

# ‘PICKING PEOPLE TO HATE’: REVERSIBLE REVERSALS IN STAND-UP COMEDY

## ABSTRACT

Generally speaking, ritual reversals mean switching to the opposite of what is considered ‘the normal order’. Such reversals can occur, for example, in terms of social hierarchies in rites of passage, in action in carnival, or in the framing of action as ritual or performance. For comedic figures such as clowns and tricksters, reversals are part of their semiotic technique. By ‘reversible reversals’ I refer to the characteristic ambiguity of comedic performance and the ability of comedic figures to play with, combine, or shift between opposite traits, actions, and perspectives. In this sense, comedy can be said to constitute a series of reversals. Jokes can also be reversible in the way their outcomes are indeterminate: they may have a number of interpretations and effects but none are guaranteed. To illustrate this, I will demonstrate how reversals figure in organizing jokes and performance in a bit called ‘Picking People to Hate’ by stand-up comedian Louis C.K. Looking at comedic performance as reversible reversals is a way to show how humor can be efficacious and meaningful both in spite and because of its characteristic ambiguity. This will illuminate how stand-up comedy creatively engages its cultural grounds and show how the study of comedic performance can offer insights into the semiotics of performance more broadly.

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**Keywords:** semiotics, performance, humor, stand-up comedy, ritual, reversal

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## INTRODUCTION: REVERSIBLE REVERSALS AND PERSPECTIVES AS FRAMES<sup>1</sup>

Reversals, broadly defined as switching to the opposite of what is considered ‘the normal order’ or inverting some aspect of it, are an important part of many ritual and other performances. Reversals of social and symbolic structures are also a vast and classic topic in anthropology (see for example Babcock 1978). Ritual reversals can occur, for example, in terms of social hierarchies

in rites of passage, when a person is first lowered, possibly below the ‘status ladder’, before being elevated (e.g., Turner 1969), or in action in carnival when an entire system of social statuses may be reversed (e.g., Bakhtin 1984; Handelman 1990). Reversals are an important aspect of the performance of many ritual clown figures (Keisalo-Galvan 2011; Steward 1991 [1929]) as well as more everyday instances of clowning and humor (e.g., Basso 1979). Reversals can also be a way of framing action as performance, ritual, or comedy, or a combination of these.

The concept of framing has been central to the discussion of play and humor: Gregory Bateson (1976) has discussed how metacommunicative messages mark something as play; actions within the ‘play frame’ are not to be received in the same way as the same actions when framed as serious. His example is a dog nipping at another dog in play—while the play bite iconically resembles a real bite, it is not to be interpreted the same way. Similarly, close friends playfully insulting each other are not interpreting these insults as ‘serious’. William Beeman describes one way of creating humor as presenting first one ostensible frame and then ‘pulling it aside’ to reveal another, which reframes the material (Beeman 2001). However, Don Handelman (2012) has argued that Bateson’s model of framing is hierarchical: the frame determines the meaning within the frame, and is in this sense both superior to the material it frames and separate from its ‘sides’—both what is within the frame and what is outside it. Handelman posits the idea that framing can also be conceived of in alternative ways: instead of viewing meta-organization as neat and linear, framing may be messy or fuzzy. Handelman uses the term ‘moebius framing’, inspired by the moebius strip, to describe a situation where the separation of inside, outside, frame, content, and wider context are not always clear.

Play-frames can certainly be vulnerable and ambiguous; it is easy for a joke to go ‘too far’ or even a play-fight between dogs to become too rough. The frame can be compromised by the content without the intention of the participants. Joking is ‘dangerous’ (Basso 1979: 43). In this article I will explore the complex relations between the various frames in a bit of stand-up comedy and how this complexity is created and manipulated for comedic effect. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on *perspectives as frames*. This view is directly

inspired by the material under analysis, as subjective intents and interpretations—and the way these are implicit, explicit, or revealed at strategic points—are central to the bit under analysis, and, I suggest, to stand-up comedy more generally. Linking frames to specific perspectives is also a way to analytically organize the plurality of frames involved in the material analytically, and to demonstrate the relations between frame and content.

Performance techniques, as well as the skill of particular performers in employing these techniques, are a way of channeling and directing the perceptions and attention of participants. By using the concept of ‘semiotic technique’ I aim to draw attention to comedic performance as ‘a performative pragmatic accomplishment’ (Beeman 2001: 98), a skill embedded in social and communicative contexts to bring about certain effects, or, for the purposes of the current argument, to effectively transmit perspectives effectively. I am interested in how humor and its effects are semiotically created in relation to (aligned with, challenging, building on, and/or subverting) semiotic ideologies, understood as ‘sign users’: reflexive sensibilities about the definition, value, and effects of different semiotic systems they use (Stasch 2011: 168; see also Keane 2007; Robbins 2012). Thus, I take semiotic technique to be inclusive of the performer’s action and the interpretive frames projected by that action and assumed as part of the knowledge and expectation of those receiving, watching, or otherwise participating in the performance.<sup>2</sup>

By ‘reversible reversals’ I refer to both the characteristic ambiguity of comedic performance, and how comedic performance and this ambiguity are created in the first place. In this sense, reversible reversals figure in both the means and ends of comedic performance, the ability of comedic figures and jokes to

play with, combine, or shift between opposite concepts, traits, actions, and symbolic frames. Comedy can be said to constitute and be constituted by a series of reversals, which set up mutually defined opposites and relate them to each other. Bringing my ideas of semiotic technique and reversible reversals together with figure-ground theory and Handelman's idea of moebius framing—and demonstrating these through a specific example—will show how comedic performance is both open and systematic and able to play with and subvert even its own grounding contexts. More broadly, this article is a step towards my eventual goal: to build on previous research to rethink the semiotics of comedic performance, with the hope of offering new insights on non-comedic performance as well.

## LOUIS C.K.: 'PICKING PEOPLE TO HATE'

Louis Szekely (born 1967), known as Louis C.K., is a renowned U.S. stand-up comedian 'commonly acknowledged as one of the greatest comics of his generation' as an interviewer on NPR put it (Gross 2014). Louis's style is observational; he talks about his own life, himself as a person, and describes his view of the world through commentary and description of mostly everyday events. Although there is a lot of talk about anger, violence, and conflict, to me Louis comes across as a basically kind and intelligent man. He bares his own shortcomings and peculiarities, and those of other people and the world, in a ruthlessly honest way, combining dark thoughts with lightheartedness. Louis is not quite as political as, for example, comedians Bill Hicks or George Carlin were, but he does often address social issues, such as white privilege, in a way that does not allow them to be simply laughed away.

... and I don't mean to say that if you're white you have no right to complain. I just mean that if you're black you have more right to complain... White people, we have the same thing, we have things that happened to us that we're still coping with—like when they took our slaves away. (Live at Carnegie Hall, *The Right to Complain*)

*Picking People to Hate*—the bit I have chosen to analyze is from the 2007 HBO Special called *Shameless*. This bit features a clear example of reversals, as well as being representative of Louis's style. The specials are filmed as shows with a live audience, but they are of course edited. In this sense the film is a finished product, the creation of Louis, the director, and the editor, rather than solely a document of a live performance. The process of making *Shameless* was the first implementation of Louis's process of beginning with new material and building the show on a tour (Maron 2010). Although Louis is known for producing new material at a fast rate, there is a continuity of style in his performances, and there are echoes of previous ideas in *Shameless*. For example the basic premise of *Picking People to Hate* is mentioned in passing in *Shitty Kids* in *Live in Houston*.

*Picking People to Hate* is the 6th of 15 bits. On the audio album these have been numbered and titled; there is the intro and outro, and thirteen titled bits in between. The shortest one is 27 seconds and the longest is 8.40 minutes. *Picking People to Hate* lasts 6.32 minutes. While the entire show is a coherent whole, each bit as it has been individualized on the album is complete in itself. Analyzing a single bit is a way to both show the complexity of even a short clip of performance and to demonstrate the key elements repeated in other bits and performances.

This particular one begins and ends with reference to a t-shirt that says ‘awesome possum’ and has a picture of an opossum. In between mentions of the shirt, Louis discusses various places like coffee shops and the post office, and the hatred he feels of people there, whether because they seem too free to Louis, or because he is indulging in ‘recreational hatred’ to pass the time while waiting in line.<sup>3</sup>

## ORGANIZING THROUGH REVERSALS

There are various reversals in the bit, most of which are linked to shifts in perspective—either in the way that Louis takes on another’s perspective or expresses a shift in his own. These perspectives and shifting between them inform and frame the content of Louis’s performance. Although at first these perspectives may seem to be organized hierarchically, the reversals ultimately challenge this hierarchy and undermine any conception of neat and orderly separation between the frames or between frame and content. Louis presents, takes on, and speaks from a total of twelve perspectives, each attached to a specific subject, including Louis as the narrator, Louis as the person experiencing the stories enacted in performance, various people who figure in the stories, and a thong swimsuit. Some only appear once, others several times. Louis goes back and forth, always returning to Louis the narrator. The performance is dialogic in various senses: impersonations and shifts are marked and created through a heteroglossic drawing from varieties of speech and multimodal expression including different ways of speaking and moving (see Bakhtin 1981; Haviland 2009). Louis’s semiotic technique is evident in how smoothly he impersonates, transmits, shifts between, and organizes the relations between these perspectives.

The bit begins with Louis telling us about a t-shirt he has:

So. Here’s a weird thing that happened to me. I have this, I have this, uh, t-shirt and it says ‘awesome possum’ on it and it’s got a picture of a possum. I know it’s stupid but a friend of mine gave it to me and—fuck you, I bought it, I thought it was cool...

Here is the first reversal. Louis, first as the friendly and sociable narrator, the host to his audience, begins to acknowledge the silliness of the shirt and panders to the possibility of being judged by the audience, hiding behind the excuse that the shirt was actually a gift. He then abruptly changes his mind and tone of voice, defending and committing to his shirt and his fondness for it, despite and against the imagined judgment. Louis then continues:

But... I’ve never seen anybody with the same shirt before—with the awesome possum shirt—and I was in this coffee place in L.A. You know like a coffee—not like Starbucks... like an indie coffee place, where all the cool people go...

Louis then mimes the cool people drinking coffee, making tight nasal ooh-sounds to depict the cool people’s discourse. He paints a picture of hipsters (without using the word), noting how they wear snow hats in the summer, have ipods, and say ‘cool things like “me too”’, which of course can only be thought to be cool from an insider’s perspective as a response to something, and to a critical outsider (such as Louis here) might mean these people are insular and exactly alike—or indicate and affirm his outsiderhood. The bit goes on to present scenes at Venice Beach, the bank, and the post office, until we finally return to the coffee shop

and the awesome possum t-shirt at the end of the bit. In my view, the most important kind of reversal—and this is a constant in all his performance—is the repeated shifting between the two perspectives of Louis himself: narrator Louis engaging the audience and Louis as the individual experiencing all this, acted out in the scenes of the narrative. Through performance these are separated from and related to each other in a variety of ways.

### CULTURAL FIGURES, GROUNDS, AND FIGURE- GROUND REVERSALS

To illustrate how reversals organize both content and its framing in comedic performance I also draw from the figure-ground theory of perception, which posits that perception and thought focus on *figures* (such as images, things, or abstract ideas), foregrounded against a *ground* (co(n)text(s), the sensual and intelligible background). An important aspect of this view is ‘the fundamental asymmetry of the figure-ground relationship of focal event and its context’, which has also meant that figures have received ‘the lion’s share of analytic attention’ (Goodwin and Duranti 1992: 10; see also Hanks 1992). Roy Wagner (1986: 25, 33 et passim) has taken the theory further by focusing on *figure-ground reversals*: perception and cognition proceed through a dialectic between referential microcosmic codings, such as language, and relatively more concrete macrocosmic grounds, such as a coffee shop. This means that ‘a perception can be inverted with its perceptual “ground” [and] referential microcosm and embodied macrocosm can serve alternatively as figure and ground to one another’ (ibid.: 33). Perception is still focused on figures, but the reversibility of the relation shows how figures and grounds, such as talk about coffee shops and

actual coffee shops, are relative to each other, each relying on the other for meaning. Figure-ground pairings are temporary and unstable, dependent on culturally and socially informed perspectives and mutually coordinated semiotic action as a constant shifting and shuffling of figures and grounds. Framing is thus an aspect of defining the relation between figure and ground. Furthermore, I suggest that deliberate figure-ground reversals, allowing shifting between grounds and re-defining figures, are an integral part of comedic performance as a semiotic technique.

In Louis’s performance, the obvious, most immediate level of contextual ground for the telling of these stories is the time and place of the performance itself, now documented on film. The film is shot from several different angles and distances. We see the stage, Louis, the audience. The stage is almost empty; there is a stool with a bottle of water, the quintessential bit of backstage iconic of stand-up performances. There is Louis holding the microphone, wearing a black sweater and brown pants. There is a watch on his wrist. The scene is simple, yet it is so easy to be transported away by the performance.

Louis names and describes places and people in them, shifting between direct narration to the audience and acted out experiences within the stories. The shifts as well as the scenes are created through speech, expressions, movement, body, and voice (on the performative framing of various contexts nested in each other, see Bauman 1986). Louis creates various places, first as described figures we focus on and imagine, which then become grounds, to be inhabited by more specific figures and events. He goes back and forth between the narrator Louis, and Louis as the character in the story, at times taking on other characters.



This is how Louis moves from the coffee shop to Venice beach and begins to broach the topic of hating people:

...and I just stand in the door way and fucking hate them—I don't know why I go to the place I—I think it's cause I hate them! I just hate this, I—there's a certain part of the culture I just hate. Cause I grew up in Boston and in Boston people just beat the shit out of each other for no reason—they just beat the shit out of each other (...) but I kind of think you need that you know, to keep quality control, cause in places where that doesn't happen people are just too free, and fucking—they're just a bummer you know—like, I was once on Venice Beach and I'm jogging, and there's this guy—roller blading towards me and he's, he's got roller blades on and just a thong, just a fucking thong that's just grabbing his dick and balls, just fighting with them, going, 'Grr, stay in there!' and then he's just totally naked otherwise and he's got this Kenny G hair and he's just rollerblading like [Louis mimes the movement] 'I'm free!' And I actually had to stop jogging cause I needed my whole body to fucking hate this guy with. I had to just stand there going oh, you motherfucker! Now I have to know you exist you piece of shit! Fucking go skate into an AIDS-tree, you motherfucker! [pause] All right now. Heh.

After the energetic swearing, understood as the silent thoughts going through Louis's head in Venice Beach but acted out loud in performance, Louis tones it down as the narrator, saying, 'all right now', and giving a half laugh at this other version of himself, in coordination with the audience. Then Louis comes to the idea of the bit's title: *Picking People to Hate*:

I dunno, I—I've started to kind of hate people and it's not because I have anything against them it's just I—I enjoy it, it's just recreation, like you know when you're at the bank and you got nothing to do while you're waiting in line so you just pick people to hate while you're waiting, you just look at someone and form an opinion, with no information, and it's never positive, who fucking wastes their time—[shifts into an exaggeratedly earnest voice, covering the mic with his hand, as if to convey a voice in one's mind] 'I bet he's a hard worker' who thinks about that shit?

This is of course a reversal of how emotional reactions are usually supposed to work: as reactions. We are supposed to hate someone only because of a good reason, and it is supposed to be something to avoid, certainly not recreational.

Louis gives two examples, the bank and the post office, as places where this sort of boring waiting in line can occur. Here, however, is a contrast between the two places; the bank is posited as more hypothetical: Louis stays in the present tense. When he posits a place as more defined, more of an actual place where the events took place, he tends to set this up by using the past tense:

I feel people hate me sometimes, you know, like uh, I was at the post office and I'm at the line you know it's one of those things where there's a line and one window open, so everyone's like 'ohh!'

These sorts of stories are a common part of Louis' stand up. He describes situations and places that are both generic enough and specific enough to imagine and to provide a (back) ground for Louis to develop events from his perspective. After all it is this perspective that

Louis provides on the familiar events that allow us to see them in a new way, through Louis' eyes, as it were.

Now that the *idea* of hating strangers in public places has been established, it can be used as a ground to make sense of further figures. The post office, also a ground, becomes the scene of various happenings: Louis describes and demonstrates the collective frustration 'like a silent movie of impatient people'. Then he describes the people who break the silence to say obvious things like, 'they should open another window', which Louis says in a slightly higher and tighter voice he often uses in performance to depict 'stupid people'. Next Louis describes a slightly more defined character in the post office:

then there's always an old lady who has a story: [in a slow and deliberate voice] "I was here on Wednesday, and there was also a line like this." Holy shit! Really?! Ohh my god, you fucking old lady! That's amazing!

Now the idea of hating people—first presented as Louis' private fantasy—begins to take on a life of its own. From the beginning there is an ambiguity between Louis being part of the group and separated from it. He depicts the group response to the 'they should open another window' as equally sarcastic: 'everyone's like "totally"'. This ambiguity is resolved into a clear rift when Louis explicitly notes how hatred is focused on the one being served:

But, anyway, then it's your turn to the window, right, and now everybody's looking at you and you feel the scrutiny of how quickly you're mailing your shit. You start realizing how (...) unimportant

your package is and you feel like they can tell—'yeah get the fuck out of there you don't need to mail that right now' and it's like if you do one little extra thing like, 'uh, do you have those stamps that have Jackie Robinson', behind you hear like 'pfft, Jesus, fuucking duuude' they put their shit down heavily like, 'fuck! Now this motherfucker's gonna make me stand here while he buys fucking stamps at the post office, are you shitting me? Let's shit in his mouth right now, seriously, let's you fucking hold him down and I will shit directly into his fucking time-wasting mouth'.

Louis goes to fairly extreme places of violence in this show. In an earlier bit in the same show (*Tell Your Girlfriend I Said*) Louis takes a scene of imagined violence to a height where the story ends with Louis beating someone to death with a pipe (because of Louis-the-individual's literal interpretation of a bumper sticker saying 'tell your girlfriend I said thanks') and masturbating on the corpse. Then Louis-the-narrator takes over and states that that was too much and unnecessary.

Didn't need that part, didn't need it. The story was totally complete without the jerking off on the corpse—[half to himself] it's too late.

This to me is even funnier because it is delivered as presenting the storyteller's own view, not in reaction to condemnation by the audience (who are, in the final edited product, laughing, cheering, and clapping for nine seconds between the end of the story and Louis' commentary). This does not need to be taken as condoning violence by either Louis or the audience. Part of why these jokes work for me, when told by Louis,

are his demeanor and overall comportment that suggest he is not actually a violent man: the reversals into violence are reversible.

So Louis artfully creates grounds and figures, places, people in those places, the perspectives of and on these people, and we follow him from place to place and from one perspective to another. Actual and imagined interactions in the stories are contrasted and connected to the actual here-and-now engagement between Louis and the audience.

I argued earlier that semiotic technique is action in relation to semiotic ideology. This does not mean that the action is determined by the ideology, more so since linguistic and other ideologies themselves contain contradictions which skillful performance may exploit. In the ways comedic performance brings contradictory elements together, it often manages to both align itself with and subvert existing ideas, which is a central aspect of the potential semiotic force of humor. For example, Louis's performance is both aligned with and opposed to the semiotic ideologies concerned with being a social person on the one hand and an autonomous individual on the other. The performance and the stories set up extremes of these and then find ways of relating them, mediating the boundary between them.

Louis-the-narrator is the one addressing the audience in the here and now of the performance. Most of the time Louis as narrator engages with the audience in a sociable, professional manner, in accordance with the genre—yet this may shift, like in the beginning of the bit when Louis starts to pander to the presumed judgment of his shirt and then turns it around (of course, dealing with a heckler is a standard example of when a stand-up comedian shifts into a less sociable register). As narrator, he is often the voice of morality, commenting both on the story and himself

within it. Louis-the-individual in the stories is different: he is apart from the other people in the stories, in conflict with them, usually concerned with what he wants or otherwise caught up in his own private, often socially inappropriate, thoughts. On the other hand, Louis-the-individual is quick-to-react, spontaneous, and creative: he says things like 'go skate into an AIDS-tree' and conjures up imaginative events and relations. He is neither moral nor social. In fact, in the end of the bit when he tries to make a sociable connection, it doesn't work. Louis the experiencing individual tries to step away from the hatred and the violent fantasies, to reverse this and have a nice social moment, but is met with an adverse reaction from the other person.

According to Roy Wagner (1981; see also Macfarlane 2008) the distinction between what is seen as the innate and given, and what is considered to be the sphere of human action and agency, can be conceptualized as what people *are* and what they *do*. Special circumstances (such as ritual) or special individuals (such as shamans or scientists), who have mastered the appropriate techniques to do so, can shift the boundary or invert these spheres, again, in terms of specific semiotic ideologies. Comedic performance as a context and as a semiotic technique provides one—perhaps mundane, but still efficacious—example of this kind of figure-ground reversal of being and doing. Louis-the-narrator *is* an individual, unique and different from other individuals, and he *does* the social and conventional, bridging the gap between himself and the people in the audience. The Louis in the stories in an inversion of this: he is actively showing his inner thoughts and bringing them out, spinning elaborate fantasies of these thoughts, full of violence and mockery, angry at how others impinge on him. The Louis in the stories as an individual is actively setting himself apart, *doing* and performing his individuality,



against the inescapable society (that he *is* part of) which impedes Louis' freedom, pushing him to assert himself. His inner individual self is presented and brought out, and Louis, as the social person relating to the audience, is (in) the (back)ground.

The performance is a constant shifting back and forth between these. As the narration tells us, Louis may just be standing there at the door of the coffee shop, but in his thoughts he is powerful, judging and condemning others.

... and I'm standing in the doorway just fantasizing about walking around just hitting their cups to the floor, like this, you know [mimes the action] fucking bagel, and coffee, and bagel...

Yet this fantasy of power, or the need for it, is partly created by the worry of being judged by the 'cool people'. If Louis-the-individual is creative and, as such, a source of power, he is also anti-social, immoral, dangerous to the self-as-a-moral-project which, in addition to fulfilling the self, also aims to fit in with and relate to others. In one way, stand-up comedy performance, so predicated on the individual identity of the performer, provides a conventional frame for bringing out and engaging with these contradictions related to the individual self. If individual autonomy and the social collectivity are difficult to fit together, Louis presents a way to relate them without compromising their difference or glossing over their contradictions. If a plurality of values sometimes means that different values require different rituals (Robbins 2014), then Louis's stand up meets this plurality and its conflicts head-on—and takes them all to extremes.

## REVERSIBLE REVERSALS

I have discussed *Picking People to Hate* as a series of reversals and shifts. Louis as the story teller, the performer in front of us, goes back and forth between the visible, audible, and concrete, and the imagined, and takes us with him by drawing on a variety of repertoires, wielding his technique to conjure and transmit perspectives for us to look through. However, a different sort of reversal takes place at the end and wraps up *Picking People to Hate*; this is an example of a reversible reversal, which shows how reversals work on different levels of performance and how the comedian's perspective can be seen as an example of 'moebius-framing'.

Louis brings us back to the cool people's coffee shop—except now he calls them 'the young people' and there is a laugh and a feel of the truth coming out. A new character is brought out: a 'young guy'—and he's wearing an awesome possum shirt! Louis describes and performs the happiness and excitement this makes him feel and how he gestures, pointing back and forth to the guy's shirt and his own and says, 'Hey, nice shirt!' But the young guy rebuffs Louis and walks away. Louis is enraged. While this is a culmination of the topic, hating people, there is also a difference in that it goes beyond the 'picking someone to hate with no information'. The conflict is now real, and all of Louis's hostile fantasies of being cut off from the group seem warranted.

Yet in the middle of this climax of anger, Louis looks down and realizes: he is not wearing the shirt. Suddenly we see Louis and his actions in a new light, reframed through the now-revealed perspective of the young guy. But we can still see Louis's perspective, too; it is not reducible to the new perspective. The end is a combination of opposed perspectives. It brings together Louis-as-narrator and

Louis-the-individual. It also brings together the real and the imagined, firstly in that this is presented as a real story, and secondly in that *the audience* has been led to see the events as Louis did in this—possibly, supposedly, real moment—and then brought to the realization that they have indeed been tricked in the performance here-and-now.<sup>4</sup>

Louis repeats the ‘Hey, nice shirt’ gesture, now caricaturing it as something senseless, ridiculous, or wrong since the shirt is not actually present. Louis makes fun of himself and the hatred is dissolved, the conflict revealed as (at least possibly) a simple misunderstanding. The perspective of Louis’s Other, the young guy, has also been reframed and shown to have its own motivation, it is not just an extension of Louis—which, of course, it really is, when we remember who is telling us these stories. But such is Louis’s skill that he has obviated his own perspective as the main frame, and given us several, held in a balance, related but still distinctly different. If the audience is tricked, this is a recreation of how Louis himself was tricked, how his own perspective was turned around and his authority (in all senses of the word) revealed as fallible.

Specifically, this final reversal is reversible in the sense that we are now able to shift back and forth between these perspectives/frames. Louis’s perspective (on the world and his place in it) that the entire bit up till now has been setting up, is the ground for interpreting the figure of ‘the young guy’s’ reaction, his scorn for ‘the old guy’. The consequent figure-ground reversal, this scorn taken as a ground, even has the power to change Louis’s perception of himself as a figure:

Why does he have to make me feel like an old fag just ‘cause I want to make a connection with another human being!

Having failed in the real world of other people, Louis retreats into the fantasies of hatred, back into his own mind. Then Louis’s perspective opens up (when he literally shifts his view and looks down) to see that there is no shirt—this absence is a new figure with *both* the previous perspectives as ground. Then the shirt’s absence is added to the ground based on which we understand the guy’s reaction as figure in a new light. Yet we have not lost Louis’s previous perspective, grounded in the assumption that he is wearing the shirt. We now have two perspectives placed in a reversible figure-ground relation; we are aware of two contradictory yet both reasonable reactions, and between them a whole range of possibility.

Since the events of the story are at all times explicitly mediated by a subjective perspective, and all these perspectives are, in fact, represented by Louis, ‘moebius-framing’ provides an apt metaphor to describe this. The reversal of perspectives is like the twist of the moebius strip, and ‘Louis-as-frame’ is not actually separable from the content, nor from the ‘other side’ of Louis-as-frame, the surrounding (social) world of beaches, post offices, and coffee shops, also mediated by Louis’s perspective and performance.

## CONCLUSIONS: (UN)PERFORMANCE

I have given a detailed description of *Picking People to Hate* to show how reversals organize this particular bit of comedic performance on several interrelated levels of content and framing. Reversals work to make the stories funny, meaningful, and intelligible, to transport us from the theater into the stories and back again, and to create the actual here-and-now engagement between the audience and performer as both spontaneous and social—and

also reflexive, meaningful, and efficacious as skillful performance. These patterns could also be explored to see how they are used to create Louis's individual style as a comedian or, by adding data from other performers and shows, how the genre of stand-up itself and its emphasis on (at least the appearance) of real selves, truths, and connections is created, as well as how the material is organized in a way to make it comedic.

I will now attempt to draw together some of the potential meanings and efficacies of *Picking People to Hate* and relate them to the ambiguities. This is related to the bigger question of how and if humor can be efficacious in spite of and because of its ambiguity. *Doing* things—creating or making something real, or effecting some systematic transformation through semiotic action—is a central concern in studies of ritual and performance (e.g., Handelman 1990; Kapferer 2004; Stasch 2011; Turner 1967). These views bring out the 'world-making' capacity of performances, going beyond reductive analyses that would see them as 'nonreal portrayal of preexisting real entities' (Stasch 2011: 163).

A review of the anthropological literature on the meaning and efficacy of humor and clowning is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of the current argument, I will limit my discussion to a few remarks on how the efficacy of comedic performance has been analyzed in relation to its ambiguity, and the 'unperformative' capacity to *undo* things specifically attributed to comedic figures. Humor has a history of being overlooked in favor of more serious topics of study and discussion. Even a fairly recent study dedicated to speech play and verbal art (Sherzer 2002: 5, 153–154) makes a distinction between speech play and 'referential, transactional speech', claiming speech play to be 'time out and time

off' from the seriousness of life, or 'grease and oil for referential transactions' in Western societies. It is perhaps this surprisingly persistent view of humor as not quite important that has led some scholars to attempt to unravel the ambiguity by focusing their analytic explanations on the 'serious', critical, or transgressive implications of the comedic figures and performances (e.g., Basso 1979; King 1977; Makarius 1970). Others, however, have found the potential for comedic power in the deconstructive, unstabilizing, or de-formative aspects of the clown (e.g., Babcock 1984; Hieb 1972; Handelman 1990). Mary Douglas (1968) refers to jokes as 'anti-rites' and notes how the classic idea of the cathartic effect of humor (discussed by, e.g., Bergson 1911) can be specifically used within ritual processes as an agent of purification (see also Macintyre 1992 for an example of comedy in mourning rituals). In these cases, the clowning can reverse the effects of previous stages of the ritual in question.

I argue that an analysis that would demonstrate how the potential efficacy of comedic performance is achieved—whether within the dynamics of a given event or in social and cultural contexts beyond the event—needs to consider the semiotic elements and relations more thoroughly than has been done in previous studies, and a view of comedic performance as reversible reversals provides a way to do this. In the case of the Chapayeka ritual clowns, who represent Judas in the Yaqui Easter ritual, the dialectical mediation of opposites is what makes their performance efficacious. This happens in different ways on different levels: one side or aspect of their performance is opposed to the ritual in a way that threatens to compromise, even undo, the frame that construes the ritual as a special sphere of meaning, while the other side is the faithful recreation of the conventional ritual forms. The Chapayeka performance shifts

between these, and finally, it is the relation between these opposed modes of performance that is an important part of sustaining the continuity of the ritual as meaningful and efficacious in recreating cosmology and culture as contexts of being. (Keisalo-Galvan 2011, see also Keisalo 2014b).

How is Louis's bit meaningful and efficacious in spite and because of ambiguity? There are various kinds of ambiguity in Louis's performance. There is incongruity of morals and values, the opposed ideological expectations and aspects of being a self-actualized individual in polite modern society. One example of a fertile element of ambiguity is the awesome possum tee-shirt. It exists and yet is absent, unusual enough to suggest a connection based on taste between the individuals who choose to wear it, or alternatively an index of coolness that comes with an age-limit that marks divisions between social groups. Louis skillfully weaves all these elements into a coherent and balanced pattern that is in itself both open and systematic: any perspective or interpretive point of entry we choose, we are also presented with its opposite counterpart (see Wagner 1992). The ambiguity is handled in such a way that there is no absolute resolution, no final reduction to one point of reference or view. In an interview in *GQ Magazine* (Corsello 2014), Louis says that a good joke is an 'epistemological problem' that one gets 'trapped' in. This is what makes it last as something to think about and with.

One apparently simple yet actually very complex aspect of comedic efficacy is the emotional one of making people laugh—all the more remarkable when this is programmed to happen at a prescribed venue, at a set time, in a gathering of strangers. Of course, the spectator's emotional engagement—if it happens at all—with *Picking People to Hate* can take various forms, from living out the entire

bit to work out his or her own feelings of anger, shame, or fear, to feeling vicarious pleasure in Louis's expressions of anger, or observing the stories at a distance, as something funny that happens to Louis. As for Louis, this bit is an example of how the comedian gets to be both subject and object, ground and figure, working through and presenting his perspective, offering it for others to see through, as well as facing others' (including the audiences') perspectives on himself. In terms of comedy's semiotic technique as a creative engagement with the cultural grounds of performance, the reversible reversals of *Picking People to Hate* allow Louis to achieve something of a miracle, or at least a workable paradox: he gets to both hold up a moral standard and fail at it, while still avoiding hypocrisy and shame.

## NOTES

- 1 I first discussed the idea of 'reversible reversals' in comedic performance in a presentation in the ritual symposium organized at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies by Joel Robbins and Johanna Sumiala. I thank them and the other participants at the symposium. A presentation of a draft of this paper was given at the Social and Cultural Anthropology visiting seminar at the University of Helsinki, and I thank the participants for many helpful comments and a chance to think through these ideas. I also thank Harri Siikala for reading previous drafts of the article, as well as the anonymous reviewer.
- 2 How the audience influences and shapes the performance and its outcome is of course a very important question in stand-up comedy as in any performance. However, exploring this relation would require not only a longer discussion but more and different data, as I am basing my current analysis on a filmed performance, where the interaction between the audience and performer is in this sense entextualized, and may have been modified by editing. For this reason I will limit my discussion of the audience to only a few passing remarks. I also want to emphasize that the anthropological

study of performance requires ethnography and a variety of data in addition to recordings of performances. This article is part of my on-going project of developing a semiotic anthropology of comedic performance, also including data on stand-up comedy collected through ethnographic fieldwork. However, the clip I am analyzing here does provide an excellent example of 'reversible reversals', so in this specific case I feel that an analysis of a recorded example of a genre is justified.

- 3 *Picking People to Hate* can be found on Youtube with the key words 'awesome possum'.
- 4 Though stand-up audiences generally know better than to take everything as face-value, honest communication, (see Raskin 1985 on humor as cooperative non-bona-fide communication) especially Louis-as-narrator gets the benefit of the doubt, and much of what he says is interpreted according to Grice's (1975) maxims: the expectation of providing the appropriate amount of information in the interest of conversational cooperation—and there is a reward for doing this, as getting tricked is part of the show and the fun. Although many things Louis mentions are presented as actual moments and linked to real things, part of the conventions of the genre is telling stories and claiming they happened 'today' or for real, regardless of whether they did or not. Louis also plays with this, as in an earlier bit of *Shameless* when he says, '... I was in a bar, doesn't matter where, because I'm lying'.
- 5 For a discussion on studies of ritual clowning see Keisalo-Galvan 2011, for a brief discussion of the anthropology of humor see Keisalo 2014a (also Mitchell 1992). For an overview of humor studies in a variety of disciplines, see Raskin 2008.

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