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Roseanne Re-BOOTED:
The Complexity and Complicity of Depicting the White Working Class

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Introduction.

Shortly after her show was cancelled, Roseanne Barr gave an intimate interview with *Vice News Tonight on HBO*. Most of the interview is conducted while Barr sits on her balcony. She's telling the story of the tweet that caused ABC to fire her. "I woke up at 2:11 [a.m.] and tweeted that tweet. And I went back to sleep. And when I woke up in the morning, it was all over the news, and uh, I was like, 'uh oh.'" She pauses for a moment and continues, "And it was characterized as racist, which just made my stomach fall to my feet" (qtd. in "This is What Roseanne"). She goes on to describe the call she received from ABC executives demanding answers. She admits she was willing to make the rounds to all the ABC shows and "explain" and "apologize" her tweet, but the network forbade her from doing so. It wasn't long after that her mother saw the show had been cancelled while watching TV. "And that was just the beginning" Barr says (qtd. in "This is What Roseanne").

Roseanne first premiered in 1988 and ended in 1997. For nine seasons, Roseanne Conner and her family shouted, cried, and worked their way through the tumultuous end of the twentieth century. The show was first credited to creator Matt Williams even though it was based on Barr's stand-up comedy. Barr, rightfully, took over for Williams as the creator in 1988 (VanDerWerff). The show was largely based on the "domestic goddess" character that Barr used on stage during her appearance on *The Tonight Show* and in her regular stand-up routines. The character made light of her struggles as a mother in the home and often involved her slamming and making fun of her own family. The show soared during its early run, but Barr flew too close to the sun and the show fell to its death after its impressive nine season run. In "*Roseanne* and the Risks of Upward Mobility" by Caryn James of *The New York Times*, she says that *Roseanne's* fall is due, in large part, to the movement from Barr and *Roseanne's* blue collar roots. She writes:

In part, [Barr's] own success ate away at the show's realistic roots. Like Cher and Madonna, [Barr] became famous for her celebrity. She wrote two autobiographies and appeared on talk shows discussing her multiple personalities, childhood abuse by her parents, the child she gave up for adoption when she was a teen-ager, her cosmetic surgery. That was a pattern the series couldn't possibly keep up with. A rich Roseanne Conner was as bizarre as the conspicuous physical makeover that no one in the Conner family ever mentioned. (James)

When the show finally came to an end in 1997, it was a shell of its former self. Roseanne had climbed from her factory job to become the part-owner and operator of a luncheonette. In the final season, she won the lottery and it seemed that both Barr and the show's writers had lost touch with what made them special.

Barr fell to a dull roar in the new millennium. She had reached the hearts of America in the final hours of the twentieth century with her hit show *Roseanne*, which ran from 1988 to 1997. An admittedly loud personality, Roseanne would find a new platform, years later, from which to shout to her lost audience. She discovered that Twitter allowed her to spill and shout her beliefs to her fans after decades of being relegated to the fringes of entertainment. Despite her fiery rhetoric, however, she was just another screaming voice in an ocean of competing twitter users. Thus, years of tweeting sounded off to her loyal followers, but failed to maintain her status as queen of the American audience. She was no longer the loudest voice on television.

Barr catapulted back into the mainstream when a revival of her hit show, *Roseanne*, was announced to air in the spring of 2018. The revival would feature all the surviving original cast members (including both Beckys). The stars were aligned for Barr's triumphant return to her throne. Trump had just been inaugurated at the start of 2017 and his presidency and campaign

spoke to the same demographic that Barr's comedy spoke most directly to: the white working class. Trump promised the "silent majority" that his election would mean a reprisal of the dominance of this long forgotten American people. Coal would make a comeback, and so would *Roseanne*. The show's reprisal was yet another sign that the white working class was on the rise once again. The timing of her original work and her return coincides so perfectly with our political turmoil that the connections are difficult to ignore. In the late eighties, Barr made a name for herself and her show as the voice of the middle American family. She was the trusted ambassador for the working class white people who were feeling abused, forgotten, and replaced. Barr's valiant return championed a reclaiming of the airwaves that had been stolen by liberal elites.

The revival was meant to be the rightful heir to early-*Roseanne*'s throne. It was meant to be a tenth season added decades later to the original nine. Alas, it only ran from March of 2018 to May of the same year. Former-Darlene, Sara Gilbert, was the driving force behind the revival. She's the one who convinced Barr to come back. Barr, herself, was unsure of Gilbert's offer until she heard John Goodman was in (*Rose*). Barr is now in her sixties and the revival positioned her as the long-suffering matriarch of a family that has grown a lot since we last left them in 1997. They are settled back into the rhythms of working class life. They are no longer millionaire lottery winners. They are back where we first met them, struggling to pay pills and fighting with each other. Roseanne and Dan's grandchildren are a more diverse collection of characters. DJ's daughter is half-black and Darlene's son prefers to wear girls' clothes. Roseanne, herself, is a Trump supporter. One of the most prominent factors of the original run was the blurred lines between Barr and her character. The revival continues that tradition of ambiguity by bringing Barr's infamous support for Trump into the Conner's world. It seems that the days of our liberal

Roseanne are gone and this new woman has her own grievances to air. She is still accepting of her family (i.e. her black granddaughter and the gender fluidity of her grandson), but her political beliefs are staunchly conservative. Her family is not as conservative, though. Just as *Roseanne* prioritized the family's discussion of pressing social issues by placing them on opposite ends of the argument, the revival pits sister against sister and mother against daughter. Some members of the family were Hillary Clinton supporters and Roseanne is a clear Trump supporter. She even shouts "fake news" to challenge the validity of her relatives' arguments.

The new Roseanne may have forgotten the old Roseanne. In the *Vanity Fair* article, "Has the New *Roseanne* completely forgotten the old *Roseanne*?" by Laura Bradley, Bradley describes a major inconsistency between the two shows. In season 6, episode 11 of the original show, Roseanne spans DJ for stealing the family car and crashing it in a ditch. As the episode progresses, we see Roseanne struggle with the guilt of spanking her child. She eventually gives a tearful apology to DJ and vows to never hit him again. Roseanne and her sister Jackie were abused by their father as children and Roseanne is terrified of passing down that trauma. Bradley writes:

While it was clear that the series understood the historical difference between spanking and the kind of abuse Roseanne and Jackie endured, it also establishes that the relationship between those two actions is too close for Roseanne—who tearfully vows to D.J. that she will never hit him again, "no matter what you do." (Bradley)

In episode four of the revival (Season 10), Roseanne is disgusted by her granddaughter's behavior. Her granddaughter Harris is Darlene's daughter and nothing short of a brat. Roseanne says that Darlene needs to spank her child to correct her behavior—something old Roseanne vowed to never do. Darlene acknowledges that she needs to do more, but she refuses to spank

her children. Jen Chaney discusses the politics of the episode in her article for *Vulture* titled “*Roseanne* Is a Political Series and Let’s Not Pretend Otherwise.” Regarding the spanking, Chaney says, “The central idea of the episode is that contemporary ‘snowflake’ parents like Darlene (Gilbert) are way too permissive with their kids and don’t know how to instill discipline the way that their own parents, i.e. Roseanne and Dan, did” (Chaney). Roseanne does punish Harris, finally, by shoving her head in the sink and spraying her with water. This new Roseanne seems to have forgotten the old in a very important way. Barr’s new politics seem to overshadow her loyalty to her character. Or, maybe this is Barr’s attempt to show the natural progression of a character like Roseanne Conner.

As Barr was poised to reclaim her rightful place at the top of television, she found herself in a new landscape. Once infamous in the tabloids, Barr had established a name for herself as a demanding boss who was quick to fire those who displeased her. Her reputation continued into her personal life as the line between celebrity and audience thinned with the proliferation of social media. Now, Barr’s rants were easily made public and she was not one to shy away from the political spotlight. Her ability to fan a flame and her increasingly conservative talking points got her into fast trouble. In May 2018, Roseanne Barr sent out the following tweet: “Muslim brotherhood [plus] planet of the apes [equals] vj.” The VJ in question is Valerie Jarrett, a black, Iranian-American woman who was an advisor to the Obama administration. The tweet is filled with racism and prejudices not out-of-character for Barr. She was quickly terminated from ABC and the show was sent into limbo (it has since recovered without her).

ABC faced fierce backlash from Trump and Barr’s reliable demographic. The white working class found themselves feeling neglected once again. But Barr’s program was never the most conservative program on television. In fact, though it is regarded as one of the finest

representations of the white working class, it also seemed to lean towards Barr's once very liberal ideals. The original show tackled issues like racism and homophobia. The short-lived reboot found time to tackle the election (Trump v. Clinton), xenophobia (ironic considering the tweet that would demolish it all), and the opioid epidemic. Often, Barr and her character chose to take the more compassionate, more liberal road. So, who is this show for? And who is the infamous/notorious white working class if they are drawn to her weekly lessons on morality? If this show is truly the best depiction of white working class in the last thirty years, what does it have to say?

Trump and Roseanne both found their footing in 2016/2017 as the voice of the once-powerful, voiceless people of the white working class. The WWC no longer feels like they hold the same amount of power they feel entitled to. White people have always held a majority of the power in America; that has yet to change. Our institutions are built on white supremacy. No system, no interaction, no thought remains untouched by our conceptions of race. The racism of our American founding fathers has bled into every aspect of our lives. White rage has been a tried and true method for those in power to maintain the hierarchy. Every opportunity for advancement for non-white people (especially Black people) results in a retaliatory lashing out by White people to deny the marginalized any further advancement (Anderson 3-5). Throughout the history of our country, evidence of white rage can be found following all significant social moments/movements that prioritize the advancement and equality of non-white people. Anderson writes: "White rage is not about visible violence, but rather it works its way through the courts, the legislatures, and a range of government bureaucracies. It wreaks havoc subtly, almost imperceptibly" (Anderson 3). If we look at the end of slavery, we see the rapid and vicious backlash against the newly-freed slaves and the systemic implementation of laws that

reinstated slavery by different names. It is bold and volatile hatred. After the Civil Rights movement, there was the Nixon and Reagan Administration. And after Obama, the 2016 Presidential Election and Trump's presidency. After our first Black President, the white people of America elected our "first White President" (Coates). Racism isn't new. Neither is White Supremacy. Both are pillars of America.

People hate being called racist. To be more specific, white people hate being called racist. But they/we do not necessarily hate doing racist things and perpetuating racist systems. Growing up, Americans are taught the evils of racism and we celebrate its defeat with the Emancipation Proclamation. We celebrated again with the success of the Civil Rights movement. We were taught that white people and black people worked together to cure the inevitable racism that plagues our nation. That may be true, but it is not an accurate representation of our history. There was a necessary coalition, but it was the supposed defeat of whiteness and white supremacy that we simultaneously celebrated and challenged. These white narratives that are pervasive in our society. These narratives uphold the white supremacy that upholds our nation. Barr is one of these narratives. She is a creator of these narratives. She is a torch bearer for the systems that advantage white people above all else. She is not alone; her voice is one of many as they march through the streets emboldened by the idea that the man behind the desk in the Oval Office is one of them. When we watch her show, and listen to her comedy, we are ingesting the nourishment of white supremacy.

When I say that Roseanne Barr's programs and comedy are the nourishment of white supremacy, I realize it may sound dramatic and sensational. It feels extreme to call out white supremacy, because we have sensationalized the idea of white supremacy and therefore its mundane demonstrations pale in comparison. The term white supremacy incites images of white

hoods and burning crosses. We demand visceral images of ghosts of racists past to accept that these old prejudices die hard and still haunt our systems today. It is crucial to note before we explore Roseanne any further that white supremacy exists beyond the Klan meetings and takes its roots most effectively when the hoods come off and the members return to their everyday lives. And we need to realize not all white supremacists feel compelled to commit the same level of theatricality required to be a Klan member. Or maybe their theater exists in a different space—as in television.

We must look at the exhibitions of white supremacy and its ideals. We must acknowledge how these ideologies take root in many different aspects of our lives. Roseanne is not some kind of evil genius when it comes to her participation in white supremacy. She is the result of a system designed to make her the way she is. She is not to blame for her prejudices, but she is not to be vindicated either. The system is an explanation; it is not an excuse. Barr's career, like whiteness, is built on the idea of the other. Without someone to mock, someone to point at and laugh, does she even have something to say? She is an insult comic in a world less tolerant of intolerance. We are living in a world where the line between art and social justice has not only become blurred, but is being actively erased. Is there a place for insult comedy in today's cultural landscape? There may not be a place for Barr specifically, but does she represent the last cries of a comedic form fading into history?

This essay is not a case for Roseanne Barr and it is not an attempt to understand why she is the way she is; nor is this a case for the White working class. The sins of this nation do not lay solely with the white working class. They may be the loudest source of hatred, but that does not mean they are the only or the most potent. I am more interested in exploring how Barr's career highlights the hypocrisy and shared prejudices of White liberals and White conservatives. I plan

on examining how white supremacy, despite its repeated attribution to the White working class, rests on the shoulders of White people on both sides of the aisle. Roseanne Barr will be our guide through all of this. Barr's specific concoction of liberal and conservative, elite and working class, creates an accurate picture of our culture—both during the original series and in the reboot. It can be confusing to try and understand all the information and data thrown at us in an oversaturated society, but all the pieces of this puzzle are laid out in front of us. They're scattered and difficult to make sense of, but they are there for us to put together. We can look at both our past and our present to try and understand where we fit in this giant puzzle of history.

Roseanne Barr created a show that centered the experiences of white working class families at a time when the real people in those families were feeling invisible and forgotten. However, her show tended to prorogate liberal ideas from conservative mouths and created a unique combination of the two ideologies that garnered praise from both white liberal and white conservative audiences. The result? A television show that highlighted the inadequacy with which white people discuss social issues in America. Roseanne gave the conservatives of the white working class enough representation to sedate their feelings of abandonment; and she fed white liberals enough of their own talking points to encourage them to pat themselves on the back and declare her social discussions a job well done. Thus, due to the complicity of her insufficient social analysis, her show(s) became yet another tool that favorably reflected and reinforced the powers that be.

Historical Context.

Roseanne first premiered on October 18, 1988 and went on to become one of the most famous (or infamous depending on whom you ask) television programs in American history. In the beginning, the show was praised for “depicting life as it really was for working-class families

across America” (Bradley). Barr’s characters worked blue collar jobs, paid bills with convoluted strategies, and struggled week-to-week. *Roseanne* quickly became one of the most successful sitcoms of all time. Was it because she was the loudest voice on television? Barr and her team arranged a cast of people to play a family of brash characters who are unafraid to make their voices heard. When Dan and Roseanne fight, they are locked in no-holds-barred shouting matches filled with quips and takedowns. They throw furniture onto the lawn, they call for reinforcements, and they often resort to barks and groans to emphasize their points. Her characters are so quick to bark and scream that they become savage-like in the home.

It is a stark juxtaposition between the domesticity of past television housewives and the woman who inherited their legacy. Roseanne was stepping into the dainty shoes of characters like *Leave it to Beaver*’s June Cleaver and *The Brady Bunch*’s Carol Brady. At the end of season 7, episode 15, Barr is joined in her kitchen by a group of TV moms from sitcoms past. She is the flannel and disheveled hair counterpart to their aprons, perfect hair, and pearls. Barr clearly offered audiences a new kind of TV mom. She makes conversation with the women, and most of it revolves around the general debauchery of Roseanne’s house compared to the gentility of their homes. June Cleaver expresses outright disgust at *Roseanne*’s displays of lesbian love and teenage sex, but Barr quickly wins her over with the zeros on her paycheck.

Roseanne was different. She was rough around the edges and unapologetic. She did things her way, but she got them done. Perhaps the best way to conceptualize *Roseanne*’s place in television and American history is by comparing it to another show that premiered in 1988: *The Wonder Years*. *TWY* ran from 1988 to 1993 and “recounts the adolescence of Kevin Arnold and his friends as they confront school bullies, early romance, and social tumult in middle-class suburbia of the late 1960s and 1970s” (Marcus 223). *TWY* offers something very different to

American audiences than *Roseanne*. Daniel Marcus writes in his piece “*The Wonder Years: Televised Nostalgia*” that “the intermittently serious comedy was part of a reevaluation of ‘the sixties’ that occurred after the conservative electoral success of the Reagan era and its call for a return to “Fifties” values” (223). Whereas *Roseanne* was challenging the notions of white life in America, *The Wonder Years* “can be seen as part a generational effort to understand the 1960s and 1980s, presented from the perspective of a fictional secondary participant in the social changes of the 1960s” (223). Marcus explains the function of nostalgia:

American culture experienced a succession of nostalgia waves beginning in the late 1960s. Nostalgia is an emotion triggered by a sense of loss from changes in location or the passage of time. In temporal nostalgia, feelings of longing are triggered by the impossibility of going back to the past, except through fantasies purveyed in entertainment or politics, or the consumption of unchanged media from the previous era. Fans of nostalgic entertainment wish to look back to previous eras for what they have since lost, either personally or as members of a group. Nostalgia can be for a particular period in one’s own life, such as early childhood or the senior year of high school, or for a historical period like the 1950s, or 1960s, or 1980s. Because these eras are documented in media and discussed through the recollections of participants, even individuals who were not alive during these times want to “go back” to a previous era. When media productions invoke a nostalgia that speaks to both individual and collective loss or dislocation, they have the potential to have both deep and broad appeal. (Marcus 224)

If *The Wonder Years* capitalized on the nostalgia of years past, in contrast, *Roseanne* appears to be one of the most liberal, groundbreaking shows on television. She offers feminism, LGBT+ characters of substance, and the deconstruction of the nuclear family glorified in shows like *The*

Wonder Years. Nostalgia serves as proof of our shared obsession with loss. We crave what we can no longer have. If American television is nostalgic, then what for? Marcus continues:

With the ascendancy of Ronald Regan and the conservative movement in 1980, nostalgia for the period moved from the cultural realm to the political one. Conservatives touted the 1950s as a time of stable growth. Correspondingly, they criticized the 1960s, particularly the late 1960s, as a time of social chaos and violence, attacks on American patriotism, and increasing threats to the nuclear family which ranged from teenage drug use to feminism. Regan and other conservatives proclaimed the 1980s as a time to return to American greatness, calling for repeal or reduction of many of the social programs created or expanded in the 1960s, and suppressing the demands made by groups associated with the era, such as civil rights and feminist organizations. (Marcus 224-5)

If Barr's family is the continuation of the sitcom's nuclear family, then they are the shell of a deactivated warhead. The resemblance of the familial model is there. Roseanne and Dan have their three kids and their modest home in the Midwest, but the similarities stop there. These people are not the polished white-collar ideal of Reagan's America. Nostalgia for the fifties and sixties is thinly veiled nostalgia for the outright racism and white supremacy of the time. Part of white rage includes a desire to go back to a simpler time. The white man wants to go back to the inequality of a time more biased to his needs and desires. While Reagan called for a return to the Fifties, Roseanne seemed to consider the future. In Reagan's America, Roseanne might've been considered a radical—or more aptly, a white radical. Barr's activism on her show never reaches too far outside her own community.

The show was revived and returned to televisions/laptops/phones/tablets across the country on March 27, 2018. Her show returned to a stage that had been revolutionized since the

end of the show's initial run in 1997. The eyes on the stage had changed as well. These eyes were sharper and more critical of a voice like hers. Her revival came at another time in American history in which an outsider politician with a show business past was calling to "Make America Great Again!" Barr is a decidedly different person in the age of Trump. She is positioned in a similar culture as the one she first aired in, but this time she is aligned with the politician. She, too, thinks that America has moved to far beyond what is needed to correct our national sins. Our liberal-ness has spiraled out of control. When Barr appeared on the *Jimmy Kimmel Show* with John Goodman, she explained to Kimmel that she hasn't changed at all. "I'm still the same," she says amid a smattering of applause and Kimmel's laughter. "You all went so fucking far out, you lost everybody" (qtd. on *Kimmel*). In Barr's reality, everyone else moved. She believes herself to be the sole survivor of a more reasonable liberalism that was eradicated by the radical ideology of the new left. The new Roseanne tells Darlene to hit her children, but the old Roseanne had a very emotional arc that resulted in her vowing to never hit her children. New Roseanne seems to forget her old self. New Roseanne returned to the screens of a country with a president said to be elected by the white working class (the reality is far more complicated), and Barr steps back onto her throne to speak for these forgotten people.

Her new show sits in the depths of a more vigilant social setting that requires a careful tongue—which has never been a strength for Barr. The new *Roseanne* occupies a different space in television. She is one of many programs on a myriad of platforms and streaming services. Also, her show now operates on a level of nostalgia that it actively contrasted itself against in its original run. Although Roseanne did not jump back to a simpler time, her return did incite a level of nostalgia. Nostalgia for the old show, our favorite characters, and where we were when we first watched the Conner family drew audiences back to that living room/kitchen in Langford,

Illinois. The house is divided now between the “MAGA” hats (Trump’s calling card) and “I’m With Her” shirts (Hillary’s merchandise), but she still brings us back to the dinner table to talk. The topics have changed, but the family is still the same.

Barr’s return came at a time where her most reliable demographic felt ignored and silenced. Maybe she represents a group of people that feel her brash nature is an unapologetic manifestation of their own desire to make their voices heard. Roseanne does not polish her edges, and maybe these people find inspiration and release that someone like them is finally allowed to air their grievances for the world to see. If Roseanne can be heard, maybe they/we all can.

Insult Comedy, Social Justice, and Art.

“I just found out I’m married to a cracker.”

Insult comedy is the genre of comedy based in making fun of others, and it has a long history of controversy. For as long as there has been someone to insult, there have been those who are offended. It is a natural response, though. We insult others to belittle, intimidate, or infuriate them. Insult comedy takes those insults and finds the humor in them. Both liberals and conservatives have a foot in the insult comedy world. Notable insult comics include Don Rickles, Bob Hope, Sarah Silverman, Ricky Gervais, Joan Rivers, Kathy Griffin. The list of insult comics here are all white, as are most of the notable insult comics on the Wikipedia page for insult comedy. However, insult comedy is not a specifically white form of comedy. Just on the Wikipedia list you will find Vince Ganda, a Filipino performer, and Kapil Sharma, an Indian insult comic.

Although insult comedy is not a uniquely white form of comedy, it does operate like whiteness. Both whiteness and insult comedy rely on the presence of an “other.” Whiteness as a

concept was created to legitimize and moralize the subjugation of people based on the color of their skin. Whiteness does not exist without the presence of something with which to compare it. Due to the history of white supremacy, whiteness exists as a way of situating certain people above others. Insult comedy relies on the same dynamic that whiteness requires. The comic needs to find a way to establish themselves as superior by mocking the target's appearance, race, dress, voice, etc. Many comics use insult comedy to silence hecklers in the crowd or call out audience members for poor behavior. It is a method of suppression. The existence of both insult comedy and whiteness is dependent upon those which they are created to oppress.

Barr's comedy and her humor had to play to television audiences in the late-eighties and throughout the nineties, and was tested again in the late 2010s. The two television landscapes in which Barr's humor had to operate was, of course, different. The nineties saw an increase in diversity and representation—new faces were seen and new voices heard. Major advancements in the internet and social networking changed what and how we watched television; and streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, etc. have flooded the market with competition that has not only driven television to new heights, but also resulted in the creation of hundreds of duds and flops. Roseanne's show would have to evolve as well to tackle the social issues of today, as it attempted to tackle the social ills of the eighties and nineties. The Conner family would not be able to talk like they used to and their politics would have change. *Roseanne* found itself to be the little fish in a pond that was much bigger than it remembered.

In many ways, television has new constraints as well. In a world with so much competition, *Roseanne* would have to compete for the attention of her audience with the plethora of programming options available to the average television consumer. She must also compete with a changing entertainment market. *Roseanne* must be more interesting than social media, the

movies, streaming, video games, virtual reality, and any other mode of entertainment that could be done instead of watching ABC on Tuesdays at 8/7 central. She must navigate a new social setting as well. The show is Barr's first major return to television, and she finds herself in a hyper-vigilant world of criticism and social media comments. Every move Barr and her cast make is scrutinized and publicized on social media. Every episode is dissected and discussed for its treatment of its characters—particularly characters with marginalized identities. Barr and her writers would be held far more accountable for every line, every joke, every plot point. It feels strange to include that being held accountable is a constraint, but I cannot confidently speak to how accountable content creators were made to be in the past. Today, writers are forced to carefully consider the implications of how they are treating their characters and what they are saying. And Barr is not known for her thoughtfulness or reservation.

Barr is a harsh comic. She did not make her name as a comic for insult comedy, but it is regarded as one of her strengths. Her comedy is born from our tendency to point at the other and laugh. She needs something or someone to poke and prod to promote herself and her career. And insult comedy has not disappeared from the comedy scene. It remains a staple in the comic's tool chest. We still make fun of our friends and maybe sometimes people who are not our friends. But, should we be using insult comedy that is based in identities like race and sexuality? Should certain things be off the table when it comes to making jokes? Roseanne Barr said in an interview with Sean Hannity post-cancellation that she believes: "Anybody who's in any kind of position of power deserves to have a joke made about 'em. And if they can't laugh at themselves, then that means something. If you can't laugh at yourself first, then that means something" (qtd. on *Hannity*). It is clear insults and insult comedy are resilient and will likely remain a part of our

culture, but how will it evolve to survive in this new hyper-aware social climate? Who can insult?

Often, insult comics will target a group or identity to which they belong. Sarah Silverman makes plenty of jokes about Jewish people and being Jewish. Barr pokes fun at being white trash constantly in her show. There is a common belief that comedians—and joke tellers of all kinds—can say offensive things about themselves and that extends to their identities and affiliations.

“I can say that, I’m [insert identity here]”

I do not believe that our culture is heading towards a society in which we are only allowed to discuss and critique cultures and identities that are within our own experiences. But, we are experiencing a period of growth that requires boundaries to be set and then moved multiple times. Laws must be written and amended.

In Barr’s comment earlier, she noted that anyone in a position of power deserves to be made fun of. In the tweet that got her fired, Barr insulted Valerie Jarrett, a former Obama advisor, by referring to Jarrett with Islamophobic and racist language. It is fair to say that Jarrett’s position as a civil servant qualifies her for public scrutiny and teasing, but does that mean Barr’s use of racist and Islamophobic language should be excused? Using language with a racially charged history targets not only Valerie Jarrett, but also the community impacted by the oppressive system. Calling on racist language perpetuates centuries of white supremacy. Roseanne doesn’t seem to think it is racist though. Rather, she says, “It was characterized as racist” (Barr on *Vice*). In an awkward, rambling interview with Sean Hannity, Barr claims she was unaware that Jarrett was even black. Thus, Barr feels that she was unfairly charged and unduly judged and punished. What qualifies as racism remains as a barrier between white people and people of color.

Attempts to remove racist and offensive language has contributed to growing discontent within the white working class. They feel this censorship is part of a larger conspiracy to silence their voices. The efforts to remove racist and offensive language has become so contentious due to an attachment to these labels and the power they hold. If I started a campaign to ban some obscure word from some other time, I would receive very little attention for my efforts. A few people may be upset at the attack on freedom of speech, but most people would not care. White people only care about the removal of these words because they depend on them. Charlton Heston was vice-president of the NRA in 1997 when he delivered his speech, “Fighting the Culture War in America.” He claimed to speak on behalf of the kind of people who would later be labeled deplorable. He said:

The God fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian, middle-class Protestant—or even worse, evangelical Christian, Midwestern or Southern—or even worse, rural, apparently straight—or even worse, admitted heterosexuals, gun-owning—or even worse, NRA-card-carrying, average working stiff—or even worse, male working stiff—because, not only don’t you count, you are a down-right obstacle to social progress. Your voice deserves a lower decibel level, your opinion is less enlightened, your media access is insignificant; and frankly, mister, you need to wake up, wise up, and learn a little something from your new America; and until you do, would you mind shutting up? (Heston).

When the language of faith and country are intermingled like above, changing the moral standards of our systems implicates white Christianity as well. In the speech above, Heston places terms like “God fearing,” “Protestant,” and “evangelical Christian” in opposition to the social justice demands of the left. Heston conflates being a Christian with gun-ownership,

heterosexuality, being from the South, being from the Midwest, being middle-class, and, of course, being white. A common thread of anti-progressive narratives includes a call to end the silencing of white Christians. Heston says, “your voice deserves a lower decibel level, your opinion is less enlightened...” (Heston) and in some ways, he is right. The culture wars have put the white man at risk for equality. For once, he is threatened by the possibility he could be put into a society where he is given no special privileges, thus his bullhorn and microphone are taken away and he must rely only on his voice. His opinion is no longer the word of God.

In “The Morality Wars,” Wesley Morris of the *New York Times* asked the question, “Should art be a battleground for social justice?” The tagline for Morris’s piece is, “In 2018, culture is being evaluated for its moral correctness more than for its quality” (Morris). Art and culture today are cross examined for their moral correctness. Qualifying and valuing art and culture based on morality is not a new concept, but the moralizers setting the rules are new. Morris writes in his piece, “Moralizers tended to be white people from politics and the church. Their concern was that television, movies, books, museums and music were exposing people— young people—to unsavory concepts like abortion and lust.” He continues, “The culture wars back then always seemed to be about keeping culture from kids. Now the moral panic appears to flow in the opposite direction. The moralizers are young people, not their parents” (Morris). The moralizers are the social justice warriors of a new generation that focuses on the act of living one’s life unburdened by the prejudices of the past. Where their parents and grandparents might have fought for family values, these young people fight for representation (Morris). Our social morality is shifting to align itself with the values of younger generations and the old moralizers are fighting back. The white Christians like Heston and the people he was defending are the same people who are losing their grasp on the moral compass of our culture.

Any time societies experience shifts in culture, there is conflict. If this is the end of the white Christian's reign as moralizer, how did it begin and how did it become so powerful? When I think of conflicts within Christianity and conflicts between Christianity and other faiths and institutions, I picture the bloodiness of the crusades, the beheadings, and the crucifixions. To make masses of people accept a morality or ideology, is there a necessary bloodshed to establish new systems of belief over the existing ideology? Of course, there is not a literal bloodshed on the scale of the crusades, but careers are killed and lives ruined. "Cancel culture" is a dominant trend in which people who have committed some kind of social injustice are 'cancelled' and therefore sent into a pseudo-exile. The term was introduced on Twitter and its creation is commonly credited to Black Twitter. The practice has become notorious for its ability to end careers quickly and mercilessly. Are these the Cancel Crusades? Are cancellations like Barr necessary to establish our new morality?

Should these social justice concerns be allowed to infiltrate into art? Upon first hearing the question, I initially thought it would be an easy yes, but Morris makes an interesting argument. He writes:

Art might not have the privilege of being art for art's sake anymore. It has to be art for justice's sake. Suddenly, but for very different reasons, the kinds of people who used to be subject to censorship are now the purveyors of a not-dissimilar silencing. Something generational has shifted, even among the cool kids and artsy-fartsis. Members of the old anti-censorship brigades now feel they have to censor themselves. (Morris)

Morris makes the argument that intermingling art and social justice has created a culture of hushed critique. If art holds moral value, to critique the craft or production of that product is an attack on the morality itself. If we only allow morally just art, is that still art? Morris writes: "It

is possible to make art from these crusades. There's now a class of sophisticated television that understands representation to be a starting point, not an end" (Morris). This push for more representation has resulted in media and art that is more reflective of our culture and society, and that has opened up entire worlds of opportunity and worked to dismantle systems of white supremacy. The white man is being made to convert and adapt to the dominant culture, and he is scared by his loss of power. When considering any great shift from one ideology to another, we must ask ourselves: what do we do with the converts?

During Barr's interview on *Hannity*, she mentions how she is seeking forgiveness by way of her religion. She claims to be in process of going through the "4 steps" to find forgiveness. In our established systems of morality, there is a process through which one can achieve forgiveness for moral transgressions. No process or opportunity for forgiveness has been established in this new social justice morality. Moral lapses are social death sentences. Should there be a chance for forgiveness? Should there be a statute of limitations for these offenses? Decade old tweets are dug up to expose social injustices committed by famous people. Is there room for converts in our new world? Is there room for those who are attempting to adjust to this new morality, but their participation in the previous culture incriminates them? There will be and there is room for converts. Those converts however, are not famous. Famous transgressions carry the added burden of their fame. Examples must be made of the champions and leaders in order to establish control of the people.

White Liberalism vs. White Conservatism.

A large part of *Roseanne*'s success is due to the show's unique appeal to both liberal and conservative audiences. The show is centered around the life of a white working class family, but Barr's character often lectures her family and friends with liberal talking points. The result is a

unique combination of white liberalism and white conservatism that shows the similarity between these two conflicting ideologies. Neither of these political parties has evolved to accommodate the needs and voices of the non-white, non-heterosexual men. The parties and the forums in which they speak were designed to house conversations between white men about white men and their belongings. The space not only excludes non-white, non-heterosexual men, but it was also designed as a tool to oppress those who were considered inferior.

Many of the themes and episodes of *Roseanne* dealt with racial injustices and prejudices as well as various other social issues. However, Barr's character--and other characters--continually display troubling patterns of behavior when discussing social issues. These behaviors are indicative of the ways white people and people with privileged identities fail to sufficiently discuss the ways privilege, oppression, and prejudice impact their lives. Roseanne's message of feminism to her daughter is half-baked and incomplete; when her son refuses to kiss a black girl, she yells at them and then acts similarly herself; and when Muslims move in next door, she spies on them and boasts that they are building explosives with fertilizer.

In season 1, episode 15, when Roseanne's daughter, Darlene, struggles with getting her first period, Roseanne puts on her liberal cap and gives her a quiet speech on feminism. Darlene is afraid that getting her period means that she has to start acting like her older sister, Becky, and like dresses, make-up, and shopping. She's afraid she won't be able to play baseball anymore because girls don't play baseball. Roseanne's speech is short and can be summed up simply as 'Girls can do anything they want' (*Roseanne*). It is more of a feminism-lite than full-blown feminism. It feels half-hearted and insufficient. Gender inequality extends far beyond Barr's simple description, but she fails to elaborate and explain. Maybe she was afraid to alienate her conservative fan base with liberal rhetoric. The show remains perched on the fence between the

two camps. The episode does include these two women discussing internalized sexism and react to their oppression. Darlene's fear of having to do "girl stuff" is proof of her internalizing the sexism of the patriarchy. She is told that girls cannot do certain things, and thus she feels she must adjust her interests to meet the standards of society. It is a nice moment of vulnerability and depth to Darlene's character (and Roseanne's a little bit) and it allows for audiences to explore the idea of marginalization and bigotry on more than just an interpersonal level. Darlene's experience is a luxury not extended to all target groups on the show.

In season seven, in an episode titled "White Men Can't Kiss," Roseanne and Dan find out that their son, DJ, refuses to kiss his classmate for the school play because she is black. They react differently. Roseanne yells at DJ and tells him that he's doing the play whether he likes it or not. She snaps, "Black people are just like us. They're every bit as good as us; and any people who don't think so is just a bunch of banjo-picking, cousin-dating, barefoot embarrassments to respectable white trash like us!" (*Roseanne*). The issue is handled much differently than the feminist-issue with Darlene. Roseanne goes to DJ's school where she realizes the reasoning behind DJ's disillusionment with kissing in the play. A little Black girl walks up and the camera stays on her. She has no substantial lines. She walks in, looks innocent, talks sweetly, and provides a catalyst for Roseanne's emotional arc. The episode does a nice job of highlighting the ways our unconscious bias impact our lives in ways that we do not always realize. DJ's behavior causes Dan and Roseanne to consider where he learned it from. DJ's teacher tells Roseanne that she sees it a lot in their area and it "always starts with the parents." Towards the end of the episode, Roseanne and her sister, Jackie, are closing their restaurant fifteen minutes early when a black man comes to the door. They had locked the door already, but the sign had not been changed. Roseanne is visibly freaked out, and she tells them that they are closed. He gets upset

and walks away only to come back and confront Roseanne for not letting him in and he reveals himself to be Geena's father. Roseanne apologizes and says she chose to keep the door closed because he is a man, not because he is black. She says she's "prejudiced against all men equally." It is late at night and they say they have to be careful when they are alone at night and a man comes up to them like that. Mr. Williams (Geena's father) leaves after telling Roseanne it is clear where DJ gets his racist beliefs. He leaves and Jackie attempts to console Roseanne and reassure her that she did the right thing. Roseanne is not convinced.

Where Darlene is allowed time to explore, analyze, and react to the effects of her marginalization, the target group in this discussion of race is relegated to the background. This episode explores the impact racism has on those it hits hardest: the racists. Beyond the lack of exploration of the affected party, the episode also focuses exclusively on the effects of interpersonal racism and fails to explore any of the other ways in which marginalization manifests in the life of the marginalized. Only discussing interpersonal racism fails to capture the immensity of institutional racism and the intimacy of internalized racism. Geena and her father are only given lines and screen time to serve Roseanne's story. They are there to illicit reactions from Roseanne.

In the revival, *Roseanne* attempted to recreate this cultural discussion, but the topics of conversation have changed. When a Muslim family moves in next door, Roseanne is convinced that they are stocking fertilizer to make explosives. It is xenophobic, Islamophobic, and maybe a little racist, but this Roseanne is different from the Roseanne that gave Darlene and DJ those childhood lessons. She is a Trump supporter and proud of it. Her biases and impulses do not appear to require the same level of reflection and analysis as they did when she was confronted with Mr. Williams at the diner. She is emboldened enough to accept her conspiracies and

prejudices as facts and she is quick to disregard contradictory or unfavorable information as “fake news.”

When she needs to borrow their Wifi in the middle of the night so her granddaughter (DJ’s daughter whom he had with a black woman) can video chat with her mother overseas in the military, she realizes that the man and woman and their son are not the evil extremists she imagined them to be. And when Roseanne runs into the woman at the grocery store, and the woman is horribly treated and makes a mistake using her government assistance, Roseanne loans her some of hers. When the woman leaves, Roseanne tells the cashier off and calls her “ignorant.” The studio audience applauds Roseanne, but for what? For being a hypocrite? Just like with DJ not wanting to kiss a black girl, the discussion is entirely interpersonal and the target group is positioned to act as storytelling tools and catalysts for Roseanne to face her own prejudices—which she does incompletely.

Not only does *Roseanne* fail to adequately address her prejudice when she is forced to confront it, but she falls comfortably back into her old habits almost immediately. She can lecture DJ on how equal black and white people are, but she still refuses to let a black man in her restaurant. The store was closed, but Roseanne’s uncertainty is evidence that she knows she is guilty of acting out of her prejudice. When she confronts the cashier, she makes a show of correcting the young woman’s ignorance and questioning her moral integrity, but she closes her assault with a joke that her Muslim neighbor has enough fertilizer to blow up the grocery store. She repeatedly falls back on her prejudices and continuously situates people like her neighbors as the butt of the joke. Both DJ’s kissing episode and Roseanne’s grocery store showdown highlight oppression from the perspective of the privileged identity. The target group (especially in DJ’s episode) is merely an object off which the privileged party can play. This exemplifies the

continuation of white supremacy by way of omitting the side of the targeted identity. Why is the story of a Muslim family that left Yemen in search of a better life and safety from the turmoil of their home country told from the perspective of their self-titled white-trash, small town Illinois neighbors? One could make the argument that *Roseanne* got a show because she was a name with recognition. But, why revive her? Why go back to her story when, since her original finale, we have seen the expansive range of opportunity in diversity and representation?

When framed this way, *Roseanne* is a waste of airtime. Television had made strides in representation, but ABC made the conscious decision to revive *Roseanne* and take a step backward. Ultimately, this cultural battle is not a battle to make television representative. That is the goal, yes, but in order to establish equality, we must dismantle the systems of white supremacy in Hollywood institutions. *Roseanne* and ABC refuse to push white people out of their comfort zones. The show continues the tradition of prioritizing the comfort and feelings of white people over the experiences and feelings of people of color and marginalized identities. White liberals and white conservatives are both unable or unwilling to accept just how much they benefit from white supremacy. They/we are therefore unable or unwilling to leave the comfort and safety of white supremacy. Failure to challenge the system is a failure to challenge white supremacy in practice. Thus, if white (or privileged) representatives remain intentionally indifferent to their complicity (or as long as representation remains white-dominated), issues of marginalization and social inequality will never be resolved.

Although the faces of television have evolved to be more representative of modern America, television remains a dominantly white space. I am not advocating for the removal of white people from television—that would be ridiculous. It is important to note the difference in the quantity and quality of shows we allow non-white, non-straight, etc. people to have. White

people have been allowed more time and space to explore the idea of themselves. Other people (non-white, non-straight, etc.) have only been allowed small amounts of time and space to explore the idea of themselves. We must make more time and create more spaces for the voices of the unheard.

Admittedly, it could be said that Barr cannot be blamed for foregrounding her own experiences over those of the less-privileged. After all, we cannot ask Barr to write and showcase the experiences and needs of people outside her experience. Even so, when representation is as lacking as it is in the history of American television, would it not be reasonable to ask for more? *Roseanne*'s use of predominantly white (and otherwise privileged) characters is evidence of her complicity in the tradition of white supremacy in American television. The innate white supremacy of American systems is fertilized by the unwillingness (or inability) of white content creators to make space for anyone other than themselves. White people always return to narratives that center their experiences. I think most people (of all identities) do; but when white people do it, it reinforces their/our power in a system meant to advantage them/us. They/we are complicit in that biased system when we turn on the camera to record the human experience and they/we only focus on white bodies.

Conclusion.

Roseanne Barr created a show that told us about ourselves. She showed us what it looked like to be us on screen. She was relatable and real. She didn't tie a bow around anything for her audience. She did teach us, though. She taught us to push our boundaries when it came to television. Our shows did not have to be clean-cut families who lived in nice neighborhoods. Our shows could be about the dirty and poor. Our shows could be about a woman who is the bread-

winner. Our shows could be about the uneducated. Our shows could be gay. Our shows could be more.

So, what do we do with *Roseanne*?

Television and popular entertainment are expressions of the imagination and fantasies of our society. If television is the expression of our society's fantasies and desires, what does it say that our fantasies don't include the faces and voices of the non-white, the non-straight, etc. Of course, this is becoming less true. Television is becoming less white, less straight, less exclusive, but it is far from representative. Fantasy allows us to explore the idea of us. Who we were. Who we are. Who we can be. It is crucial that we allow for anyone to explore the idea of themselves. We must make space for the voices of the long silenced. But, should that right be extended to people like *Roseanne*? To the silent majority? Should they be given the opportunity to disseminate hateful language?

We take what we can from *Roseanne*. The show, at its best, brought us back to the dinner table to talk about life and the many issues white Americans face in a rapidly changing environment. At its worst, the show preserved and openly supported white supremacy. While the discussion was rarely pretty, it was real—and loud. Barr was willing to say the unpopular thing and take the heat for it. She made us remember and talk about the uncomfortable and the unsavory. But are we willing to pay the price of an untethered *Roseanne*? I doubt it. However, without *Roseanne* television would not be what it is. If we take Barr and *Roseanne* out of the culture, we lose that dialogue. We lose the empowerment that comes with *Roseanne* Conner's strength and resilience. We lose the universal life lessons and the steps forward in LGBTQ+ representation. It is not that we need to bring her back, but that we need to recognize the fact that we lose something by eliminating her from our culture. We must make room for healthy debate

and a responsible, respectful discussion of the issues. We can take what *Roseanne* taught us and build from it. We can still sit around the table to talk. We just need to make sure we invite everyone to dinner.

The *Roseanne* from the eighties and nineties is not the same *Roseanne* we saw in 2018. We've lost her to our shared illness. She has disappeared into the conspiracies and contempt we hold for each other. While television became more liberal and inclusive, it appears Barr matched every movement, but in the opposite direction. She no longer quietly considers the implications of her prejudice. She advocates for others to hit their kids—despite her staunch opposition to it in the original run of the show. I am afraid that Barr has become exactly what she fought against in the eighties and nineties. Barr has become everything she once hated. I wonder if old *Roseanne* would even recognize new *Roseanne*.

Nevertheless, culture continues its constant revolution. Our idea of normal must be constantly challenged to continue moving forward. Our comfort is our death. It is essential that we constantly challenge the idea of us. It is not easy work. Revolution requires blood and sacrifice. With every new faith comes the death of the old. Something or someone always kills the old gods—even the “domestic goddess” herself.

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