On Richards, Race, and Empathy

It has been well over a month since Richards blasted four Black males at the Laugh Factory, one of several clubs I frequent in my research on Black comedy. To be frank, I care less about Richards’ words, the news coverage, and the televised apologies. I sit, poised to write, and find myself in a weary place. Actually, I am weary of race … of what happens when a white man of notoriety goes off about “niggers” and makes a veiled reference to lynching. “So what?” as comic Chris Spencer told me wearily, “Not all white people think that way.” Lest you think I want to engage in one of the safest possible ways of discussing race, let me tell you why I am weary.

It is safe to say that Richards lost it. Onstage. And somebody recorded it with their cell phone. And that is, in large part, why you and I are even having this conversation. Having watched comics closely over the past five years, I can appreciate (though not excuse) his tirade as indicative of what happens when a comic’s stage time is threatened. Comics work hard to perform in Los Angeles. The self-described “world-renown” Laugh Factory can rightly boast its title. It’s a great place for a comic to play and those who grace its stage often have to endure the careful scrutiny of club owner and former-comic Jamie Masada. In the case of Laugh Factory’s Black show, Chocolate Sundaes, comics must also past muster with two additional groups: the first is the show’s highly discriminating and vocal Black audience; the second is executive producer Leland “Pookey” Wigington III and host, Chris Spencer. Once they are featured, however, comics work even harder to finesse their routines, calibrating their hooks over time for just the right punch.

All that said I doubt that Richards had to do much more than show up in order to perform on the Laugh Factory stage. Such are the benefits of fame – itself hard-won. But he showed the audience – and especially comics – what he was made of comedically when he lambasted the four men. Many comics found Richards lacking the skill and tenacity one would expect of a stage-worn comic. Here’s a run-down of the events that precipitated Richards’ riff.

An ethnically diverse group of partygoers entered the club, situated themselves, and began to order drinks. In doing so, they caused a bit of disruption that caused Richards to bristle and bring attention to the group. They heckled back in the spirit of play. I imagine that if he had impersonated his Seinfeld character, “Kramer,” and told the group to “Hey there! Settle down,” he would’ve earned a quick laugh, flattered the offending party, and been able to proceed with his set. As we know, Richards said some other things probably because he really had some things he wanted to say as `Michael Richards and was terribly put off by their intrusions. Hecklers, we might agree, deserve some kind of sorting out. Loud guests settling themselves
into a club warrant perhaps a gentle scolding. The four Black men targeted by Richards received the worst of the worst. Richards reached into his bag of heckler retorts and hurled racial epithets and violent references to America’s tragic history of lynching. And the rest, well, will likely not make history in any lasting way.

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“If it wasn’t recorded or he’d somehow made it funny, we wouldn’t even be talking about this now.” This theory came from comic Brandon Bowlin, who is also a friend of mine. Brandon had his own ideas about how Richards could have transformed his rant into a joke. Impersonating Kramer, he quipped, “So you want me to be racist. I’ll show you racist....” Brandon’s point is that almost anything can work if it’s funny and not malicious. Another implication here is that Kramer’s unpredictable demeanor could have provided the necessary cloak for Richards’ racism and charmed the audience. Brandon, like many other comics, understood Richards’ breakdown all too well. “He choked. I’ve done it. Every comic’s done it.” Brandon also understood how Richards ended up at a point of no return. He recalled fuming about the Holocaust several years ago in a manner he now thinks was disrespectful. Brandon was playing to a mixed crowd and joked that he was “tired of hearing about the Holocaust.” “What about the Armenian genocide,” he asked indigantly. “What about slavery in America?” Later, he quipped, “I’m tired of hearing about Jew cookies.” Ever the interviewer, I asked, “And you don’t think there was a difference between your attempt to relativize historical genocides and atrocities and Richards’ racist rant?” Patiently, Brandon replied, “Lanita, sure yes. But anytime you say ‘Jew cookies’ … that’s just not cool.” I agreed and asked what happened next. “Tension.”

Tension permeated the Laugh Factory stage on Chocolate Sundaes when, two weeks after Richards’ outburst, Chris and Pookey attempted to address the situation. Pookey told the predominantly African American crowd that Richards’ words “… don’t matter to us. He’ll go on. Our concern is how the Laugh Factory handled the situation.” Ultimately, he and Chris felt that Jamie Masada was sincere in answering a pivotal question: Why was Richards able to come back and perform following his racist rant? Masada told them that the only reason Richards was allowed back was to apologize in the presence of a CNN camera. (Masada’s fear was that African Americans would never believe Richards had apologized if it was not on record.) However, when Richards did not apologize during his initial moments on the stage, Masada gave him the light and decided that Richards was no longer welcome at the club. Chris and Pookey followed this explanation with an unprecedented Q&A session. I had never seen this room, let alone any comedy club, in such a serious state. A Black man in the second row diffused the tension by shouting, “It’s all good!” Pookey replied, “That’s what I’m talking about. Let’s have some fun.” And the show proceeded as usual.

As I struggled to write all this down, Andrea, a Black woman who works at another (Black-owned) club, The Comedy Union, crouched beside me and shared her concerns. “I can’t believe we’re (Black folks) sitting here after that!” she huffed. “If a Black comic had said something about a Jew, this place would be turned out! They (Pookey and Chris) are doing this to preserve their night. Because it’s the “Laugh Factory.” This is their meal ticket!” I thanked Andrea for sharing her thoughts and then watched Chris anew as he warmed up the crowd. His very
presence onstage was politicized, explicitly so as a response to Richards’ disrespect of African Americans and the club’s questionable stance in allowing Richards to return. But was Chris’s performance equivalent to Condi telling America that Hurricane Katrina was not about race and class? Or, I wondered, was this Chris, having already voiced his stance on Richards - and having few expectations about race and fairness in his field - doing what makes him feel alive? Or was it even more complicated than this?

Andrea, was not alone in her critique. In fact, there were communal deliberations about the Richards debacle prior to Chris and Pookey’s onstage discussion. I was privy to a flurry of emails, phone calls, letters, all of which weighed in how Black people should respond to Richards’ rant. Some people argued that Richards’ behavior should not be construed as the solo action of a disturbed White celebrity, but rather symbolized a poignant reminder of Blacks’ enduring struggle in the U.S. Some framed the controversy as a civil rights issue, calling for the end of “niggah nights” – or ethnically themed shows in mainstream clubs so that people of color could monitor White comics. (The thinking here was that Richards would not have said what he said had ethnic comics been present that day. But Paul Rodriguez and other comics of color were, indeed, present during the night of Richards’ controversial set. On camera, Paul said the most generous thing a comic could ever say of a fellow comic in such turmoil: “I kept waiting for the punch line.”) Others, including Enss Mitchell, who is owner of The Comedy Union, felt that Black audiences and comics should boycott The Laugh Factory. He also felt that Pookey and Chris should move their highly successful show to his club in solidarity.

Given Enss’ stance, I doubt that he would’ve been pleased with the Chocolate Sundae Q&A or Chris’s ’comedic attempts to respond to Richards directly. During the 8PM show, Chris told the first crowd, “This is what would’ve happened if Richards had said that during Chocolate Sundae,” and then pointed stage left. The audience saw two feet dangling from the club’s second floor, a stand-in for Richards. For the 10PM show, Chris enlisted the only white comic who played that night, R.T. Acting quite like “Kramer,” R.T. moved around erratically and repeated some of Richards’ remarks word-for-word: “Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass… He’s a nig-.“ Just as R.T. began to enunciate the n-word, he is cut down by the sound of gunshots and ends up on the floor. Notably, the ethnically mixed crowd applauded and laughed at this violent display. Later, R.T. had his own joke to tell about the Richards event: “Tension. Can you feel it? Richards set white people back 100 years with that shit.” I wondered if it rang true in a personal way for R.T.. Backstage, among the comics, I noticed R.T. milling about, shut out of several private conversations among African American comics concerning Richards and race.

I joined comics upstairs for the 10PM show and asked several comics what they felt about the Richards controversy. I was surprised by their degree of empathy for Richards. Like Brandon, Rodney Perry also felt for Richards as a comic. “I understood where he was. Not where he went. He was drowning.” But Rodney was less concerned about Richards’ words and more preoccupied with questions of censorship; that is, of comics no longer being able to say what they want to say given Richards’ indiscretions.

Rodney’s concerns proved prescient. Days later, Masada joined Oprah, Jesse Jackson, and others calling for Blacks to stop using the n-word. Even veteran comic Paul Mooney vowed
never use the n-word again. Mooney explained his decision on the news as follows: “Richards taught me. He’s my Dr. Phil.” I scoffed when I heard this because Mooney uses the n-word quite often and with purpose to castigate Blacks and Whites.

I can understand Masada’s decision – indeed the very censorship Rodney Perry feared – as a way to heed Jesse Jackson’s call and thwart any future nigger-laced joke sessions on his stage. Still, it feels like an overcorrection that conflates Richards’ actions with the ever-complex uses of the n-word among African American comics. The slight feels compounded since the comics who may be most aversely affected by this reputed new policy (Black comics) are the same group who felt most victimized by Richards’ rant.

Also, Richards’ version of the n-word is a racial slur indicative of hate speech, capable of wounding and causing violence. Pierre, a comic who recently hosted The Comedy Store’s Phat Tuesday Show, likewise had this to say in the week following Richards’ rant: “If some real niggahs has been there, they would’ve had the whole club rearranged.” Celebrity comic Kat Williams agreed, “That was some gangsta shit. He [Richards] said it right in front of niggahs. He couldn’t have done it tonight. He would’ve been like (impersonates Richards) ‘Nigger - fifty years ago - (imitates Richards getting knocked the ground and then getting up in a daze) Seinfeld? Where’s Seinfeld?’” Williams added, “Now he’s got to be on the lookout for real niggahs who’ll hit him and tell him, ‘That was because fifty years ago, you put a fork up my ass.’” Comic/author Darryl Littleton elaborated: “Michael Richards is a liar! [He said] ‘He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger!’ Hell, it wasn’t no niggahs there that day. Those were “colored folks” talking about, ‘That was uncalled for! That was uncalled for!’ Real niggahs would have thrown a table on the stage.”

These jokes, along with countless meta-commentaries by Black comics concerning the n-word, trouble the rush towards censorship. For example, Chris Spencer is known to educate his ethnically mixed audiences with the following instructive: “White people – avoid the –er (suffix) if you want to avoid the E.R. (emergency room).” He adds, “Many whites want to know why they can’t use the “n-word.” Because, you already had your chance and fucked it up.” Another comic, Scruncho, routinely differentiates between “real” niggahs and “fake niggahs” in a bit that extends the tenets of Chris Rocks’ celebrated distinction between Black folks and “niggahs.” Daran Howard tells a memorable joke about how Blacks often praise “that niggah there” (think Senator Barack Obama) but disparage “this niggah” (consider, if you will, O.J. Simpson). In addition to these jokes, which explicitly qualify Blacks’ uses of the term and censor others, Black comics also invoke the term to connote people more generally, whether they be Black, White, (most often) men, with positive, negative, and sometimes decidedly communal affect.

Rodney Perry said it best onstage. “The reason why [Richards’ words] were so hurtful is that we ain’t got no comparable words. ‘Cracker’ ((one of the racial slurs that Black males leveled back at Richards)) ain’t shit.” Another phrase leveled at Richards was “White boy.” Yet, I doubt it hurt Richards any more than their claim that he was not funny. That is not to say that these words do not wound. I’m sure they do in certain contexts. But Richards’ vindictive remarks were sure to trump their critiques for reasons Richards clearly emphasized, “You’re a nigger! … That’s what happens when you interrupt a White man.”
These realities may help explain why comedienne “Leslie” began her set at The Comedy Union with these words: “Fuck that niggah (Richards). He’s rich and White. What am I gonna do about it?” Lawrence, one of club’s security guards, echoed her sentiments when I asked him if was at all bothered by the Richards controversy. “Why worry about that? What does that have to do with me?”

Enss Mitchell thinks that comments such as these stems from Blacks’ sense of disempowerment. He and I recently met after a Saturday night show to discuss what he felt Pookey and Chris should do about the Richards event. He waived his staff off repeatedly, causing me some discomfort, in order to show me an email comedienne Adriane Kelly had circulated calling for a boycott of The Laugh Factory. Her email was powerful not simply because of her direct prose, but also because she attached two images of Black men hanging from trees. Many of us have seen these photos. They are iconic of African Americans history of brutalization. I could see the rage of this history reflected in Enss’ eyes when he said, “I’m not a shuffling and jiving kind of niggah.” During our conversation and in some of his interviews with news reporters, Enss made sure to note that the injustice occurred not merely at the level of Richards’ remarks but also at the level of management. “There is no way he [Richards] should’ve been able to continue his tirade. The owner or manager should have cut his microphone immediately for the sake of the audience and … business.” He continued with whispered intensity, “I mean, could you imagine Martin Lawrence … joking about Jews.” I picked it up, “…in concentration camps.” He took it further, “in trains … being gassed.” Enss concluded, “He would never work in this town again, let alone be invited on any stage to perform!”

Back upstairs, during the Chocolate Sundaes’ 10PM show, African American comics Darryl Littleton and Tony Tone pondered the same question, sans whisper. Darryl said: “If I had said ((mimics Richards when he pointed out the Black men in the balcony)) ‘He’s a Jew! He’s a Jew! ((Hits an invisible microphone quizzically; soon realizes that the sound has been cut)). - I would have been escorted out of the club, arrested for disturbing the peace, my books would’ve been pulled from the shelf, and I would’ve been beat up three times on my way to the jailhouse.” Tony and Darryl could not agree on whether Darryl would then be out of work indefinitely, or just consigned to selling encyclopedias door to door.

Are these comics angry? I’m not sure. I think they and other African Americans feel somewhere between shocked and appalled by the clarity of Richards’ rage and then not surprised at all. Richards expressed what some Black people suspect is possible from any White person: Whites can white privilege to question, critique, problematize, or quietly assess another based on their ethnic background. They need not be as outspokenly racist as Richards, but can go about these tasks quietly, on the basis of unstated assumptions.

This perspective was underscored by several comics when ABC cameras visited Chocolate Sundaes. Comic Dannon Green was later featured on the news saying, “That Richards thing made me mad!” Yet, the news failed to air his refrain, “But that is just how it is in life.” The cameras also missed David Arnold’s performance later on in the show. He began his set with this: “Give it up for R.T. (white comic). Yeah, white people know how to do damage control. ((Imitates news reporter)) ‘The niggahs are still laughing after the travesty.’ Like we’re not
going to come – or be sad because you said “nigger.” Y’all say it everyday behind closed doors. …They got cameras out. I been coming here for years and cameras ain’t never been here.” Then he added, “I feel kind of sorry for the niggah (Richards).”

Rodney Perry wasn’t surprised by Richards’ outburst either. Upstairs, he told me that he had once performed at a club where two White comics committed a faux pas similar to Richards. In a White comedienne’s joke, a White child asks her mother if what she sees is a gorilla and the mother tells her it is a (Black) pimp. Rodney says the White male comic who followed her used the n-word repeatedly. Backstage, Rodney actually took time to ponder whether it would be expedient to beat the male comic’s ass. Ultimately, he decided against it since the comic’s set wasn’t captured on tape.

Another reason I think they’re not surprised – and a little bit weary – is because talking about race takes a lot of work. When I juxtapose comics’ onstage and offstage conversations with Richards’ awkward apologies and Masada’s reported intentions to censor the n-word, it makes me wonder how far we will ever get as a nation in dialogues around race. If I have learned anything from this, it is a conundrum that is echoed repeatedly in Hurricane Katrina humor and comics’ hypotheses about what would have happened if a Black comic had berated a Jewish audience member. With regard to race, Black comics often ask themselves, How can I make you see me? Even more importantly, how can I make you feel my pain in this moment such that you care enough to feel it too? How can I be empathetic to you? What does it take for me to matter as equally as a White person, or as many invoked, a Jewish person? (Even with Mel Gibson’s recent anti-Semitic rant, many African American comics, and African Americans more broadly, view Jews as a protected and powerful minority group in Hollywood and, as such, are symbolically “White.”)

And this is precisely why racism hurts. Racism is not merely the malicious treatment of one (often marginalized) group by a more powerful group on the basis of assumed racial superiority. Racism also entails a withholding of empathy. This withholding can make already vulnerable groups feel dehumanized. It happened not only when Richards blew his lid, but (to some who remain critical of the Laugh Factory’s response) when he was allowed back to perform again for the benefit of making an apology. These perceptions cut the deepest because they are rooted in the perception that someone is saying: I do not feel for you as I do my own, or others. These sentiments can be voiced in an in-your-face manner that is sure to arouse critique. Or they can be expressed in more benign ways that translate into differential policies and standards for people based on race.

It’s a complicated situation, especially when we consider that Richards’ televised apologies were aided and abetted by people who sympathized with Richards and were as shocked as he was by his unorthodox rage. (Richards reportedly told his friend Paul Mooney that two people actually endorsed his racist rant verbatim). Still, some say that we shouldn’t be too hard on Richards since his racism merely reflects the racism in us all. One editorial actually invoked data from a Harvard study to suggest that the bias many of us feel towards people who look like us proves we are as racist as Richards. The problem with this argument, of course, is that it equates racism with bias and ignores the panoply of reasons that may compel people to identity with their own ethnic/racial, gender, regional, etc. group. Another editorial acknowledged the risk of letting
racists off the hook by asking what his words say about us, but nevertheless appealed to audiences to ask what a deeper analysis of popular culture might tell us about ourselves as viewers.

The Richards controversy has opened the door on race and beckons us to step in and talk. That door stands ajar, with some of us peeking in and ducking out, because talking about race takes a lot of work. I see it in the clubs. I see it in my dialogues with USC students and my academic colleagues. I realize that this work is especially tedious for Whites. Consider the professional risk Jamie Masada endured by allowing Richards to return to The Laugh Factory and then not apologize. Consider Jerry Seinfeld’s intervention on behalf of Richards and the potential that it could have backfired by tainting him as racist by association? Some might argue that Richards also worked hard to subjugate himself before Black audiences and leaders and beg their forgiveness.

Yet, what many people fail to realize about the Richards controversy is that talking about race—honestly talking about race—is even more tedious for Black comics. How does one talk about Richards’ behavior while maintaining a sense of personal and communal integrity? How does one speak out in ways that recognize Richards’ humanity and vulnerability without missing a chance to problematize his behavior? What many African American comics find most difficult is how to engage in these conversations and patiently endure the many ways that Whites fail time and time again to see their own relative privilege.

Here, I consider the compassion of Jamie Foxx, who was critical of Richards in a press conference, but did not want to kick the man while he was down. I make room too for Pookey and Chris who risked a serious tension-inducing conversation with a crowd that had otherwise come to be entertained. I also consider Brandon Bowlin and Rodney Perry’s empathy for Richards’ position as a comic. And, while I may not endorse the basis for his decision, I can increasingly appreciate the work of Paul Mooney who stated in a recent interview, “I have known Michael Richards for something like 20 years. We’re friends. But I heard about the tape and I said, ‘That doesn't sound like a comic routine. That sounds like a breakdown.’ Then I saw the tape and I had an out of body experience. It was so ugly, so horrible. I hadn't heard (the n-word) like this - from someone I knew. Suddenly, I was directly connected. I was able to look at it not just through my eyes but through the eyes of the world. I had always thought it was endearing. It's NOT. It's not an equal opportunity word. I don't want everyone running around saying it.”

I find the work that Black comics are doing in these conversations, to empathize with Richards, while preserving their own sense of integrity, generous. It is generous because it takes place despite a sense of invisibility within the larger entertainment industry; an industry that tells them repeatedly to change who you are, change how you talk, make yourself empathetic to me, and do not dare breach industry protocols, so that I can sell your talent. But their labor is seldom acknowledged or reciprocated in any sincere or meaningful way. Several attempts to redress the Richards situation strike me as well-intentioned but a bit ill-conceived. To date, Richards hired a publicist after calling Black audience members “niggers” and enlisted Black leaders’ support in atoning for his sins. The Laugh Factory has banned the use of the n-word and plans to fine and potentially ban repeat offenders. Members of the press are now trying to figure out whether
Oprah uses the n-word privately with Gayle, or if Chris Rock will heed Richards’ example and stop using the n-word. These pursuits suggest that Blacks bear some responsibility for Richards’ actions and that they somehow have a responsibility to join Richards in the effort to reduce racism in America. They suggest that “we shall overcome” if we avoid using this n-word. And in doing so, they miss the point entirely.

Upstairs at the Laugh Factory, Rodney Perry told that he had been a bit fearful about performing in the aftermath of the Richards debacle. “I knew my set was going to mean something to somebody.” Later, when he was onstage, Rodney told the crowd that he’d been working on his own inner racism. “We’ve all got some.” Then he performed a joke where he reenacts alleged encounters between him and elderly Whites in grocery stores. When they politely request his assistance in reaching milk or cereal, he tackles them, holds them down, and tells them, “This is for Medgar Evans bitch … This is for Martin Luther King bitch … Remember the water hose? … Remember the water hose?” (Rodney typically uses the stool or the microphone stand as a stand-in for elderly Whites.) Rodney felt that this joke had a special resonance and urgency in the wake of the Michael Richards controversy. But it has come under fire—twice, in fact. First, from a White gentleman who created a Myspace page for the sole purpose of telling Rodney that he’d found this joke to be ignorant since Whites like him had also fought in the Civil Rights Movement. I wonder if the critic was so offended by Rodney’s words (e.g., “bitch”) and enactments of physical violence that he missed the aspect of play in the telling, as well as the concession that Rodney makes every time he tells the joke (i.e., “I’m working on my own inner-racism”). Meanwhile, this joke routinely amuses African American audiences, many of whom laugh whenever Rodney says, “Remember the water hose?” Perhaps these audience members can also appreciate the fact that Rodney would not be allowed to tackle unsuspecting White people in grocery stores without swift punitive action. Still, Rodney was trying to be accountable to that critique and his own standards when he told me he wanted to stop using the n-word. I asked him if his decision was based on the Richards controversy. He replied, “I don’t buy into the belief that my use of the word in any way condones Richards’ use … but I do feel it gets used too much as filler. I just want to work on myself.” The second time this joke came under fire was in response to his performance on the current season of HBO’s Def Comedy Jam. After it aired, Rodney’s sister called to tell him she didn’t like the joke and wanted him to consider dropping it from his routine. When he asked her why, she expressed fear that he would get hurt for telling it. Rodney says he will continue to tell the joke and to qualify it as a way of taking responsibility for the work we all need to do around race.

Even among African Americans, talking about race is often, if not always, complicated by the politics of representation. As such, commentaries about race, including this very essay, can come under fire on the basis of who’s talking to whom, for what purposes, and at what cost? When Brandon read this essay in draft, he emailed me this cautionary note: “Context is the grail here…for me and you! The Jew Cookie statement, I think, should be buttressed by my comment about them being burned after they died as opposed to being thrown overboard alive in the middle passage as ballast. Both are horrific ends and I honored none of the dead by my insensitive comment... Is it our job to be sensitive? …That's my point. I said that and had to recognize whatever the lesson. It didn't warrant an abrupt apology from all Blacks to Jews and all Jews to Blacks or a behavior forum for the races involved. Despite your weariness of the subject, I would caution you to be brave AND thoughtful. These are choppy, deep, long and soon
to be well remembered torrential words we are all adding to the conversation.”

I hear Brandon loud and clear. He is telling me many things, not the least of which is that what he tells me in private as a friend requires sufficient context when aired publicly, lest the nuances and implications of his story be lost. As I process the implications of Brandon’s note for my own public and scholarly musings, the stories surrounding Richards’ racist outburst continue to grow and complicate this telling. The Laugh Factory has continued to host press conferences and impromptu protests about the realities of racism and other –isms in “urban” and mainstream comedy. Comic/author Dick Gregory, whose autobiography is titled Nigger, has gone public about his opposition to the recent crackdown on the n-word. The Comedy Union has since hosted a “Freedom of Speech” show as a rebuttal to The Laugh Factory’s ban of the n-word. (Enss, the club’s owner, told me that he’s still reeling from media coverage which convinced many African Americans to view the night as merely a celebration of the n-word.) And just recently, Chocolate Sundaes convened its first show under the club’s new policy. When I called the host, Chris, to see if he planned to avoid using the n-word, he replied, “Just for the night. I will treat it as a T.V. set [set for T.V.] where I can’t say it anyway.” But he was also thinking well beyond the club’s policy. He added, “It’s also time for me to separate myself from the pack. When I watch myself on TV, [I see] that me and too much foul language don’t match. I still won’t be afraid to use it, but only where it counts (e.g., for emphasis or in character) …It’s time to treat my career with a business mind… I’m going to be a student of myself and … watch and study the DVD’s you’ve given me and tape every performance. I have the ability to be the next NIGGA!”

Call me desperate, but maybe there’s reason for optimism in Chris and Rodney’s newfound resolve and Brandon’s cautions about context. They’re reminding me that while issues of race pose challenges and dilemmas that can make us weary and even break our hearts, they also present opportunities to reflect and grow. I take heart in their efforts because the work is hard, especially where race and representation are concerned, and the vulnerability we all feel is strong.