over 1% of the vote; with over six thousand votes, he had more than twice as many as the next-highest total. By contrast, in the two elections immediately preceding South Carolina’s, Iowa and

⁵⁶ Marist Poll, “South Carolina Survey,” January 19, 2012, http://www.colbertsuperpac.com/marist-south-carolina-poll-results/Marist_Poll.pdf (site discontinued).

New Hampshire, Herman Cain received 0.0004% and 0.0006% respectively.⁵⁷ These results came after Cain had dropped out of the race. In the Florida primary, which came directly after South Carolina's, Cain received 0.2% of the vote. As with any election, questions of voter intent are not fully answerable, but it seems likely that a measurable and significant number of voters were motivated to cast votes for Cain in South Carolina (and, to a lesser degree, Florida) in a way that they were not in Iowa or New Hampshire.

Cain's proportional returns in South Carolina were approximately two thousand times higher than in Iowa or New Hampshire. Since Cain had dropped out of the race before any of these contests and was not campaigning, it appears that the Colbert PAC had a significant impact on Cain's vote totals. By scavenging and redeploying fragments of the extelligence that was all around him – Cain's place on the ballot, his audience's time and money, the new legal framework for super PACs, the established form of super PAC advertising on behalf of candidates, etc. – Colbert created something entirely new, and staged an effective intervention on the American public sphere.

Conclusion

Stephen Colbert's Colbert Super PAC came into existence almost by accident. It required the right combination of cultural artifacts, and the right environment for that extelligence to combine and recombine. Recursive parody provided the recombining engine and brought likely adaptations into contact with the larger

⁵⁷ In Iowa's caucus Cain received 45 total votes out of over 121,000 cast. "Iowa Republican Caucuses," *New York Times*, accessed February 6, 2018, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/primaries/states/iowa>. In the New Hampshire primary Cain received 160 from over 248,000. "New Hampshire Republican Primary," *New York Times*, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2012/primaries/states/new-hampshire.html>.

world. Beginning with a parodic commercial that mentioned a fictional Colbert PAC, the interactions between Colbert, his audience, and his material developed recursively into a legal and financial structure that ran advertisements, commissioned polls, and ultimately had an observable effect on election results.

The recursive engine behind Colbert Super PAC was made possible by increasingly uniform information access. National and global information systems are being symmetrized through universalizing access to information, making it possible to access ideas and communities that previously had been impossible to create. Colbert Nation is one example of a community that grew out of the flexibility and connectivity of information symmetry. The influx of new possible connections is causing significant disruption to and instability of the public sphere. Information symmetry is related to Farhad Manjoo's fractured media environment. Ironically, one effect of information symmetry is the construction of asymmetrical self-curated media environments.

In Richard Dawkins' view culture contains all extant memes, and so constitutes humanity's meme pool, just as the gene pool includes all extant genes. Like the gene pool, the meme pool contains viruses. In the gene pool, virus information slips itself into a gene sequence and, disguised as part of the original gene, fools the cell into replicating it in new copies of that gene. In culture, as the next chapter shows, virus information can slip itself into discourse and fool the public sphere into replicating it by disguising itself as something else. Self-curated media environments are especially at risk for information viruses, since they do not contain dissenting voices to act as a check. Stephen Colbert's game of truth – his

challenge to his audience to track his character's voice and the simultaneous critique that the character presents, and to evaluate each of the character's statements for the character's or creator's intent – is legible because it is always framed. In the next chapter, unframed performances follow the game of truth formula to disguise their own intent, entering and navigating the public sphere like viruses.

Chapter Three: The Unframing of Milo Yiannopoulos; or, Stephen Colbert Finds the Limits of Satire

Jean-Paul Sartre, writing between the 1944 liberation of France and the end of the war in Europe, offered the following explanation of outrageous anti-Semitic rhetoric that had proliferated in France well before the beginning of the war:

Never believe that anti-Semites are completely unaware of the absurdity of their replies. They know that their remarks are frivolous, open to challenge. But they are amusing themselves, for it is their adversary who is obliged to use words responsibly, since he believes in words. The anti-Semites have the right to play. They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert. If you press them too closely, they will abruptly fall silent, loftily indicating by some phrase that the time for argument is past.¹

One of the French anti-Semites to whom Sartre might have been referring was Ferdinand Céline, whose pre-war writing dehumanized European Jews, demanded the salvation of France from being “Jewified,” and argued for the necessity of an alliance with Hitler’s Germany in the face of the Jewish threat.² Céline, a charismatic writer, combined fervent ultranationalism with limitless hyperbole that offers the

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker, (New York: Schocken, 1948), 20.

² David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995), 186-89.

possibility that he is satirizing such sensibilities. His 1938 pamphlet *Bagatelles pour un Massacre* [*Trifles for a Massacre*] blamed Jews for every French disaster from Napoleon's defeat to decadent cosmopolitan art. Even among the anti-Semitic pamphlets of the time, which were numerous and virulent, *Bagatelles* was an outlier in its vitriol.³ Sartre described the irreconcilably Manichean qualities of Céline's vision: "The Jew is everywhere, the earth is lost, it is up to the Aryan not to compromise, never to make peace. Yet he must always be on his guard: if he breathes, he has already lost his purity, for the very air [...] is contaminated."⁴ But most reaction at the time of *Bagatelles*' publication was not so alarmist. André Gide chided his fellow literary critics for not getting Céline's joke:

[Céline] does everything he can to make us not take him seriously. [...] Jewry is here only a pretext that he chose, the dullest imaginable, the most trivial, the most accepted, the one which cares the least about nuances, which allows the most summary judgments, the most enormous exaggerations, and has the least concern about fairness, allowing the most intemperate carelessness of the pen. [...] Ferdinand continues to get angry to the point of the most stunning lyricism; his complaints and his harangue spill out for the greatest amusement of his readers.⁵

Perhaps the most shocking element of this story is Gide's participation. At the time Gide was perhaps best known as the author of an infamous work defending the

³ Andrea Loselle, "Céline's 'Bagatelles pour un Massacre': An Example of Failure," *South Central Review* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1989), 57.

⁴ Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, 41.

⁵ Translated and quoted in Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, 283.

virtues of pederasty. He left France in 1942 and spent the remainder of the war in Tunis, and in 1947 his contributions to literature were recognized with the Nobel Prize. One is reminded of Martin Niemöller's lament: Gide did not speak out when they came for the Jews, and when they started coming for the homosexuals, no one spoke out for him. His active endorsement of Céline testifies to the insidiousness of the bad-faith operations of antisemites that Sartre identifies. Where rational argument would not convince, the delegitimization of discourse by absurdity and disorientation achieves similar purposes, without alerting even the defenders of those tactics to their effect.

Sartre's description applies just as well to the tactics used by today's American white-nationalist alt-right, which cloaks its anti-Semitism (and sundry other bigotries) in irony and deceit.⁶ There is a striking parallelism between pre-war French antisemites "discrediting the seriousness of their interlocutors," as Sartre describes, and the current tension between the American political left and right over racist joking. The left argues that racist speech causes or opens the door to real harms to society, while the alt-right claims it is kidding, that it does not really believe the face value of its jokes, and that jokes do not have harmful effects. Céline and today's American alt-right both use techniques that have been around for a long time, probably for as long as rational argument and joking have coexisted. Today we might call these techniques "trolling," and while the techniques have a long history, recent changes to the discursive environment — including those discussed previously in Chapter Two — offer new dynamics that exponentially increase trolling's effects.

⁶ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Winchester, UK: Zero, 2017).

In this chapter I argue that these new dynamics, in particular the filter bubble, as discussed in Chapter Two, and the anonymity offered by the internet, have amplified the efficacy of trolling-like tactics and increased their prevalence, making trolling an unavoidable component of American political discourse.

Stephen Colbert has used performative techniques related to certain types of trolling. He has created a character who at times says things that are offensive in order to provoke a response. Like Colbert, erstwhile alt-right enfant terrible Milo Yiannopoulos has created a career by performing outrageous political speech. Yiannopoulos similarly claims that his performative offense-giving is satiric, that it makes a critique of American culture and politics: “I deal in ridicule and satire and mischief, and I think teasing is the best way to expose [reactionary leftists], because the more hysterical and furious they get, the even further from reason they become.”⁷ In this chapter I contrast speech and performance by these two figures to investigate whether what Colbert has done is substantially different than what Yiannopoulos has been doing, and if so, what accounts for the differences. In doing so, this chapter shows how the techniques that Colbert helped bring into the mainstream became a new way of thinking about discourse, and then got adopted and combined with internet trolling aesthetics.

Because of the history of racial trauma in the United States, satiric discussion of racism or race runs the risk of being unreadable as satire. Race as a topic overflows ironic framing. As theater scholar Shannon Jackson observes: “If there is ever a time when the tolerance for ambiguous address is low and the quest for literal

⁷ Milo Yiannopoulos, “Milo Yiannopoulos on Why Satire Is Our Greatest Weapon,” YouTube video, 4:17, from a “Dangerous Faggot Tour” appearance at University of California at San Diego, posted by MILO, June 7, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4KnFC2P1nA>.

representation high, it is in instances of explicitly racialized performance. In anti-racist performance, audience members often forget whatever they once knew about theatrical irony.”⁸ Colbert runs this risk, and sometimes it does not pay off. He ironically exaggerates his character’s racial privilege to make it more visible and thereby to enable his audience to see it critically – especially the members of his audience who possess such privilege – but as Jackson argues, attempting the defamiliarization of oblivious privilege in this way risks having the opposite effect.⁹ By locating racial privilege and unthinking racism in Colbert, the audience is safe from observing such characteristics in themselves. Yiannopoulos, as I will show, uses the uncontainable quality of race as a site of irony to break down the reliability of discourse. Where Colbert’s irony risks making his critique of race unreadable, Yiannopoulos’s irony makes his racial provocation unreadable by design, and his refusal to acknowledge the way racial joking resists irony enables his race-baiting.

Rush Limbaugh is Only Kidding

The political gains made in 2016 by the modern American heirs to Céline’s rhetorical style can be traced back to tactics forged in the furnace of talk radio in the 1990s. Scholar of humor Paul Lewis identifies a tactic, which he refers to as “only kidding,” in which a speaker claims a satiric intent to provide cover and legitimacy for marginally acceptable speech.¹⁰ Some of Lewis’ primary case studies are taken from the work of talk radio icon Rush Limbaugh, who is even today an active and influential voice in conservative American political discourse. In recent years

⁸ Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 191.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰ Lewis contrasts “only kidding” with comedic work that acknowledges that it seeks to accomplish something beyond amusement, which he calls “intentional humor.”

Limbaugh's characteristic style and tactics have been adapted and redeployed by the American alt-right movement, prominently by the final figure in this chapter's narrative, right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos.

According to Lewis, the deflection that one is "only kidding" serves to deny that one's speech has an effect on the world. "Only kidding" can be used to defend against attacks on one's accuracy, to absolve oneself of the consequences of the impact of one's speech, or to conceal a nefarious intent — often to deceive or to promulgate bigotry. Even in his examination of Jay Leno, a commercially successful late night talk show host who insisted that his political jokes could, should, and did remain free from any discernable editorial stance, Lewis suggests that humor always has an impact, intended or not. Lewis argues that although the intentions of a particular joke or comedian may be indeterminable, the effect of accumulated jokes — that is, the impact that the deflection of "only kidding" belies — is observable.¹¹ Intent may not be certain, but the existence of impact is. Lewis' conclusion is that tendentious humor is related to the ontological insecurity created by the anxieties of modern life, and that its use does have an impact on individuals' beliefs and behaviors. Because of its ambiguity and its hermeneutical instability, the use of such humor in political discourse, he argues, can (but does not necessarily) have the effect of relaxing the audience's critical thinking engagement, and thereby reinforcing their existing uncritically held views.

Lewis follows the trail of one of Limbaugh's "only kidding" moments, centered on claims he made in 1993 about American and Canadian health care systems.

¹¹ Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 157-159, 122-123.

Limbaugh asserted that Canadian doctors tended to come to the United States for their own medical care.

Criticized by FAIR [i.e. liberal media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting] of incorrectly stating that “most Canadian physicians who are themselves in need of surgery [...] scurry across the border to get it done right: the American way,” Limbaugh defended the comment as “an obvious[ly] humorous exaggeration.” [...] Factually, of course, Limbaugh was wrong [...] but the interwoven subradar comic undertone illustrates one of Limbaugh’s most effective (that is, insidiously fallacious) rhetorical strategies: the use of a veneer of comedy to lower resistance to his arguments and provide cover when they are assailed.¹²

“Only kidding” provides a defensive cover for Limbaugh. In the social media age it has been adopted and adapted into an offensive weapon. A much more recent example will help illustrate Limbaugh’s use of this technique and allow entry into its evolution. In March 2007 an *LA Times* op-ed by African-American film critic David Ehrenstein referred to presidential candidate Barack Obama as a “Magic Negro.” Ehrenstein’s piece critiqued white America’s “desire for a noble, healing Negro” by evoking an established film archetype — a black character who swoops in and uses his innate wisdom or supernatural powers to help the white hero. The column did not skewer the messianic fervor surrounding the Obama campaign so much as white America’s cooptation of the candidate as a figure on which to “project all its fantasies

¹² Lewis, *Cracking Up*, 167.

of curative black benevolence.”¹³ On his radio program that very day, Rush Limbaugh read almost the entire “Magic Negro” column for his audience.¹⁴ For the rest of that day’s program, Limbaugh referred to Obama as “the Magic Negro,” and eventually sang “Barack the Magic Negro” to the tune of “Puff the Magic Dragon.” Limbaugh claimed that he was using the term as an experiment in political-correctness-baiting, to test whether by saying it he would “own” it — that is, whether his media nemeses such as FAIR would react to his use of it. Limbaugh perpetually attacks political correctness as a perverse force in American culture, and he seldom misses an opportunity to cry foul.¹⁵

Here the power of “only kidding” allows Limbaugh to distance himself from the racially charged epithet, and to deny that he ever intended to use it to denigrate Obama. First, he claims that his repetition of the phrase “Barack the Magic Negro” serves to mock the white liberals who support Obama. White liberals, this argument goes, are racist because they are supporting a black candidate purely due to his race, which they do because political correctness dictates that they should. Second, he claims that he is repeating the phrase as a test of how he gets responded to in media and by media critics. At face value, his claim is that he is repeating the phrase without any intention other than to see whether it gets picked up by FAIR, Media Matters, and other media watchdogs and misconstrued into something more odious than mere PC-baiting. Limbaugh is then insulated from whatever criticisms are

¹³ David Ehrenstein, “Obama the Magic Negro,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007, <http://www.latimes.com/la-oe-ehrenstein19mar19-story.html> (last accessed March 2, 2017).

¹⁴ Limbaugh used the article to make an oft-repeated claim, that liberals and Democrats are the only racists in American political discourse, because they are the ones talking about race. A patently silly claim, but critiquing it is not essential to this chapter’s argument.

¹⁵ Since its coinage the 1990s, “political correctness” has become the boogeyman of the American right, where its definition ranges from general hypersensitivity to an all-pervasive persecution of white men.

made of him. He can claim that the entire bit was at the expense of white liberals and that any criticisms to the contrary are made by politically-motivated “PC thought police.” His claims cannot be disproven, in part because there is truth behind them — Limbaugh is mocking white liberals and he is PC-baiting his critics. These partial truths do not absolve Limbaugh, though.

As he knew they would, Limbaugh’s critics did condemn him for this incident. They pointed to it as part of a larger project to racialize political discourse and to delegitimize Obama as a merely symbolic candidate, rather than a candidate offering substantial change or even any specific policy positions. Limbaugh seems to have employed what Lewis dryly refers to as a butt shift, which Lewis defines as

(1) a change in how seriously a person or idea is taken, and (2) the successful attachment of a negative trait to an individual or idea through comic association¹⁶

Through repetition of the phrase “Barack the Magic Negro” Limbaugh treats the Obama candidacy as insubstantial and unserious. The repetition also reinforces Obama’s racial otherness for Limbaugh’s audience, some of whom viewed Obama’s identity as non-white as a negative trait. The butt shift accomplishes both of these while maintaining a plausible deniability. Limbaugh can claim not to intend either of these, and can insist that his use of the phrase in question (and it is highly questionable) is “only kidding,” satirically targeting Obama supporters more than the candidate himself. Limbaugh’s internet-media successors have taken the tactic of “only kidding” and turned it from a parry into a thrust.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Cracking Up*, 6.

Milo Yiannopoulos has sharpened Limbaugh's "only kidding" tactics in two ways, major and minor. The minor sharpening is a matter of degree. The offensive speech that Yiannopoulos deploys, with the explicit hope it will trigger outrage in his liberal opponents, reaches even farther into the excesses of shock value than Limbaugh's speech. The major change is a matter of form. Yiannopoulos combines Limbaugh's "only kidding" with Stephen Colbert's "game of truth." He claims to want "to desensitize [audiences] to this offense-taking grievance and victimhood culture. And if the way to do that [...] is to be outrageous [...] then so much the better. I simply don't take the charge seriously that people can't tell the difference between jokes and fact."¹⁷ Where Limbaugh simply claims that he was joking, Yiannopoulos explicitly claims to be, at least at times, putting on a character.¹⁸ In the persona of that character, he uses offensive speech to test his audience's ability to distinguish between parodic racism and actual racism.

As Yiannopoulos's shock speech provokes outrage, it goes viral, rapidly spreading across internet media. This attracts an army of like-minded internet trolls, who amplify the outrageous speech by overwhelming the original target with an avalanche of online abuse. Yiannopoulos's speech, combined with his online followers, creates an environment in which it is impossible to distinguish joking abuse from real abuse; in this way, he achieves the delegitimization of discourse.

¹⁷ Milo Yiannopoulos, interview by James Cook, *BBC News*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2016-37905652/alt-right-is-unstoppable-says-milo-yiannopoulos>.

¹⁸ Milo Yiannopoulos, interview by Kristen V. Brown, "The Ultimate Troll: The Terrifying Allure of Gamergate Icon Milo Yiannopoulos," *Splinter News* (blog), October 27, 2015, <https://splinternews.com/the-ultimate-troll-the-terrifying-allure-of-gamergate-1793852307>.

Stephen Colbert's Game of Truth and Framing

In Chapter One I discussed the game of truth, a characteristic feature of Colbert's performance. To briefly recap: while in character, Colbert makes arguments that are absurd. Sometimes their absurdity is so transparent as to be immediately obvious, but at other times his arguments, while fundamentally absurd, require diligent, articulate thought to critique and dismiss. In this way he challenges both his guests and his viewers to evaluate his questions and arguments, knowing that some are patently ignorant and easily dismissed, but that others may appear to be more valid. This tactic is most visible in his interviews, but can be seen throughout *The Colbert Report*. Colbert uses the game of truth tactic to trip up his guests by forcing them to respond to unexpected questions or comments, and forcing them to evaluate the validity of his interjected arguments. The juxtaposition between Colbert's manifest ignorance and his tenacious, insidious arguments necessitate his guests and audience alike pay close attention in their interactions with Colbert and clarify their ideas to themselves and to others. The audience is tasked with tracking Colbert the character's voice, with inferring or articulating counter-arguments to his arguments, and with recognizing when the character is giving voice to arguments that are more difficult to dispatch.

This aspect of Colbert's project presents a danger. A viewer could possibly believe that Colbert's tenacious and insidious, but flawed, arguments are sincerely meant; or, one could read them as valuable only as entertainments, with no regard to their logic nor to the critique Colbert offers of the arguments he presents. This misunderstanding would have some undesirable outcomes, up to and including the destabilization of discursive coherence. Fortunately, Colbert consistently uses the

simple strategy of constantly framing his character to circumvent this misapprehension and to facilitate his audience's task of finding the flaws in his arguments. Unfortunately, the destabilization of discursive coherence is precisely the desired outcome pursued by other performance activists examined in this chapter, and the tools crafted and popularized by Colbert can facilitate such destabilization.

The central defining feature of Colbert's performances on *The Colbert Report* was not the character's absurd arguments. It was that Colbert's character was rigorously framed, identified as a character, and separated from Colbert the performer. The framing of the Colbert character alerts the audience that the performance has boundaries and rules. The series of portraits of Colbert that hung over the set's fireplace provides a striking set of images of the literal and figurative framing of the Colbert character. Each painting showed the host posed aristocratically in front of the very mantel over which it hung. During the run of the show, the portrait underwent occasional updates. Each version featured Colbert posing in front of the mantle — above which hung the previous season's portrait, and whichever portraits were captured within that portrait. Eventually the image included at least ten images of Colbert, receding into the distance with an effect similar to that of gazing into parallel mirrors, the most distant likenesses barely discernible through the distortions of reproduction. At least two versions of the Colbert Portrait were displayed in the Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery and American History Museum, causing Colbert to brag, "My portrait has

more portraits than any other portrait in the National Portrait Gallery.”¹⁹ These portraits remind the viewer of the multiplicity of voices present in each of Colbert’s pronouncements, of the character’s hyper-exaggerated sense of self-importance, and of the importance of distortive repetition to the character. They also make clear that the contents of *The Colbert Report* are playfully tweaking reality within certain limits and while observing specific rules.

Colbert did not seek to trick the guests or audience on his program.²⁰ The audience knows that the things Colbert says ought to be interpreted in some way other than literally because *The Colbert Report* maintained a clear division between the Colbert character and Stephen Colbert the performer at all times. Only the character appears on-camera on the show, except when Colbert breaks character. Every guest and audience member could reasonably have been expected to be aware of the difference between character and performer, as this difference was signaled in several ways. Not only did Colbert warn his guests before their interviews, the audience was signaled to be wary about Colbert’s recursive parody in various ways throughout the show. “The Wørd” segments provided one such warning. These featured Colbert on a tirade against some aspect of politics or culture, with on-screen text undercutting his argument at every point. The contradictory messages, and the

¹⁹ Max Kutner, “A Stephen Colbert Portrait Returns to the Smithsonian, With Even More Stephens,” *Smithsonian.com* (blog), December 19, 2014, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/stephen-colbert-returns-portrait-gallery-even-more-stephens-180953647/>.

²⁰ In the earliest days of *The Daily Show*, before Colbert’s character and process were fully developed, a person who appeared on one of Colbert’s field pieces attempted to sue him. The plaintiff alleged that Colbert and his crew claimed to be from CNN. Colbert insists that neither he nor his crew ever explicitly made such claims, but the legal agreement mandates that the segment can never be rebroadcast or made available online. Ann O’Neill, “He’s Not Amused After ‘Interview’ Becomes a Satire,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 1999, <http://articles.latimes.com/1999/jan/10/local/me-62217>. Stephen Colbert, interviewed by Paley Center for Media, “Inside Media: Top TV Stars in Their Own Words S1 E2 *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* – Stephen Colbert Gets Sued,” published by Paley Center for Media, July 29, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofnHcbQJiYM>.

character's participation in his own negation, operated as a clear signal that all of Colbert's claims required critical engagement and might be similarly undermined. Colbert's penchant for misinterpreting his audience's responses — for instance, if the audience cheered for a point that his guest had just made, Colbert might reinterpret their cheering and absorb it into his fictional reality by thanking them for supporting his argument before he had even made it — operated as another signal to the audience that Colbert's reality did not intersect our own at all points. Even outside the context of *The Colbert Report*, Colbert made an effort to keep his character and self separate, and to mark or frame the character for his audience. While testifying to Congress in 2010 on the subject of migrant farm workers, Colbert's testimony marked the existence of the character through self-contradiction (“Now, I am not a fan of the government doing anything. But I have to ask, why isn't the government doing anything?”). On the microblogging website Twitter Colbert contributes as himself, never in character, and his username is “Stephenathome,” to differentiate him from his character.

Framing Stephen Colbert's Ironic Racism

It is unsurprising when Colbert makes critiques, couched in irony, of conservative guests, political figures, or *idéés célèbres*. He also frequently uses the game of truth to force his guest or audience to rethink their justifications for accepting their own political assumptions as worthwhile and valid ideas. Somewhat more surprising are his occasional forays into political incorrectness, such as when Stephen the performer has Colbert the character say something idiotic about race in America. In these moments Colbert still critiques a target by parodically assuming

their identity and exaggerate their argument, but the content is more shocking. Rush Limbaugh makes makes racist jokes that are thinly-veiled dog whistles for racists, but Colbert also has made racial jokes. What, if anything, constitutes the difference between the two? In each of the following two examples, the outrageousness of Colbert's satiric speech threatens to overshadow his critique. The point in this discussion is not to discover whether the satires in question were legitimate, effective, or even good. The point is to compare Colbert's racial joking and his framing techniques to Limbaugh's and to what we will see later from Milo Yiannopoulos.

As mentioned previously, Colbert meets privately with each guest before the interview and instructs them to honestly "disabuse me of my ignorance."²¹ Through the game of truth he makes a similar demand of his audience. His character constantly challenges his audience to identify and neutralize his ignorance – particularly when his ignorance is at its most stunning. The Colbert character is a privileged wealthy white man, and when he speaks about race, he speaks from a position of ignorance about that privilege. Stephen as a performer is also a privileged wealthy white man; he appears to be aware of his privilege, but this awareness does not change his positionality or the content of his speech. For his character to speak about race from a place of outrageous ignorance does not constitute a significant critique on its own. On the contrary, it reinscribes racial tropes and tensions. In describing and discussing the following two examples, and then in comparing them with Milo Yiannopoulos's public persona, I will not attempt to show that Colbert's

²¹ Lisa Rogak, *And Nothing But the Truthiness: The Rise (and Further Rise) of Stephen Colbert* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2011), 127.

ironic racism is a net social good — too much would depend on the audience understanding the satire. I will instead demonstrate that in addressing race and class in American life, Colbert’s satire makes it possible for the audience to see an indisputable “framing” of his character and to answer his satiric questioning on their own, while Yiannopoulos’s performance intentionally blurs the lines between character and self, making it impossible for any audience to reasonably identify the “framing” or to even identify the questions he claims to raise, much less answer them.

As Linda Hutcheon points out, even though “there is no such thing as a marker that would allow us to determine with certainty the presence (or absence) of irony [...] this doesn’t mean [...] that markers don’t exist and don’t have functions of some kind in signaling the possibility of recognizing or attributing irony.”²² The spectator can never be certain about the artist’s intent, and neither can the artist be assured that his irony will be detected, but the importance of alerting the spectator to the presence of irony has been recognized at least since the first century Roman rhetorician Quintilian: the presence of irony “is made evident to the understanding either by the delivery, the character of the speaker or the nature of the subject. For if any one of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says.”²³ *The Colbert Report* marked the ironies of the Colbert character throughout the program. The opening title sequence placed the Colbert character among an over-the-top barrage of American iconography. His recurring segment *The Wørd* undermined his

²² Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), 149.

²³ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.54.

character via on-screen text. The set design facilitated a nearly endless repetition of the name “Colbert” in projections, in lights, in the multiple displays of the show’s title, and even in the unmistakable capital letter C shape of the host’s desk. What follows traces the framing present in one specific and especially problematic *The Colbert Report* interview.

One recurring segment on *The Colbert Report* is “Better Know a District,” in which Colbert interviews a member of congress.²⁴ These interviews are conducted on location; usually in the Congressperson’s Capitol Building office, or otherwise in their district office. The August 26, 2014 episode featured a “Better Know a District” interview with Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, representative of Ohio’s 11th congressional district and head of the Congressional Black Caucus. In the interview, Colbert elicited gasps and shocked laughter from the studio audience when he pushed back on Congresswoman Fudge’s work on immigration reform: “You fought for immigration reform to include immigrants from Africa. Why would you want to do that? We tried that for three hundred years, and it was terrible for both sides. [...] Led to huge problems. Led to a war.”

Let us acknowledge the immense offensiveness of this statement on its face, in addition to the gross ignorance. With this question Colbert – in character, of course – conflated abducted Africans with immigrants. He deftly absolved slaveholding America of any guilt or responsibility for a centuries-long atrocity, and he minimized the magnitude and impact of the horrors of slavery, all without any apparent awareness that he was doing so. Let us also acknowledge that Colbert was attempting

²⁴ Marcia Fudge, interview by Stephen Colbert, *The Colbert Report*, aired August 26, 2014, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/pupsy6/the-colbert-report-better-know-a-district---ohio-s-11th---marcia-fudge-pt--1>.

to make a satiric critique. He casually invoked slavery in a criticism of immigration reform not to satirize slavery or immigration reform, but to satirize those who, like his character, are ignorant of – or worse, uninterested in – the gravity of historic realities. Colbert was intentionally flippant, but the problems with his words do not cease to exist simply because they are spoken satirically. In some ways there is no essential distinction between satiric racist commentary and straightforward racism; both reinscribe racialized thought and language onto discourse. As Shannon Jackson observes, this is a “defamiliarization of racism that actually runs the risk of naturalization.”²⁵ As Peggy Phelan suggests, Jackson reminds us, “using visibility to rectify invisibility often misfires.”²⁶ Colbert provides his audience with a safely distanced display of racial privilege. His character’s racial obliviousness can translate for the audience into self-absolution – “I am not like him” – instead of into self-awareness.

In response to this inflammatory statement Congresswoman Fudge smiled perplexedly and shook her head; she seemed genuinely thrown. “That’s not – that’s not right.” One is curious whether she was still playing within the game of Colbert’s interview and was trying to disabuse him of his ignorance, or whether her remark was directed toward the offensiveness of Colbert’s character. Her response seemed to indicate not so much that the facts of Colbert’s claim were incorrect than that his character choice was out-of-bounds. However, Colbert was undeterred and remained in character, determined to finish the bit: “It’s not? I’m pretty sure – you’re saying the Civil War was not over slavery?” His character choice of misunderstanding what,

²⁵ Jackson, *Professing Performance*, 210.

²⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 96.

precisely, was “not right” about his response was a recursive response to Congresswoman Fudge, folding back her attempt to redirect the conversation into more comfortable territory.

To gauge Congresswoman Fudge’s reaction: she admirably maintained a pleasant demeanor, she was acutely aware of Colbert’s game, and certainly she then took seriously his challenge to gently disabuse him of his ignorance. “Yes. But it’s not necessarily because people from Africa were trying to come across our borders. We were brought here against our own will.” Colbert, perhaps in capitulation to Congresswoman Fudge’s unshakable gentility, or in deference to what he as a performer must have recognized as her profound discomfort, remarked only that “history will be the judge,” before moving on to the next topic.²⁷

Colbert’s interviews are excellent examples of recursive parody at work in real time. Colbert puts a parodic statement into the world of political discourse: “We tried that for 300 years, and it was terrible for both sides.” Political discourse, in this instance embodied by Congresswoman Fudge, responds. Colbert then engages, satirically, with that response, and so on. The recursive pattern of Colbert’s interviews forces his interviewees and audience to play the game of truth. They must judge his speech from moment to moment to discern his intent as character and his satiric point as performer, and to calibrate their own responses accordingly. These skills are essential for navigating the treacherous waters of contemporary discourse, in which agendas frequently are hidden and explanatory context often is stripped out.

²⁷ His transition to the next topic: “Speaking of people of color: John Boehner.”

Perhaps it is not great satire that forces a black woman to speak for all black Americans or to justify her existence to a white man who expresses doubt at the genuineness of the African-American experience. Or at least, perhaps that is not the greatest aspect of it. Whether Colbert's ironic racism was effectively a critique of or a reinscription of the racism it satirized, at least it was framed as satire, using identifiable markers, as Hutcheon observes. The "Better Know a District" series was similarly framed by ironic markers. The segments were enumerated as sequential parts of an ongoing 435-part series.²⁸ Each segment begins with Colbert introducing the district, almost invariably referring to it as "the fightin' [number of district]," with a few factoids about the district — important historical figures or events, local institutions and industries, etc. — each fact undermined by a joke. In the prefatory history of Fudge's district, Colbert mentions that "in 1935 the district was the birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous, founded by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith. Oh, shoot! I mean: founded by two guys. Sorry." At the same time, the onscreen photographs of Wilson and Smith are blurred out, reinforcing Colbert's supposed violation of the founders' anonymity.

In the interview with Congresswoman Fudge, Colbert mentions that the Cleveland Clinic was the site of the world's first successful face transplant, and asks her in all apparent seriousness why he should believe that she really is Marcia Fudge, and not someone else who has had her face grafted on in a transplant. The interview concludes with Colbert asking Fudge about her experience as a competitive fencer in high school. He then slaps himself across the face with a leather glove and challenges

²⁸ Although never completed, Colbert got admirably far in this series, eventually tallying 94 interviews for it.

her to a duel. The two then fence, in full protective gear, in the hallway outside her office.

But of course, surrounding racialized kidding with less problematic humor or trapping his guest in a linguistic corner do little to alleviate the effects of racial jokes. Colbert achieved additional framing through the responses of his audience and of Congresswoman Fudge herself. During the “Better Know a District” interviews, one way Colbert framed his character as a parodic intervention was by asking questions in which the assumptions underlying the question precludes an acceptable answer. During the George W. Bush administration he would frequently ask Democratic congresspeople: “George W. Bush: great president, or greatest president?” The obvious trap of these questions, and the befuddled responses they elicited, served to mark the interviews as parody, and are evidence of Colbert’s successful discourse-hacking. Certainly there is no acceptable answer to the question posed to Congresswoman Fudge about slave trade “immigrants.” Her uncertainty about how to respond — whether to respond to the parodic character’s question or to the actor directly — is palpably discomforting, but her decision to engage the character and to continue to operate within the framework of the parodic interview does serve as a satiric marker of the parody.

The audience reactions also mark the interview as satire. As Colbert’s seemingly benign question about immigrants from Africa getting included in an immigration reform bill begins to transition to American participation in trans-Atlantic human trafficking, his audience — in the studio, watching the interview onscreen — starts to gasp. There is scattered nervous laughter, murmuring, and

groaning. Congresswoman Fudge is shown onscreen, smiling but shaking her head in disbelief, and as she playfully reprimands Colbert the audience breaks into widespread laughter and applause. The “Better Know a District” interviews took place on location, and the inclusion of the audience response alongside the interview audio significantly differentiates the pieces from the straight news interviews they parody, and signals the viewer to the presence of irony.

Congresswoman Fudge herself provides a marker of irony. At one point in the interview, Colbert sings a lengthy bit from his (fictional) 80’s band hit single, “Charlene (I’m Right Behind You),” a parody of The Police’s “Every Breath You Take,” which is apparently sung from the point of view of a woman’s stalker. Colbert’s song is ridiculous, and he affects a deadly serious commitment to silly dance moves while seated a few feet in front of Fudge. She burst with laughter, doubling over and slightly losing her “in-interview” composure. She turns, still laughing, to the off-camera crew, and asks “Are we done?” Interrupting the interview playback from the studio for a commercial break, Colbert responds to her question: “No, we’re not done. Stay tuned for the exciting conclusion of this thing we’re not done with.”

As Richard Schechner observes, “Performativity is everywhere - in daily behavior, in the professions, on the internet and media, in the arts and in the language.”²⁹ Congresswoman Fudge appears on *The Colbert Report* in a dually performative mode, simultaneously performing herself as “dignified politician” within the interview, and performing her playful participation in Colbert’s ridiculous world. The conversational quagmire of Colbert’s recursive parody trips up

²⁹ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 110.

Congresswoman Fudge — it causes her to break character, to drop involuntarily both her “dignified politician conducting a serious interview” character and her “good sport politician participating in some silliness” character.

Breaking character is not limited to Colbert’s guests. The distinction Colbert maintained between character and self became clearest unintentionally, when he himself broke character. There is an undeniable joy in seeing a deadpan ironist break into laughter; it reinforces the knowledge that this character is an act, that all speech is performative and all social existence involves some degree of presentation of character. Character-breaking makes the game of truth more visible by exposing the edges of performance. Jane Fonda’s third appearance as a guest on *The Colbert Report* brought Colbert to a charming moment of breaking character. After Colbert shook her hand and welcomed her to the show, Fonda got up, slowly circled the table, and insinuated herself onto his lap over his confused protestations. Once perched there, she put her arms around him and gave him a kiss full on the mouth, telling him that she had been dreaming of his lips since her last appearance on his show. Colbert’s initial discomfort and confusion were palpable, but whether it was the discomfort of the character or of the actor was unclear. After a clip from the film that she was promoting — a scene in which her character used a baseball bat to assault a man — she told him that now he knew what would happen to him if he did not embrace his fantasies about her. Colbert replied, with uncharacteristically nervous laughter and perhaps some genuine concern, “No, now I know what’s going to happen to me when I go home tonight.” This interview is particularly resonant in discussion of the game of truth. Fonda’s turning of the tables on Colbert with her

own discomfoting character choice causes a combination of clear performativity and uncertain interpretation, matching his in-character performance with one of her own. Fonda's playful sexual advances on Colbert are a character choice, while Colbert's rare reference to his private domestic life and his concern for the consequences of Fonda's fondness for him thereupon might not be.

#CancelColbert: The Framing of Ching-Chong Ding-Dong

Occasionally Colbert's recursive parody will reach escape velocity, slipping free of his show's gravity and into the larger galaxy of discourse. One such instance was the sequence that led to a brief outcry on Twitter calling for Comedy Central to cancel *The Colbert Report*. It will be particularly useful to examine Colbert's framing of the character in this example, because part of the Twitter outcry was caused by the Comedy Central Twitter account utterly decontextualizing a joke Colbert had made on his program, stripping the framing from the character.

A segment on the 26 March 2014 episode of *The Colbert Report* addressed one small aspect of an ongoing controversy over the name of the Washington Redskins, a National Football League team. Pressure for the team to change its name to something less shamefully racist and blatantly offensive had increased over the previous year. In January of 2014 the National Congress of American Indians, an advocacy group, created a television ad to call attention to the offensiveness of the name; the commercial was released online, taking advantage of the press given to big-budget Super Bowl ads. Over the 2013 and 2014 football seasons, several prominent media figures and publications, including CBS's broadcast analyst Phil Simms, who announced the team's nationally televised game on Sept. 25, 2014,

made a point of refusing to use the team's name in print or on the air. In the face of this mounting pressure, team owner Dan Snyder dug in his heels, insisting that the team name would never be changed. In March 2014, Snyder founded the Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation,³⁰ the stated mission of which is "to provide resources that offer genuine opportunities for Tribal communities," but which was more likely a calculated (albeit poorly) public relations strategy to deflect some of the criticism of his franchise's name. Colbert's expository recap of the Washington Redskins malfeasance and satirical praise for Snyder and his organization served as satirical framing for the following segment, in which Colbert announced the creation of his own, similarly oriented, foundation, as a satiric response to Snyder.

In transitioning from Snyder's Redskins foundation to his satirical intervention, Colbert declared that *The Colbert Report* had a "so-called offensive mascot" of its own: Ching-Chong Ding-Dong [CCDD]. He then ran a clip from a 2005 episode of *The Colbert Report* featuring himself performing a blatantly offensive Asian stereotype in the style of Charlie Chan or Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. In the footage, Colbert was aggressively and one-sidedly flirting with an off-screen young staffer in thickly accented pidgin English. After running the clip, Colbert explained that CCDD was a beloved recurring character, setting up an explicit parallel with the Washington football team mascot, but in reality the character had appeared only once on the show, more than eight years earlier.

³⁰ It is worth reiterating that the Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation was a completely real organization founded by an actual billionaire NFL team owner, not a satire.

The multiple layers of signification in this moment are characteristic of recursive parody: the central incident of Colbert's 2005 yellowface performance was recontextualized and reused in entirely new ways at every step of the 2014 sequence, and the responses to each of those uses were also folded back in to the parody. The repeated folding of this parody back over itself is a small but instructive example of the essential recursive dynamic at work in Colbert's performances. These layers upon layers of signification and authenticity are difficult to sort through rationally; that is a primary characteristic of recursive parody. Besides laying out the dynamics of recursive parody, this sequence of examples demonstrates the participation of recursive parody in the larger sphere of public discourse.

The original CCDD segment in 2005 was meant to parallel in a general way Bill O'Reilly's troubles with a sexual harassment lawsuit brought against him by a younger female producer, and to echo the unrelated release of footage of O'Reilly not intended for broadcast in which he behaves childishly, yelling at his show's producers. On the November 8, 2005 episode, Colbert claimed that footage from the show's satellite feed was intercepted by some bloggers and leaked online; of course, this is all a fiction. In the "intercepted feed," Colbert is preparing for a satellite interview when a staffer, Laurie, hands him some tea from off-camera. Stephen briefly puts on an Asian stereotype character, extolling the health benefits of tea and propositioning Laurie with crude sexual innuendo, all in a mocking pidgin English. The 2005 segment featured a fictional controversy over a fictional leak of a fictional lapse of professionalism, which was filmed just before a real satellite interview and may or may not have included the participation of a real, but unseen, producer.

Already the regression is deep; it is made even more complex by Colbert's response to the fictional uproar over the video:

First of all, that was taken completely out of context. [...] That wasn't me. That was a character I was doing. [...] I don't talk like that, and I certainly don't talk to women like that. [...] Now I think we all understand the difference between me and a character I am doing.

The paradox of Colbert's satiric character recognizing that he, as a television host, is playing a character offers the audience a clear satiric marker, framing the bit as parody.

This apology was completely fictitious — it appeared in the same episode as the original CCDD segment — but it was woven deeply enough into reality to cause confusion. Three nights later Colbert offered another apology, this time of uncertain facticity. In a segment devoted to replying to viewers' emails, Colbert read an email demanding that he apologize for his hurtful Asian stereotype. Colbert apologized in his inimitable style — that is, he blithely made things worse, compounding the offensiveness of the original bit with a reference to CCDD's opium pipe.³¹

In the original 2005 appearance of CCDD, the Colbert character complained, ironically, about being mistaken for a character that he played. The complaint about context became, in the context of its decontextualization in the 2014 bit, somewhat ironic. In 2005, Stephen and his writers intentionally put the Colbert character into the fictional position of defending an outrageously offensive act, unintentionally

³¹ This was an early example of the kind of ongoing storylines and interactions with reality that The Colbert Report would engage in; one suspects that the email was staged, but that is uncertain and not critical to the understanding of this moment. It is interesting to notice that the 2005 segment complaint was an email read on the air, and thus totally in the control of Colbert, while complaints about the 2014 segment were disseminated via Twitter and were completely beyond Colbert's control. The changes in the public sphere between 2005 and 2014 were significant.

foreshadowing the controversy that would surround Stephen and his writers and producers when they revived CCDD in 2014. The intended irony in 2014 – Colbert paralleling Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder by defending his propagation of a racist stereotype through even more oblivious racism – backfired on the *Colbert Report* staff when the program itself was criticized for playing a racist stereotype for laughs, regardless of the context.

In character in 2014, Colbert defended the use of CCDD as “a unique part of the heritage of the Colbert Nation that cannot change,” the same rhetoric used by Snyder regarding his team’s name, framing what would follow as a response to Snyder. In order, he claimed, to demonstrate his caring toward Asian-Americans, Colbert announced the formation of “The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever.” The outrageous offensiveness of Colbert’s organization was clearly intentional. Colbert’s lengthy expository introduction of Snyder’s defense of the Washington Redskins team name and of the newly-formed “Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation” serve to frame his parodic response as satiric criticism. Snyder’s organization used an offensive racial slur in the very name of an organization nominally intended to help the targets of that slur, the creation of which was a transparently cynical public-relations ploy; Colbert mirrored that dynamic exactly. By repeating the rhetoric he had just quoted from Snyder, Colbert frames his response as parody. Again, the parodic repetition of problematic speech by itself does not necessarily constitute a critique nor de-problematize the speech. Here, I do not examine the efficacy of the parody so much as the recursive rippling it caused.

Colbert's parodic, exaggerated use of Snyder's tactics became the center of a controversy when, as part of Comedy Central's cross-platform marketing, the network-controlled @ColbertReport Twitter account posted the following tweet on the following evening: "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever." Completely stripped of its context and framing, the joke lost its parodic punch, but retained its racial offensiveness. This tweet attracted the attention of Suey Park, an online activist known for initiating conversations and engaging in online debates about race, and particularly about Asian-American stereotypes in media. Whatever the value of Twitter activism may be, Park was gaining a reputation for her effective and savvy use of the medium as a means to spark those debates. In response to the @ColbertReport tweet, Park issued a challenge to her Twitter followers: "The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it."³² The hashtag reached the trending list almost immediately. As more Twitter users saw the @ColbertReport tweet, with its racially charged joke now totally stripped of context, more offended calls for the cancellation of *The Colbert Report* were issued. That same evening Stephen himself addressed the growing Twitter outrage from his personal account. He tweeted: "#CancelColbert – I agree! Just saw @ColbertReport tweet. I share your rage. Who is that, though? I'm @StephenAtHome," followed by a link to the video of the segment. The recursivity of this incident – the satiric playfulness feeding off the ripples it

³² Twitter originated the use of the "#" symbol as a "hashtag" used to track usage. A word (or a sequence of words unseparated by spaces) following the hashtag can be tracked on Twitter. The most-used hashtags at any given moment appear under the headline "trending" on the Twitter homepage. "Trend it" was an exhortation for Park's Twitter followers – she had at least 16,000 at the time – to comment on the situation and to include "#CancelColbert" in those tweets.

created in the discourse, and the tweaking of the fabric of perceived reality – was only beginning. This moment contains a key to understanding why and how recursive parody is such a central aspect of twenty-first-century American discourse: the cyclical shedding of context combined with relentless recontextualization in the packaging of partisan spin and outrage mean that no audience can truly trust any speaker, believe any claims, or even tell if a speaker is genuine or is at some level playing a character to parodically tweak a target or the audience themselves.

The major critique of Park by other Twitter users was that she had missed the satire of Colbert's piece, willfully or otherwise, and that the outrage she claimed to feel was partly or entirely manufactured. These criticisms of her intent and her performativity largely disregard the point of her protest. The day following Park's #CancelColbert tweeting, Jay Caspian Kang interviewed her to parse her intentions for an article that appeared in *The New Yorker*. Park claimed that she did not actually want to see *The Colbert Report* cancelled. Rather, she viewed this particular activist engagement as "a way to critique white liberals who use forms of racial humor to mock more blatant forms of racism."³³ Park claimed to be taking on a public persona, her unreasonableness an intentional character choice. She explained that she would not be taken seriously in any case, so "perform[ing] crazy" ensures that her activism is noticed and responded to. Twitter, with its 140-character limit and its near-total lack of context, easily lends itself to such a public performance. Park was not a performer taking on a character, but rather a regular person doing so.

³³ Jay Caspian Kang, "The Campaign to Cancel Colbert," *The New Yorker*, March 30, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-campaign-to-cancel-colbert>.

That is an increasingly successful tactic in the American media landscape, and is a shift in discourse that Colbert has been party to.

Accepting Park's self-interpretation, the #CancelColbert uproar provides a glance into a newly developing form of recursive parodic protest: the decentering of a rationally-based agreed-upon reality as the central organizing principle of discourse. Park turned around the entire dynamic of inside/outside the joke on Colbert's fans, with some success. Ironic racism, Park's activism argued, is still racism: a critique of "racial humor [that] just makes people who hide under the title of progressivism more comfortable."³⁴ Park underlined Colbert's reinscription of an Asian stereotype by taking on the voice of Colbert's own offending fictional organization to stage an ironic, or at least a not-totally-serious, call for the cancellation of *The Colbert Report*.

In the days following the trending of #CancelColbert, the news media picked up the story; Colbert himself later highlighted stories from Fox News, MSNBC, and local television news programs, as well as feature stories on online outlets *USA Today*, *The New Yorker*, *Slate*, *Variety*, *Time*, *Salon*, and *The Huffington Post*. In his next show, Colbert addressed the Twitter tempest head on, taking pains to emphasize the difference between a satiric character and the artist. Colbert, in character, insisted that CCDD was a character. Pointing to himself, he emphasized that "this is the real Stephen Colbert. I mean everything I say on the show." To confuse the issue – which is one of the primary characteristics of recursive parody, after all – Colbert then claimed not to know what CCDD means by what he says,

³⁴ Quoted in Kang, "The Campaign to #CancelColbert."

because “he is not returning my calls.” On *The Colbert Report*, Colbert responded to the Twitter hullabaloo:

Who would have thought a means of communication limited to 140 characters would ever create misunderstandings? [...] When I saw the tweet with no context, I understood how people were offended. The same way I, as an Irish-American, was offended after reading only one line of Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*. I mean, eat Irish babies? Hashtag: Cancel Swift! Trend it! [...] The ‘Cancel Colbert’ people think that even in context I am a racist. I just want to say that I am not racist. I don’t even see race. Not even my own. People tell me I’m white and I believe them, because I’ve just devoted six minutes to explaining how I’m not a racist. And that is about the whitest thing you can do.

The angle of Colbert’s argument is clear: Park and her #CancelColbert followers did not understand or appreciate the parodic thrust of the bit, and perhaps not even the dynamics of satire. However, it is possible that Colbert himself missed the satire in Park’s tweeting, rather than the other way around. Both Colbert’s parody and Park’s tweeting bring difficult issues and underexamined actions to light. That is the appeal of these moments of recursive parody, and the horror of them: they attempt to address cultural issues that are very difficult to address. They dare to speak out loud in a voice that demands critical redress, sometimes burying their intentions so deeply that they are made invisible, in order to incite discussion of a topic that might otherwise go unremarked upon. This is how recursive parody uses

the relative free movement of speech as leverage to facilitate discussion of topics that are otherwise suppressed or repressed.

Colbert's game of truth is an intervention on discourse that aims to protect discursive fluidity.³⁵ But others use tactics similar to the game of truth to achieve the opposite. The American alt-right movement is a loose confederation of economic nationalists, Western chauvinists, white supremacists, anti-feminists, and other disaffected groups. This movement's activists, who are mostly young and internet-savvy, primarily rely on strategies of provocation and disruption — strategies which seem to echo Colbert's game of truth, albeit with the discourse-crippling difference that alt-right satirists provide no frame and no context. Suey Park similarly did away with any framing by "performing crazy."

Throughout his work on *The Colbert Report*, and any time he appears in character as the host of that show, Stephen Colbert offers his audience a clear frame to contextualize his satire. As LaMarre et al observe, the audience's existing political views have a powerful influence on their interpretation of satire, but Colbert's framing gives clear clues about the performer's intent, if not the character's. As the following sections will reveal, Milo Yiannopoulos, erstwhile hero of the alt-right, does the opposite. Like Park, he offers an outrageous performance stripped of framing to get internet-fueled attention. Yiannopoulos leaves it up to the audience to imagine or not to imagine a frame, so the audience has greater freedom to interpret the satire as supporting their existing political beliefs. The absence of framing

³⁵ According to Frye, protecting discursive fluidity is the primary characteristic of satire, although he does not use the term. Cultural critic Farhad Manjoo, as discussed in Chapter One, defines discursive fluidity as the free movement of thought and speech within culture.

transforms what might be Yiannopoulos's character into a personal brand, into an empty cipher that his audience is free to fill however they want.

Stephen Colbert's popularity and political engagement, and the popularity of somewhat similar figures, served as a highly visible model for performative character-driven engagement with everyday life and with public figures.³⁶ Alt-right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos uses a performance style that draws on Colbert and other satirists to create an attention-getting persona that relies on two main engines: the attractive power of transgression, and the plausible deniability of satire.

Rather than tricking his audience, Colbert's parody of an uninformed opinionated host creates the game of truth that he plays with audience and guests. This comedic technique questions intentionality, and was adapted by Milo Yiannopoulos. By evacuating the ironic framing, Yiannopoulos turns the game of truth into a technique that achieves a rather different end than Colbert's. Rather than questioning the intentionality of the character, Yiannopoulos uses it to destabilize all discourse.

³⁶ Some clear antecedents to Colbert's game of truth interview style can be found in the hidden-camera style used by pranksters and practical jokers. Examples of this style in performance can be found in a variety of forms, from mainstream popular actor Ashton Kutcher's television series *Punk'd*, in which Kutcher played tricks on friends and strangers, to the viral videos of Improv Everywhere's stunts, which used performance to create surprising moments in everyday life, such as a "big league" audience attending a little league baseball game. British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen's characters may be the closest analogue to the host of *The Colbert Report*. His various projects revolved around Cohen playing one of several dim-witted or malignant characters, interacting with and fooling unwary victims. The entertainment value of Cohen's style, contemporary with or slightly predating Colbert, derives from the tricking (or perceived tricking) of his interviewees. One of Cohen's most successful projects was *Da Ali G Show*, an interview show hosted by Ali G, a post-adolescent London simpleton who valued hip-hop and club culture and not much else, but who imagined himself to be keenly intellectual. Cohen's audience was entertained both by the character's idiocy and by Cohen's success in fooling his interview subject into believing someone so outrageous as Ali G was a real person rather than a character. Colbert brought a similar style to his in-character political show and into the American mainstream, but augmented so that its entertainment value did not rely on tricking his subjects or his audience. Rather, it relied on forcing his subjects to engage in conversation: the dialogue was the star of the interviews, rather than Colbert himself. That the dialogue in Colbert's show often served to promote progressive causes or to damn conservative ideas is a function not of either ideology's supposed inherent virtues or fallacies, but in Colbert's selection of topics.

An Introduction to Milo Yiannopoulos

Late in the evening of a one-night-only art show, alt-right comedian and public personality Milo Yiannopoulos entered the floor of a Brooklyn art studio stripped down to his briefs. Mostly down to his briefs. He also wore sunglasses, several thick gold necklaces, and a white “Make America Great Again” hat autographed by Donald Trump. His modesty protected by an assistant holding up a blanket between him and his audience, Yiannopoulos slowly lowered himself into a cast-iron bathtub filled with cow’s blood. This was the beginning of “Angel Mom,” a performance piece that, according to Yiannopoulos, was both a protest against illegal immigration and a tribute to American victims of “radical Islamic terrorism.” A woman in the audience, interviewed by Breitbart’s videographer, was “glad [Yiannopoulos] went through with it,” because “it’s a pretty cool move to bathe in pig’s blood.” A nearby man stammered out that the piece was “transgressive.” While this interviewee did not articulate what precisely Yiannopoulos transgressed, he was absolutely correct. “Angel Mom,” like the art show in which it featured and the presidential campaign which it supported, blurred the line between agenda-driven political activism and self-serving publicity stunt. This obfuscation of intent is an essential element of alt-right discourse. The entire event raises an essential question of contemporary American culture: what the fuck is even going on here? More specifically, how has Yiannopoulos (to examine but one alt-right activist-performer) so successfully exploited the gap between “authentic” and “parodic” self? To answer that question, this section identifies what Yiannopoulos does, what he says he does, and analyzes what the actual effects of his tactics might be. I use “Angel Mom” as the

central case study, because of all Yiannopoulos's appearances, it was the most clearly a performance, and the most likely to be intentionally framed and fully planned.

Milo Yiannopoulos is one of several popular figures of the American alt-right movement who engage in similar obfuscatory tactic. Yiannopoulos is perhaps best described as a multi-platform media personality. He has found a professional niche by leveraging his online writing (for his own blogs, as an editor for Breitbart, on Twitter), his guest appearances on television talk and news shows, and his college campus speaking tours into an outrage-provocation enterprise. Yiannopoulos claims that he uses hyperbolic bigotry and offensive speech to achieve critical ends similar to Colbert's game of truth, but unlike Colbert, the audience is never alerted to the presence of a character. At least to some degree, his public speech is a character-driven performance. He claims to "play an asshole in [his] columns."³⁷

Yiannopoulos's clearest, most explicit explanation of his public persona, made in an interview with the BBC's James Cook, is that he is using offensive speech in order to "desensitize this offense-taking grievance and victimhood culture." In the following excerpt from that interview, Yiannopoulos places the onus on his audience to discern the difference between his joking and the literal meaning of his statements, while articulating that an important goal of his project is to use his offensive comedy to provide inoculation from what he terms "outrage [or victimhood] culture":

COOK: There's a difference, isn't there, between being offended and disagreeing with someone's facts or their interpretation of something. So for example, you said today that Muslims hate everyone,

³⁷ Chadwick Moore, "Send In the Clown: Internet Supervillain Milo Doesn't Care That You Hate Him," *Out Magazine*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.out.com/out-exclusives/2016/9/21/send-clown-internet-supervillain-milo-doesnt-care-you-hate-him>.

all Muslims hate everyone was your position. Now maybe you were joking maybe you weren't —

YIANNOPOULOS: Well you know I was. [...] You should ask me a question that is not a deliberate misrepresentation of what I said in my speech. You're perfectly well aware from the context and the rhetoric of the speech that I was talking about different minority groups. If you want to ask me a question about stuff like that you should ask a question that is less disingenuous.

COOK: Ok. You said Muslims like gang rape.

YIANNOPOULOS: Well, I said I thought that they were going to bring their delicacies with them, like [lamb] chops, yogurt and gang rape. [...] If you're not prepared to read the comedy into that statement and you think that that is a literal expression, then I can't help you.

COOK: No, but that's my point, that's what I'm asking you about. Are you concerned that people are becoming confused between what is comedy and what is serious political comment and that they can't listen to any of it because they just take offense?

YIANNOPOULOS: No. I think you'd have to be so stupid to mistake my comedy routines and stand-up — [...] I don't believe that anybody is so dumb that they can't tell the difference between a piece of political analysis and a joke. If you're one of those people there's really no hope for you and I don't care. What I do want however is to desensitize to this offense-taking grievance and victimhood culture. And if the way to

do that, if the way to respond to outrage culture is to be outrageous — which it seems to be, it seems to be working by the way, I’m winning on college campuses for sure — then so much the better. I simply don’t take the charge seriously that people can’t tell the difference between jokes and fact.³⁸

Yiannopoulos’s rhetorical style relies on muddying the distinction between joking and earnestness. His insistence that there is a difference between his jokes and something he benignly calls “fact” is in truth a tactic to devalue subjective experience. Rather than focusing his audience’s critical faculties on the (il)logical underpinnings of his argument in order to undermine that specific argument, as *The Colbert Report* did, Yiannopoulos uses his interrogation of intentionality to undermine all subjective claims. His adaptation of the game of truth uses tactics that are superficially similar but have been deliberately stripped of any frame. Or perhaps his racial offensiveness and his trolling are his frame, and he is empowered by the (white) racial grievances of his audience. Either way, the effect is that Yiannopoulos normalizes racist speech while simultaneously absolving his audience of the need for self-reflection. Instead of the passive self-absolution Colbert’s performance runs the risk of facilitating, Yiannopoulos actively insists that his audience’s basest tribalistic impulses are natural and rational.

The issue of framing offers the most important distinction between Yiannopoulos and Colbert. As argued above, Colbert always frames his character, revealing the edges in so many ways. Colbert’s recursive parody showed a character

³⁸ Milo Yiannopoulos, interview by James Cook, *BBC News*, November 8, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/election-us-2016-37905652/alt-right-is-unstoppable-says-milo-yiannopoulos>.

who would not engage in rational-critical debate, much less value its results, but this distrust of discourse was contained within an identifiable frame. Even at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006 — where the Colbert character claimed, like his hero President George W. Bush, to believe on Wednesday what he believed on Monday, no matter what happened on Tuesday — the edges were evident. Colbert dropped enough satiric markers in the first minutes of his performance to ensure that his audience could apprehend his irony. He juxtaposed a declaration that he was there to celebrate his hero President Bush with vicious ironic praise. He asserted that “the truth lies [...] in the gut” because “you have more nerve endings in your gut than you have in your head,” and he insisted that medical reference books that said otherwise were wrong.³⁹ Perhaps some were offended by the content of Colbert's performance, but no one was uncertain about the performedness of the character.

As Heather LaMarre observes with *The Colbert Report*, Colbert's audience has latitude to interpret the character in ways that are consistent with their existing biases, but even then the frame still exists and is accounted for. By offering no framing and no differentiation between character and self, Yiannopoulos leaves it up to his audience to imagine (or not imagine) a frame, leaving the audience even more free to interpret his character in ways that accommodate their own beliefs and biases. Yiannopoulos's explicit strategy is to force his audience to decide whether what he says is comedy or hate speech without providing, despite his protestations, much in the way of context.

³⁹ Stephen Colbert, 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner, April 29, 2006, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?192243-1/2006-white-house-correspondents-dinner>, (51:32-1:15:14).

The only contextual clues in his stage performance are the fact that it is a performance and that he expects his audience to derive humor from his denigrations of “different minority groups.” These do not differentiate Yiannopoulos’s on-stage persona from his everyday self, because there is no such differentiation. Yiannopoulos himself has acknowledged the collapsing division between himself and his alter ego: “I didn’t like me very much and so I created this comedy character. And now they’ve converged.”⁴⁰ As argued above with Colbert, providing such a framing for the character would make it possible for the audience to see the critical intervention of the joking, rather than simply taking it at face value. The conclusion one must reach with Yiannopoulos is that being taken at face value provides some or all of the value of his on-stage persona.

Trolling: A Brief History

Milo Yiannopoulos received lots of media attention leading up to the 2016 election, partly due to his provocative messaging and partly due to his charming, flamboyant affect. But before he became the most visible icon of the alt-right, Yiannopoulos first gained a position of influence in several overlapping online subcultures sympathetic to alt-right views via his participation in “GamerGate,” a 2014 cultural skirmish about video game player identity. “GamerGate” was an argument, mostly conducted online, that brought together online subcultures of video game players, reactionary anti-feminist activists, and trolls to fight a common

⁴⁰ Milo Yiannopoulos, interview by Kristen V. Brown, “The Ultimate Troll: The Terrifying Allure of Gamergate Icon Milo Yiannopoulos,” *Splinter News* (blog), October 27, 2015, <https://splinternews.com/the-ultimate-troll-the-terrifying-allure-of-gamergate-1793852307>.

cause.⁴¹ Yiannopoulos conducted much of his GamerGate activism via his columns as Technology Editor for Breitbart, a far-right news and commentary website.⁴² The primary result of GamerGate for Yiannopoulos was that he recruited a new audience for himself. He is funny (for a given value of funny) and deft with flattery, and his media presence made him personally accessible for his fans. The story he told about GamerGate turned out to be the same story Trump told about America: your otherwise worthy culture is being ruined by outsiders. After claiming space for

⁴¹ GamerGate, an online culture war about the identity of video games and gamers, had its roots in reactionary antifeminism. Ostensibly a controversy about ethics in gaming journalism, the movement quickly became a harassment campaign against anyone who expressed a desire for more diversity in games or in gaming culture. The movement helped to popularize the use of “social justice warrior” or “SJW” as an epithet used to denigrate a person’s status as a true gamer. SJW refers to someone who is not actually interested in video games, but only in using video games to advance a political agenda. Again, it alleges a non-disprovable imputation of intent. GamerGate was at heart a fight over the identity of gaming and gamers — for many it was specifically about keeping women out of gamer spaces. Several women involved in the gaming industry were forced to flee their homes when specific threats were made against them. Jenn Frank, “How to Attack a Woman Who Works in Video Gaming,” *The Guardian*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/sep/01/how-to-attack-a-woman-who-works-in-video-games>.

The original primary subject and target of GamerGate was Zoe Quinn, an independent video-game developer. Her ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni posted a series of painfully intimate blog entries detailing what he describes as her emotional abuse and serial adultery. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the GamerGate movement coalesced around his story. Because one of Quinn’s affairs was with Nathan Grayson, a writer for the popular game-review website Kokatu, the GamerGate movement suggested that there had been a sex-for-coverage quid pro quo. Quinn, Grayson, and Gjoni all denied that that was the case, but accusations kept coming regardless. Far more ominous, Quinn’s phone number and physical address were posted online, and she received a number of death threats and rape threats. Caitlyn Dewey, “The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read,” *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/>.

Cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian had worked in partnership with Bitch magazine on “Tropes vs. Women,” a 2011 video project that examined the representation of women in science fiction films. After the conclusion of “Tropes vs. Women,” Sarkeesian proposed a related project, “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games.” For this new project, she would conduct a lengthy survey of dozens of popular video games. As before, Sarkeesian’s aim was to create a series of web videos analyzing the representation of women in the genre of video games. Although the aims of “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” were seemingly innocuous, Sarkeesian received some backlash against these videos from the beginning of the project. After GamerGate she became the target of a focused campaign of online harassment. Just like Quinn, Sarkeesian was subjected to horrific threats of violence and had her home address posted online. Nathan Rott, “#Gamergate Controversy Fuels Debate on Women and Video Games,” *All Tech Considered* (blog), NPR, <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2014/09/24/349835297/-gamergate-controversy-fuels-debate-on-women-and-video-games>.

⁴² Breitbart’s editor-in-chief, Steve Bannon, was hired in 2016 to run Trump’s campaign and served in the administration as Trump’s primary political advisor.

himself as a leader in this online subcultural struggle, Yiannopoulos became an influential self-described troll and one of the most prominent figures in alt-right media, with close to a half-million followers on Twitter before the service banned him for life for his part in the online harassment of comedian and actor Leslie Jones.⁴³

Like the Colbert character, internet trolling refuses to engage in or value rational-critical debate; like Yiannopoulos, a troll does not frame, does not show its edges, at least not to the whole audience. Yiannopoulos's public persona has

⁴³ The story of Milo Yiannopoulos' expulsion from Twitter begins with his campaign against the 2016 remake of the 1984 film *Ghostbusters*, featuring an ensemble of female actors. In columns and comments posted during the film's rollout, Yiannopoulos made numerous objections to the film: the lead roles were played by female actors that Yiannopoulos found insufficiently attractive, the trailers lacked charm, the final product lacked intelligence and subtlety, the representation of men in the film was offensive. That these critiques are vague and subjective is probably intentional, because Yiannopoulos' central criticism has nothing to do with the execution of the film and everything to do with what he interprets as the intention behind the film. What, exactly, he perceives as that intention is not clearly articulated in his two columns about the film, but Yiannopoulos' writings describe a constellation of perceived offenses. He accuses producer Amy Pascal of "trying to recover her progressive credentials [...and] self-proclaimed feminist values" with "rancid films dressed up in social justice-friendly narratives." Milo Yiannopoulos, "Here's Why the Left is So Desperate to Defend the Feminist *Ghostbusters*," *Breitbart* (blog), May 5, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/05/05/heres-left-desperate-defend-new-feminist-ghostbusters/>. Yiannopoulos further asserts that the film acts "as standard bearer for the social justice left" through its "petty, two-dimensional feminist posturing." Milo Yiannopoulos, "Teenage Boys with Tits: Here's My Problem With *Ghostbusters*," *Breitbart* (blog), July 18, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/07/18/milo-reviews-ghostbusters/>. Again, the vagueness of these accusations is an important aspect of Yiannopoulos' strategy, and is not due to any inarticulateness on his part. Simply, by activating his readers' political beliefs about social justice and feminism, Yiannopoulos creates an audience predisposed to appreciate him and his humor and primed to question the intentions of his targets. To this end, the specifics of the criticism do not matter.

Immediately following the publication of his review of the film, a week after the film's release, offensive messages began appearing on Twitter, directing vicious racist and sexist abuse at *Ghostbusters* actress Leslie Jones. These messages came from a variety of users, some anonymous, some not, and some of whom were Twitter followers of Yiannopoulos. Yiannopoulos himself participated, posting public messages to Jones. Some of Yiannopoulos's messages appeared to reference homophobic or racist messages that Jones had written, but in fact they were falsified messages created with a photo editing application. As a result of these incidents, Twitter decided to expel Yiannopoulos from the service permanently.

The GamerGate and *Ghostbusters* incidents exemplify the two primary traits of internet trolling: to attack someone online, and to pretend to be someone else or to have beliefs different from one's own. In addition, they reveal a tactical weakening of intention. Yiannopoulos's allegation that filmmakers or video-game producers are ruining otherwise-apolitical products with their social agendas is at heart a conspiracy theory. No denial will ever convince his true believers, and evidence of the conspiracy can always be found.

effectuated the evolution of Limbaugh’s “only kidding” and Colbert’s “game of truth.” In order to explore how Yiannopoulos’s innovative tactics function — tactics that antagonize his audience’s and targets’ intentionality anxiety — this section defines internet trolling and examines Yiannopoulos’s public persona in that light. The GamerGate and Leslie Jones incidents exemplify the two primary traits of internet trolling: to attack someone online, and to pretend to be someone else or to have beliefs different from one’s own. They reveal a tactic that has the unavoidable side effect of heightening intentional anxiety. Where Colbert’s game of truth challenges his guest and his primary audience to inform him and to address his bogus arguments, Yiannopoulos evokes to his primary audience an imagined secondary audience, and challenges that imagined audience to remain unoffended by offensive speech.

Internet trolling is central to this chapter’s examination of Yiannopoulos’s lack of framing. The first academic exploration of trolling comes from Judith Donath, a scholar of internet discourse, in 1999. Donath observes that “the troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns.”⁴⁴ Donath identifies some of the negative consequences that trolling has on its host discursive community, which are inseparable from the act of trolling: disrupting discussions, fostering distrust, and eventually making the environment inhospitable to honest questioning. Scholar of online social spaces Kelly Bergstrom, in an examination of the unmasking of a particular online persona, offers the following definition of trolling:

⁴⁴ Judith Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (London: Routledge), 27–58.

To troll is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort upon one's audience. To be trolled is to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else's joke. We are warned 'do not feed the troll,' as by responding to their frivolous posts we risk adding fuel to the fire — a troll is merely looking for any reaction as validation to continue with their activities.⁴⁵

The definition of trolling used in this project uses the central pillars of Donath's and Bergstrom's definitions. The troll assumes an identity — sometimes as a member of the targeted group, sometimes as whatever seems likely to antagonize that group — and seeks a reaction from the target. One source of enjoyment for the troll is perhaps the juxtaposition of the troll's attitude of unserious play and the target's serious response. Online media scholar Whitney Phillips demonstrates that trolls are motivated by achieving "lulz" — an "unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter" caused by provoking outrage and other emotional distress.⁴⁶

Trolling has been a central tactic of some factions of the alt-right, a confederation of vocal Donald Trump supporters that was largely unknown before the Trump candidacy, even among mainstream conservatives. To reach out to a more mainstream audience, Milo Yiannopoulos cowrote "An Establishment Conservative's

⁴⁵ Kelly Bergstrom, "Don't Feed The Troll: Shutting Down Debate About Community Expectations on Reddit.com," *First Monday* 16, no. 8 (August 2011).

⁴⁶ Phillips conducts a detailed anthropological study of subcultural trolling, by which she means "self-identifying trolls engaged in highly stylized lulz-based trolling." Whitney Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 21. Subcultural trolling consists of communities that self-identify as trolls. Merely being provocative online, even in an effort to evoke an emotional response, is not subcultural trolling as Phillips defines it. But the use of trolling tactics is not limited to subcultural trolling communities. While Phillips' study covers these communities and their trolls, rather than antagonistic online behavior in general, the details she provides about trolling behaviors is more widely applicable. "Lulz" is a word coined from the abbreviation LOL, laughing out loud, and has been adapted by the subcultural troll community to refer to their enjoyment of the emotional distress caused by their trolling activities. Phillips, *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 24.

Guide to the Alt-Right,” an article for the far-right website Breitbart that explains the factions comprising the alt-right’s loose coalition. Among the four groups identified is what Yiannopoulos refers to as the “meme team,” a group drawn from online communities overlapping the subcultural troll communities studied by Phillips.⁴⁷ Yiannopoulos even observes that their “true motivation [...is] lulz,” just as Phillips has found. Because of the “meme team’s” work, trolling became a defining cultural touchstone for the alt-right coalition and a key tactic in its increased visibility and influence.

Yiannopoulos asserts that internet trolls are attracted to the alt-right because it offers an opportunity to have fun and to provoke society by violating social norms they find incomprehensible. Speaking for his youthful followers, Yiannopoulos describes the alt-right’s attitude toward racism and feigned racism:

Millennials have trouble believing [racism is] actually real. They’ve never actually seen it for themselves — and they don’t believe that the memes they post [...] are actually racist. In fact, they know they’re not — they do it because it gets a reaction. [...] To politically alert Millennials, the contrast between the truly marginalized and those merely claiming victim status has become stark. [...] The alt-right openly crack jokes about the Holocaust, loudly — albeit almost entirely satirically — expresses its horror at “race-mixing,” and denounces the “degeneracy” of homosexuals... while inviting Jewish gays and mixed-race Breitbart reporters to their secret dinner parties. What gives? For

⁴⁷ This is not exactly Richard Dawkins’ meme, but is related. In this instance memes are small image files with picture and text that serve as online propaganda.

the meme brigade, it's just about having fun. They have no real problem with race-mixing, homosexuality, or even diverse societies: it's just fun to watch the mayhem and outrage that erupts when those secular shibboleths are openly mocked.⁴⁸

For Yiannopoulos, trolling embraces a pretend racism in order to provoke offense. The question of whether feigned bigotry is substantially different than the genuine article is a difficult one. At the very least, expressing bigoted views in the name of humor still propagates the bigoted views. Whether the satiric force of the joke neutralizes the further propagation of bigotry must be judged case by case. His persona — a charming troublemaker — makes it possible to dismiss any particular offense as part of the schtick. That the Milo Yiannopoulos who appears in public is to some degree a character seems to reinforce the claim that his expressed racisms, sexism, etc., are pretenses and therefore substantially different than “real” bigotry, but the bigotry expressed still affects discourse.

Yiannopoulos and what he refers to as “the meme team” are, they acknowledge, trolling political discourse, baiting liberals to provoke reactions. This is transparent and obvious, and is nevertheless effective. Their stated aim is to provoke reactions that prove how over-sensitive liberals are, not to delegitimize discourse. They might not even want to do that, but delegitimization of discourse is unavoidably one effect of trolling.

The put-on of racism as trolling, even if the troll claims not to believe it or thinks he doesn't believe it, still has a profound effect on discourse. It attracts racists,

⁴⁸ Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, “An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right,” *Breitbart* (blog), March 29, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>.

rallies them, and gives them comfort. It makes it possible for “real racists” to exist among “ironic racists,” assuming that there is some significant difference between them. It uses the “only kidding” cover of trolling to spread racist ideology. It inures people to racist language and ideas.

One thread of alt-right discourse puts the imprimatur of rational critical debate to racist or sexist ideas. This is a soft entry into hard racism, and it exists in the guise of rational critical debate. Why, it asks, are we not allowed to discuss the science of racial and gender difference? The answers that one could give — that such research is morally repugnant, that biologically distinct races do not exist, that such research has been and would be impossible to separate from existing racism and would be used to justify and perpetuate racisms, that such research has been and would be subject to misuse — are not sufficient answers for those for whom racism is not morally repugnant, who believe in biologically distinct races, and who desire research that would justify their racisms. Just as Christian fundamentalist parents demand that their children’s science curricula teach a controversy about evolution that does not exist in the world of science, so white supremacists demand that their not-so-innocent questions about race be addressed.

Yiannopoulos and other public figures of his type claim they are using humor — satire, even — to make their point. As far as Yiannopoulos is concerned, any complaint about the kind of hate speech one receives only reveals one’s lack of character. Words, he insists, cannot hurt, and anyone who claims otherwise thereby demonstrates their inability to win an argument on merits. He claims that one aim of his intentional offensiveness is to root out arguments that are purely based in

emotion. Let us take him at his word for a moment to observe an interesting contrast between his satire and Colbert's. Colbert takes on an exaggerated version of his political opposite for the amusement of his audience. An oversimplification, but not totally inaccurate. Yiannopoulos' satire follows a different path. He takes on an exaggerated version of how his audience believes he (and they) are viewed by their political opposites. The primary amusement is gained through the outrage (real or imagined) that Yiannopoulos' performance invokes in their political opponents. In short, lulz. Outrageous racist speech does provoke outrage, but it has perlocutionary effects beyond that. It normalizes racist speech and empowers and attracts racists.

The opportunity to provoke draws trolls to the alt-right. There is a compelling reason that the alt-right has embraced trolling in return, besides its effectiveness — trolling contains an implicit critique of the ability to discern intention in discourse.⁴⁹ Trolling, even more than the “only kidding” from which it descends, delegitimizes discourse of all kinds, especially discourse that relies on perceiving intent. In fact, as Donath has observed, they call into question the intent of all discourse.⁵⁰ According to Yiannopoulos, many young members of the alt-right do not believe (or claim not to believe) that racism or other bigotry exists. They decry “identity politics” because they believe that allegations of sexism, racism, etc., are used cynically and hypocritically.⁵¹ In certain online communities populated by the alt-right, allegations

⁴⁹ Not incidentally, trolling offers a way to introduce bigotry into discourse while providing a convenient excuse for having done so. Trolling shares a lineage with Limbaugh-style “only kidding,” making it part of a longstanding tradition in the discourse of the American right.

⁵⁰ “In a group that has become sensitized to trolling — where the rate of deception is high — many honestly naïve questions may be quickly rejected as trollings.” Donath, “Identity and Deception,” 45.

⁵¹ “Identity politics” as understood in this context is usefully defined by James Jacobs and Kimberly Potter, legal scholars hostile to hate crime laws: “‘identity politics’ refers to a politics whereby individuals relate to one another as members of competing groups based upon characteristics like race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation.” Jacobs and Potter, *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and*

of sexism, harassment, and even rape are generally assumed to be fabricated.⁵² A necessary result of the stated beliefs of these alt-right subgroups is that the intentions and lived experiences of political opponents must be delegitimized, and trolling has become an important tool to accomplish said delegitimization.

Daddy Will Save Us

This all brings us back around to Yiannopoulos' pig-blood bath, presented at "#DaddyWillSaveUs: An Art Show for Patriots," a pro-Trump art show produced by a group of alt-right New Yorkers in October 2016. In articulating the show's goals, the primary organizer, photographer Lucian Wintrich, simultaneously embraced and distanced himself from trolling aesthetics: "I don't want to say troll the art world, but sort of troll the art world."⁵³ Provocation and an inauthentic self-presentation, the basic elements of troll culture, were present from the show's inception. The Boiler, a gallery space in Williamsburg that was originally set to host "Daddy Will Save Us,"

Identity Politics, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998), 5. This is in line with the American right's long opposition to the existence of hate crime laws, which rely on perceiving the intentions of the perpetrator. Tim Lynch of the Cato Institute testified against federal hate crimes laws in 2007 before the United States House of Representatives' Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security. As he expressed his opposition: "hate crimes legislation will take our law too close to the notion of thought crimes. It is true that the hate crime laws that presently exist cover acts, not just thoughts. But once hate crime laws are on the books, the law enforcement apparatus of the state will be delving into the accused's life and thoughts in order to show that he or she was motivated by bigotry." Lynch, "The Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2007," *Cato Institute* website, April 17, 2007, <https://www.cato.org/publications/congressional-testimony/hate-crimes-prevention-act-2007>.

⁵² These communities include pickup artist and Men's Rights Activism pages on reddit.com, among other sites. These contend that modern American men are dominated by women, and that allegations of sexism, harassment, and rape are tools used cynically by women to control men. Popular subreddit The Red Pill expresses a typical sentiment in a post that new commenters are required to read before posting: "Women are machiavellian in nature, this means they are comparatively proficient at being manipulative versus the typical male." IllimitableMan, "Red Pill Antibiotic Nuke, Come and Feed," *TheRedPill* (subreddit), February 23, 2014, http://www.reddit.com/r/TheRedPill/comments/1ypnv3/red_pill_antibiotic_nuke_come_and_feed/ (archived at <https://archive.is/KQfIA>). The Red Pill and Men's Rights Activism communities were clamorous in their support for Trump.

⁵³ Lucian Wintrich, "#DaddyWillSaveUs: An Art Show for Patriots," YouTube video, 2:28, September 13, 2016, crossposted to <http://www.daddywillsaveus.com/>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5D6MHZ2SHw>.

ended up breaking their lease agreement with Wintrich. Joe Amrhein, co-owner of the gallery, explained that Wintrich originally pitched the show as “a satirical, Andy Kaufman-esque project.”⁵⁴ When the true nature of Wintrich’s project came to light, Amrhein refused to facilitate it. Wallplay, the eventual venue, was also deceived, as one of the managing partners explained: “This show wasn’t represented accurately when we signed up for this. I was very unhappy when I found out. It was a big shock. It was brought to us as satire.”⁵⁵ Like other trolling, “Daddy Will Save Us” entered discourse with a plausible deniability that allowed it to use neo-nazi hate speech while denying any willful intent and rejecting the idea that such speech has any consequences.

Some of those showing work at the show were popular alt-right figures with no previous history as visual artists: comedian and media personality Gavin McInnes, political activist James O’Keefe, pharmaceutical executive Martin Shkreli, best known for obtaining the rights to the HIV drug Daraprim and increasing its price by over 5500% overnight⁵⁶, and Yiannopoulos. Except for Shkreli, these participants were all public figures who had engaged in trolling behaviors as part of their activist work. Even Shkreli’s contribution to the show was, as will be shown, an exercise in double-voiced trolling.

⁵⁴ Sarah Cascone, “Brooklyn Gallery Conned Into Hosting Pro-Donald Trump Art Show With Martin Shkreli,” *artnet news* (blog), October 5, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/pro-donald-trump-art-show-685502>.

⁵⁵ Eli Kurland, “The Mt. Rushmore of Alt-Right Provocateurs Had a Pro-Trump Gay Art Show,” *Medium* (blog), October 20, 2016, https://medium.com/@Eli_Kurland/the-mt-rushmore-of-alt-right-provocateurs-had-a-pro-trump-gay-art-show-4bf4de673896.

⁵⁶ Andrew Pollack, “Drug Goes from \$13.50 a Tablet to \$750, Overnight,” *New York Times*, September 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/business/a-huge-overnight-increase-in-a-drugs-price-raises-protests.html>.

Even before it opened, the organizers framed the show with two primary claims, which were echoed by politically sympathetic reviewers afterwards. The first claim was that “Daddy Will Save Us” would be an assault on their political enemies in two senses: an assault on their sensibilities, but also a front in what they viewed as the battle of discourse. This understanding of discourse as a violent conflict was reaffirmed in a fawning online review: “The ripple effect of art as a form of spreading memes — that is, memetic warfare — is something we must continue to use to our advantage.”⁵⁷ One participant, Gavin McInnes, acknowledged that stoking controversy and outrage was as essentially the point of “Daddy Will Save Us” as any of the art exhibited.⁵⁸ Another, Martin Skreli, agreed that the show was “a trolling, liberal-media attention grab,” describing it as “more of a nose-thumbing than it is an attempt at serious art.”⁵⁹ Wintrich, the creative drive behind the show, argued that it was “designed to be so [incendiary] that people will realize how limiting the discourse is in this country.”⁶⁰

Wintrich’s description of the show’s goal of revealing what he viewed as the prurient limitations of American public discourse lead in to the second primary claim of the show’s organizers and participants: the show itself, and the ability of the artists and of conservative Americans more generally to speak out, were under

⁵⁷ Julia Rouget, “Make Weimerica Grate Again: A Review of the ‘Daddy Will Save Us’ Art Show,” *Counter-Currents Publishing* (blog), October 11, 2016, <https://www.counter-currents.com/2016/10/make-weimerica-grate-again-a-review-of-the-daddy-will-save-us-art-show/>.

⁵⁸ “[T]he spectacle that surrounds the show is just as much the show as the show.” Gavin McInnes, “Grabbing Art by the Pussy,” *Taki’s Magazine* (blog), October 13, 2016, http://takimag.com/article/grabbing_art_by_the_pussy_gacin_mcinnes.

⁵⁹ Alex Brook Lynn, “Martin Shkreli Talking Like a Human Being Was the Best Part of the Alt-Right Art Show,” *The Concourse* (blog), October 10, 2016, <https://theconcourse.deadspin.com/martin-shkreli-talking-like-a-human-being-was-the-best-1787626877>.

⁶⁰ David Freedlander, “A Pro-Trump Art Show – But the ‘Artists’ Are...Interesting,” *The Daily Beast* (blog), October 8, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-pro-trump-art-show-but-the-artists-areinteresting>.

significant threat. A related sub-grievance was the claim that there would be and were significant protests against “Daddy Will Save Us” — Wintrich and Yiannopoulos name-checked Robert Mapplethorpe’s exhibitions and Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ — and that these protests threatened their ability to participate in the art world.

The art exhibited at “Daddy Will Save Us” came in several varieties. Some work provided by people who had a demonstrated commitment to visual art. Lucian Wintrich displayed “Twinks for Trump,” a series of nude photographs of boyish young men wearing the “Make America Great Again” trucker hats that were so emblematic of the Trump campaign. Oakland-based artist Jonathan Proby lent several of his original paintings to the event.⁶¹ Some contributors were high-profile within alt-right communities, and whose name recognition was as much an asset to the exhibition as any tangible contribution. These included McInnes, O’Keefe, and Shkreli. Epstein convinced O’Keefe not to donate the “pimp coat” that featured in his breakthrough in deceptively edited “sting” videos. Instead, O’Keefe brought “Emotional First Aid Kits,” consisting of stuffed animals in canvas bags. Anti-immigration activist and white nationalist Marcus Epstein contributed a convincingly photoshopped portrait of George Washington wearing a Make America Great Again hat. An occasional contributor to conservative online media described his piece as “an old McDonald’s placemat of Martin Luther King [J]r. that we affixed

⁶¹ Proby’s works tend toward hagiographic icons of such far right figures as Alex Jones and James O’Keefe, or toward his Bosch-esque visions of the contemporary American distopia. His website describes his style as “a tapestry of occult insights and socio-political commentary that forces its will onto the viewer. Layers of meaning flash before the minds eye and only those with a passion for the multi-dimensional will penetrate them all.” “Jon Proby,” accessed December 20, 2017, <http://jonproby.com/>.

a Trump hat on.”⁶² Still other contributors lent prints of existing works from other media to fill the studio walls. An enterprising pair of young men displayed large-format prints of the Trump- and alt-right-themed playing cards that they had been selling online. Street art group Art Wing Conspiracy lent prints of some of their guerrilla-art-style posters, including an Apple Computers logo with a silhouette of Trump’s face in place of the trademark bite mark, featuring the slogan “Think Different.”

Gavin McInnes’ post-event overview expressed a fundamental alt-right understanding of discursive tactics. “[T]he spectacle that surrounds the show is just as much the show as the show,” he wrote. In other words, the reactions to his work were at least as important to him as the content of his work as an articulation of his thoughts. This dynamic shows up again and again in McInnes’s and Yiannopoulos’s writing, and as a baseline assumption of the alt-right internet, part and parcel of the aesthetics of trolling: provoking outrage is at least as good as winning a debate on merits. McInnes’s contribution to the gallery event was a series of three outdoor photographs that “mocked the left’s obsession with trivial issues,” featuring himself “playing the role of a sincere leftist [protester].”⁶³ A frequent targets in McInnes’s columns is protests or protest art in which the protesters or subjects have words or phrases written on their bodies. He plays with this thread in his photographs. In one, he appears bare chested and wearing a feathered headdress. The Twitter tag “#abolishcolumbusday” is written on his forehead; tear-smearred makeup runs down

⁶² Alexander Habighorst, “Conservative Dada,” *The Daily Caller* (blog), October 11, 2016, <http://dailycaller.com/2016/10/11/conservative-dada/>.

⁶³ Lucas Nolan, “Gavin McInnes Mocks the Left with Hashtag Themed Piece at Pro-Trump Art Show,” *Breitbart* (blog), October 8, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/milo/2016/10/08/gavin-mcinnnes-unveils-hashtag-themed-piece-at-new-york-art-show/>.

his cheeks. In another, he holds a sign reading “#RAPE” while wearing a plain a-line dress, heels, and a blonde wig. The third displays McInnes in chains and white briefs, with “#sosorry” written on his chest. These are on one hand meant to be self-evident critiques of three “trivial issues,” the existence of which McInnes doubts: the genocide of native Americans, sexual assault, and the enduring legacy of American slavery. On the other hand, these photographs are an extension of McInnes’s primary tactic: to provoke outrage, to upset those to whom these issues are not trivial, and then to pounce on those reactions.

Personae

One critic described the art show’s tactics as “the contemporary Breitbart playbook”: “generate some sort of publicity stunt, follow the media and activist responses closely, then report on those responses aggressively as evidence of some sort of liberal conspiracy to silence those view points.”⁶⁴ This coheres with McInnes’s and Yiannopoulos’s strategies, and while the feedback loop suggests it has something in common with recursive parody, the lack of framing provides a clear distinction from the Colbert model. Colbert’s primary audiences were those watching in the studio and those watching on television or online. The object of their attention was the Colbert character, and they are asked to counter his arguments and to articulate their own views clearly. Yiannopoulos uses a more fractured audience model. His primary audiences are those watching or reading live or online, but there is a secondary audience that is nearly as important: the target of the trolling. Unlike the primary audience, the actual existence of this secondary audience is irrelevant. It is

⁶⁴ Eli Kurland, “The Mt. Rushmore of Alt-Right Provocateurs Had a Pro-Trump Gay Art Show,” *Medium* (blog), October 20, 2016, https://medium.com/@Eli_Kurland/the-mt-rushmore-of-alt-right-provocateurs-had-a-pro-trump-gay-art-show-4bf4de673896.

important only as an imagined entity. The primary audience of his performances must imagine this secondary audience's reaction to appreciate the full effect of Yiannopoulos's performance.

Historian and communications scholar Charles Morris describes a similar phenomenon in public speech, which he calls the "fourth persona," as it builds on other scholars' works that define the first, second, and third personae.⁶⁵ The fourth persona consists of "a collusive audience constituted by the textual wink [...]. What is not said is nonetheless performative, a speech act that can be read by certain audiences, and call those audience members into being as abettors."⁶⁶ Morris develops his tool as a method to explain the collaborative silence of gay men "passing" as straight in the mid-twentieth century — his particular subject is J. Edgar Hoover. Yiannopoulos uses a fractured audience model not to pass as straight, but to mobilize his audience.

Yiannopoulos fragments and targets two audiences. The "fourth persona" that he uses is reminiscent of dog-whistle political tactics in the style of Lee Atwater's "southern strategy," communicating via textual (or performative) wink to a primary, collusive audience. The secondary audience important to Yiannopoulos's work is the imagined but not (or not necessarily) present audience that his performance seeks to outrage. This is not achieved through silences, as is Wander's third persona. The outraged liberal viewer is frequently conjured in Yiannopoulos's performances. The

⁶⁵ The first and second persona are the "I" of the speaker and the "you" of the audience, as constituted through language. The third persona evokes an audience that is not present through textual silences. For example, by speaking about a Van Gogh painting of peasant's shoes, Martin Heidegger — speaking to an audience in Weimar German — necessarily touched the politically charged topic of poverty without explicitly addressing it. Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984), 209.

⁶⁶ Charles E. Morris, "Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002), 230.

result is that for at least some of his audience, the joy of his performance is the imagined reactions of an absent anti-audience.

In introducing his piece at “Daddy Will Save Us,” Yiannopoulos provided a clear example of his winking to a collusive audience. He spent much of his speech lamenting the problems of popular culture. In particular, he argued that

the problem is that people are not allowed to say things that are true, or that are real, people are not allowed to express opinions that millions of ordinary Americans hold which are not bigoted or racist, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, whatever the fuck.

They’re simply ordinary opinions that millions of people hold. There is a problem when perfectly respectable reasonable mainstream opinions become proscribed by the media.⁶⁷

Exactly what these true, real opinions are, Yiannopoulos doesn’t specify. It seems obvious but is worth noting that ordinary opinions held by millions of Americans and opinions that are bigoted are not mutually exclusive categories. The repetitive assurance that these unspecified opinions are “true,” “real,” “respectable, reasonable [and] mainstream,” that they are widespread, and that they are “not bigoted or racist, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, [or] transphobic” suggest that Yiannopoulos’s audience appreciate (or require) such absolution or reassurance. Without ever enumerating the beliefs, he assures his audience that the opinions they hold that have been condemned by society as bigoted are, in fact, not.

⁶⁷ “MILO Performs Anti-Globalist Art Piece at Pro-Trump Exhibition,” YouTube video, 1:19:53, livestreamed by “MILO,” Oct. 8, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9nZhNPo_iE.

Yiannopoulos's columns hold more clues as to what he is signaling covertly to his collusive audience, and what the opinions are that he has taken such pains to vindicate. In his "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," Yiannopoulos's taxonomy of the alt-right devotes a section to a group he refers to as "The Intellectuals." It is, Yiannopoulos argues, intelligence that differentiates the alt-right from skinheads:

Skinheads, by and large, are low-information, low-IQ thugs driven by the thrill of violence and tribal hatred. The alternative right are a much smarter group of people — which perhaps suggests why the Left hates them so much. They're dangerously bright.⁶⁸

Among these dangerously bright individuals behind "the 'human biodiversity' movement [are] a group of bloggers and researchers who strode eagerly into the minefield of scientific race differences." The group in question here has taken the legitimate science of the influence of genetics on human behavior⁶⁹ and asserted that it proves the existence of distinct races and of white superiority. Rather than the virulent racial hatred of skinheads that Yiannopoulos describes, the human biodiversity movement claims to be dispassionately objective. This is firmly in the tradition of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's study of class and intelligence, *The Bell Curve*, which explicitly argued that white Americans outperform the black compatriots due to innate differences in cognitive abilities. Alt-right discourse online has taken the term "human biodiversity" and married it to white supremacy, if it had

⁶⁸ Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Breitbart* (blog), March 29, 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/>.

⁶⁹ See for example Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002).

not been already. The human biodiversity front takes pains to distinguish itself from racism: they harbor no hatred, merely a scientific certainty in their own objective superiority.

The scientific legacy of human biodiversity is not totally relevant to this project, but the way in which HBD made its way to Yiannopoulos's column is. "An Establishment Conservative's Guide..." is a lengthy piece that aspired to define the inchoate alt-right movement just as it was coming to national attention — much of it negative. The project hoped to wrest the narrative of the alt-right's emergence away from the reactionary and racist impression some were getting from it. To do so required representation of dozens of the alt-right's constituents, so Yiannopoulos and his cowriter/ghostwriter, Allum Bokhari, sought guidance from many sources.

One enterprising journalist got ahold of emails that documented Yiannopoulos's writing process for the article. The first step in his brainstorming process was to ask several self-described white nationalists and neo-nazis for input, including the administrator of neo-nazi website *The Daily Stormer*. When a draft of the article was completed by Bokhari, some of these same figures gave line-by-line feedback. Once Breitbart's upper management — including Trump advisor Steve Bannon — received a further draft, they helped Yiannopoulos to refine some of the overt racism. For example, rather than flatly state that some of the central alt-right websites "are racist," they suggested the more sympathetic formulation that they "have been accused of racism."

"An Establishment Conservative's Guide" was not the only thing to get scrubbed of overt racism. The emails further evidence Yiannopoulos's understanding

that he needed to maintain an edge of racist virulence tempered with absolute plausible deniability. “I’m easing everyone in gently,” he wrote to a friend who worked for a prominent white nationalist website in regards to an argument in one of Yiannopoulos’s columns about IQ determining a nation’s success. Another of Yiannopoulos’s friends offered advice on how to deal with the “endless tide” of overt white supremacists and neo-nazis who were starting to populate his circles: don’t associate with them, not because you disagree with anything they believe, but because they are a public embarrassment. In response, Yiannopoulos admitted “I have been struggling with this. I need to stay, if not clean, then clean enough.”⁷⁰ Yiannopoulos needed to remain able to convincingly claim that he — and the alt-right writ large — was unassociated with bigotry, while remaining attractive to the very bigots from whom he was distancing himself. As the alt-right manifesto claims, “Those looking for Nazis under the bed can rest assured that they do exist. On the other hand, there’s just not very many of them, no-one really likes them, and they’re unlikely to achieve anything significant in the alt-right.” Not exactly an unequivocal disavowal.

Angel Mom

At the event, organizer Lucian Wintrich described Milo Yiannopoulos’s “Angel Mom” to the waiting audience as “the most brilliant thing I heard about” and “the most insightful look at modern culture since the work of Theo van Gogh. And prophetic.” He then gave the floor to Yiannopoulos to introduce his own piece.

⁷⁰ All emails quoted in Joseph Bernstein, “Here’s How Breitbart and Milo Smuggled Nazi and White Nationalist Ideas into the Mainstream,” *Buzzfeed News*, October 5, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/josephbernstein/heres-how-breitbart-and-milo-smuggled-white-nationalism?utm_term=.xrYr917bR#.rteNGXZwP.

Yiannopoulos proclaimed that the show was “the first really significantly protested art show since Piss Christ, and it is as far as I’m aware the first significantly protested art show in history to have been protested from the left.” This, he assured his listeners, was an indication that political dissidence and punk-cool stylings were now exclusively qualities of the Republican party and the (alt-)right. There were apparently one or two protesters in the studio at the beginning of the evening, and the show did have trouble finding a space, as described above. Beyond that, the audience is left to imagine hordes of protesters offended at Yiannopoulos’s shenanigans.

After these hyperbolic introductions, Milo Yiannopoulos exited to change. Some minutes later he reentered the art studio stripped down to his underwear, sporting sunglasses and smoking a cigarette, and fashionably accoutered with several thick gold necklaces and a white “Make America Great Again” hat autographed by Donald Trump. His modesty protected by an assistant holding up a blanket between him and the audience, Yiannopoulos slowly lowered himself into a cast-iron bathtub filled with cow’s blood. This was the beginning of “Angel Mom,” a performance piece that, according to the press release, was a protest against illegal immigration. For several minutes, Yiannopoulos bantered with some of his audience — he complained about the frigid temperature, viscous texture, and above all rancid odor of his chosen medium. Yiannopoulos writhed and posed for the photographers and the audience. The former told him how sexy he looked and requested poses; the latter catcalled and laughed appreciatively. There was no discernible artistic task underway, and no

performative character aside from Yiannopoulos's existing public persona (which is itself quite performative).

As art, "Angel Mom" had little coherence and evidenced no artistic discipline or vision. It was impossible to tell what was and was not a planned or intentional part of the piece, as the entire piece gave the impression that it was being made up on the spot after having been hastily slapped together with the most banal stereotypes of provocative performance art. Nor was there any distinction between the art and the self-promotion. Once in the tub, Yiannopoulos sang "America the Beautiful," took selfies with an assistant, languidly smoked his cigarette, caressed himself with bloody fingers. Then he splashed the whooping audience, chastising his admirers: "If I've got to do it, you've got to do it." He splashed the wall of photographs; took one off the wall, gazed at it, held it to his chest. After more writhing and blood-throwing, a line for selfies formed, and after taking photos with his audience Yiannopoulos' performance was over. But "Angel Mom" was not primarily about the content, nor was it solely about the reaction it might provoke. "Angel Mom" was a put-on, and as such was highly successful.

Cultural historian Craig Peariso defines a put-on as "a mode of inauthentic self-presentation based in the performance of stereotypical identities."⁷¹ In his analysis of 1960s counterculture and political activism, Peariso finds that the "put-ons [were] campy repetitions of political personae that were, in themselves, little more than repetitions of normative conceptions of opposition, whether in the form of black masculinity, youth culture, or same-sex sexuality. [... But] we should read these actions as performances, analyze them in relation to the forms of nonconformity

⁷¹ Craig Peariso, *Radical Theatrics*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 8.

they recited.”⁷² Like cultural theorist Susan Sontag and film critic Jacob Brackman before him, Peariso recognizes that “the put-on’s cynical irony had tainted virtually every interpersonal exchange.”⁷³ Peariso further suggests that the earnest and the campy not only coexist in the put-on performers he examines but are inextricably linked, opposing the status quo by presenting conflicting identities and thereby embodying an impossible contradiction — as he describes them, put-ons are “acceptably unacceptable ‘radicalism.’”⁷⁴

Yiannopoulos has successfully adopted the cynical irony of the put-on, not incidentally tainting every interpersonal exchange. His adoption and adaptation of the tactics of the 1960s far-left is purposeful — he and others within the alt-right write emphatically of the importance of following Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* in their culture war. Like the political activists and the performance artists he emulates — Andy Warhol, Andy Kaufman, and Abbie Hoffman, for example — Yiannopoulos’s public persona is difficult to discern from his private self, and intentionally so. Yiannopoulos forces his viewers either to take nothing he says seriously, or to take everything he says seriously. For those on the latter path, Yiannopoulos overloads their attention bandwidth with everything from contemptuous insults to race-baiting to sticky combative squabbles. For those on the former, Yiannopoulos introduces white nationalist ideas and white supremacist rhetoric in low doses, with the aim of lowering his audience’s resistance to higher concentrations. For both tracks, Yiannopoulos forces his audience to question his intent and authenticity. Whether his audience decides that his schtick is inauthentic

⁷² Ibid, 36.

⁷³ Ibid, 24.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 37.

and just for laughs, or that he uses inauthenticity as a double feint to give aid and comfort to his allies further on the right, by calling all discourse into question, Yiannopoulos has already accomplished one of the primary goals of the alt-right: the destabilization of rational-critical debate.

An attentive reader will have noticed some ambiguity on the question of exactly what sort of blood Yiannopoulos used in “Angel Mom.” In the initial descriptions of his intended project Yiannopoulos specified that he would be bathing in pig’s blood, but in the week leading up to the event the organizers discovered that pig’s blood was not available. Whether because the pig’s blood was a semiotically significant part of the piece, or because the change was not adequately communicated to those promoting the show, or simply because the change was so insignificant that Yiannopoulos and his assistants never bothered to communicate it, even after the change it was still referred to as pig’s blood. The only documentation of the switch was in journalist David Freedlander’s piece describing his behind-the-scenes observations of preparations for the event. “They contacted a butcher to arrange for the delivery of cow’s blood, since pig’s blood was unavailable (‘something about a Jewish holiday,’ [event organizer Ali] Akbar said with a shrug.)”⁷⁵ Exactly why Rosh Hashanah would result in a shortage of pig’s blood is unimportant, but even with forty-eight hours’ notice, all coverage of the event only mentioned pig’s blood.

There was, in fact, a compelling reason to maintain the narrative that Yiannopoulos would be bathing in pig’s blood — one that many commenters on the

⁷⁵ David Freedlander, “A Pro-Trump Art Show – But the ‘Artists’ Are...Interesting,” *The Daily Beast* (blog), October 8, 2016, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-pro-trump-art-showbut-the-artists-areinteresting>.

Breitbart stories promoting the event picked up on, even as it was conspicuously absent from any of the official releases or Breitbart articles. As a candidate, Donald Trump retold a violent and untrue story about an American general executing Muslim Philippino prisoners with bullets dipped in pig's blood in a deliberate effort to offend. The allusion to Trump's violent rhetoric was a powerful attraction to the audience Yiannopoulos was courting, and the idea of pig's blood signaled to that violence at a remove, subtly activating the reference in some viewers while allowing Yiannopoulos to maintain his distance.

An even more attentive reader will have noticed a similar ambiguity about exactly what issue Yiannopoulos's piece aimed to protest or highlight. Yiannopoulos variously explained that the piece would honor victims murdered by illegal immigrants or victims of acts of terror. Both issues fed the nativist sentiment of the Trump campaign and certain of its supporters, and Yiannopoulos certainly wanted to appeal to that audience as much as possible, so the presence of both claims is understandable. It also evidences a sloppiness in Yiannopoulos's thinking about his piece — or at least a sloppiness in his artistic vision, even if the claims are an asset in his quest for publicity and notoriety. One asks whether the piece is performance art or a send-up of performance art, and the only reasonable answer, as Peariso recognizes with such activism, is that it is both simultaneously. The muddled semiotics and careless execution of the piece are partly a product of Yiannopoulos's inexperience as a performance artist, but they also contribute to his continual savage attack on rational-critical debate. Interpretation of his piece needs not be grounded in any evidence or consistency. His audience can enjoy the ostensible artistic aims

and the mockery of what they perceive as incomprehensible far-left avant-garde art. If Colbert had some claim to be the avant-garde performer of the 2000s who brought his tactics into the mainstream, Yiannopoulos certainly has a similar claim for the mid-2010s.

Intentionality Anxiety and Propaganda

Yiannopoulos is not unique in his use of humor to inculcate his audience with racist propaganda. Even those who have little or no interest in maintaining plausible deniability explicitly use humor to acclimate their actual audience to white supremacy and to attract potential new audience. Indeed, the spectrum of bigotry, from plausible deniability to overt white supremacy, can be traversed in both directions. The introduction of uncertainty into the realm of hate groups facilitates recruiting and intra-group communication.

The most visible neo-Nazi website in the English language is “The Daily Stormer,” founded in 2013 by Andrew Anglin and Andrew Auernheimer. A less virulently racist alt-right figure who goes by the pseudonym Vox Day has bickered with Anglin and Auernheimer on and off about tactics and public relations, jockeying for position and influence within the alt-right. In the lead-up to an eventually aborted debate between Day and Anglin, a former ghostwriter for Anglin sent Day a 17-page document that served as the Daily Stormer style guide, and Day published excerpts alongside his condemnations. A few months later a writer for the Huffington Post got ahold of the style guide and published more excerpts. These excerpts confirm that disguising true bigotry as joking is an intentional strategy of

some alt-right white supremacists. Under the heading “Lulz,” the style guide urges contributors to mask their true intentions with ambiguous humor:

The tone of the site should be light. Most people are not comfortable with material that comes across as vitriolic, raging, non-ironic hatred. The unindoctrinated should not be able to tell if we are joking or not. There should also be a conscious awareness of mocking stereotypes of hateful racists. I usually think of this as self-deprecating humor — I am a racist making fun of stereotype of racists [sic], because I don’t take myself super-seriously. This is obviously a ploy and I actually do want to gas kikes. But that’s neither here nor there.⁷⁶

The guide evidences careful consideration of the propagandistic value of presentation. The styleguide offers only an invisible frame. The audience is implicitly asked to create a frame for themselves, drawing a line that comforts them. It recommends the use of racial slurs, but cautions that “when using racial slurs, it should come across as half-joking.” The explicit goal is to make it impossible for “unindoctrinated [readers...] to tell if we are joking or not.” It aims to use the fundamental uncertainty of intent to get new readers to interpret the website as sympathetic to their own values, no matter what they are, and then to radicalize them. *The Daily Stormer’s* goal is the intentional obfuscation of the frame.

After attracting readers with *The Daily Stormer’s* ambiguous transgressive humor, Anglin’s next undertaking is to wear down new readers’ resistance to neo-Nazi ideology through repetition. Writers are reminded that their “target audience is

⁷⁶ Ashley Feinberg, “This Is *The Daily Stormer’s* Playbook,” *HuffPost*, December 13, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/daily-stormer-nazi-style-guide_us_5a2ece19e4boce3b344492f2.

people who are just becoming aware of this type of thinking [i.e. white supremacy]. The goal is to continually repeat the same points, over and over and over and over again. The reader is at first drawn in by curiosity or the naughty humor, and is slowly awakened to reality [i.e. a global conspiracy of Jews] by repeatedly reading the same points.” The ceaseless repetition of these points is paired with an equally relentless self-promotion: “We are covering very negative content, generally, but still as much effort as possible should be put into presenting a positive message. We should always claim we are winning, and should celebrate any wins with extreme exaggeration. This does not mean we downplay the enemy, just that we play up ourselves. We overestimate our influence.”⁷⁷ The playful, humorous qualities described by Anglin have some of the appeal of *The Colbert Report*, but — like Yiannopoulos — it offers the audience no interpretive key, no clues to the performer’s intent, and no framing for the performance.

Beyond providing a continuity of the tactics of Ferdinand Céline, *The Daily Stormer* style guide is relevant to this project because it demonstrates that the alt-right and its allied white supremacists are fully cognizant of the “only kidding” tactic, and exploit it as fully as they can. In his critique Vox Day explicitly connects the *Daily Stormer* tactic to Colbert’s Comedy Central mentor, condemning it thusly: “[Don’t] think that the Anglins [i.e. Anglin and his various ghostwriters] are just performance art [...] they are playing the Jon Stewart game of ‘kidding, not kidding’ [...] in order to preemptively fend off merited criticism.” To be sure, this is not an accurate description of Stewart’s work. Day is responding to Stewart’s frequent

⁷⁷ Vox Day, “The ‘Andrew Anglin’ Style Guide,” *Vox Popoli* (blog), September 6, 2017, <https://voxday.blogspot.com/2017/09/the-andrew-anglin-style-guide.html>.

refusal to acknowledge that he has a journalistic responsibility, but he never has used anything approaching the Limbaugh “only kidding” technique, much less the Daily Stormer one. The Daily Stormer explicitly articulates that their goal is to convert readers to a more extreme ideology by appealing to them through humor and soft-pedaling.

One fascinating aspect of the humor-to-extremism pipeline is that it seems to work just as well in reverse. White nationalists seek to attract audience with humor in order to instill in them sincere beliefs about white supremacy, but humor posing as white supremacy or other conspiratorial worldviews can be absorbed into white supremacist or similar communities, stripped of their irony and redeployed in earnest. A shooting at a Washington D.C. pizza restaurant, for example, had its roots in an online prank linking Democrat Party politicians to a child sex trafficking ring based out of the pizza parlor. The obvious fiction of the hoax was not obvious enough to deter the shooter. The following case study, a culture hacking prank initiated on the anonymous 4chan site, shows how vulnerable discourse is to tactics that target intentionality anxiety.

In February 2017, a 4chan user proposed “Operation O-KKK,” a prank in which participants would “flood twitter and other social media websites with spam, claiming that the OK hand sign [i.e. the thumb-and-forefinger circle] is a symbol of white supremacy.”⁷⁸ The “okay” gesture had already been an iconic part of alt-right symbology, used by figures including Milo Yiannopoulos and white nationalist Richard Spencer. Whether they were imitating Pepe, a cartoon frog popular on the

⁷⁸ Anonymous, “Introducing: Operation O-KKK,” *boards.4chan.org/pol/* (discussion board), archived at <https://yuki.la/pol/114482325>.

alt-right internet, or perhaps imitating Trump himself is uncertain. In the 4chan hoax, participants were to insist that the three straight fingers make a “W” and the circle and hand form a “P,” to stand for “white power.” The idea was that if they could fool enough bona fide left-wing Twitter activists into buying into the protest, they would get those activists to discredit themselves in the eyes of moderate Americans. As the original poster wrote: “Leftists have dug so deep down into their lunacy. We must force [them] to dig more, until the rest of society ain't going anywhere near that shit.”⁷⁹ The other prime directive of 4chan — to create chaos whenever possible, as documented by Angela Nagle — was also in effect, and evidenced by the comments of those participating.

A method underlies the apparent madness, though. The Anti-Defamation League’s online database of hate symbols includes a two-handed signal, the fingers of the right hand forming a “W” and those of the left a “P.” The photograph from ADL listing was posted in the 4chan discussion. The 4chan trolls knowingly put a hoax hate symbol within semiotic spitting distance of an actual one, complicating the task of disentangling them. One participant succinctly summarized the planned effect of this sort of prank:

[1.] Lefty Journalist writes an article mocking 4chan for creating a false flag ok symbol operation

[2.] White Nationalists and 14/88ers [i.e. neo-Nazis] catch on and actually make the ok symbol and acceptable White Power symbol

⁷⁹ Ibid.

[3.] Lefty Journalist is trapped in a dilemma of looking like a complete retard or not reporting the truth accurately⁸⁰

This is not exactly what happened, at least not yet, but there was an eventual payoff to the 4chan hacking of discourse. The prank reached an apex of sorts in December 2017, when President Trump met with several dozen White House interns. While group photographs were being taken, the president asked everyone to pose with one hand raised with a thumbs-up gesture, and in one picture the president and the dozens of interns are all doing so. Jack Breuer, one of the interns, is the only exception, displaying the encircled thumb-and-forefinger “okay” sign instead.

The photograph became the focus of at least one tabloid story, when the UK’s *Daily Mail* accused the “Trump intern” of “flashing a known ‘white power’ sign.”⁸¹ From there the story spread to other disreputable websites and to social media, and even some mainstream media sources picked up the story. *Newsweek* ran an online story that committed two cardinal sins against journalistic integrity. The all-caps headline blared, “DID A WHITE HOUSE INTERN USE A WHITE POWER SYMBOL IN TRUMP PHOTO?” phrasing a lurid accusation as a question to protect against libel. The story had no reliable source on its claims about the hand gesture — understandably, since the white power meaning was a fiction — and so settled for describing it as “a symbol *that some have said* has a more malicious meaning by

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Martin Gould, “White Power at the White House,” *Daily Mail*, December 28, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5216137/White-House-intern-flashes-white-power-sign-Trump.html>.

representing a ‘w’ and ‘p’ for ‘white power.’”⁸² Eventually the narrative headlines changed to “White House intern denies making white power sign in photo with Trump.”⁸³ By causing such confusion that even one of the most mainstream news magazines published what could fairly be called “fake news,” the hoax worked even more insidiously than could have been hoped.

That still leaves the question of what is actually happening in the photograph. The viewer is faced with several possible explanations of Breuer’s motive. One: he was giving the “ok” sign exactly as he later described, emulating President Trump and simply misunderstood the photographer’s directions. Two: he was giving the “ok” sign as part of “Operation O-KKK,” creating an opportunity for left-wing media and social media to mistake his innocent gesture for a hate symbol. Three: he admired some of the many alt-right figures, including Milo Yiannopoulos, who used the sign frequently in photographs to troll for liberal outrage, and he was emulating them without really knowing why. Four: he was genuinely expressing solidarity with white power and white nationalist movements, using a recently developed signal that has maximal plausible deniability. The entire 4chan project aimed at confounding an audience’s ability to discern intent and creating just this sort of uncertainty. This sort of successful hacking of discourse leverages intentionality anxiety, in this example about Breuer, into an environment that aids and comforts actual white supremacists by giving them enough cover to provide deniability. Further, by implicating committed white nationalists and those flirting with white nationalism into the

⁸² Peatrice Dupuy, “Did a White House Intern Use a White Power Symbol in Trump Photo?,” *Newsweek*, December 29, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/did-white-house-intern-make-white-power-symbol-764865> (emphasis mine).

⁸³ Gabby Morrongiello, “White House Intern Denies Making White Power Sign in Photo with Trump,” *Washington Examiner*, December 29, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/white-house-intern-denies-making-white-power-sign-in-photo-with-trump/article/2644568>.

conversation, such as Richard Spencer⁸⁴ and Milo Yiannopoulos respectively, along with those claiming to be just in for the joke, the tactic creates a project in which participants all along the white nationalism spectrum can see their own beliefs represented. This has the further effect of making it possible for participants to migrate further along the spectrum towards explicitly racist ideology.

What can Stephen Colbert and other like-minded people do to counter the efficacy of Yiannopoulos's style of trolling, only-kidding empowerment of racism? The first step might be to satirize the culture of victimhood that enables Yiannopoulos. If the critique of grievance culture is the sole province of alt-right figures like Yiannopoulos, then the allegation that petty grievances are a defining tactic of the left seems plausible. There are other possible steps to take in response to trolling tactics in public discourse. Thoughtful public figures could step back from outrage in response to provocation by focusing on the tactical cry for attention rather than amplifying its shock value. The attraction of trolling tactics is the amusement provided by outraged normies, so a measured response to the tactic itself rather than its content might diminish that enjoyment. A dispassionate factual response might have a similar effect. Rather than responding with emotional outrage to a public statement in support of, for example, letting the poorest among us starve as a consequence for their personal failings, mainstream media figures could offer a brief

⁸⁴ Richard Spencer has spent his career working for a variety of white nationalist organizations and publications. He describes his dream of a white American entho-state, achieved through "peaceful ethnic cleansing." He concluded a highly publicized speech less than two weeks after the 2016 election with the words "Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory," a recognizable echo of the Nazi "siege heil," for which he received dozens of straight-armed Nazi salutes, which he acknowledged by raising his glass. Nevertheless, he prefers to be called a "identitarian," rather than a white supremacist. Branding, it seems, is everything. Daniel Lombroso and Yoni Appelbaum, "'Hail Trump!': White Nationalists Salute the President-Elect," *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/richard-spencer-speech-npi/508379/>.

history lesson about hunger and poverty in the democratic world and the society-wide costs and benefits of a social safety net. The joy of trolling may be deflated when the merry trollers are treated as merely woefully wrong rather than outrageously provocative.

Conclusion: Framing Yiannopoulos

Stephen Colbert's contribution to and critical analysis of American political discourse responds to and has its roots in a long tradition of political speech that leverages the inscrutability of intent. "Only kidding," the tactical predecessor of trolling exemplified by Rush Limbaugh, has long been a way to inject controversial and toxic political ideas into public discourse while maintaining distance between those ideas and the speaker. Just like dog-whistle political speech, "only kidding" gives the speaker the protection of plausible deniability of intent. By relying on speech that claims to be humor but is indistinguishable from what it pretends to be, "only kidding" can help to shift the Overton Window by introducing ideas far outside acceptability in the guise of humor. While Colbert uses the uncertainty of his intent to spur his audience's critical viewing, his framing of his performance as a character makes it much less likely that it might be taken literally.

Milo Yiannopoulos is an example of a more current trend, in which political discourse, especially of the alt-right, exploits the gap between parody and authenticity. His lack of framing serves that exploitation. By providing no definite ironic markers — not even claims like Limbaugh's "only kidding" — Yiannopoulos combines internet trolling tactics with dog-whistle political speech. Yiannopoulos's contribution to "Daddy Will Save Us" was less a satire of performance art than a

farce of one, and as sociologist Kevin Dettmar observes, “Satire is only a step from farce, and while satire might have some political potential, farce primarily reinforces prejudices rather than challenges them.”⁸⁵ Like Yiannopoulos, farce asks no hard questions of and demands no work from its audience — it only requires the belief that ridicule serves the highest good.

The personal and political gains made by alt-right figures’ exploitation of the gap between parodic and authentic has led to the deployment of the tactic at an industrial scale, with the aim of blurring the lines between authentic belief and parody. When differentiating truths from lies is impossible, discerning an objective fact pattern among the discordant voices of discourse becomes equally impossible. Objective facts take a secondary importance to impressions, and citizens’ faith in a discernible objective reality may be severed altogether. This is what the organized culture-hacking and meme wars driven by white nationalist communities such as the Daily Stormer and 4chan explicitly aim to achieve.

Stephen Colbert’s *The Colbert Report* adopted a stance critical of “only kidding,” dog whistle political speech, and the destabilization of discourse. The way Colbert frames his character is a central component of his performance and how its critique of discourse works. Colbert maintained a distinct separation of character and performer, while for Yiannopoulos the blurring of that distinction is part of his stated goals. By framing his character as identifiably separate from his everyday self, and maintaining that separation so totally that it is possible for him to break character, Colbert makes it possible for the audience to interpret his character

⁸⁵ Kevin Dettmar, “Learning Irony with The Simpsons,” in *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*, ed. John Alberti (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2004), 104.

choices. On the other hand, Yiannopoulos offers no edges between self and character, and spectators cannot make clear differentiations between character and performer. This allows his audience to ascribe any words or actions that they find objectionable to the character, and dismiss them as mere ironies, while retaining everything Yiannopoulos says that they do not filter out in this active way as genuine, legitimate discourse. In this way, Yiannopoulos's character acts as a one-man filter bubble.

While the tactical blurring of character and self brought Yiannopoulos popularity, influence, and financial rewards, it also resulted in his fall from grace. Throughout his Breitbart career, Yiannopoulos's constant pushing against social norms was an important feature of his public persona. One way he defied norms was his frank discussion of his own sexuality, with no self-censorship. As Yiannopoulos himself observed, he did not distinguish the character of his outrageous public persona from his true self, and no such distinction can be made by others. In July 2016, Yiannopoulos appeared as a guest on *Drunken Peasants*, a video podcast. In other appearances, Yiannopoulos had hinted at having been abused by his childhood priest, although it is impossible to know whether his stories were based in any autobiographical fact. On this occasion, Yiannopoulos had more to say on the matter, arguing that sexual relationships between adult men and boys as young as thirteen could be beneficial for the children involved. While psychoanalysis of Yiannopoulos is of course nowhere near the scope of this project, one has to wonder what lies behind this particular instance of transgression.

Because of this interview, Yiannopoulos was finally made to break character. A recording of this podcast came to the attention of a conservative political blog in February 2017, and from there the coverage of Yiannopoulos's comments exploded. It portended a crashing halt to Yiannopoulos's remarkable rise. Endorsing pederasty, it seemed at first glance, was at last the rubicon that Yiannopoulos's financial backers and supporters could not abide to be crossed. In the hours and days following, Yiannopoulos felt the blowback. The American Conservative Union disinvited him from speaking at CPAC, a major media event. Yiannopoulos was forced out of his position at Breitbart. Simon and Schuster cancelled his book and demanded return of the \$250,000 advance. Eventually, the billionaire Mercer family cut off the lucrative funding they had been providing to Yiannopoulos. One does wonder whether Yiannopoulos's patrons were genuinely disturbed by his comments, whether they were worried about the backlash the comments might bring, or if, most cynically, they abandoned him not because he had gone so far that they couldn't support and defend him, but because he had brought too much neo-Nazi and white nationalist underbelly to attention, but of course that is unknowable, a question of intent that can only cause uncertainty.

Without a frame to contain it, satire can become or facilitate what it pretends to be in a non-trivial way. In his defense of Ferdinand Céline, André Gide believed there was something akin to taking on a satiric character happening in Céline's work, but Céline's work created an environment in which the assumption of character worked in two directions. The satirist can be an ironic antisemite, but that enables the antisemite to shroud his bigotry in the guise of satire. Charles Morris's work on

the “fourth persona” examines how public figures can behave in such a way that they “pass” (as straight) but mark themselves as queer for a select, collusive audience. In Céline’s prewar France, as in today’s American alt-right, actual antisemites are able to pass as ironic antisemites because of the “winking” that ironic antisemites use to indicate their insincerity. Eventually the “wink” itself — like the “okay” gesture or Pepe the Frog — becomes a sign intentionally saturated with uncertain intentions.

Conclusion: Putting the Coarse in Public Discourse

This dissertation has defined recursive parody and argued that it is a characteristic mode of interaction in the recent American public sphere. Recursive parody is a satiric form in which a performer, taking on a parodic character, forces a legitimate public figure into an interaction. As the public figure responds, the parodic character takes that response and folds it back into the interaction, repeating this process again and again, confronting the public figure with the difficult situations and absurdities that they themselves have participated in creating.

Colbert and Yiannopoulos present different modes of interrogating discourse, but each performer is responding to the same communicative landscape and each is using feigned intent to perform for his audience a way of engaging with and within it. Each performance provides its audience with some benefit, and each comes with some risk. If we can grapple with the questions of cost and benefit, then perhaps we can draw some conclusions about the utility of each form.

The value of Colbert's intervention is that it makes the performativity of public political discourse more visible. His audience is presented with a character whose every action is a performance, and part of the task of watching *The Colbert Report* is to evaluate the character's intent behind each action. The separation of character from performer and the delimitation of the character's presence to the program, with only occasional appearances outside of that context, and the program's own context on a comedy network all work together to provide the audience with a clearly demarcated area within which to practice critique of Colbert's targets and guests, and of Colbert himself.

In the divisive atmosphere of contemporary American politics, no political discourse is likely to be widely regarded as neutral. Even though Colbert made a point of critiquing liberal Democratic politicians as well as conservative Republicans, the overall pattern of his show and the impression of his slightly left-of-center personal ethos outside *The Colbert Report* gave his satiric critiques the patina of partisanship. Even if this reputation was undeserved, the tools Colbert modeled and the critiques of discourse he made on *The Colbert Report* were still seen in some quarters as an attack on the political right by the left.

Even with the diligent framing Colbert provides, it may be possible for a viewer to misunderstand his performance as one meant literally. The cost of this is effectively to add one more uninformed partisan blowhard to the viewer's media landscape. Taken literally, none of Colbert's rhetoric would amount to more than a tamer, nearly as uninformed version of the Sean Hannity style he parodies. It is also possible, as LaMarre et al argue, to recognize the framing and still to interpret Colbert as satire sympathetic to a conservative viewer.¹ For example, when Colbert addresses the topic of guns in the United States, he often shows his audience his own handgun, which he has named "Sweetness." Colbert has a disturbing relationship with Sweetness. He caresses it and he hears it whisper to him (inaudibly to the audience). A conservative audience member might see Colbert's affection for Sweetness as a parody of an uninformed liberal misunderstanding of conservative attitudes about guns, an interpretation that does not neutralize Colbert's critical interventions nor obviate the interrogation of intent with which Colbert tasks his

¹ Heather LaMarre et al, "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2009), 217.

audience. These reasonable interpretations may disagree about Colbert's own beliefs about the topic at hand, but all stem from the essential critical stance Colbert asks of his audience. In other words, Colbert may be mocking some gun owners' fetishization of their firearms, or he equally may be mocking the absurd caricature of gun owners that some liberals believe. Colbert's true intent is inaccessible and is irrelevant to the discursive tools he brings to bear.

Milo Yiannopoulos's mode of interrogating discourse, separate from the content of his speech, may have value as critical interventions. One value is that it forces a perspicacious audience to be suspicious of everything he says. It is impossible to know what Yiannopoulos means literally and what is satiric, and even when that question is put aside it is equally impossible to know the target of his satire. If an audience member approaches Yiannopoulos's performance critically, it could result in the acknowledgement of the radical uncertainty of contemporary discourse.

Yiannopoulos claims that his offensiveness is an effect of people taking offense too easily. He claims to hope that exposing his audience to offensive speech will inure them to it, helping them to engage with ideas that are controversial with measured rationality. One problem with this approach is that feeling attacked, as many of Yiannopoulos's targets do, is an emotionally overwhelming response, and when someone is flooded with emotional response they have a harder time responding rationally. Another problem with this approach is that it imagines that a separation of emotion and reason is possible and beneficial, and that emotions have no place in public discourse. I neither believe that his tactic is an effective way to

achieve his purported goal, nor that such is actually his aim, but it is in some limited ways a laudable goal. Conversations do get shut down due to perceived slights and hair-trigger outrage, even if I am unconvinced that exaggerated offensiveness is a salve for exaggerated offense-taking. Journalist Ezra Klein argues that the more shocked and outraged liberal and mainstream figures are by Yiannopoulos's style of alt-right provocation, the more effective and attractive it becomes as a way to rebel against what the alt-right argues is a culturally enforced conformity.² One can hope that American liberals, realizing that offense-taking has become an easily manipulable and ultimately counterproductive strategy, will abandon it.

Yiannopoulos's method confronts his political opponents with an overwhelming task. As observed at the beginning of Chapter Three, Sartre recognized that the proliferation of bad-faith arguments can have a cumulative effect out of proportion with their rational value. While the anti-Semites that Sartre describes "play with discourse, [...] giving ridiculous [arguments]," their political opponents must respond as if those arguments have value.³ Unanswered claims occupy discursive space and so must be addressed, but it requires far less energy to make ridiculous claims that have the appearance of rational argument than it does to refute them. Whether to address them at all is a catch twenty-two – if unchallenged, they exist in the public sphere as seemingly true as anything, but if they are addressed they may take on a sheen of legitimacy by virtue of having been taken seriously enough to address, to say nothing of the energy expended to denounce

² Ezra Klein, "Sam Harris, Charles Murray, and the allure of race science," *Vox* (blog), March 27, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/27/15695060/sam-harris-charles-murray-race-iq-forbidden-knowledge-podcast-bell-curve>.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker, (New York: Schocken, 1948), 20.

them. One way or another, their existence threatens a death of a thousand cuts. The tactic of overwhelming the public sphere with specious and divisive arguments may have value for the political faction that wields it, but their advantage comes at a high cost to the general public. The divisive form that Yiannopoulos uses exploits and further heightens the us-versus-them attitude prevalent in American politics, and it debases coherent rational discourse by disclaiming the connection between words and meaning. It also contributes to the erosion of public trust in the rational/critical public sphere and heightens fears about fake news and propaganda.

Yiannopoulos's race-baiting content, rather than his form, attracts cryptofascists, but the form itself damages the public sphere. One of the simplest analytical tools of game theory might help explain how the Yiannopoulos form itself undermines the public sphere, regardless of its content. Yiannopoulos brings about a decrease in the efficiency of the engagement of some participants in the public sphere, through inviting misunderstandings and eliciting responses to ridiculous arguments. If his form negatively affects the efficiency of some participants without offering an equal or greater gain in such efficiency elsewhere, it is a negative-sum game. This simply means that all the losses added up are greater than all the gains. The net effect is that the more the tactic is used, the lower the overall discursive efficiency. This analysis suggests that the form Yiannopoulos uses, regardless of content, degrades confidence in the public sphere.

In contrast, because Colbert offers a demarcation between character and performer, he neither escalates misunderstandings nor puts others in a position in which they are obliged to counter specious arguments, and so *The Colbert Report*

may have been a positive-sum game in regards to confidence in the public sphere. By helping his audience develop their critical faculties, Colbert offers a net positive change to discourse. The content of *The Colbert Report* contributed new and useful information to discourse, as did his engagement with longer form projects, like Colbert Super PAC. His chosen form, too, may be a positive-sum game, in that it offers his guests opportunities to engage with and articulate their own ideas, and helps his audience to productively question their assumptions and to find some firm footing in the interrelatedness of discourse while acknowledging its instability.

One possible fate of the tactic used by Milo Yiannopoulos might be exemplified by a custody lawsuit against internet talk-show host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. In the lawsuit, Kelly Jones contended that her former husband was “not a stable person” and was an unfit father.⁴ To support these claims her lawyers wanted to introduce into evidence videos of a visibly enraged Alex Jones hosting his radio and internet programs. These were relevant, they argued, not only because they demonstrated Alex Jones’s instability, but also because Jones “broadcasts from home [and] the children are there, watching him broadcast.”⁵

Alex Jones’s legal team countered with the contention that in his appearances on his show, *Infowars*, their client is “playing a character. He is a performance artist,” and that therefore his performance should not be allowed to serve as evidence as to his parental fitness.⁶ Essentially, Jones’s lawyers declared their client to be a performance artist in order to protect him from possible real-world

⁴ Jonathan Tilove, “In Travis County Custody Case, Jurors Will Search for Real Alex Jones,” *Austin American Statesman*, April 16, 2017, <https://www.mystatesman.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/travis-county-custody-case-jury-will-search-for-real-alex-jones/rnbWzMHnFCd5SOPgP3A34J/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

consequences of his on-air rhetoric. This put Jones in a difficult position. If he insisted that his appearances on *Infowars* reflected his true beliefs, he would risk losing his custody suit, but if he agreed with his lawyers' portrayal of him as a performer he would risk damaging his reputation with his audience and thus his livelihood.

And so Alex Jones – or at least the version of himself that he plays online – fought against his own lawyers' argument. While driving to the courthouse for this trial, he livestreamed to Facebook a rambling diatribe about his lawyers' assertion. At one point he looks directly into the camera, held by someone in the passenger seat, and declares, "I am completely real, and everybody knows it."⁷ That same day several media outlets covered Jones, focusing on his lawyers' claim that he was a performance artist – including a parodic segment of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, whose host knows a thing or two about performing a right-wing extremist character.⁸ Jones responded on a segment of his *Infowars* program that night, delivering another tirade insisting on his reality, again without acknowledging that it was his own lawyers who had argued that he was a performance artist. In this tirade, Jones did not address the question of whether he is in character while hosting *Infowars* or grapple with the conundrum of where Alex Jones the private citizen ends and Alex Jones the talk-show host begins. Instead, he claimed that the stories about him as a performance artist were generated by journalists hostile to him,

⁷ Alex Jones, "I Am Not Fake," published by Alex Jones on Facebook 17 April 2017, captured and republished by rightwingwatch.org, 18 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXo6eD6bdxo>.

⁸ Stephen Colbert, "Brain Fight with Tuck Buckford," *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, aired and published online 18 April 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qBNml_sSVo.

trying to “brand [*Infowars*] as fake news” and that they were trying to discredit him by deceptively describing his activities:

[T]he media loves to attack me, and say ‘He dresses up in lizard suits [...]. Are you serious?’

And I say ‘That’s satire! I’m being an actor, acting like I’m a space alien that wants to exterminate the population of the Earth, trying to sell you on taking vaccines. I don’t actually believe that [... that’s] real.’

Then they go ‘Oh my gosh! Alex Jones is fake! He says he’s an actor!’

[...] If I put a top hat on and play the part of the head of Goldman Sachs, saying ‘I’m screwing you over, I love the megabanks, I’m gonna rob you, world government’s good,’ I’m illustrating how George Soros and other people think of you. I don’t literally believe that.

The time that I put on clown makeup and played the part of the Joker, saying ‘drink your fluoride water and take your vaccines, ’cause you’re gonna see pretty colors, kids,’ people got freaked out and said ‘Oh my gosh, you’re not for real, because you act like a nice guy on air, but then you acted like a monster for an hour on TV,’ and it was powerful! It was a powerful performance! That’s why people were so freaked out, and they said ‘What’s the real you?’ [...] This is the real me. [...]

There are headlines in BBC, Reuters, AP, uh, [he reads from Canadian news outlet CTV News] ‘Infowars host Alex Jones plays a character, is different in real life.’ What? I didn’t say that! [...] This is the type of deception that’s going on. If I say I want to knock somebody upside the

head, they go, ‘Oh, we’re gonna charge you for that.’ I go, ‘it was a figure of speech, to make my point.’ ‘Oh, then you’re fake! You don’t really want to punch me in the face?’ They play these semantical [sic] lawyer games, ladies and gentlemen. It’s ridiculous.⁹

During the segment, Jones showed clips from the three previous episodes he mentioned in which he had put on costumes for various performative bits. Jones claimed that these bits were the source of the media claims that he was an actor or performance artist. At one point he read from a headline that he showed on camera: “*Infowars* host Alex Jones plays a character, is different in real life.” He then denied saying that, as if he was being misquoted, but even the headline he showed onscreen attributed the message to Jones’s lawyer. He attributes the outrageous “semantical lawyer games” to the news media coverage of his case, when in reality they stemmed from his own lawyers.

So what is the reality? Is Alex Jones a performance artist? Of course he is, and part of his performance is dancing on and beyond the edge of believability. But his performance, like Yiannopoulos’s, is indistinguishable from his not-performing-for-*Infowars* self. What we seem to have here is a character arguing for his own existence against the best efforts of his actor’s legal team, which is a little unsettling. The inscrutability of his performance combined with the extremist content, as with Yiannopoulos, can have drastic consequences when his audience takes him seriously. For example, Jones infamously pushed an internet-fueled conspiracy theory that insisted that Hillary Clinton and other national Democratic Party figures were

⁹ Alex Jones, “Alex Jones Responds to Claims He Is an Actor,” published by The Alex Jones Channel, April 18, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAl8QJSmkPE>.

running a pedophilia ring out of a D.C. pizzeria. One of his listeners, having heard Jones allege that Hillary Clinton had “personally murdered and chopped up and raped” untold numbers of children, drove from North Carolina to Washington D.C. and, a lone armed vigilante storming the pizzeria, terrorized its customers and employees.¹⁰

The presiding judge in the Joneses’ custody case decided not to allow most of the videos to be shown to the jury, finding that they were not relevant to the question of parenting and telling the lawyers for both sides that “[t]his case is not about *Infowars*, and I don’t want it to be about *Infowars*.”¹¹ In the courtroom, judicial authority can opt to exclude such speech. The public sphere has no such recourse, and no simple intervention can effectuate such an exclusion. Perhaps, given the potential reactions to and repercussions of public policy that regulates discourse, that is for the best.

The denouement of Jones’s current career may be brought about by legal pressure that forces him to either acknowledge or disavow his extremist rhetoric. Four different individuals filed defamation lawsuits against Jones between March and April 2018, with much more direct claims against his on-air speech than his custody case. Jones is being sued by an attendee at the counter-protest to the August 2017 white supremacy rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia, whom Jones identified as a

¹⁰ Amanda Robb, “Anatomy of a Fake News Scandal,” *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/pizzagate-anatomy-of-a-fake-news-scandal-w511904>.

¹¹ Tilove, “In Travis County Custody Case, Jurors Will Search for Real Alex Jones,” <https://www.mystatesman.com/news/state--regional-govt--politics/travis-county-custody-case-jury-will-search-for-real-alex-jones/rnbWzMHnFCd5SOPgP3A34J/>.

member of a “deep state” conspiracy that orchestrated the violence at those rallies.¹² A Massachusetts resident is bringing a case against Jones for identifying him as the perpetrator of the February 2018 shooting at Marjorie-Douglas High School in Florida.¹³ Separate suits are being pursued by the families of two children murdered at the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which Jones claimed was a staged event, part of a government conspiracy.¹⁴ The consequences of speech in discourse may not always be definite and the effects may not always be traceable. Flawed though the American justice system may be, and although it moves at a fraction of the speed of public discourse, in a courtroom the consequences of Jones’s speech might be concrete.

What, then, does Stephen Colbert teach us in the age of President Donald Trump? As a candidate and as president, Trump has had a remarkable impact on American political discourse. He has overwhelmed his political opponents with the volume – in both senses of the word – of his bad-faith arguments. He disregards the consequences of being wrong, and by disregarding them he overcomes them, albeit perhaps temporarily. Colbert’s work shows that creating genuine public spheres is still possible, and that affective publics are some of the most effective coalitions in modern politics. He demonstrates that seeking truth is not incompatible with playfulness, and that a truth-seeking playfulness is an effective counter to the nihilistic provocation of political trolling. As Sartre observed, those who do not value

¹² Sam Levin, “Suit Claims Infowars’ Alex Jones Stoked Harassment of Charlottesville Witness,” *The Guardian*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/mar/13/infowars-alex-jones-charlottesville-lawsuit-conspiracy-theory>.

¹³ Megan Flynn, “Infowars, Alex Jones Sued Again,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/04/04/infowars-alex-jones-sued-again-this-time-for-falsely-identifying-man-as-parkland-shooter/?utm_term=.b30ea66bafc4.

¹⁴ Matthew Haag, “Sandy Hook Parents Sue Alex Jones for Defamation,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/business/media/alex-jones-sandy-hook.html>.

discourse and who use argument to intimidate rather than convince have no interest in the rightness or wrongness of their words. But as the defamation lawsuits against Alex Jones might teach us, some speech has legal consequences, and those who speak it cannot be shielded from them forever by claiming to have been only kidding.

Bibliography

- Achter, Paul. "Comedy in Unfunny Times: News Parody and Carnival After 9/11." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 3 (August 2008). 274-303.
- Allen, Charles, ed. *Satire: Theory and Practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1962.
- Alterman, Eric. *What Liberal Media?* New York: Basic Books, 2008.
- Amarasingam, Amarnath. *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2011.
- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. 2nd ed. ed. London: Routledge, 2008.
- . *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things With Words*. Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975.
- . "Performative Utterances." *Philosophical Papers*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979. doi:10.1093/019283021X.001.0001.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- . "Epic and the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 3-40.
- . "Discourse in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination*. Translated by Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. 259-422.
- . *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- . *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Ball, Howard. *Murder in Mississippi: United States v. Price and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 2004.
- Balme, Christopher. *The Theatrical Public Sphere*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014.
- Barnett, Michael D., and Jeremy T. Deutsch. "Humanism, Authenticity, and Humor: Being, Being Real, and Being Funny." *Personality and Individual Differences* 91 (March 2016). 107-112.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Noonday, 1972.
- . *Image-Music-Text*. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Baumgartner, Jody, and Jonathan Morris, eds. *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- . "The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth." *American Politics Research* 34.3 (2006). 341-367.
- . "Humor on the Next Frontier: Youth, Online Political Humor, and the JibJab Effect." *Social Science Computer Review* 25 (2007). 319-338.

- . "Jon Stewart Comes to Class: The Learning Effects of *America (The Book)* in Introduction to American Government Courses." *Journal of Political Science Education* 4 (2008). 169-186.
- . "One Nation Under Stephen: The Effects of *The Colbert Report* on American Youth." *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 52:4 (Dec. 2008). 622-643.
- . "MyFaceTube Politics: Social Networking Web Sites and Political Engagement of Young Adults." *Social Science Computer Review* 28 (2010). 24-44.
- . "Stoned Slackers or Super Citizens?" In *The Stewart/Colbert Effect*. Edited by Amarnath Amarasingam. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2011. 63-78.
- Baumgartner, Jody, Jonathan Morris, and Natasha Walth. "The Fey Effect: Young Adults, Political Humor, and the Perceptions of Sarah Palin in the 2008 Presidential Election." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76.1 (Spring 2012). 95-104.
- Baym, Geoffrey. "*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." *Political Communication*. 22:3 (2005). 259-276.
- . *From Cronkite to Colbert: The Evolution of Broadcast News*. Boulder: Paradigm, 2010.
- . "Serious Comedy: Expanding the Boundaries of Political Discourse." In *Laughing Matters*. Edited by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris. New York: Routledge, 2008. 21-37.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1978.
- Bergstrom, Kelly. "'Don't feed the troll': Shutting Down Debate About Community Expectations on Reddit.com." *First Monday* 16 no. 8 (August 2011). <http://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3498/3029>
- Berry, Jeffrey, and Sarah Sobieraj. *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.
- Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. *The Postmodern Turn*. New York: Guilford Press, 1997.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: New Press, 1992.
- Bogad, L. M. *Electoral Guerrilla Theatre: Radical ridicule and social movements*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- . "A Place for Protest: The Billionaires for Bush Interrupt the Hegemonologue." In *Performance and Place*. Edited by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 170-179.
- Bohn, Roger and James Short. "Measuring Consumer Information." *International Journal of Communication* [Online] 6 (April 27, 2012): 980-1000. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>.
- Boler, Megan. *Digital Media and Democracy: Tactics in Hard Times*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
- Bolotsky, Josh. "Use Your Radical Fringe to Shift the Overton Window." In *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*. Edited by Andrew Boyd. New York: OR Books, 2012.
- Boyle, Frank. "Jonathan Swift." In *A Companion to Satire*. Edited by Ruben Quintero. Malden: Blackwell, 2007. 196-211.

- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*. Translated by John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.
- Brooks, Joanna. "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Series 57 no. 1 (January 2005). 67-92.
- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
- Bugliosi, Vincent. *The Prosecution of George W. Bush for Murder*. Cambridge: Vanguard, 2008.
- Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Carroll, David. *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995.
- Case, Sue-Ellen, and Janelle Reinelt, eds. *The Performance of Power: Theatrical Discourse and Politics*. Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 1991.
- Cervantes, Miguel de. *Don Quixote of La Mancha*. Translated by Walter Starkie. New York: Signet Classic, 1964.
- Chamber, Robert. *Parody: The Art that Plays with Art*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Catherine Chaput, "Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010), 1-25.
- Chomsky, Noam. *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*. Boston: South End Press, 1989.
- . *Letters from Lexington: Reflections on Propaganda*. Monroe ME: Common Courage Press, 1993.
- Clark, Katarina, and Michael Holquist. *Mikhail Bakhtin*. Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1984.
- Colbert, Stephen. *The Colbert Report*. Comedy Central. 2005-2014. www.cc.com/shows/the-colbert-report.
- Colletta, Lisa. "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 5 (2009). 856-874.
- Combe, Kirk. "Stephen Colbert: Great Satirist, or Greatest Satirist Ever?" *International Communication Gazette*. 77, no. 3 (2015): 297-311.
- Combs, James E., and Dan D. Nimmo. *The New Propaganda: The Dictatorship of Palaver in Contemporary Politics*. New York: Longman, 1993.
- Consason, Joe, and Gene Lyons. *The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill and Hillary Clinton*. New York: St. Martin's, 2001.
- Conway, Mike, Maria Elizabeth Grabe, and Kevin Grieves. "Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O'Reilly's 'No-Spin Zone': Revisiting World War Propaganda Techniques." *Journalism Studies* 8 no. 2 (2007). 197-223.
- Coulter, Ann. *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right*. New York: Crown, 2002.
- Corsi, Jerome. *The Obama Nation*. New York: Threshold, 2008.
- Craig, Geoffrey. *Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences*. Cambridge: Polity, 2016.
- Crespino, Joseph. *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007.

- Dagnes, Alison. *A Conservative Walks Into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor*. New York: Palgrave, 2012.
- Dale, Timothy. *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent Through American Popular Culture*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2010.
- Daly, Steven. "The Second Most Powerful Idiot in America." *The Telegraph*, 18 May 2008. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/3673509/Stephen-Colbert-the-second-most-powerful-idiot-in-America.html>.
- Day, Amber. *Satire and Dissent*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2011.
- . "Shifting the Conversation: Colbert's Super PAC and the Measurement of Satirical Efficacy." *International Journal of Communication*. 7 (2013), 414-429.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone, 1994.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U Cal P, 1984.
- Defoe, Daniel. "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters." In *Literature Suppressed on Religious Grounds*. Edited by Margaret Bald and Ken Wachsberger. New York: Facts on File, 2006.
- Descartes, René. "Meditation II." In *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy of Descartes*. Translated by John Veitch. New York: Tudor, 1901. <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/descartes-the-method-meditations-and-philosophy-of-descartes>.
- Dettmar, Kevin. "Learning Irony with The Simpsons." In *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*. Ed. John Alberti. Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2004. 85-107.
- Donath, Judith S. "Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community." In *Communities in Cyberspace*. Edited by Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock. London: Routledge, 1999. 29-59.
- Dryden, John. "A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire." *The Satires of Decimus Junius Juvenalis*. Reprint of the 1696 London edition, Project Gutenberg, 2014. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2615/2615-h/2615-h.htm>.
- . "Absalom and Achitophel." *The Poetical Works of Dryden*. Edited by George Gilfillan. 1855; Project Gutenberg, 2004. <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11488/pg11488.html>.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory*. London: Verso, 1975.
- Edwards, Gavin. "Colbert Country." *Rolling Stone*. November 3, 2005.
- Elliott, Robert C. *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1960.
- Feinberg, Leonard. *Introduction to Satire*. Ames: Iowa State Univ. Press, 1967.
- Fenster, Mark. *Conspiracy Theories*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minneapolis Press, 2008.
- Fish, Stanley. "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony." *Daedalus* 112 (1998): 175-91.
- Frankfurt, Harry. *On Bullshit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005.

- . *On Truth*. New York: Knopf, 2006.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere." *Social Text*. 25/26 (1990), 56-80.
- Freddoso, David. *The Case Against Barack Obama*. Washington DC: Regnery, 2008.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Interpretation of Dreams*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1965.
- . *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by James Strachey. London: Routledge, 1960.
- Frye, Northrup. "The Nature of Satire." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, October 1944, 75-89. Reprinted in *Satire: Theory and Practice*. Edited by Charles Allen. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1962. 15-30.
- Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957.
- Garrett, R. Sam. "Seriously Funny: Understanding Campaign Finance Policy Through the Colbert Super PAC." *Saint Louis University Law Journal* 56, no. 711 (2012). 711-723.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1988.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- Goldberg, Bernard. *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. Washington DC: Regnery, 2001.
- Goodin, Robert. *Innovating Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.
- Gournelos, Ted, and Viveca Greene, eds. *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*. Jackson, Mississippi: Mississippi Univ. Press, 2011.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Watching With "The Simpsons"*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Gray, Jonathan, Jeffrey Jones, and Ethan Thompson, eds. *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2009.
- Griffin, Dustin. "Dryden and Restoration Satire." *A Companion to Satire*. Edited by Ruben Quintero. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 176-195.
- . *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1994.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989.
- . *The Habermas Reader*. Edited by William Outhwaite. Cambridge: Polity, 1996.
- Harold, Christine. *OurSpace: Resisting the Corporate Control of Culture*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Harrington, Austin; Marshall, Barbara; Müller, Hans-Peter. *The Encyclopedia of Social Theory*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Henry, Matthew A. *"The Simpsons," Satire, and American Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Highet, Gilbert. *Anatomy of Satire*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style In American Politics, and Other Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- . *The Progressive Historians*. New York: Knopf, 1968.
- Holderness, Graham, ed. *The Politics of Theatre and Drama*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.
- Howell, Jaclyn. "Not Just Crazy: An Explanation for the Resonance of the Birther Narrative." *Communication Monographs*. (79.4) 2012. 428-447.

- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- . *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Ife, B.W. "Cervantes and the Credibility Crisis in Spanish Golden-Age Fiction," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 26 no. 1 (January 1982): 52-74.
- Jacobs, James, and Kimberly Potter. *Hate Crimes: Criminal Law and Identity Politics*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998.
- Jackson, Shannon. *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006.
- Johnson, Steven. *Where Good Ideas Come From*. New York: Riverhead, 2010.
- Jones, Jeffery. *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*. 2nd ed. Rowman: Lanham, 2010.
- Jones, Jeffrey P., Geoffrey Baym, and Amber Day. "Mr. Stewart and Mr. Colbert Go to Washington: Television Satirists Outside the Box." *Social Research* 79, no. 1 (Spring 2012). [PAGES]
- Keller, Florian. *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Kercher, Steven. *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Kernan, Alvin. *The Canker'd Muse*. New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1959.
- . *The Plot of Satire*. New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1965.
- . "Aggression and Satire." In *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*. Edited by Frank Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price, eds. New Haven CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1973.
- Kershaw, Baz. *Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- . *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Kohn, Bob. *Journalistic Fraud: How The New York Times Distorts the News and Why It Can No Longer Be Trusted*. Nashville, TN: WND Books, 2003.
- Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. New York: Penguin, 2005.
- LaMarre, Heather. "When Parody and Reality Collide: Examining the Effects of Colbert's Super PAC Satire on Issue Knowledge and Policy Engagement Across Media Formats." *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013). 394-413.
- LaMarre, Heather, Kristen Landreville, and Michael Beam. "The Irony of Satire: Political Ideology and the Motivation to See What You Want to See in *The Colbert Report*." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 2 (2009). 212-231.
- Lamis, Alexander. *Southern Politics in the 1990s*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1999.
- Lessig, Lawrence. *Free Culture*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

- . *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*. New York: Penguin, 2008.
- . *Republic, Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress – and a Plan to Stop It*. New York: Twelve, 2011.
- . “The Only Realistic Way to Fix Campaign Finance.” *The New York Times*. 21 July 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/21/opinion/the-only-realistic-way-to-fix-campaign-finance.html>. Last accessed 19 Jan 2016.
- Lewis, Paul. *Cracking Up*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Lichter, S. Robert, Stanley Rothman and Linda Lichter. *The Media Elite*. Bethesda, MD: Adler and Adler, 1986.
- Lightman, Alan. “The Symmetrical Universe.” In *The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew*. New York: Pantheon, 2013. 67-84.
- Loselle, Andrea. “Céline's ‘Bagatelles pour un Massacre’: An Example of Failure.” *South Central Review* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1989). 56-72.
- Lyman, Peter, Hal R. Varian, et al, “How Much Information? 2003.” October 2003. <http://groups.ischool.berkeley.edu/archive/how-much-info-2003/index.htm>.
- Mancing, Howard. *The Chivalric World of Don Quijote: Style, Structure, and Narrative Technique*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982.
- . “Cervantes as Narrator of Don Quijote.” *Cervantes: Bulletin of the Cervantes Society of America* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2003).
- Manjoo, Farhad. *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-fact Society*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2008.
- Mann, Thomas. “Election 2016: Dumbing Down American Politics, Lawrence Lessig, and the Presidency.” *Institute of Government Studies*. August 2015. <https://igs.berkeley.edu/news/election-2016-dumbing-down-american-politics-lawrence-lessig-and-the-presidency>.
- Marx, Nick, Matt Sienkiewicz, and Ron Becker, eds. *Saturday Night Live and American TV*. 2013.
- McClennen, Sophia. *Colbert’s America: Satire and Democracy*. New York: Palgrave, 2011.
- McConachie, Bruce. “Using the Concept of Cultural Hegemony to Write Theatre History.” In *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*, edited by Thomas Postlewait, and Bruce McConachie. Iowa City: U Iowa Press, 1989. 37-58.
- McHugh, Jack, and Joseph Lehman, “101 Recommendations to Revitalize Michigan with an Introduction to the Overton Window of Political Possibility,” 3rd ed. Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2011.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Signet, 1964.
- Merrin, William. *Baudrillard and the Media*. Malden, MA: Polity, 2005.
- Morris, Charles E. “Pink Herring & the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 228-44.
- Mueller, John. “Reacting to Terrorism.” In *Coping with Terrorism*. Edited by Rafael Reuveny and William R. Thompson. Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2010. 369-383.

- Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Eldar Shafir. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Holt, 2013.
- Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump*. Winchester, UK: Zero, 2017.
- Neuman, W. Russell, Yong Jin Park, and Elliot Panek. "Tracking the Flow of Information into the Home: An Empirical Assessment of the Digital Revolution in the United States, 1960-2005." *International Journal of Communication* [Online] 6 (April 27, 2012): 1022-1041. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/issue/view/8>.
- Nyhan, Brendan. "Strategic Outrage: The Politics of Presidential Scandal." PhD diss.. Duke Univ., 2009. ProQuest (304873807).
- Oliver, J. Eric, and Thomas Wood. "Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion." *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014). 952-966.
- Ott, Brian. *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.
- Pariser, Eli. *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You*. New York: Penguin, 2011.
- Parr, James. "Don Quixote": *An Anatomy of Subversive Discourse*. Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 1988.
- Paulson, Ronald. *The Fictions of Satire*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1967.
- Peariso, Craig. *Radical Theatrics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014.
- Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Phiddian, Robert. "Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?" *New Literary History* 28, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 673-696.
- Phillips, Whitney. *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. New York: Viking, 2002.
- Postlewait, Thomas, and Bruce McConachie, eds. *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance*. Iowa City: U Iowa Press, 1989.
- Postman, Niel. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin 1985.
- Pratkanis, Anthony R., and Elliot Aronson. *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*. New York: W.H. Freeman, 1992.
- Puchner, Martin. *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006.
- Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*. Translated by Harold Butler. New York: Twayne, 1974.
- Reinelt, Janelle. "Rethinking the Public Sphere for a Global Age." *Performance Research* 16, no. 2 (2011): 16-27.
- Rivers, Elias. *Quixotic Scriptures: Essays on the Textuality of Hispanic Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.
- Robbins, Jeremy. *The Challenges of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature*. London: Duckworth, 1998.

- Robinson, Peter M. *The Dance of the Comedians: The People, The President, and the Performance of Political Stand-up Comedy in America*. Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 2010.
- Rogak, Lisa. *And Nothing But the Truthiness: The Rise (and Further Rise) of Stephen Colbert*. New York: Thomas Dunne, 2011.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989.
- Samaha, Adam. "The Story of FCC v. Pacifica Foundation (And its Second Life)." *Chicago Public Law and Legal Theory*. No. 314. 2010.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Anti-Semite and Jew*. Translated by George J. Becker. 1948. Reprinted with preface by Michael Walzer. New York: Schocken, 1995.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Schechter, Joel. *Durov's Pig: Clowns, Politics and Theatre*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
- . *Satiric Impersonations: From Aristophanes to the Guerrilla Girls*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1994.
- Schlossman, David A. *Actors and Activists: Politics, Performance, and Exchange among Social Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Seidel, Michael. *Satiric Inheritance: Rabelais to Stern*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979.
- Sharp, Jill. *Culture Jam: Hijacking Commercial Culture*. New York: First Run, 2001.
- Smith, J. Walker, Ann Clurman, and Craig Wood. *Coming to Concurrence: Addressable Attitudes and the New Model for Marketing Productivity*. Evanston IL: Racom, 2005.
- Sokal, Alan. *Beyond the Hoax*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008.
- . "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." In *Social Text*.
- Stewart, Ian, and Jack Cohen. *Figments of Reality: The Evolution of the Curious Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1997.
- Suskind, Ron. "Without a Doubt." *New York Times Magazine*. October 17, 2004.
- Swift, Jonathan. "A Modest Proposal." In *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*. Edited by Louis Landa. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960.
- Taber, Charles, and Milton Lodge. "Motivated Skepticism in Political Beliefs." *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (2006). [PAGES]
- Test, George A. *Satire: Spirit and Art*. Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991.
- Turner, Victor. *Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977. Print.
- . "Carnival, Ritual, and Play in Rio De Janeiro." *Time out of Mind: Essays on the Festival*. Edited by Alessandro Falassi. Albuquerque: U. of New Mexico Press, 1987. 74-90.
- . "Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?" *By Means of Performance*. Edited by Richard Schechner. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990.

- Unger, Craig. *Fall of the House of Bush*. New York: Scribner, 2007.
- Urgo, Joseph R. "Comedic Impulses and Societal Propriety: The Yippie! Carnival." *Studies in Popular Culture* 10.1 (1987): 83-100.
- von Baeyer, Hans Christian. *Information: The New Language of Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004.
- Wampole, Christy. "The Great American Irony Binge." In *The Other Serious*. New York: Harper, 2015. 27-64.
- Wander, Philip. "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory." *Central States Speech Journal* 35, no. 4 (1984): 197-216.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone, 2002.
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- White, Theodore. *The Making of the President 1972*. New York: HarperCollins, 2010.
- Whitehead, Don. *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970.
- Wurman, Richard. *Information Anxiety 2*. Indianapolis: Que, 2001.
- Zito, Salena. "Taking Trump Seriously, Not Literally." *The Atlantic*. Sept 23, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/trump-makes-his-case-in-pittsburgh/501335/>