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Politically Correct Language in George Carlin

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Abstract

American stand-up comedian George Carlin is notable for his long-standing popularity from the early 60s up until his death in 2008. In this paper, I examine George Carlin's stance on politically correct language. Focusing on his three books *Brain Droppings*, *Napalm and Silly Putty*, and *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?*, I show how his attempts to remove himself from a politically correct system ultimately fail as he adheres to his own ideals of language and morality. Using his texts and various work from Stanley Fish to support these claims, I show how Carlin ridicules the redundancies and hypocrisies that exist when groups claim words as their own. While breaking down these claims on political correctness, Carlin implements his own set of values. I show how there is no direct way to escape politicizing language. However, Carlin's position as stand-up comic allows for a more fluid approach to politically correct language, as it offers a way to shift leanings and explore various forms of ideology permitting audiences a way to think differently about the world around them.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Politically Correct Language in George Carlin

by

Alan Schultz

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

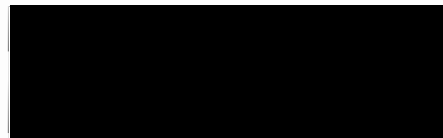
Master of Arts

May 2020

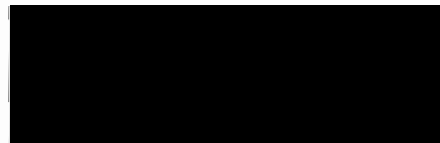
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

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POLITICALLY CORRECT LANGUAGE IN GEORGE CARLIN

A THESIS

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2020

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The 1960s and '70s were times of massive cultural change for America. Stand-up comedy was also beginning to change as comedians began to write “their own material and used it to express their personal point of view about what was happening in the country, the culture, and their own lives” (Zoglin 1-2). Stand-up comedians took to the stage to make fun of and ridicule everything from the smallest nuances of life to the biggest issues of politics and philosophy. Comedians were beacons of new perspective “who often risked their careers as they reinvented a popular art” and gave Americans a form of entertainment that challenged the status quo (Zoglin 3). Michael J. Lewis marks this time as a transitional phase as “audiences born after the 1970s have difficulty understanding American popular culture from the 1970s – the moment before what has come to be known as ‘political correctness’ came to dominate every aspect of cultural awareness” (75). Politically correct speech became a polemical term that seemed to threaten artistic freedoms as it gave performers cultural guidelines for them to accept or reject.

At the forefront of stand-up comedy during the 1970s was George Carlin, known for his thoughts on free speech. In her book *All Joking Aside*, Rebecca Krefting retells how, in his early years, Carlin would be arrested and jailed mouthing off to cops in defense of Lenny Bruce, who was arrested for obscenity. Carlin’s stances on free speech go beyond arrest: “afterwards Carlin took up a similar mantle in the '70s with his ‘Seven Dirty Words’ bit, which attempted to secure the right to free speech for comics” (55). In this bit he challenges what is unacceptable to say on public radio, narrowing it down to the words “shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker and tits” (*Occupation: Foole*) and goes on to explain the redundancies and hypocrisies of these words. He deconstructs them showing their triviality as compound words like *cocksucker* and *motherfucker* are only “fifty percent dirty,” containing words you *can* say with “sucker” and “mother,” and “cock” even being found in the Bible. “Shit” is “not okay with the middle class”

but is inevitably slipped in by frustrated mothers. Fuck is used to describe sex and life “and something to hurt us with” when used with more aggression. Carlin masterfully analyzes these words to show the triviality and bias of declaring certain words as unacceptable. He even adds on to this list at the end of the bit to show how this list will be constantly changing with “fart, turd and twat,” (*Occupation: Foole*) and that some other “dirty words” are perfectly acceptable given the proper context. The overall sentiment of this bit is to put pressure on censorship, especially regarding words, as he shows an underlying concern with freedom of speech and other constitutional rights being put at risk. Lewis commends Carlin’s ability “to spell them out as [he] did in plain, clinical language – as one might recite the conjugation of a verb – was to achieve the greatest feat for any class clown: to become the teacher himself” (76). Bringing humor, masterfully wielded wit, and intelligence to the bit, Carlin cleans up these “dirty words” and shows audiences that words should be harmless aspects of life.

Krefting continues to explain how Carlin was at the forefront of pushing boundaries and challenging societal norms that went beyond a defense of free speech: “Carlin was politically incisive at times, wielding satire like a weapon, but in main his jokes on religion zero in on problems without offering solutions” (56). Krefting’s concern with Carlin is his lack of solutions, falling short of what she describes as “charged comedy” or comedy “with specific intentions to promote unity and equality or to create a safe and accepting space for people from all walks of life” (2). These “specific intentions” are a tall order for stand-up comedians as these changes are more likely to occur by progressive politicians. However, Carlin’s comments on language do just that. Carlin may not offer a *clear* plan to promote what Krefting wants but, by breaking down cultural systems and showing redundancies and hypocrisies, Carlin brings an awareness to audience members that allows them to think differently about the world around them. Art

influences the world we live in, and Carlin and his contemporaries' "rise paralleled a revolution that was taking place across the popular arts, as the nation lurched through the political and cultural ferment of the late '60s" (Zoglin 4). Comics like Richard Pryor and Steve Martin changed the thoughts of the people and the format of the medium. Between "Pryor's raw street talk" and how "Martin dynamited comedy tradition with his 'wild and crazy guy' shtick" stand-up comedy was making an impact on American entertainment (Zoglin 5).

Articulating the importance of 1970s stand-up comedy and its impact on how we look at the world we live in, Zoglin writes: "It freed up our language and showed that our most embarrassing memories are nothing to be ashamed of, because others share them too" (224). From truck drivers to "frustrated mothers," Carlin shows that censored and taboo words are an unavoidable aspect of life that should not make us feel ashamed. Scrutinizing Americans' sensitivity to language, Carlin's critiques do in fact promote unity and equality – the solution being a simple recognition, reflection and application of morality. Normalizing these words and analyzing the complicated structures that are a part of them Carlin pushes his idea of morality. He believes in a clear relationship between what is right and wrong, based on brute honesty and transparency removed from shame or judgment.

These solutions are most notable when looking at Carlin's focus on politically correct language in modern American society. Looking at how Carlin recognizes, reflects on, and attacks politically correct speech, we will find how closely related morality is to these concerns of speech. By offering larger solutions to life, Carlin positions himself in a social field. Jonathan Greenberg writes about Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" as a way of understating satire: "by distinguishing good from bad, satire distinguishes us: in delineating what we as writers and readers accept and reject, it positions us within a social 'field' according to our tastes,

judgments, and behaviors” (11). Carlin’s tendency to describe language’s “codes” and “rules” in plain terms, such as “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong,” and “liberal” and “conservative,” shows how he believes “we” as society are being lied to by people in positions of power. Carlin gives people the opportunity to reflect on how they treat their fellow humans and applies those thoughts by using his comedy to focus on language that puts on display larger social norms and brings to light common hypocrisies. To illustrate this point, in a bit talking about poverty he writes:

People used to live in slums. Now “the economically disadvantaged” occupy “substandard housing” in the “inner cities.” And a lot of them are broke. They don’t have “negative cash flow”...Smug, greedy, well-fed white people have invented a language to conceal their sins. It’s as simple as that. (*Napalm and Silly Putty* 199-200)

He shows how commonly used language can conceal problems that are within the control of people in powerful positions. This gives audiences the opportunity to think about how common words might conceal greater problems.

Carlin’s comedy is drawn from three sources, as he describes in the preface to his first book, *Brain Droppings*. The English language, the “‘the little world,’ those things we all experience every day: driving, food, pets, relationships, and idle thoughts. The third is what I call the ‘big world’: war, politics, race, death, and social issues” (xi). It is as if Carlin comes back from the grave to directly counter Krefting’s criticism of his inability to offer solutions with his comedy. Carlin is aware of this, as he talks about comedians who

comment on political, social and cultural issues...They’re looking for solutions, and rooting for particular result, and I think that necessarily limits the tone and substance of

what they say. They're talented and funny people, but they're nothing more than cheerleaders attached to a specific, wished-for outcome. (xi)

Carlin feels there is more to say when restraints and boundaries are lowered or removed.

Solutions for Carlin come from breaking down as many boundaries as he can and not being politically tied down to a set of ideas. To Carlin, the current "system" is flawed, and he feels the best perspective is an outside one: "it's the unpleasantness of the system that keeps me out. I'd rather be in, in a good system. That's where my discontent comes from: being forced to choose to stay outside" (*When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* Preface). To Carlin, a morally "good system" cannot work when political ideology forces people to choose a side as it is an indicator of control. At the forefront of restricting systems that force people "in" or "out" is politically correct language. In his three books *Brain Droppings*, *Napalm and Silly Putty*, and *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops*, Carlin engages with these worlds he puts on display. Yet an examination of Carlin's stances on politically correct language will show him as a cheerleader for his own "outsider" system that inevitably has its own correct terms and conditions.

Carlin may fall short of offering clear solutions through his critiques on these "big" and "little worlds" that he draws his material from. However, his analysis of the English language is an area where he can "promote unity and equality" for all. Carlin's focus on politically correct speech is where we can find some of Carlin's biggest criticisms of society, echoing his "Seven Dirty Words" bit that can offer the best ways in which we look at humans beyond a preconceived idea of what is on the surface. Carlin is wary of anything that limits the tone and substance of what may be said. For Carlin, politically correct speech is at the forefront of these limits as he holds language to a high level of moral function rather than a political object. Carlin wants

audiences to see how groups use politically correct speech on immoral ground to hide their underlying desire to control and limit people's freedoms.

Putting Carlin into context of politically correct speech, we must identify what "politically correct" means in American culture. In its most direct form, politically correct means "conforming to a body of liberal or radical opinion, esp. on social matters, usually characterized by the advocacy of approved causes or views, and often by the rejection of language, behaviour, etc., considered discriminatory or offensive" (OED). Cori Healy discusses politically correct speech in comedy and states that laughter is a form of performance showcasing groups' moralities: "in a hyper 'pc' culture, reactions to a joke can, in effect, serve as a medium by which people evaluate one another" (138). She commends much of Carlin's material as politically correct especially his stances on women's rights as she gives examples of various bits showing Carlin's progressiveness and longstanding support of women's rights and pro-choice movements. Carlin goes into a bit about why women are crazy, and men are stupid:

But it doesn't just happen; it isn't an accident. Women have good reason to be nuts, the main one being that in the course of life, compared with men, they have far more to put up with; they bear greater burdens. Think of it this way: In the Big Cosmic Cafeteria, as human beings move down the chow line of life and reach that section where the shit is being spooned out, women are given several extra portions. (*When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* 22)

The joke brings to the forefront the "several extra portions" of shit women have taken from the universe, shaming the inequality against women that has persisted throughout time. While an important topic to take on, these stances are where she positively evaluates Carlin because they are both humorous and progressive, as they fall into her social field. There are, however,

moments where Carlin is poorly evaluated by Healy because he is not progressive as he steps outside of her liberal political leanings.

Healy notes where Carlin misses the mark, labeling him politically incorrect at times. Stanley Fish writes that “presumably what is deficient about ‘politically correctness’ is that its judgment of right and wrong are made from an angle, from a site of interest, from a position colored by partisan desires” (*There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech* 79). When Carlin steps outside her angle, Healy criticizes a joke about endangered species and humans’ involvement with the environment: “by choosing comedic illustrations that present human beings as a group that greatly overestimates their influence on Earth, Carlin challenges a politically correct atmosphere that embraces ardent environmentalism” (139). She goes on to show some of the titles Carlin has used for numerous specials going into the new millennium: “*You Are All Diseased* (1999), *Complaints and Grievances* (2001), and *Life Is Worth Losing* (2006) were aptly named as they continued in the same loud, subversive, politically incorrect tone” (140). These tones are also found in the titles of two books by Carlin. *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops* follows the same trend where “In a TV interview on CNBC with Tim Russert, Carlin said the title offends all three of the major religions, and the vegetarians” (Walker). *Napalm and Silly Putty* serves similar purposes of man’s imagination to make two distinctly different products. Carlin states:

The title serves as a fairly good metaphor for Man’s dual nature, while also providing an apt description of the kinds of thoughts that occupy me...on the one hand, I kind of like when a lot of people die, and on the other I always wondered how many unused frequent-flier miles they had. (Introduction)

Loud, subversive and politically incorrect may definitely be the case. But is there something to learn from these “incorrect” stances?

Greenberg writes, “satire can be seen not only to judge, attack and blame, but also to inquire, provoke and explore” (18). In judging and attacking these instances of man’s dual nature and ability to kill thousands, religion’s ability to divide countries, and well, vegetarians, Carlin shows that choosing a side does not always equal righteousness. While Carlin attacks religious, political, and many other social groups, it is important to ask what this attack is also exploring and inquiring about. Why might these cultures be a target of blame? Carlin is interested in showing how these groups have their own way of being regressive. He wants to show the good inside the bad and the bad inside the good, the dual nature of man as he puts it. Groups can be silly putty, fun and innocent, while also containing their own variations of napalm, destructive and threatening.

Through these intentions to offend, Carlin provides an exploratory form of art with the objective of entertainment and laughter. Greenberg notes the second side of satire that intends to attack, providing examples of various texts and work. When discussing these works and texts that exhibit attacks and transgression that resemble Carlin’s aggression, Greenberg shows that “none of these writings is *merely* a work of aggression or transgression. They all shape their judgments into an artistic form and blend attack with entertainment” (7). Carlin’s comedy is not “merely” a work of this aggression. It is also a form of entertainment that produces pleasure and laughter as Greenberg continues to note how “imagination and wit render the object of attack amusing or ridiculous” (7). Laughter and the goal of entertainment should not be forgotten. Carlin certainly has moments where his jokes are boring and fall flat. While subjective, much of his “short takes” are not as entertaining with jokes like, “Fuck whole-grain cereal. When I want

fiber, I eat some wicker furniture” and “I think TV remotes should have a button that allows you to kill the person on the screen” (*Napalm and Silly Putty* 114-115). While they may not spark large moments of laughter or entertainment, there may be a joke next in line to do so.

While jokes do not always succeed, at the very base there is the pure *intent* of sparking a laugh. It is important to acknowledge the setting which these titles and jokes occupy. The performances and writing are explicitly in settings where satire is expected. This includes Carlin as stand-up comedian, critics of comedy, writers of comedy, audience members and other consumers of the performance or writing. They all occupy and belong to the same community seeking entertainment and laughter. These people belong to the same “interpretive community,” a term coined by Fish. Carlin’s “interpretive community,” includes comic, critic, and audience member. When interpretations of his work are formed, it creates a “communication that occurs only *within* such a system and the understanding achieved by two or more persons is specific to that system and determinate only within its confines” (*Is There a Text in This Class?* 304). With this, there needs to be intense attention to the main goal of Carlin’s joke. The question of what is politically correct, starts to be diminished as political truth becomes blurred when the intent relies less on an ideological truth and more on an attempt to create something that is funny. Acknowledging the intended satire is a major factor that needs to be considered. The context of the material as a comedy routine is important to avoid disastrous misunderstandings. Taken outside the interpretive community to say “Carlin is not pro-environment” is not indicative of his true beliefs, but only an idea that exists in that moment. Keeping that conversation within the confines of the comedic interpretive community will aptly show Carlin was playfully taking the opposition. Other jokes show where he is even pro-environment:

Every sixty seconds, thirty acres of rain forest are destroyed in order to raise beef for fast food restaurants that sell it to people, giving them strokes and heart attacks, which raise medical costs and insurance rates, providing insurance companies with more money to invest in large corporations that branch out in the Third World so they can destroy more rain forests. (*Napalm and Silly Putty* 11)

Healy is quick to decide that Carlin goes against political correctness of environmentalists but does not take in additional information from the community that may counter the claim.

It seems as if at the same time, that she notes the offensive nature of this bit, she misses the exploration of the conservative opposition to environmentalism and the successful execution of the joke. Healy continues citing the joke:

Let me tell you about endangered species alright (laughter) [and the punchline] Over 90%,... over way over 90% of all the species that have ever lived on the planet, every lived, are gone (whooshing sound). They're extinct (pause). WE DIDN'T KILL THEM ALL (laughter). (qtd. in Healy 139).

The moments of laughter show that the intended audience finds the joke to be funny. At the end of her essay, Healy shows a major flaw and problem that Carlin is trying to express. Healy writes, "If audiences had become offended by Carlin's initial tone and word choices, they would have done so without experiencing the full scope of his performance and subsequently missed out on an exploration of notions that were extremely liberal and progressive" (140). For Healy, the exploration of new ideas is not fully experienced if the crowd misses when they are extremely liberal and progressive. She contradicts herself by missing the "full scope of his performance" when she criticizes the exploration of conservative thought outside her political leanings. The notion Carlin holds is not that environmentalism is wrong, but that, while humans

do account for the decline of species on earth, it is not the fault of *all* humans. He does not want humans to be controlled by people advocating for a cause that puts the full blame on everyone while championing their self-righteousness that they are right and everyone else is wrong. Carlin is throwing napalm on the environmentalists to show they are not always silly putty.

While it seems like he viciously attacks individuals, groups, and systems, he does so through satire to instead show redundancies, deeper understandings and compassion. For Carlin, politically correct language is a manipulation of language. Carlin is concerned with society's manipulation of language as a political object. This language is language that is viewed as a "truth" or what is "correct," when compared to a conflicting set of ideas of an opposing party or group. He finds politically correct language to be a guise for groups to push an agenda, to hide truth and to blur morality. This focus on morality ultimately becomes a component of what Carlin finds to be politically correct.

In the section "euphemistic bullshit" he talks about how taboo and censored words hide truth: "I don't like euphemistic language, words that shade the truth. American English is packed with euphemism because Americans have trouble dealing with reality, and in order to shield themselves from it they use soft language" (*Napalm and Silly Putty* 197). Hiding the truth shows an attack on morality as it is a form of lying. When words are considered harsh and rigid, Carlin feels there is something taken away from the human experience. Even if those harsh words are directed towards large groups there is still something to be taken away from it, a truth that needs exposure. We begin to see Carlin's version of his intended angle and special interest.

In *When Will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?*, Carlin continues to show politically correct speech's position within America and the truths it hides: "Political correctness is America's newest form of intolerance, and it is especially pernicious because it comes disguised as

tolerance. It presents itself as fairness, yet attempts to restrict and control people's language with strict codes and rigid rules" (69). Carlin takes issue with how language is forced into boundaries and confined by political groups and their tendency to prescribe an idea of what is right.

Claiming political correctness allows groups to turn away from ideas by the opposition while laying claim to words as their own. When words need to adhere to "strict codes and rigid rules," general rights seem to be threatened. For Carlin, this is made worse by the false veil of tolerance that these rules hide behind. Control becomes an issue as it does not grant morally good people the opportunity for freedom.

Showing how intolerance can be disguised as tolerance, Carlin explores the language used to describe groups of people. For Carlin, "Labels divide people. We need fewer labels, not more" (*Brain Droppings* 165). Carlin goes on to examine the term "Indians" used to describe Native Americans. In certain politically correct movements, there are discrepancies with the use of the term "Indians" and it is a derogatory and incorrect term. Carlin breaks down this claim on several levels and feels that "Indians" is perfectly acceptable, using history, redundancies, and triviality to support his claim. He first uses history to show the redundancy of using the word:

Now, the Indians. I call them Indians because that's what they are. They're Indians.

There's nothing wrong with the word Indian. First of all, it's important to know the word

Indian does not derive from Columbus mistakenly believing he had reached "India."

India was not even called by that name in 1492; it was known as Hindustan. More likely,

the word Indian comes from Columbus's description of the people he found here. He was

Italian, and did not speak or write very good Spanish, so in his written accounts he called

the Indians, 'Una genta in Dios.' A people in God. In God. In Dios. Indians. It's a

perfectly noble and respectable word. (165)

Carlin shows the origin of the word and explains that there has been a possible misinterpretation of what is generally viewed to be the root of the word “Indian”. Carlin takes the generally accepted version of the story and presents a different historical account and set of facts. Carlin makes an important note that the word itself, meaning “In God,” is noble and of a high moral standard. Carlin’s issue of fairness then arises as one side attempts to establish Indian as wrong and Native American as right. The one side deems it not fair to call them Indians because Columbus did not actually land in India. Carlin shows an alternate idea that Indians could be perfectly noble because of *his* accepted side of the story, that the original name held them to a high standard of being people of God.

While his take is interesting, Carlin is wrong. In his book *Word Myths*, David Wilton references this exact quote from *Brain Droppings* and provides ample amount of information on the etymology of the word. He writes: “The word *Hindustan*, or more accurately *Indostan* to use the early spelling, on the other hand, did not enter common European use until the seventeenth century. If Columbus were to use a name for that land, it would be *India*, not *Hindustan*” (163-164). Wilton continues to address the issue of “in Dios” as well explaining that “the phrase *una gente in Dios*, or anything like it, is found nowhere in Columbus’s writings” (164). While his facts are mistaken, Carlin’s broader argument can still hold true. Unknowingly or not, Carlin is showing that truth can be manipulated. Rumor can perpetuate a frivolous argument about the credibility of the truth. Carlin then shows a second truth that goes beyond the problem with the word, showing his problem is the hypocrisy and redundancy of relying on historical fact to determine something as fixed in the present. Fact can be manipulated and twisted to fit an agenda of a political purpose.

Carlin shifts the focus to show his difficulty with the “correct” term of Native American as it contains its own unethicity and moral hiccups. He explains these issues in further detail, breaking down the term: “So let’s look at this pussified, trendy bullshit phrase, Native Americans. First of all, they’re not native. They came over the Bering land bridge from Asia, so they’re not native. There are no natives anywhere in the world. Everyone is from somewhere else” (*Brain Droppings* 166). Carlin first calls the term “pussified” going back to the idea that it is shading the truth as it is a soft term that Americans are so comfortably drawn to. This is also using a politically incorrect word to describe a politically correct claim. Calling it “trendy” shows that it is simply what is current, fashionable and hip, again showing his problem with the malleability of words and time. It gives a subtle nod that the term was once not considered right or wrong, for the term is what is newest and simply what is acceptable at this moment. For him, trendiness removes any true concern for the change of the title.

Time plays a large role in the problem Carlin has with the word. Carlin feels as if the word was acceptable, so why change it? Wilton notes how “Indians” and “names like this begin life as simple descriptions. In this case, the description is inaccurate, but Columbus did not use the term in an offensive manner. Over time, the use of such name in pejorative contexts can give the word offensive connotation and render the word unacceptable” (165). This shift of meaning words take on over time is plainly called the “euphemism treadmill,” as coined by Steven Pinker: “People invent new words for emotionally charged referents, but soon the euphemism becomes tainted by association, and a new word must be found, which soon acquires its own connotations, and so on” (212). Through his breakdown of acceptable labels Carlin shows that “Native American” may even become dated and old and fall victim to the euphemism treadmill. History even shows us that Carlin was ahead of his time, as Native American is now slowly becoming an

uncommon term, and there is a shift to use “Indigenous” people instead. This shift takes time as Native American is still very common, showing how there is a delay between change and general acceptance.

Carlin goes on to explain the overall redundancy of the word, stripping “native” from any concrete meaning when referred to a group of people. “Native” can certainly be a shaky term when looking to history to try to establish the people as native. For Carlin, if we all share a common ancestor, no one is native, and the term is thus wrong as it is void of real meaning. Deciding who is native as an actual anthropological fact is hard to define. Regardless whether this idea is wrong, the sentiment behind the idea is worth noting. It is the simple acknowledgment that cultural identity is hard to identify and simply shows that words and their meanings are inherently shaky. Carlin takes issues with placing a fixed value on terms that may be fluid. Words like “native” have definitions that are not as defined as perceived.

Carlin shows this same idea with less politically correct terms such as “now” and “canceled.” The breakdown of “native” is comparable to a quick idea of his saying, “We use words like ‘now.’ But it’s a useless word, because every time you say it, it means something different” (*Napalm and Silly Putty* 165). This same thought continues with “If something in the future is canceled, what is canceled? What has really happened? Something that didn’t occur yet is now never going to occur at all. Does that qualify as an event?” (*Brain Droppings* 42). When compared to more innocent words like this, the correctness of “native” becomes more about a philosophical idea than an issue of political correctness of identity. This is when satire becomes a “‘sensibility’ ... a way of seeing the world – something short of a fully worked-out philosophical position, but something more than a mere feeling or mood” (Greenberg 10-11). The philosophical ideas are beginning to emerge but don’t go as far as declaring themselves as such.

Carlin is attempting to provoke people to consider the world at a deeper level, or at the very least having fun with half-baked philosophical ideas or linguistic ideas.

Carlin goes on to show his moral dilemma with the history of the term “Native American” as they are named after the country that killed millions of them:

As far as calling them “Americans” is concerned, do I have to point out what an insult this is? Jesus Holy Shit Christ! We steal their hemisphere, kill twenty or so million of them, destroy five hundred separate cultures, herd the survivors onto the worst land we can find, and now we want to name them after ourselves? It’s appalling. Haven’t we done enough damage? Do we have to further degrade them by tagging them with the repulsive name of their conquerers? (166)

Carlin does an interesting thing in this critique by placing himself and Americans into the equation. He uses “we” to make a collective argument about the atrocities done to the people. He does not try to separate himself from the other Americans who have done these things.

Intolerance exists within the self-professed tolerance of those that deem words politically correct. Tolerance, to Carlin is not accomplished through a simple change of language. Intolerance is shown through the attempt to remove the self from being a part of the historical equation and ignoring brutal atrocities and uncomfortable realities. Pinker shows the trouble with the euphemism treadmill as the concepts behind the words matter the most: “Give a concept a new name, and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name, at least not for long” (213). Changing the word does not change what we did in the past.

For Carlin, paying respect to Native Americans does not come from changing language; it comes from an acknowledgment of history and owning up to moral failures. Carlin’s issues

come from the “classroom liberals” who need to be told “it’s not up to you to name a people and tell them what they ought to be called” (166). Carlin finds that the respect must come from a deeper understanding of the history of the people, as he shows further discrepancies in ways which the American people have wronged Native Americans. He continues for a page and a half, noting times the United States government has wronged the people. He goes on to list actual names of tribes, names that they want to be called by, that have been taken over that have lost their voice and identity due to the “correct” blanket term of Native American. This is again where Carlin finds the guise of tolerance to lie. Tolerance does not come from a simple change of words, but from time spent researching and understanding the people and their history.

Bringing in an understanding of history is not the only way to understand politically correct language. There needs to be an understanding of the claims of politically correct language and what it intends to do. For a reading like this it is helpful to use Fish in depth, as he further conceptualizes the goals of politically correct language. Carlin and Fish share a common ground. Carlin says politically correct language presents itself as fairness, and Fish does the same, showing how fairness is also disguised as merit. In the introduction to *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech*, Fish explains how “merit” and “fairness” are presented as if their meaning are perspicuous and “they are among the prizes that are claimed when one political agenda is so firmly established that its version of the way things should be is normative and can go without saying” (4). Declaring something as fair is the ultimate prize for a political party in that “what is fair” becomes established as truth. When a group acquires the label “fair” they have manipulated an agenda into something “real.” Fish uses a metaphor from the film *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* to explain how opposing sides of an issue take on political

values and have their own ideas of what is “desirable, possible and even real” (6). This “realness” further cements Carlin’s concern about the malleability of the real story of Columbus.

Fish goes on to talk about how “merit” is used as a way of defining something as fairness. In the film, the main character played by Robert Morse, is assigned to work in a mailroom where he finds a fellow co-worker to be the boss’s nephew:

It turns out that one of the two will be elevated to the position of mailroom head, and the junior executive who is to make the decision announces solemnly, “I’ve been told to choose the new head of the mailroom on merit alone.” To this the boss’s nephew immediately responds, “That’s not fair.” (*There’s No Such Thing* 3)

Fish goes on to play devil’s advocate as he examines why the nephew’s feelings are justified as it points to larger issues of family politics and validates his cause of fairness. He goes on to clarify that family politics are not devoid or unrelated to merit but “only that in a bold political stroke one party has managed to define merit so that the concept is congruent with the assumptions underlying its own practices” (6). He goes on to explain how this same kind of assertion of a word like merit can be used with one’s own brand, giving examples of “those who range themselves against multiculturalism, feminism, ethnic studies, gender studies, campus speech codes, deconstruction, literary theory, and popular culture”(7). Fish explains further how these “isms” can be characterized as special interests:

In each case the claims of the “ism” are declared to be narrow, political rather than genuinely aesthetic or rational, and as “merely” political claims they weigh little against the large claims made in the name of truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truth that, transcending accidents of class, race and gender, speak to us all. (7)

In short, what each of these groups claims to be the truth is political and serves a special interest or agenda. The same can be said for those who campaign for correct speech and the “classroom liberals” who attempt to decide what “true facts” of history will be used to define words.

Carlin constantly attempts to position himself above all politically correct speech. Yet when he states that he wishes to be away from the system and campaigns against politically correct speech, he inadvertently falls into his own realm of speech that he deems correct. Fish shows how

political correctness, the practice of making judgments from the vantage point of challengeable convictions, is not the name of a deviant behavior but the behavior that everyone necessarily practices. Debates between opposing parties can never be characterized as debates between political correctness and something else, but between competing versions of political correctness. (9)

Carlin tries to be outside the debate as “something else” but instead has his own version of political correctness.

Carlin’s version of politically correct speech extends across two realms. First there is where Carlin values speech maintaining its “rules” regarding Standard English. A second realm is where Carlin is concerned with language maintaining a purpose to communicate morality. The latter is more congruent to how “correct speech” should communicate clear honest language, when discussing the big and little worlds he draws his inspiration from. Fish explains how Carlin’s own certainty in the fundamentals of speech presents its own problems: “The critic who confidently rests his analysis on the bedrock of syntactic descriptions is resting on an interpretation; the facts he points to are there, but only as a consequence of the interpretive (man-made) model that has called them into being” (*Is There a Text in This Class* 167). Carlin

comments on the technicalities of language and its position in the greater sphere of society: “there is a tendency these days to overcomplicate speech by adding unnecessary words” (*Brain Droppings* 69). He goes on to list words like “emergency situation” “flotation device” “shooting incident” and many more, with a list comprising thirty-three phrases. Carlin is resting on an interpretation. His interpretation of these redundancies relies on his idea of the system of words that are “correct” and stray away from redundancies, because they cancel each other out and become “wrong.” Carlin goes on to show his favorite oxymorons, listing fifteen in one particular section with words like “plastic glass” “new tradition” and “original copy” (*Brain Droppings* 114). Carlin’s issue with “correct” language is apparent in its technical values and the rules following Standard English. Fish shows that because they too are man-made, Carlin creates his own redundancy by putting trust into a system he believes to be the truth. This truth, like any truth Carlin argues against, is built on the same shaky ground.

Looking at the interpretations that Carlin makes, we see a different understanding of Carlin’s issue of “plain language” discussing euphemisms. Carlin interprets how words shade the truth as a form of lying and thus sees plain language to be beneficial in telling the truth even if that truth is harsh. In a bit, he discusses “some of the other non-victims” when he talks about his use of the word *fat* to describe overweight people (*Brain Droppings* 161). He explains why he uses “fat” joking about synonyms and how other terms are not accurate and overcomplicating because “They’re fat. They’re not large; they’re not stout; chunky, hefty, or plump. And they’re not big-boned. Dinosaurs are big-boned” (*Brain Droppings* 161). Carlin makes other jokes about redundancies of other terms such as “overweight” and “obese” and comments that “it is not intended as criticism or insult. It is simply descriptive language. I don’t like euphemisms. Euphemisms are a form of lying” (161). Directly claiming what they are or are not, shows

Carlin's idea about what he feels to be correct. He is stern about what he will say because he sees championing movements and changing descriptive words into euphemisms as a form of lying.

Carlin believes lying to be a form of moral concern. The euphemisms are less important than his greater concern of honesty. It is interpretation that should be deemed politically incorrect, not the words. The intent behind the bit is "seeing things the way they are, not the way some people wish they were" (*Brain Droppings* 161). Positivity can be drawn from this as Carlin simply shows a new perspective to get people to be truthful with one another. When critics like Krefting take issue with comedians that do not "promote unity and a safe space for comedy," Carlin sees such a claim to be a bigger concern as lies are perpetuated when creating that safe space. Carlin attempts to step outside a system that adheres to a politically correct ideology but while doing so creates his own politically correct system. While he may deny the label politically correct, he inevitably creates his own version of what is correct.

When Carlin says he is forced to "stay outside" because he wishes to be in a good system, he places himself not "out" or "above" but simply to the side, something that is his. Carlin calls for a transparent system that urges people to connect with one another on clear moral standards of good and bad. Just as Carlin wishes to connect with natives on their true issues, he wishes to see people for who they are and wants to remove the frivolous terms of language. He reminds readers later in the same bit, after commenting on "midgets" and "cripples" and other euphemistic words, saying "And remember, this has nothing to do with the people themselves. It has to do with the words." (162-163). This final reassurance is to reiterate the words are separate from the people as he takes issue with the veiled political manipulation of the words, not the people themselves. As with the euphemism treadmill, the concepts are what need change, not the words.

Stating that he will not change what he calls people, can obviously spark trouble for Carlin taken out of the context they were delivered. Fish makes another notable point that words do matter: “speech always matters, is always doing work; because everything we say impinges on the world in ways indistinguishable from the effects of physical action, we must take responsibility for our verbal performances” (*There’s No Such Thing* 114). Satire, Greenberg writes, is an “intervention in a public arena of discourse, an activity that brings people together (and pushes others away) to create a ‘public’ or dissenting ‘counterpublic’” (Greenberg 11). It is abundantly clear that Carlin’s words are a part of public discourse. It seems that Carlin’s “counterpublic” is careless when putting victimized groups on display, pushing more away than bringing people together. The counterpublic that has been created, that opposes politically correct language, is a new system with its own thoughts and deviations. While countering, the group maintains its ideals and political agendas. Carlin’s system of clearly defined language that does not hide the truth and his critiques that provide people a new way to think, are his way of fighting.

When Carlin brings attention to concepts that may be perpetuated without an honest realization of their deep-seated problems, is reminiscent of when Fish writes that stopping discrimination will only cause discrimination in some other direction: “You don’t redress discrimination simply by stopping it for its legacy will live on in the form of habits and thought and action now embedded in the fabric of society” (*There’s No Such Thing* 76). Carlin does not attempt to hide that “politically incorrect” terms are a part of the fabric of our society. They are embedded terms and ideas that we will never be able to escape. By keeping the terms and instead making fun of them and bringing humor into the equation, he is trying to soften these crude hard facts of life that cannot be hidden. Fish continues to say that “redress requires active

intervention, and active intervention will always be discriminatory in some other direction” (*There’s No Such Thing* 76-77). Carlin’s active intervention are the jokes he makes. He is doubling down on the discrimination, politically incorrect and derogatory, because this doubling down is actively seeking laughter. Carlin does not hide the discrimination; he brings it up and has it become a part of the routine so that this active intervention at the very least, creates a positive outcome of entertainment and a new way for people to look at problems that seem fixed.

This cycle may always be around us as Pinker concludes his thoughts on the euphemism treadmill: “names for minorities will continue to change as long as people have negative attitudes toward them. We will know that we have achieved mutual respect when the names stay put” (213). While this seems hopeful and distant, Carlin uses his comedy to instead force people to feel the uncomfortable systems that those who champion for politically correct language attempt to hide. Instead of changing words under the guise of tolerance, Carlin would rather expose the uncomfortable concepts of life and be proactive by ridiculing them and finding some sort of joy through entertainment. If what he says is not entertaining or funny, he loses the platform that allows him to explore these concepts.

Carlin concludes his preface by again attempting to detach himself from “the system” or any system:

No matter how you care to define it, I do not identify with the local group. Planet, species, race, nation, state, religion, party, union, club, association, neighborhood improvement committee; I have no interest in any of it. I love individuals as I meet them, I loathe and despise the groups they identify with and belong to. (*Brain Droppings* xii)

While trying his hardest to push himself away, Carlin cannot. What exists in his comedy are the very things he rejects: “I enjoy describing how things are, I have no interest in how they ‘ought

to be.’ And I certainly have no interest in fixing them. I sincerely believe that if you think there’s a solution, you’re part of the problem. My motto: Fuck Hope!” (xii). Carlin’s solutions are not direct. Just as he tells the “classroom liberals...it’s not up to you to name a people and tell them what they ought to be called” (*Brain Droppings* 166) he does not attempt to establish his own solutions. As a classroom liberal who is part of the problem, I must say Carlin does offer solutions. Carlin is not a political scientist, philosopher, or supreme moralist. He is a comedian. His humor is where we can find these solutions.

Carlin will not save us. His solutions are just as repetitive and hypocritical as those that he rejects. However, humor has the potential to be a momentary form of escape that can create progress. Comedy allows us to detach from systems by momentarily allowing us to detach and laugh at them. We laugh at them because they are flawed, redundant, hypocritical, deceitful and wrong. Fish again gives us a way to examine what is to come from Carlin’s comedy. In an article discussing the function, funding, and purpose of college humanities, Fish concludes with:

To the question “of what use are the humanities?,” the only honest answer is none whatsoever. And it is an answer that brings honor to its subject. Justification, after all, confers value on an activity from a perspective outside its performance. An activity that cannot be justified is an activity that refuses to regard itself as instrumental to some larger good. The humanities are their own good. (“Will the Humanities Save Us?”)

The comedy of Carlin – of any comedian – are their own good. By stepping outside his performance, Carlin shows how comedy is justified, how it is honorable. It is aware that it will not drastically change the world for its main intent, in its purest form, is to be funny.

Carlin is successful at this because apart from his stances on morality and denying politically correct speech he has “wield[ed] satire like a weapon” (Krefting 56) to bring quality

comedy to battle the hopelessness of society. His “short takes” section that comes up in all three books are reminders that comedy does not need to invoke larger questions of life. “The wisest man I ever knew taught me something I never forgot. And although I never forgot it, I never quite memorized it either. So what I’m left with is the memory of having learned something very wise that I can’t quite remember” (*Brain Droppings* 70). It is a simple joke that plays with language and metaphor. Of course, jokes like these are indicative of the various comedic stylings found in American stand-up and satire. The stylings are abundant, and the interpretations are just as rich.

It is undeniable the amount of success Carlin reached in the world of stand-up and the influence he has had on American stand-up comedy. From Carlin’s predecessors like Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, comedy remains a venue where comedians can explore nearly any area of life, from one-liner greats like Mitch Hedberg, absurdist like Andy Kaufman, and those questioning the trifles of everyday life, like Louis C.K., Dave Chappelle and others. The list of comedians influenced by George Carlin is far too long to list completely and accurately as they transcend comedic genres and overlap into other art forms. What all these performers of comedy that have in common is their ability to extract humor found in life. The complexities of “satire may claim the higher purpose of social critique or moral reform, or it may simply revel in its own transgressive laughter” (Greenberg i) as it has a wide range of applications and uses. Whatever satire and comedy may do, they have the ability to be extremely serious or incredibly trivial, or both.

Carlin exhibits fluidity of form as he tests political correctness, American politics, race, and gender that are fueled by opposition and aggression. The same aggression can be found with silly notions like a section “Fuck you, I like these kinds of Jokes!” listing quick one-liners like

“Chess: The piece movement” (*Brain Droppings* 63). Jumping from one idea to the next, Carlin offers a way for us to explore life. Resisting and challenging politically correct language, Carlin shows us a system that urges us to question what is around us. While questioning others, he asks us to question ourselves. He then has us question him. Where Carlin leads us is to a space of recognition, reflection and application of morality to give us the tools to laugh at the world around us.

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