

World-Traveling, Double Consciousness, and Laughter

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Abstract

In this paper I borrow from Maria Lugones' work on playful "world-traveling" and W.E.B. Du Bois' notion of "double consciousness" to make the case that humor can facilitate an openness and cooperative attitude among an otherwise closed, even adversarial audience. I focus on what I call "subversive" humor, that which is employed by or on behalf of those who have been continually marginalized. When effectively used, such humor can foster the inclination and even desire to listen to others and, if only for brief moments, adopt their point of view. To be able to see oneself as others see you can also be a desirable capacity, because along with such multidimensional seeing comes an epistemic advantage lacking in those who have no need nor desire to see as others do, especially if the vision of the others happens to be from below where one perceives that the promises of our explicit ideals are constantly being implicitly broken. Such humor is aesthetic, pleasurable in and of itself, and not amenable to scientific dissection. But it is also a skill that can be honed into a powerful tool of persuasion in circumstances where straightforward arguments are less effective. It can raise consciousness about the lived experiences of those suffering under systemic oppression and foster world travelling. Subversive humor encourages audiences, especially those who contribute to what Jean Harvey calls "civilized oppression", to playfully travel across worlds and "tarry along" with the perspectives of the marginalized.¹

Keywords: Oppression, Racism, Humor, Privilege, World Traveling, Double Consciousness

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I. “Why is it that ‘When white women are naked, that’s pornography,’ but ‘when black women are naked, that’s anthropology?’” (Quoted in Gilbert, 82).

This question, from comedian Ellen Cleghorne, is more than just a question—it is also a riddle, an insightful commentary, a subversion of a dominant social hierarchy or status quo, an invitation to see an element of the social world from a different perspective, and of course, it is a joke stated in the context of a performance. But if it is all of those things, it is clearly not *just a joke*. She is intending to get a laugh, and perhaps that is the primary goal—but with humorists like Mark Twain, Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Ellen Cleghorne, Margaret Cho, Sarah Silverman, Louis C.K., Hari Kondabolu, and Dave Chappelle, for example, much of their humor can be considered “subversive”, with more than a desire to merely delight.

Cleghorne’s question brings to consciousness a phenomenon that Shannon Sullivan calls *ontological expansiveness*: “As ontologically expansive, white people often manifest a way of being in the world (often nonconscious) in which they presume the right to occupy any and all geographical, moral, psychological, linguistic, and other spaces. From the point of view of white ontological expansiveness, the existence of a linguistic space off-limits to white people is an ‘unjust’ violation of the ‘natural’ order of the world that must be rectified” (Sullivan 2004b, 302). This overly-privileged access to the spaces others inhabit leads to lop-sided power relationships that can be sustained through covert psychological distortions. It also creates epistemic blinders for the privileged as they feel no need to learn from the experiences of others in any other fashion than that of ethnologist or zoologist. In Maria Lugones’ sense, this “maximal way of being at ease [is] somewhat dangerous because it tends to produce people who have no inclination to travel across ‘worlds’ or have no experience of ‘world’ traveling” (Lugones 90).

It is hard to categorize Cleghorne’s sort of humor, because the creators of these jokes, short stories, analogies, riddles, etc., are playful but serious at the same time. Their attitude is similar to the desired attitude of philosophers who play with ideas in thought experiments about serious issues and wish to encourage others to follow them along in their stories. The comedians (and philosophers) are serious without being dogmatic or somber, but playful, creative, and critical, without being frivolous.

Sometimes the jokes have a façade of absurdity that crumbles when the comedian facilitates our “tarrying along”, as George Yancy puts it (Yancy 2008; 2012, 44, 52), with her to the conclusion (punch line), and we now understand, we “see” that there is an alternative way of comprehending that piece of reality that is in fact not as ridiculous as it first appears. Put another way, the initial incongruity or inconsistency is used to produce an insight that otherwise would remain hidden, either because we just could not see it from our confined perspective, or through willful ignorance we hide in our complacent, disinclination to see differently. The humorist can move us from the funny “Huh, that’s strange”, to the funny “Ha-ha that’s amusing”, and vice versa. Some instances of humor are capable of inclining audiences to engage in what Maria Lugones calls “world-traveling.”

II. Playful World-Traveling

According to Lugones, world-traveling is a capacity to access or come to know the multiple and complex constructions of oneself or the “self” of another. Here knowledge can imply the traditional true, justified, belief triad, but without the presumption of objective, one-dimensional certainty *felt* by those who presume to know all there is to know about those whom they stereotype, for example. Lugones’ point is that the better we come to know another person, or ourselves, the more we come to the recognition, like cosmologists studying the vast universe, that there is so much more mysterious, open-ended, and surprising about other subjects.

Lugones is influenced by Arthur Danto’s use of “world” in aesthetics where he analyzes the lived spaces (worlds) of a woman who uses these spaces to express feminist viewpoints, e.g. These subversive spaces are inhabited within a dominant culture (another world), but they imaginatively and symbolically express a transgression of the conventions and expectations of that culture. To the extent that those conscious only of the hegemonic world finally come to explicitly see (through world-traveling) the worlds inhabited by the marginalized, they are described as ““individuals whose feelings and thoughts will be modified upon grasping the meanings conveyed or transformed by the expressions”” of marginalized people (Lugones 23, quoting Danto). Note “traveler” has a very different connotation than “tourist.” You take pictures and commodify mementos for

your own when you tour. When you travel, you are open to learning, understanding, and perceiving differently, seeking out with interest and curiosity the benign tensions that accompany a novel world.²

Lugones examines the notion of worlds and traveling among them in the context of her own experiences of being viewed as playful by some people and constructed as unplayful by others. She describes her experiences at times perplexing based upon the different worlds she inhabits and the contradictory attributes she might have among them. She does not always understand the ways in which she has been constructed in some worlds, and in others she does, but refuses to accept it. These are each worlds to which one can travel back and forth, and importantly, they remain “purposely incomplete” (Lugones 88). This is in part due to the dynamic complexity and interaction among them, some of which are happily inhabited, others are stereotypically constructed, but all of which constitute the *bundle of worlds* that constitutes the ambiguous self.

Lugones does not interpret “worlds” as wholly symbolic or merely logically possible constructions. She evaluates social reality “in terms of multiple actual worlds... [comprised of] flesh and blood people” (Lugones 25, 87). In this way, Lugones’ approach to confronting the thinly sliced stereotypes that perpetuate oppression is similar to Lewis Gordon’s confrontation with anti-black racism, which he views as “a form of bad faith because it is an effort to evade facing human beings in their ambiguity or, as we prefer, in the flesh” (Gordon 1999, 136).³ There is another connection between Lugones’ conception of how the identities of marginalized folk are perceived (or not) and Gordon’s

² On issues concerning the commodification/exoticization due to urban gentrification of inner cities where jazz and soul food, e.g., can be consumed by whites but now with police protection against the “bad blacks”, see (Sullivan 2006, 126). For the commodification and exoticization of Native American culture, see (Sullivan 2006, 133). For an account of ontological expansion of an oblivious white tour bus trip to a black church in Harlem where the church is described to the tourists as if it were a wild zoo with exotic inhabitants see (Sullivan 2006, 164 Quoting Patricia Williams).

³ Granted, there are potential metaphysical concerns with Lugones’ conception of world-traveling and the *actual* selves that she becomes as she navigates (willfully or forcibly) the assortment of worlds. This is an interesting and legitimate worry highlighted by Mariana Ortega (13-19) who prefers a “multiplicitous self” rather than Lugones’ ontological commitments or lack thereof. But even if Ortega’s metaphysical critiques stand, they would not alter the point I wish to make between the potential for humor to facilitate world-travel.

analysis of racism that will inform the discussion on humor below: “epistemic closure” in the context of making judgments about groups of people. According to Gordon, “In the act of epistemic closure, one ends a process of inquiry. In effect, it is the judgment ‘say no more’... In contrast, epistemological openness is the judgment ‘there is always more to be known’” (Gordon 2000, 88). World-traveling requires openness to surprise, novelty, ambiguity, and confusion. In the process of world-traveling we come to see that our knowledge is imperfect and as long as we adopt a *playful* attitude, this ignorance is not paralyzing, but in fact, thought and act-inducing.

However, “playful” is ambiguous, as it can imply mere frivolity or detachment from serious matters, as argued for by John Morreall: the difference between a humorous incongruity and a threatening or serious incongruity is that the former are accompanied by “playfulness and the tendency to laugh” (Morreall 2009, 73). The non-humorous incongruities “lack the playfulness of amusement, in that they are emotionally engaged responses” (73). The point of playfulness, and humor, is merely to “delight” (Morreall 2009, 102). There is also the agonistic and competitive sense of play where the goal is victory over others. There is a third type of playfulness, however, the sort I am interested in here, that is akin to the serious play of children, musicians or the significant intellectual creations in philosophical thought experimentation where one plays with thought. Lugones’ conception of play fits the sort I envision for the world-traveling humorist.

Morreall’s contrast between seriousness and playfulness focuses too much on the presumed total detachment from emotion and any desires to change the world when one is in a playful attitude. But playful in the sense I use the term, and in the sense implicit in Lugones’ “playful world-traveling”, is in contrast to the sort of seriousness first invoked by Arthur Schopenhauer: “The opposite of laughing and joking is *seriousness*. Accordingly, it consists in the consciousness of the perfect agreement and congruity of the conception, or thought, with what is perceived, or the reality. *The serious man is convinced that he thinks the things as they are, and that they are as he thinks them*” (Schopenhauer 1887, 280, my italics). I will expand on this distinction between seriousness and playfulness more below.

In contrasting Lugones’ sense of play from the *agonistic* and competitive sense espoused

by Johan Huizinga and Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, she adeptly and succinctly deflates the former's view: "Huizinga, in his classic book on play, interprets Western civilization as play. That is an interesting thing for Third World people to think about" (Lugones 94). This purposeful understatement exposes the absurdity in the notion that colonialism, Manifest Destiny, and unfettered expansion by Western civilizations, armed with their *guns, germs, and steel*, is analogous to a sporting event in which one team has the better players. With this conception of playfulness, there are always winners and losers, and always more of the latter. This attitude precludes the possibility of world-traveling; instead it cultivates the inclination to dominate and "kill other worlds" (Lugones 95).

Playful world-traveling requires freedom of thought in which rules and hierarchies are viewed as contingent and malleable rather than necessary and inviolate. When one is playful one is open to others in ways not available in a serious mode;⁴ meanings are not

⁴*Serious* in this context has an existential lineage. Consider what Jean-Paul Sartre (1977, 796), Simone De Beauvoir (1976, 35-7), and Lewis Gordon (1999, 22-4; 2000, 122-5) will later call the "spirit of seriousness." Under this attitude, the oppressor, and often the oppressed, fails to recognize the dynamic, flexible, and contingent characteristics of human persons that challenge the idea that we have unchanging natures, some presumed to be "superior" to others. The spirit of seriousness is a kind of "bad faith" (Sartre 1977, 86-116; Gordon 1999) or "false consciousness" (Cudd 178-80) in which one is either purposely rationalizing regarding the supposed static nature which bounds the identity of those thought to be inferior in order to sustain the status quo, or one has become habituated to automatically categorize others into an inferior out-group through cultural presuppositions, biases, and stereotypes that more often than not rely upon demonstrably false beliefs. Here the salient feature is the absolutist, dogmatic, and otherworldliness and/or unquestionable nature of the values and meanings held by serious people. These are people who, like slave owners and perpetrators of oppression, maintain an attitude that inculcates mental inflexibility especially related to values and meanings connected to power and comfort. The serious stereotyper uses essentializing constructs to sustain a status quo that favors him. Such a person is quite capable of laughing and creating jokes, e.g., but they are rarely used *playfully*. That is, they are the jokes of Archie Bunker who arrives at his conclusions "with such confidence in their validity" based upon "unchallengeable premises" (Alcoff 48) that his feeling of certainty constrains his inclination to think divergently or creatively, much less to consider alternative perspectives about the social world—such laughter arises out of an "absolute commitment" (Davenport 173) in which the central aim is to ridicule those without power or privilege. This is the laughter of the complacent individual who is committed to a social hierarchy that "just happens" to offer him privileges and rights not available to

absolute and fixed, but contingent, as are the hierarchical oppressive structures resisted by those on the margins or those within the dominant world who speak on behalf of the oppressed. It is in this way that “seriousness” is an antonym for “playfulness.”

For instance, metaphysical musings on the nature of one’s identity within the ambiguous interstices of the social world(s) can easily qualify as serious work. But, following Lugones, a playful attitude can allow for mental freedom without abandoning the *subject* of study: “The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise*” (Lugones 95-6). This is a crucial connection with a humorous attitude that is not only open to surprise, but manifestly seeks it out in the quest for playful incongruities. This is especially the case with humorists who question the presuppositions of societal norms and values—rules. Lugones continues: “This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing. We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying we are *open to self-construction*. We may not have rules, and when we do have rules, *there are no rules that are to us sacred*.... While playful we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular ‘world’. We *are there creatively*. We are not passive” (Lugones 95-6).

What is significant here is the potential for world-traveling, for expanding our cultural competency, not through straightforward argument or some presumed objective metaphysical stance from nowhere,⁵ but through narratives (even exceptionally brief) of the lived experiences of those on the borders of society: “In describing my sense of a ‘world,’ I mean to be offering a description of experience, something that is true to experience even if it is ontologically problematic. Though I would think that any account of identity that could not be true to this experience of outsiders to the mainstream would be faulty even if ontologically unproblematic. (Lugones, 283). The “ontological confusion” that might result from such travel is representative of the actual phenomenological experiences that are difficult to pin down logically and unambiguously. This is largely because reality is rarely as neat and tidy as we might wish

others. For an extensive account on the distinctions between playfulness and seriousness in humor, see (Kramer 2015).

⁵ See (Ortega 6; Yancy 2008, 848; 2002, 300).

it to be or think it is according to our reason, a point not lost on the pessimist philosopher Schopenhauer who argued that humorous laughter results from the “victory of knowledge of perception over thought [which] affords us pleasure...It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency” (Schopenhauer 1887, 279-80).

For Lugones, ontological confusion is an important stage in coming to see from the perspective of another. The movement requires accepting tension, murkiness, and mild dis-ease. This is an improvement upon the state of mind Nietzsche calls “miserable ease”, or again Lugones’ sense of a “maximal way of being at ease” (90) where one is not inclined to accept that the marginalized even have a point of view worth considering, and their complacency and comfort stands in the way of world-traveling.

This is not to say seeing differently is impossible from the perspective of the powerful, inhabiting only hegemonic worlds. If this were the case, Lugones’ conception of world-traveling would be rendered otiose. However, there are both positives and negatives of being able to see in this fashion, just as there are in W.E.B. Du Bois’ conception of double-consciousness. It will be informative to map the parallels in world-traveling and double-consciousness before making the connection with humor more explicit.

IV. Double Consciousness

The world-traveler or the wit who seeks to cultivate world-traveling in others, promotes a positive form of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls “double consciousness. ”I contrast the positive with the negative because Du Bois’ original conception seems to have both. In one sense, this way of seeing is forced upon oppressed people and is clearly adverse. Du Bois asserts that “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 8). In a related way, Lugones argues that “all people who have been subordinated, exploited, and enslaved have been forced to travel to ‘worlds’ in which they animate subordinate beings” (Lugones 17, 77). But she notes earlier “you’re having that double consciousness about yourself in space is transgressive” (9). Boundaries that have been imposed upon one can be violated, or put less aggressively, the reality underlying the confines can be revealed:

they are historically constructed through the contingent acts of human beings, not divinely decreed by necessity. Thus, they can be transgressed or broken down by human beings.

Simone de Beauvoir makes this point regarding oppression and the mystifications of serious people who seek to maintain an unjust status quo: “In order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature. When a conservative wishes to show that the proletariat is not oppressed, he declares that the present distribution of wealth is a *natural* fact and that there is thus no means of rejecting it” (De Beauvoir 1976, 83; see also Douglass 2003, 92).⁶ Being able to perceive openly as opposed to arrogantly (Frye 69), playfully instead of seriously, takes effort for those not forced to live on the margins. For those who have become adept at border crossing due to living in the borderlands, this kind of seeing is not without its dangers.

Du Bois recognizes the concerns with his capacity for multivalent seeing in which he perceives that he is both a part of a dominant world but cutoff from its benefits: “...for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs [whites], not mine” (Du Bois 8; see also 50 for his description of his “tiny community” as a World separated by a Veil). In contemporary psychological terms, he becomes aware of internalizing the stereotypes against him, while at the same time maintaining his own view of himself: “And last of all there trickles down that third and darker thought,— the thought of the things themselves, the confused, half-conscious mutter of men who are black and whitened, crying ‘Liberty, Freedom, Opportunity—vouchsafe to us, O boastful World, the chance of living men!’ To be sure, behind the thought lurks the afterth'ought,—suppose, after all, the World is right and we are less than men? Suppose this mad impulse within is all wrong, some mock mirage from the untrue?” (Du Bois 64; see also 136).⁷

⁶ It is interesting that prior to the economic philosophy of Keynes, it was assumed that a certain level of poverty among a given population was inevitable and in fact *natural*; hence, no government *should* meddle with the economic system, and, as a corollary of sorts, no poor person should feel systematically oppressed by a government any more than she would feel exploited by the *oppressiveness* of earthquakes, hurricanes, or gravity.

⁷ George Yancy describes his own lived experience of subtle racism in similar terms: [To

Du Bois is clear that this divided self can be debilitating and that one desires to “merge his double self into a better and truer self” (9), but he is adamant about the worries of assimilation, and adds that “He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Bois 9). Since the doors of opportunity are now more subtly closed, or at the very least still very difficult to open for black people due to many of the hidden pressures found in what Jean Harvey calls “civilized oppression”,⁸ fostering a positive form of double consciousness in those who are unwittingly stopping that door of opportunity can be helpful. It can reveal to them not only how they actually see difference, but how, from the perspective of the marginalized, they *should*.⁹

Moreover, this advantaged perspective assists in resistance to oppression: “Ironically, however, it may be political groups on the fringes that best appreciate and understand the mainstreams of culture in this country. Outsiders often have a clearer vision of the center than those deep within it ... ” (Duncombe 24; see also Johanson 31 on fantasy and humor

the white woman in the elevator with Yancy] there is only the visible, the concrete, the seen, all there, all at once: a single black *thing*, unindividuated, threatening, ominous, *Black*. The white woman thinks that she takes no part in this construction; she acts ‘in the name of *the serious*’. She apparently fails to see how her identity is shot through in terms of how she *constructs me*” (Yancy 861 my italics). In another passage he expands on this idea: “Well-dressed, I enter an elevator where a white woman waits to reach her floor. She ‘sees’ my Black body, though not the same one I have seen reflected back to me from the mirror on any number of occasions...Despite what I think about myself, how I am for-myself, her perspective, her third-person account, seeps into my consciousness. I catch a glimpse of myself through her eyes and just for that moment I experience some form of double consciousness, but what I see does not shatter my identity or unglue my sense of moral decency (Yancy 846-7).

⁸ Jean Harvey distinguishes what she takes to be civilized oppression in contrast to violent, legal or economic oppression: “Civilized oppression is inherently more difficult to recognize, even by its victims. It is often subtle but pervasive ... Unlike violent oppression, there is often nothing conspicuous and it often involves acts of omission” (Harvey 2010, 14; see also 1999, 1-2). It cannot be legislated against, and perhaps should not be, as in many cases the oppression persists in large part due to the good-intentioned, non-conscious behavior of generally tolerant people.

⁹ Not coincidentally, this capacity is commonly found among humorists (see Morreall 1999, 4-6; Roberts 142).

against oppression). To be able to see oneself as others see you can also be a desirable capacity, because along with such multidimensional seeing comes an epistemic advantage lacking in those who have no need *nor desire* to see as others do, especially if the vision of the others happens to be from below where one perceives that the promises of our explicit ideals are constantly being implicitly broken.

This epistemic vantage point also provides a further psychological boon when world-traveling involves a playful humorous attitude, as it places the oppressed in the appropriate cognitive and emotional distance to better handle an extremely difficult situation, and it provides them with the recognition that they are not essentially inferior and cannot have their freedom completely stolen. The psychological benefits of adopting a humorous attitude are connected with epistemic privilege possessed by the oppressed who have been forced to use the language of the oppressors: “‘When you have mastered the dominant discourse but are still able to stand apart from it (in the margin), you are in the best, most informed position to critique it.’ In this way, the ‘stigma’ usually associated with ‘marked’ or marginal individuals may be transformed rhetorically into a critical lens” (Gilbert quoting P.H. Collins 5, see also 33). So, part of the psychological buffer that humor provides is the social insight that is cultivated by the inclination and skill of recognizing moral incongruities.

Iris Marion Young also looks at the harmful and empowering aspects of this multi-perspectivity: “Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped, visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior. ...” But she adds: “Double consciousness, then, occurs because one finds one’s being defined by two cultures: a dominant and a subordinate culture. Because they can affirm and recognize one another as sharing similar experiences and perspectives on social life, people in imperialized groups can often maintain a sense of positive subjectivity” (Young 60; see Watkins 68-9 and Alcoff 44 for a similar positive description).

When it is directed beyond oneself, this sort of perceiving uncovers the complexities of other subjects—human beings who cannot be summed up through stereotype and cliché.

It cultivates a curiosity to know others, to having true justified beliefs about marginalized people that is informed by adopting a perspective of the lived experience of others rather than the mere accumulation of propositional knowledge. This reduces one's inclination toward ontological expansiveness and complacency. So double consciousness is also potentially beneficial for the privileged person as it contributes to cracking open an otherwise rigid, limited and limiting point of view of others.

But, in order for this type of seeing to cross borders, it cannot simply be an external gaze. Double consciousness can encourage self-monitoring—an aid to *knowing thyself*. To borrow a point from Yancy, double consciousness “provides an opportunity to have [the privileged person's] identity challenged, cracked and rendered ambiguous, a form of uncertainty that begins to expand her sense of interpersonal possibilities and moral imagination” (Yancy 2008, 868). It offers the professed egalitarian the opportunity to align her moral and epistemic ideals with her habitual mode of being, and as I will argue below, the successful subversive wit can provide the stage upon which one can be *conscious* of both.

But if humor can be successfully wielded to subvert an unjust system by facilitating world-travel and double-consciousness, there is the concern that laughter can also be used as a weapon to close borders, stifle empathy for others, and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. I will briefly address this concern before elaborating on the positive role of humor in facilitating double-consciousness and world-traveling.

V. Oppressive Laughter from Above

Consider the following jokes, which significantly, like most of their type, are anonymous and thus grant the teller a degree of immunity: “How can you tell if a blonde's been using the computer? There's White-Out on the screen!” and “A man and a woman were stranded in an elevator and they knew they were gonna die. The woman turns to the man and says, ‘Make me feel like a woman before I die.’ So, he takes off his clothes and says, ‘Fold them!’” (Ford et al. 162).

There are two central points of interest for this section. First, the laughter showers down from the perspective of the “winner's circle” (Harvey 1999, 7) as in most cases in which such a joke is presented, the joke-teller (who is often different than the joke-creator who

also likely comes from a privileged position) is more powerful socially than the butt of the joke, and possibly the third-party audience as well.¹⁰ The jokes are not at all intended to facilitate world-travel, and to the extent that they are playful, it is only in the agonistic, dominating sense. Second, the laughter of the powerful often reveals a presumptuousness of privileged access on their part that they possess knowledge (about the oppressed) that the powerless do not have, indeed, cannot have due to presumed ignorance, naiveté, or what might be worse, simply the lack of a sense of humor.¹¹ Epistemically, the joke-creator/teller assumes some knowledge about an individual woman, in these cases standing in for all women in a way that fits the basic stereotypical and essentializing formulae for such jokes; *all* women are naturally less intelligent than men, they were created or evolved to work in the home, and they really do desire the roles into which societal norms have defined them and continue to constrain them.

The joke-teller also assumes a morally privileged stance in two seemingly inconsistent ways: (1) He cannot be condemned for any negative content in the joke as it is *simply* expressing the truth; this attitude relies upon the cliché that all jokes have an element of truth¹² to them, so it would be obtuse and immoral to censure a truth-teller. (2) On the other hand, if one protests that there is no veracity to the malicious claims in the jokes, he can, from a socially constructed cloak of immunity, hide behind the confession that he was not being serious. Furthermore, he can now add insult to the butt of the joke who has either missed the point of the story and is thus lacking in intellectual wit, or if she understood it but complains that it was just not funny, she is seen to lack humorous wit. She (and importantly, *all women like her*) are “‘poor sports’ or ‘have no sense of humor.’” So they usually ‘comply’ with the joke” (Harvey 1999, 52; see also Bergmann 65, 75).

¹⁰ This is the case with office banter among colleagues in which a group of men might “playfully” mock the perceived ineptness of a female coworker. As the number of incidents like these accumulates, the qualifier “playful” no longer seems to apply.

¹¹ In setting up a response to the theory of humor proffered by John Morreall (1983), Harvey notes the social importance attached to a good sense of humor, and that those without one “will pay a price for it. As the essayist Frank Moore Colby points out, people ‘will confess to treason, murder, arson, false teeth or a wig. How many of them will own up to a lack of humor?’” (Harvey 1999, 3).

¹² Consider the following as a counter-example: “A man at the dinner table dipped his hands into the mayonnaise and then ran them thru his hair. When his neighbor looked astonished, the man apologized: “I’m so sorry. I thought it was spinach” (Hurley et al. 51, quoting Freud). No one, I suspect, would respond with, “That is *so* true!”

The derisive laughter in such quotidian spaces is similar to the laughter that results from the proverbial banana peel systematically placed before the underprivileged in an effort to cause them to fall (Bergmann 78). The fall elicits ridiculing laughter which adds to the injury as it presumes innocence on the part of the privileged who gracefully avoid these hazards they themselves have constructed, and full accountability for those who have failed in the game. That is, on the Superiority Theory of humor at least, the oppressed are laughed *at* because they are deemed inferior.¹³ But of course, to paraphrase Mary Astell, an early feminist writer, a man should not value himself for being wiser than a woman due to having a better education, than he should boast of his courage for beating a man whose hands are bound. This kind of laughter-from-above or boasting about successes that could not possibly have been as independently achieved as the powerful assume, has to be distinguished from the humor of the marginalized.

In the next section, I will show how subversive humor can be distinguished from “humor” that intends to justify and maintain the status quo at the expense of those without power and for those with power.

VI. Border-Crossing Humor

The use of stereotypes in the jokes created and performed by serious people is motivated by the goal of system justification; this is not the case with the subversive humorist. The serious person wishes the stereotypes were true; the subversive attempts to reveal that they are not. In an upside-down world in which the playful acceptance of ambiguity, dynamism, and incongruity, etc., was the norm, in addition to a genuine concern for equality, those who would seek to subvert such “power” structures would not be subversive or playful in the senses I am using here. Moreover, in such a possible world, opinions opposed to the ambiguity-tolerant norms would likely be viewed by the non-dogmatic as just another element in the dynamic, open system, and would be given a fair hearing.

¹³ According to the Superiority theory, all laughter has a butt or object of scorn. Many prominent figures in the history of philosophy have at least made tangential remarks in support of this view, such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson, and some less prominent, such as F.H. Buckley, who presents a book-length defense of the Superiority Thesis.

The following example from Louis C.K. on white privilege can be used as a model to illustrate how humor can be used to question presuppositions and engage double-consciousness and world-traveling in an audience:

I'm healthy, I'm relatively young, I'm white—which, thank God for that shit boy. That is a huge leg up, are you kidding me? Here's how great it is to be white. I could get in a time machine and go to any time, and it would be fucking awesome when I get there. That is exclusively a white privilege. Black people can't fuck with time machines! A black guy in a time machine is like, 'Hey, if it's before 1980, no thank you, I don't wanna go.' But I can go to *any* time. *The year 2*. I don't even know what was happening then; but I know when I get there, 'Welcome. We have a table right here for you.' Oh, thank you." ... Now, if you're white and you don't admit that it's great, you're an asshole! It *is* great. And I'm a man. How many advantages could one person have? I'm a white man. You can't even hurt my feelings. What could you really call a white man that really digs deep? 'Hey cracker.' 'Ugh. Ruin'd my day. Shouldn't have called me a cracker. Bringing me back to owning land and people. What a drag.'" (Louis C.K., 2008)

Louis highlights a point that is almost pedestrian for critical race theorists and feminist philosophers, but one that has not gotten much traction in the public sphere—the reality of white male privilege and the benefits it bestows upon those who have it. He succeeds in relaying serious content efficiently, playfully, and to an audience that likely has been culturally ensconced in “willful ignorance” regarding a whitewashed past and the negative subtle effects that remain in the present. Lugones’ “aggressive ignorance” (18), Charles Mills’ “collective amnesia” (2007, 31), George Yancy’s “structured blindness” (2008, 862), or Lewis Gordon’s “willful non-seeing” and “epistemic closure” (2000, 88), I take to all be roughly synonymous.

When Louis yells to (at?) his audience that “if you don't think it's great being white you are an asshole”, it is potentially offensive, but within the playful-mode he has placed his

audience, there is more likely a desire to “tarry along” with his mirthful rant about a serious matter. Louis’s indirect approach places the *participants* in a playful state of mind where they have the desire to adopt alternative points of view because they have the desire to enjoy humor, which requires an inclination to shift perspectives. Louis is being direct but within a *fictional* setting that has meaning and implications that extend beyond that creative construction in his thought experiment and the “real” world. In other words, he has caught us up in his humorous story facilitating world-traveling.

Louis uses ambiguity deliberately the final comments of the bit, “‘Shouldn’t have called me a cracker. Bringing me back to owning land and people.’” This ambiguous space provides an opportunity for his audience to interpret the conclusion in a humorous manner. From a playful attitude, we are more likely to read this as a condemnation not approbation of white male privilege, as an interpretation in the latter vein is simply not as funny as the former, to say nothing of the moral ignorance it would entail. Interpreted seriously as a straightforward claim there is little room for humor other than the laughter from above--from the “winner’s circle” (Harvey 1999, 7). This form of laughter is system-sustaining, or the sort Bergson seems to endorse, the laughter *from* those with power *at the expense of* those without, with the goal of maintaining the status quo.¹⁴ But

¹⁴ Although Bergson does claim that the object of laughter is always rigidity (inelasticity) in thought or action, he adds the following problematic assertions: “Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of SOCIAL GESTURE. By the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity...” (18). In the same text he claims that “Each member must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment; in short, he must avoid shutting himself up in his own peculiar character as a philosopher in his ivory tower. Therefore, society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter. Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is, really and truly, a kind of social ‘ragging.’... The truth is, the comic character may, strictly speaking, be quite in accord with stern morality. All it has to do is to bring itself into accord with society” (Bergson 65-6). He continues, “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (Bergson 91). Turning Bergson’s insight on its head, I follow Willett’s claim that “Laughter liberates the blind perpetrator of the prevailing social norms.... As laughter lets loose the reins of conventional moral judgment, audiences cast off rigid prejudices and punitive moral categories, and experience as revitalizing libidinal energy flowing free” (Willett 55).

this sort of ridicule does not involve playfulness, and thus, it lacks a necessary condition to even qualify as world-traveling humor.

The literal reading remains confusing and has no resolution as we interpret the referent of “cracker” to be offended by a term that connotes success, at least in Lockean sense of the liberty and ability to pursue property. But there is resolution and enjoyment if we understand Louis to mean something like “owning property unfairly and commodifying people is not anything to be proud of.” When given the option between two interpretations of a joke or comic strip, one that relies upon superiority and domination and the other that subverts such dominance, most people choose the subversive rendering as the more amusing (see Morreall 2009, 109-110; Weaver 40-1; Veale on jokes; and McGraw and Warner especially Chapter 3, on cartoons and for conflicting data on this point). In addition, the audience “is allowed to construct” the meaning collaboratively,¹⁵ as the ambiguity is not over-specified and they are not forced to a single, convergent idea. The listeners have the joyful co-burden of choosing how the piece should be understood, and given the predilection to humor, and the playful, epistemically open mode, the audience is more likely to interpret the conclusion in the way Louis intends *because* it is funnier, not because they have no other options.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Veale 422-3; Oring 56; Gilbert 18, and especially 55 on the “audience’s playful participation”; and Duncombe 131: “Jokes are active, social things. More than any other form of communication they demand participation from their audience”).

¹⁶ Consider the following that we find humorous because it is the more enjoyable, and in fact, more sensible of an interpretation: “When the unfaithful artist heard his wife coming up the stairs, he said to his lover, ‘Quick! Take off your clothes!’” (Marmysz 136). Here, one initially plausible, even obvious expectation is “subverted”, but not rendering the entire joke irreconcilable; instead an opposing, yet still sensible script encourages us to shift to another interpretation. This is not outright contradiction, as that would be less funny, if at all. It offers a creative alternative to perceiving an ambiguous reality, showing there is more than a single meaningful way to complete a story, and that when there is the possibility for a humorous rendering, that will likely be the one adopted rather than making the assumption that it is a supremely stupid adulterer, or the speaker has incomprehensibly committed a *non-sequitur*, which might be the case if the final pleading was something like “42!” or just about anything else not at all meaningful on a different, creative interpretation.

So, given our desire for humor, so much so that we might be said to have an addiction to mirth,¹⁷ it is not surprising that we would seek out humor wherever it might possibly be. Not coincidentally, this more amusing interpretation is also the more accurate one epistemologically and morally speaking. This funny interpretation is the more egalitarian and truthful one, which should appeal to those who are consciously professed truth-seeking *and* mirth-seeking egalitarians—which is most of us today. Louis' indirect and playful approach invokes imaginative counterfactual scenarios that collaboratively engage his audience and “crack open” their proclivity to seriousness, priming them toward attitude change and the inclination toward world-traveling.

Laughter that “punches down” is used as a means to sustain an unjust status quo; it is wielded by those who want negative stereotypes to be true, and this requires closing minds to difference, glossing over incongruity, and adopting an aggressively non-playful attitude. Subversive humor, in contrast, revels in ambiguity, difference, and playful openness.

Louis offers another example from his Monologue on Saturday Night Live (3/29/2014). He humorously reminds us of facts such as women were only *granted* the right to legally participate in this country in 1920: “American democracy is ninety-four years old! There are three people in my building older than American democracy.” This brings to consciousness a number of implicit or dispositional beliefs: the definition of “Democracy” which assumes rule by the people which should not exclude more than 50% of the population, the ideals of American democracy and freedom that presumably have persisted for over 200 years, and the historical date of women's right to participate in one of the most important civic duties. This should cause tension, cognitive dissonance (if not some sense of double-consciousness), and doubt because not all of those beliefs can be true at the same time.¹⁸

¹⁷ Whether with jokes or a comedian's story, if they want the reward that constitutes a fix for their addiction to mirth, they must follow the humorist to the end, to the conclusion or the punch line, in which expectations are shattered, or at least bent considerably, errors are exposed, and they like it. It is not surprising that we would seek out humor wherever it might possibly be. For more on this evolutionary account comparing our addiction to mirth to that of sweets, sex, drugs, and music, see (Hurley et al. 1, 26, 62, 81-2, 253, 290, 294).

¹⁸ For more on Louis C.K.'s subversive humor, see (Kramer 2016).

Importantly, consciousness-raising in this way can also inculcate in the privileged audience an acceptance of tension even when that discomfort competes with one's desire for complacency, ease, and the feelings of certitude. A subversive wit can summon this epistemic openness to cognitive dissonance, and yet incline one to world-travel in an "ontologically confused" (as opposed to "expansive") but potentially illuminating manner.

VI. Ambiguity, Doubt, and Tension in World Traveling

In contrast to a logic of purity in which ambiguity, unclassifiability, and "ontological confusion" (Lugones 86) are avoided, subversive humor uses what Lugones calls "curdled logic" which favors dynamism, permeable boundaries among "worlds", and the creation of tensions which lay the groundwork for "epistemic shift[ing]" among multiple views, thereby pacifying "aggressive ignorance" (Lugones 18). I follow Lugones' perspective on resisting oppression: "My perspective is in the midst of people mindful of the tensions, desires, closures, cracks, and openings that make up the social" (Lugones 5), and that it is a "playful attitude" that allows us to "Notic[e] the tensions from within a logic of resistance [that] enables one to acquire a multiple sensing, a multiple perceiving, a multiple sociality" (Lugones 11). From the perspectives of the oppressed *and* the privileged, this double-consciousness provides an "awareness of the possibility of an alternative situation—that [the oppressed] has a perspective on the world, that he [or she] is a human being" (Gordon 1999, 134-5).

Moreover, when this multi-vision comes about from playful subversive humor, it stands as a "protest in the face of mistreatment [that] signals the victim's refusal to comply with such manipulations of their intellectual and moral judgment. They know they have a right to fairer treatment and their protests convey that they have not been intimidated or browbeaten into thinking otherwise" (Harvey 1999, 77).¹⁹ The epistemic privilege possessed by the oppressed can be seen as a necessity for survival,²⁰ but this does not

¹⁹ See also (Morreall 1983, 101; 1999, 28-9) on the "liberating effect of humor."

²⁰ Quoting Weldon Johnson, Mills notes that "'colored people of this country know and understand the white people better than the white people know and understand them.' Often for their very survival, blacks have been forced to become lay anthropologists, studying the strange culture, customs, and mind-set of the 'white tribe' that has such

entail that insight into social incongruities is only possible for those in subordinate positions. Du Bois' (not Rawls') "veil of ignorance" can be lifted by privileged but professed egalitarians even if they are inclined toward ontological expansiveness.

While I agree with Mel Watkins, quoting Alan Dundes, that "the American Negro has had subtlety and irony forced upon his art...the consequences of split vision—the ability (or, for Du Bois, an enforced burden) to see oneself and others from multiple perspectives" (Watkins 27, 68), I think this ability can also be shared (Yancy 2008, 860-2). It is what the successful subversive humorist facilitates but in an eye-opening, collaborative way. For example, consider this on Richard Pryor's socio-political performances:

Audience members – at the very least, blacks and whites--laugh from different perspectives and "in and out of symmetry." ... In this and other performances ... black folk "see themselves as whites see them," in the tradition of double consciousness articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, "but they like what they see," and whites "now see themselves from the outside as well; but they are content, for the length of the occasion, to lend their mechanical bodies to the comic machinery." Blacks and whites "laugh from different positions that go in and out of symmetry," argues Limon, but "they all laugh." (Carpio 74)

"Symmetry" can have many meanings, but I think in this context it refers to the bonding (see Koziski 68) fostered by Pryor's performance, in which seriousness is literally cracked through the contagious smiles and laughter witnessed in the audience. Blacks and whites in that same audience still have their own perspectives, but they are reinterpreted through a non-dominant frame. This fits well with Lugones' world-traveling:

frightening power over them that in certain time periods can even determine their life or death on a whim" (Mills 2007, 17-18). Lugones asserts the same: "I think that most of us who are outside the mainstream of, for example, the United States dominant construction or organization of life are 'world' travelers as a matter of necessity and of survival" (Lugones 88). But survival in this sense relies upon a non-solipsistic world-view. Unlike the privileged, the marginalized do not have the luxury of assuming theirs is the only valid perspective on reality.

When in one ‘world I animate, for example, that ‘world’s’ caricature of the person I am in the other ‘world.’ I can have both images of myself, and to the extent that it can materialize and animate both images at the same time, I can become an ambiguous being. This is very much a part of trickery and foolery. It is worth remembering that the trickster and the fool are significant characters in many nondominant or outsider cultures. One then sees any particular ‘world’ with these double edges and sees absurdity in them and so inhabits oneself differently. (Lugones 91-2)

For many in Pryor’s crowd this might be the first time such seeing has happened, and although the perspective adjustment might be brief, often that is all that is needed to raise consciousness.

Though rhetorical, it is the first step in protest against an unjust situation.²¹ This is not a passive audience who sleepily, antipathetically absorbs vacuous content, but a collaborating, participating multitude that can now “see” from a common ground *that was always already there*, even if they each came into the performance from very different “worlds.” The humorist encourages a playful attitude, “the attitude of play that is an openness to surprise and that inclines us to ‘world’-travel in the direction of deep coalition” (Lugones 98). Pleasurable collaboration, non-threatening playfulness, and insight into social incongruities through imaginative thought experiment, are all part of the subversive wit’s battery. These are civilized tools that provide opportunities for “Constructions of ‘playlike worlds’ visited in a reflexive mental state outside the confines

²¹“The first essential element in successful resistance is raising consciousness about particular cases of oppression and building a moral case against them” (Cudd 201). For Cudd, this is both a theoretical and rhetorical endeavor, but it is no less effective for being so: “Rhetoric is both a cognitive and affective strategy that challenges stereotypes of oppressed groups and the false consciousness that accompanies oppression, and persuades and motivates change” (Cudd 202; see also Gilbert 177-9 and Basu 388 on the persuasiveness of humorous rhetoric).

of objective social life [that] may represent the ideal culture America falls short of achieving” (Koziski 71).²²

The subversive wit directs an audience’s attention to some serious flaw in our conceptual heuristics that remain potent even if below the level of consciousness. The *anthropological* comedian (Koziski 57) can see from within a culture, mirror the elements she wants to make prominent back to us in a way that makes it appear alien, thereby startling us out of our complacency regarding our own social realities. The important connection here is the intentional use of hyperbole in both humor and thought experiment used to highlight an otherwise hidden aspect of reality and render it extraordinary. The comedian, like many philosophical thought-experimenters, as Koziski claims, “exaggerates or distorts his observations as a participant observer talking to people in his own society about the familiar cultural rules and behavior patterns in *their* and *his* own society. The audience may hear their own behavior described as if it is an alien culture in the sense that they knew that information all along but no one ever said it like that to them before” (Koziski 61). In this way a specific point is being emphasized in comparison to some quotidian aspect of reality and in some cases the extreme nature of

²²Although there is not space to make the argument explicit, the preceding stands as a defense of Robert Roberts’ claim that humor constitutes a virtue. Roberts views most humor as resulting from incongruity, and proposes that humor is a moral virtue on the basis of the insight it provides: “The concept of virtue is thus the concept of a congruity between one’s character and one’s nature, and thus of the live possibility of lacking congruity between character and nature—of falling short of one’s telos. Given this, one form of humor closely connected with the virtues would be a representation of moral failures as incongruities” (Roberts 130). I would phrase the point differently: the world and our place in it is rarely the way we would wish it to be. Since it is very difficult to achieve the desired congruence between our (moral) desires and reality, individually or culturally, it is clear that there is the real possibility of a perceived incongruence between the way things are and the way we think they ought to be. Such recognition leads to entertaining what it would be like if my actual “character”, or the “character” of the nation, was congruous with our respective consciously professed goals. In many ways this is the starting point of all moral thinking. Without the perception of inequality or injustice, for instance, there would be no impetus to make an effort to change the world or self for the better. So, a moral failure would constitute an incongruity, and this will more likely be acknowledged by the individual who has cultivated a sense of humor, or one who has been cajoled into a playful attitude, for many of the reasons offered in this paper.

the constructed scenario facilitates the desired frame-shift, enabling the audience to take on the perspective intended by the witty thought experimenter.²³

The notions and beliefs that were not reasoned in, and thus not propositionally or logically constructed and connected, cannot be deconstructed (solely) through logic. Koziski, in her prescient paper written well before Implicit Association Tests, notes that “Covert behavior is not merely hidden because informally learned, but includes a component of ignored, repressed behavior patterns and commonly-learned attitudes running counter to the culture’s articulated ideals” (Koziski 59). She presents a compelling case that many comedians are anthropologists who are effective in revealing the hidden facets of social reality: “The comedian as licensed spokesperson²⁴ can grasp and articulate contradictions in the culture of which other Americans may be unaware or *reluctant to openly acknowledge*” (Koziski 65, my emphasis). The mirth-seeking audience wants to tarry along with the subversive wit to hear them out—this is less likely the case with more direct methods of argument that favor unambiguous logical or metaphysical precision over the ontological confusion of lived experience.

Here is a final example from Dave Chappelle in which Chappelle and his white friend “Chip” are high on marijuana as they notice the police nearby:

“[Chip shouts] Dave! It’s the goddamn cops [then Chappelle as Chip, takes a long *comfortable* drag on a joint, and in Chip’s voice] I’m gonna ask him for directions” ... [the cop tells Chip to move on after giving him the directions. Then, Chappelle in his own voice] That’s all that happened, that’s the end of the story. Now, I know that’s not amazing to some of

²³Gendler even adds a note comparing thought experiments to riddles where contexts are created “making suddenly intelligible what previously appeared to be a nonsensical description” (Gendler 413, nt. 25).

²⁴I interpret this to mean that we are willing, in extremely large numbers, to pay for the humorous performances of comedians, who in many cases point to the incongruities between our ideals and our beliefs and actions: “It is amusing to realize that a comedian can be seen to be a sort of informal—but expert—scientist, leading the way, helping us expose and resolve heretofore unnoticed glitches in our common knowledge” (Hurley et al. 112-13). Moreover, we offer professional comedians much greater leeway in criticizing people in power, even if the comedian comes very close to or in fact crosses, a line of acceptability. We permit them a cloak of immunity, but only up to a point.

you, but you ask one of these black fellas here, that shit is fucking incredible. A black man would never dream of talking to the police high. That is a waste of weed. (Chappelle *Killin' Them Softly*, 2000)

I have not been able to determine whether “Chip” is actually one of Chappelle’s friends or if this is an instance of the comedian “making shit up”, but that is no more relevant than the fact none of the people in *To Kill A Mockingbird* actually existed: it is as true as anything that does happen, to borrow from Louis C.K. Rarely do white parents have to instruct their children on how to act around the police or in department stores for fear of being watched and accused. Echoing Chris Rock, white parents have no worries that they or their children will ever be guilty of “shopping while *white*” or “driving while *white*”, as being white automatically expands the spatio-temporal, and chronological freedoms for that person: there is virtually no place or way of being that is off-limits to them. What Chappelle is describing is not something new especially for black males, and it *should not* be news for whites either.

VII. Conclusion

A rhetorical attempt at consciousness-raising needs something like that found in the Louis C.K. and Chappelle performances in order to be successful, especially regarding implicit biases and civilized oppression. For instance, Tamar Gendler notes, “But another thing that distinguishes good thought experiments [and subversive performances] from bad is their ability to direct the reader’s attention to inadequacies in her conceptual scheme that she herself recognizes immediately, *as soon as they are pointed out to her*” (Gendler 413, my italics). In order for this to work, the audience must become participants in the fault-finding process with the humorist in a manner not found in direct logical argument, or bona-fide unambiguous protest against the absurdities of oppression. The humorous narratives facilitate an openness and inclination to see differently, foster a positive sense of double-consciousness, and move an audience toward world-traveling. Borrowing from Jul Sorensen on the use of humor against marginalization and oppression, “It [is] not necessary to invent new absurdities, because reality in itself [is] absurd enough” (182), and the subversive humorist makes this incongruity salient in a

manner that encourages self-reflection and potentially attitude change. We come to see that an element of social reality within the context of the quotidian is hardly innocuous, frivolous, or mundane. Subversive humorists let us see how extraordinary civilized oppression really is; not because it so rarely happens, but because it happens so much, affects so many people, and in so many everyday situations in what political pundit Sean Hannity calls “America--the single greatest and best country God has ever given man on the face of the planet.” This is incongruous. Borrowing again from Dave Chappelle, the subversive humorist reveals to us that “that shit is fucking incredible.”

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