

ARTICLE

Richard Pryor's Sonic Acts: Epistemological Rupture at the Hollywood Bowl, 18 September 1977

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The jokes that stick in people's minds are the ones they don't quite get.
—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹

On the night of 18 September 1977, the stand-up comic Richard Pryor took the stage at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. The event was the “Star-Spangled Night for Rights,” a fundraising concert and variety show for the San Francisco-based Save Our Human Rights Foundation. The foundation, spearheaded by a group of gay professionals, was launched as a rebuke to the moral panic against sexual and gender minorities, including the widely publicized “Save Our Children” campaign led by Anita Bryant.² According to Pryor biographer Scott Saul,³ the event was named “Star-Spangled Night for Rights” in order to gloss over its real intentions.

Until Pryor stepped onstage, everything had been going according to plan. Seventeen thousand people listened to lauded English actor Christopher Lee deliver a serious monologue titled “The Ascent of Man,” accompanied by an orchestra. Everyone sang the national anthem, with great passion. The other comics and actors gave performances that were well received, if unmemorable. No one mentioned homosexuality or the subject of gay people, with the exception of Pryor's friend, Lily Tomlin, who “came the closest to striking a direct chord when she reminisced about the 1950s as a time ‘when sex was dirty . . . and of course, no one was gay, only shy.’”⁴ Pryor loathed any hint of pretense or artifice.⁵ Pryor also noticed that the few other Black performers—specifically the Lockers, a Black gay dance and roller-skating troupe—were not as well received by the audience and mistreated by the stagehands.⁶ He took the stage.

After pacing, pensively, for a few moments, Pryor speaks. Slurring, obviously intoxicated: “I came here for human rights. Aaand—thank you—what I found out it really is about [*pause*] is about not getting caught with a dick in your mouth!” A shock of laughter. A roar of confusion, curiosity, and disbelief reverberates throughout the space. A notorious spectacle even by Pryor standards,⁷ the only recording of Pryor's performance that night is a tape cassette housed in the Gay and

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Lesbian Archive at the New York Public Library. While widely reported upon the event's immediate aftermath in the fall of 1977, the organizers worked hard to move on from the fallout. As a result, descriptions of the performance are largely confined to newspaper articles and biographies of Pryor, with little attention to the material from a theatre and performance studies perspective.

Pryor, as a celebrity and artist, is under constant reconfiguration and assessment in the US comic imaginary and in the world of popular comedy. Popular sources tend to focus on his innovations and status among the stand-up greats.⁸ Biographies and more scholarly sources are also interested in his virtuosity, but they often place emphasis on Pryor's ingenuity. For instance, John Limon discusses Pryor in terms of the sheer complexity of his performances and, specifically, relationship to his audience, describing his opening words in *Live in Concert* this way: "As a first offer in a negotiation, this is as complicated as any academic could wish."⁹ On the other hand, Amy Ongiri¹⁰ and Bambi Haggins,¹¹ respectively, investigate the political valences of Pryor's comedy and influence. Taking Pryor's ingenuity and political potency as a given, I am interested in the essential performativity making his genius possible, namely in Pryor's deployment of sound and voice. Pryor at the Hollywood Bowl in 1977 reveals the fusion of method with chance, sound with voice, and rage with humor that structured Pryor's work, and that structure is, fundamentally, sonic.

In other words, I take the sonic primacy of the performance's current status as a recording as a point of opportunity and discovery. By listening closely, I theorize the sound of Pryor's cacophony, identifying the performative tactics that comprise it. Fred Moten writes, "By way of this [Chomskyan] engagement, the question 'What is a language?' is not eclipsed but illumined by the question of what happens when we hear a sequence of sounds."¹² Stand-up comedy, as an art form, is frequently essentialized as fundamentally a verbal condition, with language the Ur-vehicle expression for the comic.¹³ But the fact that stand-up comedy, for the vast majority of its history, was disseminated largely via album recordings¹⁴ marks it as a vitally sonic formation, and indeed is something made possible by the performer's voice. As Alexander Weheliye notes, the recording apparatus as a radicalized phenomenon functions to delink the oppositional hierarchy–dichotomy of original–copy. All sound-recording technologies—vinyl records, compact discs, tapes, mp3 files, and so on—are not merely efforts "to replicate a lost immaculate source/original but [are] events in their own right."¹⁵ With this in mind, I identify the ways in which Pryor's sonic techniques realize the epistemological rupture that happened that night—a rupture between and through Blackness and queerness, comedy and violence. These tactics mark the Hollywood Bowl performance as not merely the spectacular failure and outburst of a troubled Black stand-up comic and famous actor—as the journalistic coverage in its aftermath framed it—but a violent and complicated fusion of Pryor's virtuosic comic method and style with the unpredictability of rage and hate.

The tape reveals the audibility of this epistemological rupture at work, the noisy fissure between Pryor and the seventeen thousand members of the crowd, between Pryor and the listening audience. Pryor's words, as hate speech, register as noise—oversignification—the reproduction of the homophobic and misogynistic status quo from which so many audience members had gone to the Hollywood Bowl in order to, even if for just one night, find refuge. Drawing from the work of

Black sound studies and theories of masculinity and voice, I notice and identify, through listening, the audibility of Pryor's performance, and how his vocality here points toward an understanding of his stand-up as sonic as much as it is verbal. In other words, what epistemological rupture accomplishes, here, in this performance, is the realization of a methodological shift in stand-up comedy. As Cathy Park Hong describes,

Pryor blowtorched the beige from my eyes. I didn't know he was not just a comedian but also an artist and a revolutionary. He got rid of the punchline to prove that stand-up could be anything, which is what geniuses do: they blow up mothballed conventions in their chosen genre and show you how a song, or a poem, or a sculpture, can take any form.¹⁶

The radical swerve between sound and noise, hate and creativity, emerges in Pryor's shifting the domain of comic performance from the purely verbal into an explicitly sonic register, the mixing of the two in the act of hate speech. Per Hong's words, Pryor "blow[s] up" stand-up as a medium, revealing it as an art form that is not just the work of a "comedian" but also an "artist"—with both labels ethically fraught.

What Pryor Does Next

Just a few minutes after his opening remarks upon stepping onstage, Pryor decides to talk a little about himself:

I sucked one dick. I didn't get a jones though. *A quiet gasp of laughter into the microphone, heard over audience's laughter.* In 1952, sucked Wilbur Harp's dick/It was beautiful but I couldn't deal with it. I had to leave it alone. *Warm laugh.* I sucked it once and went home and didn't tell nobody. *Pause.* And it was the first time in my life I ever realized that faggots are prejudiced.

Pryor talks quickly, his pitch varying up and down over the course of the description; the effect is one of improvisation, like he is excitedly telling the audience something that has been bothering him for a long time and now is his chance to finally come clean. He slurs a little on the sibilant sounds, like "sucked." On the tape recording, I notice the "gg" sound in the word "faggots" carries a little static, as though the recording apparatus, personified, has taken a ragged breath and blown into the consonant, making the glottal "gg" harsh, wielding the sound toward maximum hurt. To my ear, the word's lack of clarity makes its semantic meaning all the more shocking when I finally register it. There's a voice in my head, a failed duet with Pryor: "Did he really say what I think he said?" The audience's uproar of angry shouting and shocked exclamations seems to indicate they were on a similar journey.

The Black male voice is a fetishized object in US sonic cultures; I want to attend to how Pryor's voice, as a recording artist, indexes this tendency. Maurice O. Wallace notes the centrality of sonic vocality for Black preachers in performance, identifying Martin Luther King Jr.'s vibrato as essential to what is often declared his innate "transcendent preaching" abilities, but that instead are made possible

by “the acoustic calculus of voice, architecture, organology, and audience.”¹⁷ Voices mark subjectivity, and they are also social forces; King’s powerful vibrato sounded out against and through his listeners, as well as through the space and the instrument (pipe organ, as Wallace notes) present. I hear Pryor’s voice as a kind of depraved version of Wallace’s theorization of King’s vocality, but instead of a “calculus” that makes the performance feel transcendent to listeners, Pryor’s intoxicated rage and hate speech perforate the intended purpose for the event: the “Star-Spangled Night for Rights” as a celebration has been briefly suspended for the duration of the performance, creating an epistemological rupture between Blackness and queerness as opposing forces, in a noisy reproduction of racist and homophobic norms. Pryor’s language is ambivalent—reflexive. He is naming the event’s real purpose—gay rights—by including himself in the gay community by virtue of his past actions. But in this specific context, of both Pryor’s specific complaints in his tirade and the space of the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles in the fall of 1977, the inclusion is something other than comradely.

Indeed, a few moments later Pryor disavows any affiliation with homosexuality or acts deemed homosexual based on how, in the environment he does avow, sucking dick is a common practice and experience untethered to identity. He explains: “Cause niggas don’t care about who sucks what. *Slight pause.* You know you live in the ghetto if you suck a dick and its coooool ’cause a lot of people be sayin’, ‘hey, suck my dick.’”¹⁸ Pryor’s relationship to and depiction of his own sexuality was complicated and changeable over the course of his life, with mainstream knowledge of his sexual and/or romantic relationships with men only a recent phenomenon.¹⁹ His speculations are hostile as he describes the kinds of interests and activities in which this community partakes. I hear a dark sense of delight in his tenor voice as he rushes, freely, through the description and impact of his activities with Wilbur, colliding with the audience’s indignant sounds of confused anger. This collision heightens the deep sense of corporeality and the imbricative relationship between the sense of violence and the sense of vulnerability that is the heart of Pryor’s performance. Pryor’s enunciation of “faggots” is uttered like a punch in the face, even with the “gg” sound, as mentioned, somewhat obscured. I hear the profane and derogatory term purposely and dangerously balanced on Pryor’s tongue like a razor meant to hurt—both himself and the audience.

Pryor’s sonic, vituperative language highlights the mortality and vulnerability of the people he is discussing. Pryor’s voice *samples*—that is to say, records the attenuated homosexuality of the space—and edits, or remixes this discourse in(to) a supplementary act of creation. This creation, however, is a reproduction. Via idiosyncratic sonic techniques, Pryor deploys transgressive language, vocal speed, and hate speech and hegemonic discourse—namely, heteropatriarchy and the erasure of queers of color. In the desire for justice, Pryor attempts to censure the whiteness of the space by criticizing the night’s decadence.

Indeed, in the line about Wilbur he describes their sexual relationship as “beautiful,” though the beauty was too much, and so he “had to leave it alone.” This reflexive relationship to desire/disgust exemplifies E. Patrick Johnson’s observation about Black comic culture in the latter part of the twentieth century. Johnson notes that there is a tendency for Black, male, and heterosexual performers—especially comedians—to “appropriate signifiers of queerness to stereotype, demean, and

repudiate black gay men as well as attempt to delimit the parameters of authentic black masculinity.” Simultaneously, in this effort to discipline and punish, these performers “ironically and unwittingly queer heteronormative black masculinity.”²⁰ Like Pryor mixing noise with language and hate speech with comedy, the quick alignment of Blackness with heterosexuality in the performance of masculinities necessarily brings epistemological rupture, wherein all identity categories come into question as it emerges how much each category relies upon the others in order to exist.

But Pryor isn’t performing heterosexuality per se. He does a careful dance of disclosure and indictment, naming his actions as homosexual and using that as a basis for legitimating his censure of the audience. But then he dampens the impact of the disclosure, while owning up to actions, by announcing that the environment from which he comes forecloses the ability really to name the actions as relevant to identity.

Then, Pryor introduces the specter of queer Black women into the performance, ensuring his sonic violence spares no one. He is derisive, almost huffing with contempt: “And I KNOW a lot of Black bitches who love pussy who ain’t here tonight. . . .” The audience responds with “oooooh” sounds of sudden realization; I also hear a few boos. Pryor waits, then finishes the thought, blaring, a bright smile entering his voice as he goes up in pitch on the last word: “and tear pussy UP!” He chuckles softly into the microphone, then, with a cadence of stream-of-consciousness: “Do you hear me/Yes sir. Kill the pussy/make you embarrassed that you leave the pussy alone sayin’/go on mama, you can handle it, shit.’ Get dooooooown, bay-BAH!” Pryor’s direct acknowledgment of the existence of lesbians—despite not saying the word “lesbians” in favor of describing activities that, for him, define this group (yet another essentialism)—is, clearly, a complicated moment. In a sense, Pryor’s direct address to the audience here is a perversion of the very culture he declaims. Black lesbian culture is a comic culture; what Pryor does here is the opposite of what, for example, Pryor’s predecessor Jackie “Moms” Mabley or LaWanda Page cultivated in their sonic outputs. As Katelyn Hale Wood notes, Mabley, a queer Black comic who played with the presentation of her sexuality depending on her audience, “pioneered an overtly political style of stand-up comedy that influenced her male mentees such as Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory.”²¹ The jokes these women told were often overtly sexual; J. Finley writes, “LaWanda Page was the only black woman comic during the 1970s who achieved popular success using primarily explicit humor.”²² Her influence cannot be understated; for Page, among other “working-class black women comedians performing in the 1970s and 1990s, exploiting hardcore sexuality through joking was a means to celebrate control over their immediate environment, erotic control—in terms of arousing their audiences by recalling sex acts and scenarios to evoke pleasure.”²³ This method is even constitutively sonic, framed as “corporeal orature.”²⁴ Despite Pryor’s debt to his forerunners and his responsibility to pay attention to his contemporaries, Pryor talks about lesbian sexuality as a means to “control” the audience by deploying lesbian sexuality as an invective, as malediction, rather than to cultivate a community of pleasure.

Members of the audience included lesbian critics, who wrote about the experience. Jeanne Córdova, in the Los Angeles-based newspaper *The Lesbian Tide*, noted Pryor’s use of subterfuge in his indictment:

Initially [Pryor] appeared to be caustically commenting on the racism of the gay movement. . . . If you listened very closely through the obscenities and had any racial consciousness, it could be guessed that he was trivializing sexuality issues in the same way rich and middle class gays ignore the reality of poverty.²⁵

She quotes the line that made the women present especially angry, leading them to stand up and boo: “You bitches don’t need no Equal Rights Amendment, take your money down to welfare.”

Hearing the audience respond to his rage, Pryor only unravels further. With a quickness, he asks: “You ever put cocaaaaaaaaine on the clit?” The statement is dynamically phrased in such a way as to be almost musical. The long, low stretch of the “aaaaaaa” sets up a sense of anticipation for the punch line, “clit,” toothy and direct on the “t” sound of the word. I hear the audience laugh and exclaim, much louder than before. I hear loud whispers, roars of booming laughter, and also low but loud whistles of disapproval. As the audience’s wave of sound dies down, Pryor’s voice returns, interrogative and bright: “. . . and suck on iiiiiiit?” The audience freaks out.

The “cocaine on the clit” moment is meticulous in terms of timing and cadence. The vocal speed maximizes the element of surprise—the sense of the new—that is central to the epistemological rupture between and through Blackness and queerness that night, as well as to stand-up as a form. Describing the avant-garde as an impulse—its own kind of epistemological rupture—literary critic Michael North writes that, under capitalism:

[T]he novel can persist only insofar as it meets with resistance and *doesn’t diffuse*. This is one reason why the avant-garde is often considered a necessary adjunct to the settled order it supposedly opposes, *why sociologies of innovation in the arts strongly resemble sociologies of commercial innovation*.²⁶

Pryor’s refusal to “diffuse,” or dissolve, or self-abnegate in the face of resistance from the audience is coupled with and made possible by the vituperation of his language. The fact of it as a commercial performance—not despite, but because of the event’s goal of innocuous entertainment—is, I believe, part of what makes Pryor’s performance ruptural in the first place. The sense of surprise and urgency of the ruptural impulse becomes all the more palpable by its juxtaposition with the self-serious banality that immediately precedes and follows it. The alliteration of the “c” sounds in “cocaaaaaaaaine” and “clit,” combined with the assonance and rhyme of “clit” with “iiiiiiiit” make, for example, Christopher Lee’s “Ascent of Man” monologue at the top of the show seem banal rather than stirring or profound.

This refusal to diffuse connects to Nina Sun Eidsheim’s observation about “the acousmatic question” (“Who is this?”).²⁷ To be clear, I am not asking this question. As Eidsheim points out, the acousmatic question is a futile one (which is, of course, what makes it so fascinating). This is because voice is a cultural phenomenon, sourced by the listener.²⁸ In this article, I hope you are reading me as a listener, but one who listens to other listeners, including Pryor, the speaker. The words aren’t cruel in and of themselves; they are targeted to the queer audience at the Hollywood Bowl, and they are carved out of sounds and the language of transgression and the desire for violence.

I now turn to a discussion of the role of profanity as transgressive language in Pryor's performance. This element is crucial to the epistemological rupture, as its deployment here reveals the ultimate futility of language to communicate Pryor's ideas and experiences, crucial to the disconnect/unbearable signification of Pryor's performance of language.

Transgressive Language: Noise, Hate Speech, and Malediction

According to Douglas Kahn, noise is created by the discursive oscillation between what is outside of signification and what is known. He writes, "Noise can be understood in one sense to be that constant grating sound generated by the movement between the abstract and the empirical."²⁹ Noise is an epistemological rupture. Because all sounds are earthbound—which is to say, social, in some function—they signify and inscribe the world and the human's place in it. The introduction of noise renders that world abstract. As a result, the experience of noise is an abject one: the borders between what we know and what we do not understand coalesce into a state of confusion. Stand-up comedy, especially in the postwar tumult of the 1960s and 1970s, had a controversial relationship with a very particular kind of noise: profanity, or cursing.

Scholars of language Kate E. Brown and Howard I. Kushner argue that curse words, especially in Richard Pryor's stand-up comedy, fall under the linguistic category of malediction, a necessarily relational mode of linguistic transgression.³⁰ Malediction is an eruptive voicing: the performance of the self becomes ruptured from the discourse of civilization. Brown and Kushner argue that curse words comprise a linguistic alienation from language as a cohesive system. In this way, malediction in performance can invoke a kind of Derridean absent-present in the form of the speech act that gestures toward a world or being outside of the confinements of speech at the same time as it must include, in order to register at all, the elements it seeks to contest. *Coprolalia*—uncontrolled transgressive speech—is more about introducing alienation to speech, whereas *malediction* is more about using or exposing alienation in order to make a point about the constructed, and thereby empty, ontology of language as a method for signification and sociality. In this way, malediction embodies and exceeds the speech act as well as voids it. Malediction harnesses the means of representation that are at one's disposal in order to critique and define the limits of representation.

How are curse words liminal? How does Pryor's voicing render his performance tactics into a kind of grotesque poetics? As Brown and Kushner write:

The maledictory force of words like *cunt* or *fuck* is a cultural endowment over time; they are words that have absorbed the history of their past speakings. As such, their force exceeds their immediate context: curse words verge toward autonomy, congealing in themselves a quasi-magical and singular capacity to offend. Like maledictory and coprolalic eruptions, then, curse words are not owned but are only *voiced* by the speaker. In vocalizing them, we lay claim to the word's own autonomy, thus disavowing the circumstances that have rendered us helpless or ridiculous.³¹

For instance, Pryor wields the discursivity of "Black bitches who love pussy"—the long history of debasement, violence, and erasure of these women—as a signification or structure of knowledge historicized to the extent as to exist only as

citation. In this context, the words themselves become purely abject noise. This noise is exposed in the audience's response, especially the women audience members highlighted by Jeanne Córdova in *The Lesbian Tide*.

I contend that the concept of "poetics" discussed here relates to, and in fact metonymizes, the performance's ruptural politics. Blackness and queerness in and through the noise blast a cacophony that blares out, ultimately, in the simultaneous imbrication (à la Johnson's analysis) and incommensurability of the two categories. Profanity is the aspect that transforms Pryor's performance not only from *comedy*—where the performer's intention is, supposedly, to first and foremost elicit a laugh—but to the revelation of *stand-up comedy* as capable of linguistic, and even ontological, deconstruction. This is because curse words inaugurate discourse; they grant the content in which they make audible a particular context—one simultaneously abject yet unbearably significant.³²

Pryor uses curse words as exclamations, modifiers, and descriptive nouns. He uses them so frequently that they might seem like merely speech habits; "motherfucker" is just a synonym for "guy," for example.³³ And, at the Hollywood Bowl, that aspect does linger: Pryor's speech patterns do in a sense come across as casual and habitual. For example, at one point, he complains: "And I say, well, here I am on the motherfucking stage 'cause when the last niggas was out here kicking ass and jumpin' 'cross shit you motherfuckers say, 'well, that's alright.'"

The impersonation in the last phrase is of a bored, rich, white guy. The audience makes dissenting, clamorous noise. A little laughter. Pryor continues: "And then the white people came out and do some ballet and shit and they played that kind of music that y'all conditioned to/y'all say: 'Heeey. Them's some bad motherfuckers.'" Here, Pryor does the same voice as before, but with a mock-impressed, even dimmer inflection. Because of the metatheatricality of his subject matter—specifically, here, where Pryor calls attention to the unequal treatment of white and Black performers—it becomes clear that Pryor thinks deeply about the words he uses. The metatheatricality here also speaks to the way malediction functions as a point of revelation of linguistic and subjective ontology. When Pryor impersonates a white person's reaction to the performers onstage, he at once embodies a stereotypical white guy *and* maintains his status as the arbiter of discourse, the one in control of this performance. This twofold task is accomplished by his characteristic profanity—specifically, here, "motherfuckers"—in the impersonating voice of the subject he critiques.

Transgressive abjection combined with the significance of the summoned object of scrutiny—the proverbial white guy in the audience—is crucial to the ruptural politics of this performance, especially as a sonic rupture from normative linguistic signification. Pryor, after a wheezing, angry laugh, speaks in to the microphone, "all the white people go, 'excuse me, I don't give a damn.'" His impersonating voice is high and staccato. "The show is over." Another mirthless chuckle from Pryor. But then, in almost a heel turn from the charming and harmless mocking of white discourse, he turns vituperative: "I hope the police catch you motherfuckers suckin' dicks and shoot yo ass accident'ly." The audience objects, a whorl of angry combative noise. Here, hate speech emerges once more as Pryor's signature anarchic artistry. Pryor's hate speech both speaks against dominant ideology and recreates it. Richard Schechner notes that this "reduce, reuse, and recycle" tendency of

transgressive performance can lead to conservatism, despite the historical avant-garde and some midcentury avant-garde practitioners explicitly advocating for active disruption of the status quo as “a revolutionary cathartic as prelude to a new world order.”³⁴ The same can be said for stand-up comedy; for, as a mass media art form, stand-up comics are always already in a relationship to prior and contemporaneous performance by necessity. Who wants to tell jokes someone has already told?

This conservatism is a byproduct of midcentury stand-up comedy’s status as a necessarily postmodern art form. Stand-up comedy is postmodern because, as Philip Auslander notes, it “currently occupies an ambiguous position on a smooth cultural continuum with two other performance modes also chiefly supported by the same audience: performance art and rock music.”³⁵ The postmodern condition is fundamentally a condition of repetition, a deconstructive apparatus and ideology that undoes the arbitrary distinctions between art forms, genres, and even historical lineages, revealing the mass imbrication of all discursive categories. As a result, stand-up comedy in general can’t *not* be, at least in part, conservative—which is to say, simultaneously static as well as recapitulating—at its very foundation.

As a result of this inevitable tethering to a dominant system of power and communication, the role of impersonation in stand-up becomes an interesting point of resistance and/or recapitulation of the status quo. Generally, when stand-up comics do impersonations, the goal is not to portray an entirely realistic version of whom-ever it is they impersonate. In other words, the goal is not exactly verisimilitude, or mimesis. This is part of the reason, perhaps, that comic impersonations are sometimes called “impressions”; they perform an elemental or reductive version of a given subject or object. Pryor’s impersonations—of white people, specifically, with this rigid and awkward phrasing—are always performed with the particular power dynamic that is Pryor’s critical perspective in his given performance space. Pryor uses his own language of profanity but vocalizes it in a pastiche of white banal speech habits. He dissects and analyzes these performative acts of whiteness in order to interrogate and draw out the discursive and tangible violences that make up the world; in addition, he wields them to his own ends. Pryor breaks down the behaviors and social mores of white people into a series of affected behaviors. By deliberately taking on a tacit, nominally unquestioned system of signification, one with enormous influence on American society and politics—white men’s anger, white men’s curse words—Pryor cites but does not embody that which he critiques. He impersonates, without ever losing the Pryor persona.

More about Wilbur

I turn back to Wilbur here, because, as a kind of case study for Pryor’s performance of malediction, this specter provides a dense nexus of desire, humor, and hate. Pryor reminisces:

’s beautiful, ’cause Wilbur man Wilbur had the best booty in the world. Now I’m saying “booty” to be nice. I’m talking about *aass*-hole. Wilbur had some good AAAAASS-*hole*. And Wilbur would give it up so good and put his thighs against your waist. That’d make you come quick.

There is a slight punch on the “c” sound of “come” and the “qu” sound of “quick”—for emphasis. Form mirrors content. He continues, the room scared mostly silent, with some caustic rumbling and high diminutive gasps framing the passion erupting from his mid-tenor voice:

I was the only mothafucka in the neighborhood that took Wilbur roses. *He pauses for the audience: the audience laughs.* Everybody else was buuullshit Wilbur’s a . . . “here dear.” *He says the last part in a white, high-status suburban husband voice.* Wilbur in St. Louis now. Has a big bidness, own a dress shop and shit and he said he didn’t mind me mentionin’ his name this evening as long as I mention the motherfuckers that fucked him. Matt, James Clark, Henry Evans, Bob Simmons, Pootie Butt Jimmy. . . *He pauses.* Cocaine Bill. Niggas have great names/shit see that’s what’s so weird about you have a human rights shit and the shit be goin’ like you be worried.

Pryor’s speech zigs and zags, the blast of sound a whirlwind of names and places and worries. Through cacophonous rupture, he exposes the violent sense of urgency that always already makes up Black and queer lives in Los Angeles in 1977. Saul quotes *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist John Wasserman:

In more than 14 years of covering the great, near-great and terrible of show-business, I have never seen anything like it. [. . .] To call what happened bizarre would not, for me, do it justice. It was like watching a person come unglued in front of you and then, as in a cartoon, disappear piece by piece.³⁶

This “cartoon” description is apt. In popular cartoons, the performing object is voiced into being, the tincture and timbre of the voice articulating and signifying a character in performance. Also, like the Looney Tunes Road Runner speeding through conjured space, so fast he both makes and becomes a trail of dust, Pryor’s performance that night showed someone disappearing. That disappearance is audible.

At the end of his performance—and before the show’s director Ron Fields rushed onstage to apologize, and a blustering Aaron Russo, the event organizer and manager for headliner Bette Midler, also apologized in an apparent state of shock and embarrassment—Pryor invites the audience to “kiss my happy, rich, Black ass.” As he speaks, Pryor contorts his body so as to physically present said “ass” to the audience. He leans into the sibilant “ss” sound of the word “assss.” The enunciation marks a synecdoche of the fusion of form and content at the heart of the performance’s epistemological ruptural politics: the sound of the word on his tongue presents the inextricability of sound with meaning, expresses the connection between word and body. The fusion is made audible by Pryor’s transgressive sonic techniques, of expository language and intonation, critical invective, and malediction in performance.

This fusion of performance techniques corresponds to the fusion of different responses to Pryor that night. In the aftermath of the event, *Jet* magazine reported that Bette Midler, the closing act, “tried to recapture the angered audience with this opening invitation: ‘Is there anyone here tonight who wants to kiss this rich white a--?’” The audience responded with rapturous applause. She then added, “‘But, whatever he did I still love him.’”³⁷ Midler, who arrived late, missed Pryor’s set,

but had gotten word of its general impression upon the audience and showrunners before stepping onstage.

From the evening's beginning to its end, the "Star-Spangled Night for Rights" was a series of performances as responses to ambivalence. However, the coverage of Pryor's performance that evening was largely one-note. In this article, rather than rehearsing the dominant journalistic perspective toward Pryor's set as merely—or only—the slurred rants of a coked-up, drunk maniac, I hope that my approach sheds light on his relationship to a theatre of transgression and radical Black artistry. By the same turn, this approach reveals the crucial sonicity of Pryor's artistry, and how this sonicity manifests as the ruptural epistemological politics of Blackness and queerness—as discourses and modes of subjectivity—exploding through and against one another that September night in 1977 at the Hollywood Bowl. Ultimately, this rupture reveals the mutual reliance of both categories, and illuminates how transgressive sonic performance as an aesthetic condition gives rise to this realization. Sound prefigures language here, and maybe the potency of this entanglement can serve as a synecdoche for stand-up itself, as a genre.

Notes

1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

2 According to the Stonewall National Museum's exhibit "Days without Sunshine: Anita Bryant's Anti-Gay Crusade" (June 2007), "In 1977, the Dade County Ordinance that [passed] prohibit[ing] discrimination in housing, employment, loans and public accommodation based on race or religion was amended to include 'affectional or sexual preference.' That extension of civil rights engendered a backlash among social conservatives." Anita Bryant, a public figure as a pageant queen and performer, became the face for this backlash, as her "Save the Children" campaign worked to repeal these advancements in legislation, and the culture shifts it enacted; <https://web.archive.org/web/20100724191646/http://www.stonewall-library.org/anita/panel4.html>, accessed 7 March 2024.

3 All descriptions of the performance and quotations from Pryor and others surrounding it come from a combination of my sonic, perceived transcriptions from the NYPL tape ("Performance at the Star-Spangled Night for Human Rights, Hollywood Bowl," Tape No. A00503, International Gay Information Center collection, New York Public Library) and Scott Saul's description of the event in *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: Harper, 2014), 439–46. In addition, the documentary "Omit the Logic" includes some of the audio and grainy footage from the performance, sourced from the NYPL as well.

4 *Ibid.*, 441.

5 Pryor biographers David and Joe Henry claim that Lily Tomlin, a close friend of Pryor's, invited him to do the event: *Furious Cool: Richard Pryor and the World That Made Him* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2013), 207. For more context on the performance itself and the backlash, see John Meroney and Sean Coons, "The 'Flickering, Fragile Flame' of Richard Pryor," *The Atlantic*, 21 November 2013, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/the-flickering-fragile-flame-of-richard-ryor/281515/, accessed 4 March 2024.

6 Pryor noticed that the two dancers from the Los Angeles Ballet Company who performed a pas de deux from *Le Corsaire* were better received. "As he later told Jim Cleaver of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 'When a white dance act went on stage, every damn body and his brother went to fix the lights. They didn't do shit for the Lockers. Then a fire marshal started to reprimand a black youngster, and all the white folks simply turned their backs and ignored what was going on and I got mad as hell.'" See Jim Haskins, *Richard Pryor: A Man and His Madness* (New York: Beaufort Books, 1984), 148.

7 Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, 442.

8 See John Wenzel, "The 20 Greatest Stand-Up Specials of All Time," *Vulture*, 1 October 2014; www.vulture.com/2014/10/the-20-greatest-standup-specials-of-all-time.html; "Comedy Central's 100 Greatest

Stand-Ups of All Time,” *Ranker*, 24 June 2021, www.ranker.com/list/comedy-central_s-100-greatest-standups-of-all-time-v1/celebrity-insider; Matthew Love, “Rolling Stone’s 50 Best Stand-Up Comics of All Time,” *Rolling Stone*, 14 February 2017, www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/50-best-stand-up-comics-of-all-time-126359/, accessed 7 March 2024.

9 John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory; or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 84.

10 See Amy Abugo Ongiri’s *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

11 See Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

12 Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 126.

13 See Ian Brodie, “Stand-Up Comedy,” in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, 2 vols., ed. Salvatore Attardo (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2014), 2:733–7. Brodie highlights the importance of recording technologies as vocal amplifiers that are crucial to the intimacy stand-up affords: “With a microphone, the stand-up comedian’s voice is equal to that of the crowd. Speaking in a natural register allows for greater use of tone and inflection; furthermore, tangents, false stats, muttering, and other verbal transgressions can occur and yet control can still be maintained. Amplification not only allows for traditional verbal art performances on a larger scale, it allows for the unpatterned, unstylized talk that often precedes it” (735).

14 For more on the centrality of LPs to comedy, see Jacob Smith’s *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

15 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 32–3.

16 Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 38.

17 Maurice O. Wallace, *King’s Vibrato: Modernism, Blackness, and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 1.

18 Pryor was orally raped when he was approximately six years old. See Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor*, 48.

19 Gwilym Mumford, “Richard Pryor and Marlon Brando Were Lovers,” *The Guardian*, 8 February 2018, www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/08/richard-ryor-and-marlon-brando-were-lovers-ryors-widow-confirms, accessed 7 March 2024.

20 E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

21 Katelyn Hale Wood, *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth & Twenty-First Century United States* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021), 13.

22 Jessyka Finley, “Raunch and Redress: Interrogating Pleasure in Black Women’s Stand-up Comedy,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 49.4 (2016): 780–98, at 795.

23 *Ibid.*, 782.

24 *Ibid.*, 786.

25 Jeanne C[ó]rdova, “Hollywood Bowl, A Sexist Bomb,” *Lesbian Tide*, November–December 1977, 4–5, at 5. www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Assorted%20Pubs/Lesbian%20Tide/lesbian%20tide-7711.compressed.pdf, accessed 7 March 2024.

26 Michael North, “Novelty: A History of the New,” *PopMatters*, 24 October 2013, www.popmatters.com/175858-novelty-a-history-of-the-new-2495717103.html?rebellitem=1%23rebellitem1, accessed 7 March 2024; emphasis mine.

27 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 1.

28 Eidsheim writes: “Voice is not innate; it is cultural. • Voice is not unique; it is collective. • Voice’s source is not the singer; it’s the listener.” *Ibid.*, 40.

29 Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1999), 25.

30 For Brown and Kushner, this is in opposition to coprolalia, which is semantically disruptive transgression, commonly linked to communication disorders like Tourette’s syndrome. Kate E. Brown and Howard I. Kushner, “Eruptive Voices: Coprolalia, Malediction, and the Poetics of Cursing,” *New Literary History* 32.3 (2001): 537–62.

31 *Ibid.*, 550.

32 Indeed, according to John Limon, “what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection.” Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, 4.

33 Pryor uses the words “nigger” and “motherfucker” as synonyms for “Black guy” and/or “guy,” respectively, throughout his career, in jokes and even album titles: *That Nigger’s Crazy* (1974) and *Bicentennial Nigger* (1976). His relative freedom to do so comes out of the efforts of a number of trailblazing subversive comics of the 1950s and 1960s, but especially Dick Gregory, Belle Barth, and Lenny Bruce. Stephen E. Kercher’s *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006) considers the history of profanity in midcentury American stand-up culture.

34 Richard Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde,” *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): 895–913, at 895, 896.

35 Philip Auslander, “Comedy about the Failure of Comedy: Stand-Up Comedy and Postmodernism,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), 196–207, at 197.

36 Saul, 440.

37 Ronald E. Kisner, “Pryor Adds Fireworks to Star-Spangled ‘Gay Night,’” *Jet* 53.3 (1977): 54–6, at 56.

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