

Richard Pryor in Black and Blue

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"What I'm saying might be profane," I explained. "But it's also profound."

- *Pryor Convictions* by Richard Pryor

"Inter faeces et urinam nascimar"

- Misattributed to St. Augustine of Hippo

I don't remember the exact date when I first encountered Richard Pryor's comedy, but I do know it was after my sister, Gule, had returned from the United States where she'd been pursuing a Film Studies degree at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It must have been sometime in 2007, when she either pulled up clips on YouTube or pirated *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982). I not only remember Pryor's red suit, but I also remember his bit near the end of the concert, when he thanks the audience and his wider fan base for supporting him after his near-fatal suicide attempt – departing from traditional suicide attempts he poured rum on himself after freebasing cocaine and set himself on fire:

"I want to say y'all gave me a lot of love when I was not feeling well...and y'all really, I appreciate it. Also, y'all did some (audience applauds)...yeah applaud yourself. Also, y'all did some nasty-a** jokes on my a** too. Oh yeah, y'all didn't think I saw some of these m**f**ers (Pryor begins to light a match)...since you love me so much. I remember this one, you strike the match like this and go (Pryor holds a lit matchstick and waves it across right to left): What's that? (That's) Richard Pryor running down the street!"

It was a striking introduction and it's certainly not often that someone lives to tell you a yarn about their self-inflicted incineration. By the end of the concert, I was suddenly privy to extremely intimate details about Pryor's life. Although I don't remember much about the other bits (apart from his visit to Africa and his subsequent disavowal of the n-word – an expletive and racial slur that I later learnt had been an integral part of his comedic routines in the past), I do remember how I felt after watching him: full and absolutely steeped in laughter.

The landscape behind this introduction was post-9/11-and-very-much-in-the-throes-of-War-on-Terror-Pakistan, and while on a first glance it seems improbable that a 17-year-old Pakistani girl would find much in common with the experiences of a 42-year-old Black man talking

candidly about his addictions and predilections, the connection was actually quite obvious. In a world besieged by violence, misery, and heartache, the few moments of reprieve are offered by laughter. This seems blasé, but humour me if you will.

Despite living a sheltered life in Islamabad, far removed from the more devastating effects of the American invasion of Afghanistan and the Pakistani military's numerous failed and unaccounted for "operations" that were ostensibly meant to combat terrorism, I also remember the siege of Lal Masjid in 2007 and the bombing of both the Danish embassy and the Marriott hotel, which were within less than a half-mile radius from our house at the time. Although the two bombings took place in the year subsequent to my introduction to Pryor, my peers and I had already developed a perverse, immature, and audacious - in a way that only teenagers can be - approach to the onslaught of violence we witnessed on newly privatized Pakistani TV channels. Fake bomb threats to our school to get a holiday were not uncommon and despite not participating in said pranks, I regret to say I did little to condemn them. We developed a warped and grim sense of humour¹ - gallows, morbid, and dark are adjectives that come to mind - to the events around us; laughter was one of the few ways to react to the absurdities in abundance. Therefore, it's also not a coincidence that I returned to Richard Pryor in the midst of a global pandemic, and listened to most of his albums, a lot of his concerts, and watched a number of his movies during the past year and a half.

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Pryor's comedy lies squarely at the intersection of two comedic traditions: black and blue humour. The term black humour (*humour noir*) was initially coined by the French Surrealist André Breton in order to contend with the work of the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift. Later on, Breton published an anthology of writing in 1940, which illustrates instances of black humour; namely, humour that exhibits a preoccupation with suffering, death, tragedy, violence, and subjects traditionally considered taboo. While the term entered print in the mid-twentieth century, it's fair to assume that various literary and cultural traditions along with antecedent texts display instances of proto-black humour.

Blue humour, on the other hand, is humour that relates to sex and the body, and is referred to through a gamut of names - bawdy, ribaldry, risqué, off-color, blue. It's speculated that the word bawdy finds its roots in Middle English "bauded" or "bowdet", which means "soiled, dirty" and derives from the Welsh "bawaid" that itself emerges from "baw", which also means "dirt, filth." The bawdy tradition uses the body as its primary site of inquiry and doesn't shy away from questions of intimacy that take corporeal realities seriously. It strips the human body of any semblance of puritanical dignity and lays it bare at the altar of a joke. And on occasion,

the bawdy tradition can reveal something about our attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, and class. In fact, by instrumentalizing humor, the bawdy tradition is often able to provide great insight into the frailty and fallibility of the human form. Pryor does this frequently in his comedy: he is often the butt of his own jokes by talking about how his body fails him. The use of the bawdy has a long, storied tradition in literature, one that certainly doesn't begin with but can be found in the work of authors like Shakespeare and Rabelais. Eric Partridge's seminal essay in Elizabethan Studies titled *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947) provides a remarkable and thorough taxonomy of the bawdy tradition in Shakespeare's repertoire (non-sexual bawdy, homosexual, sexual, and valedictory) for those interested, and the tradition itself allows us an entry-point through which to expand our understanding of Pryor's comedic style.

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When I was asked to write an essay on the theme of risk, I immediately thought of global finance, plunging stock markets, and the financial crisis of 2008. Risk animates my imagination in dystopic ways, but I don't claim to understand much about its connection to finance. Additionally, the essay isn't a form I feel comfortable inhabiting, and this is neither an academic essay nor solely a personal one. Maybe it is best described as a collage, an attempt at gluing together or reading between the seams of a text. I can imagine that's an unsatisfying frame but that's the risk I have to take.

The ghost of an essay has been steadily materializing in my brain during the pandemic. I've been wanting to write about Richard Pryor, the grotesque body, and the sublime ever since I chased Pryor down a rabbit hole - the notion of the sublime unfortunately gets left to the wayside in this iteration. I wasn't thinking about the essay in terms of an audience so much as an itch I wanted to scratch. Perhaps if I did a close reading of some of his comedy, I could gain an inch of understanding about what tickled me and gave me comfort and I could return to the familiar pleasure of parsing sentences until I could squeeze some meaning out of them. Thus, I sought to make a risky bargain with the editors of this esteemed journal: I'll write the essay as long as I can write about Richard Pryor. It helped in no small part that risqué is the first cousin of risk, and the former adjective is one of many apt descriptions of his comedic style. It felt like a hard sell at first but surprisingly the editors said yes.

I then did what I usually do when given a word as a theme: I turned to etymology. Here is where matters turned murky: all over the internet, links between risqué, risk, and the Islamic concept of rizq emerged in ways that suggested a false/folk-etymology, but were in fact just routine matters of dispute amongst linguists, lexicographers, and etymologists². I looked to scholars to see if there was any credence to the connections between risk, risqué, and rizq. It's worth

producing the full if lengthy quotation on the matter from an essay "The meanings of 'risk': a view from corpus linguistics" by Craig Hamilton, Svenja Adolphs and Brigitte Nerlich:

"Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1996: 1162) defines 'risk' with reference to the French word 'risqué' because 'risk' entered English from French circa 1660. According to Ewald (2000), 'risqué' was used in France for the first time in 1578, and very early the word was used as both a noun and a verb. Ewald (2000) apparently gets the 1578 date from Le Robert. The definition of the noun 'risqué' in Le Nouveau Petit Robert (1993: 1990) can be paraphrased as follows: 'possibly from Latin rescare 'to cut,' or from ancient Greek rhizikon ('risk' in modern Greek), from rhiza "root". This reveals a fundamental uncertainty about the word's origin among lexicographers. Webster suggests the word 'risk' initially entered Greek from Arabic ('rizq'), while Le Robert suggests it entered French through Italian - either via ancient Greek or Latin. Given these conflicting views of the word's etymology, along with the fact that nouns' gender in French switched from feminine to masculine between 1578 and 1663, 'risk' has had an interesting history. The first OED entry for the noun 'risk' refers to a phrase from 1661, while the first OED entry for the verb 'risk' refers to a phrase from 1686. Whereas the French spelling ('risqué') was preferred in the 17th century, both English and French spellings were used interchangeably in the 18th century." (pgs. 164-165)

Leaving aside the matter of rizq, the links between risk and risqué appear abundantly clear, and Pryor's experiments with humour that dabbled in the black and blue traditions were both risqué and risky. At the moment there seems to be consensus amongst most comedians in America that eliciting laughter is doubly risky business. Contemporary debates in American popular culture about cancel culture, outrage (faux or otherwise), and political correctness gone awry or too far, partly echo the refrain that it's hard to make art, in this case comedy, without fear of the much dreaded but amorphous notion of "getting cancelled".

Personally, I find the debate stale and the terms unclear. Are we talking of Louis C. K. being cancelled (after five women came forward to report he had masturbated in front of them without their consent)? Or the broad and disparate forms of ostensible cancellation (including C. K. 's) that Dave Chappelle - one amongst many comedians also indebted to Pryor's legacy - extensively talks about in his 2019 Netflix special *Sticks & Stones*?²³ It's important to note that C. K. was accused of sexual misconduct while Chappelle has been accused of making off-color jokes at best, and hateful and discriminatory jokes at worst.

Chappelle has complained in *Sticks & Stones* about having a "#MeToo headache". He also included jokes about the allegations against R. Kelly and Michael Jackson, and provided a

dubious explanation about why his jokes about trans people were in fact progressive (spoiler alert: they aren't). Since then, Chappelle has gone on to win the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for American Humour along with winning the Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album twice. All this to say, a significant part of the outrage about outrage is now orthodoxy and the comedians doth protest too much, methinks. Is comedy really risky business when you're beloved by the cultural cognoscenti?

Addendum: Chappelle's *Sticks & Stones* begins with a spoken epigraph by Morgan Freeman:

"This is Dave. He tells jokes for a living. Hopefully he makes people laugh, but these days it's a high stakes game. Hmm, how did we get here, I wonder? I don't mean that metaphorically, I'm really asking: how did Dave get here? I mean, what the f** is this? But what do I know? I'm just Morgan Freeman. Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is if you say anything...you risk (emphasis mine) everything. But if that's the way it's gotta' be—okay, fine, f** it!"

Irrespective of whether you agree with the sentiment expressed, the oft repeated and unquestioning acceptance of comedy as an inherently dangerous and risky proposition merits further scrutiny.

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Perhaps part of the answer as to why comedians consider comedy to be intrinsically transgressive, lies in the history of figures as similar and vastly dissimilar as the Fool and the Trickster. The Fool is a capacious and nebulous category and has produced a varied taxonomy. I'm thinking specifically of the Court Jester, found in wide-ranging cultural traditions, who at least in the popular imagination if not reality - as is disputed by some historians - occupied the position of truth-teller. Beatrice K. Otto in *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* states "we have seen the impressive extent to which jesters everywhere were allowed and encouraged to offer counsel and to influence the whims and policies of kings, by no means being limited to 'small historical windows of possibility.'"

The figure of the Trickster also spans cultures, histories, mythologies and literatures, but unlike the Fool, it can also have divine or mythological properties. It is important to not consider these categories discrete and the spirit of mischief that is the quintessence of the Trickster can also be found within the Fool. However, the difference between foolishness and mischief may also help in articulating the difference in disposition between the two. Henry Louis Gates in *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* provides a brief sketch of the divine

trickster Esu in Yoruba mythology and posits him as the sole messenger to the gods. Alongside this, Esu is also characterized by the qualities of "satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty" (pg. 6). The tension between a serious role and a mischievous temperament is one of the contradictions that invigorates most tricksters.

Perhaps also, there is something to be said about the historical and contemporary associations of laughter and lunacy with excess. The symbiotic relationship between laughter and lunacy is in some ways apparent because both laughter and lunacy and/or madness can exceed reason and meaning. If we bear in mind the adage that an explanation of a joke kills it, it is as if pure, unadulterated laughter emerges from a subterranean region that doesn't merely defy but outright disfigures and rejects explanation. Laughter can be ineffable, inscrutable, and transcend the mere notion of an explanation.

Laughter can also elucidate or clarify. Another adage popular amongst comedians is that the audience *knows*, i.e., the audience will let you know what material works and what doesn't through laughter or its opposite: the purgatory of silence. But this romanticized notion of the audience as the custodians of the key to a venerated form of communal laughter is at odds with the audience that comics turn on when the former doesn't laugh. Then the audience is too frigid, unsophisticated, puritan, and the list goes on and on. Moreover, there is no singular notion of the "audience", which itself is a capricious shapeshifting beast that on some days can be mastered and on others will show no mercy to the lone comic on stage. The stories of Richard Pryor's genius are also accompanied by many anecdotes of Pryor bombing on stage, but persisting, hours into a set and sacrificing or risking his dignity in pursuit of a laugh.

Laughter isn't always righteous. People laugh for all kinds of reasons because laughter is mercurial and not bound by a singular affective register: laughter can be polite, cruel, nervous, joyful, and hopeful amongst other things. Laughter can also be libidinal.

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The specter of Death is always hovering in Pryor's comedic routines, but rather than being a malignant force, it's more in keeping with Pryor's style of physical comedy and one can conceive of this specter as a poltergeist: noisy, naughty, and chaotic. Similar to the poltergeist that enjoys physically tormenting its victim, Death too likes to remind humans of the ultimate betrayal their bodies will enact on them. Pryor's bit about having a heart attack in the seminal *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (1979) is masterful not only in terms of his physical comedy – Death is ventriloquized in the form of the heart attack ordering Pryor to get down on one knee, lay

splayed on the stage, and eventually reduces the comedian to a fetal position – but also in terms of the host of different voices Pryor conjures in a span of a few minutes: his own voice plaintively negotiating with Death; Death's voice taunting Pryor in the form of the heart attack that's verbalized; the nasal and indifferent voice of an angel in customer service that Pryor contacts to plead with God about his impending death; and lastly his Heart, which is angered by Pryor's lack of faith in its ability to function: "Your heart say, 'Was you trying to talk to God behind my back? You is a lying m**f**er.'" In another bit in the same special, Pryor relates the true story of his father – a retired pimp – having a heart attack during sexual intercourse:

"Thinking about death, though, I'd like to die like my father died, right. My father died f**ing. He did! My father was 57 when he died, right, and the woman was 18. My father came and went at the same time. And the... and the woman that he was making love to, right, couldn't give away no p** for two years, cause people were going, un-un, no, no, mmm, uh, no baby, uh, no. You done killed one m**f**er with it, that's all right. No, that's some p** you can keep right there, mmm. And I saw the lady recently, and she's still a little f**ed up about it, you know. She came and said, I'm sorry I killed your father. I said, miss, what are you talking about. I said, s**, people get killed in plane wrecks and run over by buses and s**. He died in your p**. That's called recycling. You know, I just figure God must have loved my father an awful lot to let him go out like that, right. 'Cause if I had a choice, now, men, you know the truth when I tell you if you had a choice between dying in some p** or getting hit by a bus, which line would you be in? I know which line I'm gonna' be in. I'm gonna' be in that long m**f**er, jack."

While Pryor's encounter with death seems considerably less gratifying than his father's, the macabre comedy of "My father came and went at the same time" find the strands of blue and black comedy inextricably intertwined: eros and thanatos interlocked in a dance to the death. It's also interesting that Pryor displays flagrant disregard for the conventional set-up of a joke and is involved in a more immersed and embodied form of storytelling through physical comedy and mimicry where the punchline appears on its own volition and can be secondary to the bit. The second punchline is where he comforts the woman and calls the circumstances that engendered his father's death "recycling." In this rendering, the vagina functions as the site of birth and death; the void and that which is full; both abundant and barren. Something incalculable also exists between these binaries in the form of something porous, perhaps a portal: one can go in and out (in more ways than one: sexual intercourse, childbirth, menstruation, vaginal discharge) like Pryor's father who "came as he went."

This is, in some ways, redolent of the "grotesque body" conceptualized by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his monograph *Rabelais and His World* (1968). A key text in Renaissance Studies, Bakhtin considers the ritualization of laughter through various cultural forms, but most substantively

through the medieval carnival: unofficial feasts not bound by the strictures of those with religious and political power and a space where normative hierarchical structures were temporarily suspended. One of the ways in which this suspension manifests is through the collective nature of carnival:

"Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it...It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part." (pg. 8)

To this end, because the carnival effaces the distinctions between spectator and participant along with public and private, the grotesque body is not singular but plural. And because the grotesque body is not individual but of "the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed...This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable." (pg. 43). Similar to Pryor's notion of the vagina being a site of "recycling", one of the characteristics of the grotesque body is that it contains "two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born." (pg. 50).

Why does any of this matter? It matters because Bakhtin's historical appraisal and characterization of the grotesque body troubles our understanding of the body as a discrete, functioning unit. The aesthetics of the grotesque exist in opposition to some of "the canon of antiquity that formed the basis of Renaissance aesthetics" (pgs. 28-29). In fact, the emphasis "on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (pg. 16) illustrates how the grotesque body pushes, shoves, squeezes, and thrusts against the constraints imposed by classical form through the processes of "copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (ibid.) - processes that were relegated to the realm of the profane, low, and folk.

In *Live and Smokin'*, which was filmed at The Improv in New York in 1971 but released fourteen years later, Pryor dives into his set with little warning, beginning with how he grew up near "whorehouses" and elaborating on his first encounters with white people:

"They come down through our neighborhood to help the economy. Nice white dudes, though. 'Cause I could have been a bigot (raises his voice in faux-anger), you know what I mean? I could have been prejudiced...but I met nice white men, (puts on a baritone voice with a "white" accent) "Hello, little boy. Is your mother home? I'd like a b**." I wonder what would happen if n** go through white neighborhoods doin' that. "Hey, man, is your mama home? Tell the b** we wanna' f**." "Ah, I'll see. She says you have to come back after lunch."

At the mention of "whorehouses", the audience hesitates to laugh, as if unsure about the truth of the bit and its possible trajectory. They warm up by the end as the critique concerning the double standards inherent in racism becomes legible and digestible. Pryor cycles through a wide variety of material as denoted in the contents of his set-list that flash upon the screen at the beginning: "Colored guys have big ones"; "Eating with white friends"; "A disease called virgin"; "White folks don't come"; and so on. From this brief and incomplete sampling alone, the inclinations of the grotesque body to consume, either through lust or gluttony, are obvious.

In the bit concerning how the eating habits of white and black people differ, Pryor subverts racialized caricatures of excess by presenting white people and their consumption of food as clinical and joyless: "White folks eat quiet." In a juxtaposition that plays on the Other as a signifier of excess, Pryor mimes his father eating with gusto and with repeated invocations of the profane and curses in a manner that doesn't reify racialized notions of polite/impolite and civil/uncivil behavior but in fact elevates the material. As Bakhtin says,

"Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body...the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense." (pg. 281)

There is an erotic charge in Pryor's characterization of the differences in eating habits between white and black folk, an emphasis on the sensual that animates so much of his work. It is this tension between the bawdy and political that informed a screenplay Pryor wrote titled *Bon Appetit*, which he mentions in his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions*:

"The picture opened with a black maid having her p** eaten at the breakfast table by the wealthy white man who owned the house where she worked. Then, a gang of Black Panther types burst into the house and took him prisoner. As he was led away, the maid fixed her dress and called, 'Bon appétit, baby!'" (pg. 107)

I'm not sure where to begin: the politics of interracial desire in a country that continues to contend with the legacy of chattel slavery; the inversion of dominance in heterosexual intercourse in terms of both class and race; and finally, a revenge fantasy enacted through recourse to the bawdy and the literal act of "eating" out the "black maid". While this may be a different type of "eating", the setting of the breakfast table is reminiscent of the banquet at carnival and, as Bakhtin suggests, "the encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought" (pg. 281). What are we to make of this scene? The text and the subtext alone could merit another essay. According to Pryor in his autobiography, the movie "was retitled *The Trial*, was a silly stab at a political statement. The Panthers held the guy in a

basement and put him on trial for all the racial crimes in US history" (pg. 107) and members of the public demanded for the man to be lynched.

This comic nihilism – the seemingly coarse but complex intermingling of sex and death – and descent into chaos also typified by one of Pryor's earlier pieces called "Hank's Place." Before elaborating on the aforementioned bit, it helps to emphasize that the imbrication between black and blue comedy which occurs in Pryor's work, can be traced to the historical moment and cultural milieu during which he was writing and performing stand-up: the late sixties and seventies. Shelley Bonis, Pryor's second wife, was "a child of liberal Hollywood" (pg. 188) as Scott Saul says in *Becoming Richard Pryor*, and the interracial union between "the two lovers...(was) emblematic of larger hopes and tensions (between)...the Black Power movement and the largely white counterculture (movement)" (pg. 192).

Unfortunately, these hopes were thwarted, and the tensions exacerbated, reaching their apex after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the memorial benefit held for Dr. King two weeks after his murder, Pryor took the stage and said: "All these people here are giving money, but if your son is killed by a cop, money don't mean s**" (pg.194). This statement, which prompted numerous complaints, had more of the sting of truth than comedy or eulogy. Correspondingly, when Pryor's father Buck passed, his Aunt Maxine said: "Your father f**ed everything. Just be glad he didn't f** you" (pg. 206). Viewing these statements simultaneously, there's an irreverence that's tragicomic, which is exemplified by the black humour Pryor engages with in his entire oeuvre.

According to Saul, in late July 1968, the comedian's then-manager Bobby Roberts – Pryor went through a slew of managers throughout his career – was able to record four nights of Pryor's performances at the Troubadour, after Roberts commissioned a recording engineer by the name of Robert Marchese (pg. 197). Saul offers a thorough account of both the material generated for Pryor's self-titled debut, and the behind-the-scenes hijinks that ensued as both Roberts and Marchese tried to comb through and cohere the free-wheeling and provocative material (pgs. 194-203). What's of interest to me is a bit called "Hank's Place" that was axed from Pryor's debut vinyl due to concerns about subject-matter, an issue that would afflict him for a significant part of his career. However, it's amongst the best material produced during these recording sessions and the set-up is a simple and familiar one to those familiar with Pryor's comedy. The setting is an after-hours watering hole where the audience is introduced to a quick succession of characters over the course of eleven minutes. It's worth mentioning that these characters recur throughout his repertoire, as they chuckle, dance, hustle, and eulogize their way in and out of different comedic bits. Further, these characters exist at and against the margins of society, disturb social norms, and live a life that embodies the spirit of risk, in spite of the drudgery of the day-to-day. They are the derelict, vagrants, eccentrics, lunatics, sex-workers, pimps, addicts, and drug-dealers.

This particular sketch opens with Pryor telling the audience that he would go to Hank's Place as a child to "play cards, shoot craps, and eat fish sandwiches." He says that it was a "beautiful place...where everybody was individual" and adds that a lot of "tricks" went there along with "farmers...looking for thirteen-year-old girls." Immediately, the juxtaposition is established: while the community at Hank's is both "beautiful" and unique, it's more troubling aspects never lurk too far from sight. As the audience nervously chuckles at Pryor's imitation of a farmer cajoling an unnamed "boy" for an under-aged "trick", Pryor acknowledges the tension in his description of Hank's by saying, "it's rough, but that's the way it went down" and moves on. What commences is a tour through the surreal late-night landscape of Hank's, and an extended polyphonic riff on the word "nothing" that is an obvious literary complement and counterpoint to Samuel Beckett's riff on "nothing" in *Waiting for Godot*.

While I don't intend to evaluate each use of the word "nothing" in this bit, I'll itemize the ones relevant to my point. The first character Richard observes is Mr. Perkins, a carpenter, looking to overcharge if not outright swindle Hank, as he offers unsolicited advice about the state of the craps table at the bar. Mr. Perkins offers a wide range of arguments to persuade Hank to hire him such as "I knew you as a little boy"; "I knew your mother, she always treated me well", and beyond these appeals to familiarity, the chance of a real bargain: "I'm going to do it for nothing...but thirty-five dollars and maybe a fish sandwich." The punchline hinges on the fact that no amount of community kinship can undercut the demands unrelenting capital makes on subjects marginalized by race, class, and gender, and that any bargains in a capitalist economy are mere smokescreens for further extraction. Mr. Perkins may have known Hank as a "little boy" but "nothing" in this context means "thirty-five dollars and maybe a fish sandwich."

The second character we encounter is Big Irma – Pryor prefaces her arrival by telling the audience that "her favorite thing was to tell people to kiss her a**" and that she was "big, black, and beautiful." Irma's monologue is replete with "nothings" as she says:

"Ain't nobody got no money. Funky m**f**ers ain't got *nothing*! Just kiss my a**, n**, I ain't giving up *nothing*! Tell me *nothing* about it; what's happening Martha? Fix me a fish sandwich, baby. Hey pretty n**, you sure is fine. You could get some of anything if you do the right thing. Kiss my a** now, don't be asking me for *nothing*. (Italics mine)

The semantic shifts in Irma's variations on the word "nothing" may seem like nothing but are in fact something. With each nothing proclaimed by Irma, meaning accumulates in ways that defy quick elaboration, but the laughter and round of applause that Pryor receives at the end of Irma's monologue demonstrates that the audience is all too aware of the proliferation of meaning taking place. Each "nothing" has a staccato rhythm; a form of sharp punctuation that nonetheless provides a cadence that I cannot possibly do justice to on paper. Like it did

for Beckett, who mentions "nothing" over forty times in *Waiting for Godot*, "nothing" means everything.

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When I began this essay on Richard Pryor, I knew it was an exercise in risk. I wrote on a cardboard on my wall:

"I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk."

I find finishing things – tasks, conversations, and texts I'm writing – hard, which in fact makes me a little soft, the kind of sentimentality and lack of performance that Pryor would abhor and deride respectively. I tried to come up with a sentence containing the kind of off-color puns he would have loved, but I'm not quite sure how to conclude this essay. I'm not making an argument about Pryor being politically progressive – he was and he wasn't. I'm also not trying to provide a neat narrative trajectory about his comedy career – because there isn't one. What I can show is that, through his blending of black and blue comedy, Pryor often risked his dignity (and frequently that of others) to make us laugh. A risky move that makes one think, how much is too much in the service of laughter? He states as much in the preface of *Pryor Convictions*:

"It was a risk, a big risk, which he knew" (pg. 5).

This is an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

Notes

1. Another anecdote, to give a sense of where my comic sensibilities were headed, is from when I must have been six or seven. I asked a family member – who shall remain unnamed – to braid my hair. Unable to pronounce چُنیا I asked her to make me a چوتیا instead, and suffice to say it provoked laughter on not one but multiple occasions when I was asked to repeat this request in the presence of company. A few years later when I finally understood the joke, it seemed marvelous that a difference in consonant and a misstep in pronunciation could result in uproarious laughter. It is also entirely unsurprising that I lived in a household where impromptu recitations of verses from the eighteenth-century bawdy poet Chirkeen were not beyond the pale:
چرکین کی گلیوں میں جب یار کا آنا ہوا
پیٹ میں اینٹھن ہوئی اور دھڑ سے پاخانہ ہوا
2. In the Pakistani context, an illuminating example of the construction of a false etymology can be seen through the explanation of the word سامراج offered by a Pakistani novelist over a decade ago, where the aforementioned word allegedly had links to the raj of Uncle Sam in a post-Partition context. The claim was debunked, and I honestly don't mean to be pedantic, but the function and seduction of language as confirmation bias is an interesting phenomenon to be explored in another essay.
3. This essay was conceived before *The Closer* (2021) – Chappelle's latest special for Netflix – was released and while my thoughts on that special are best suited for another platform, I will say this: the distinctions between censorship, cancellation, and curation as cultural phenomena are something that require our sustained attention. Their routine conflation amidst the American culture wars, and by extension, the global culture wars, clarifies little and clouds far more.

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