

Black Lives Matter in History Too: Slavery, Memory, and the Haitian Revolution in Chris Rock's *Top Five*

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If you look at my comedy, it was always serious.
Chris Rock as André Allen, *Top Five*

Hollywood studios have released a spate of new films about slavery in the last half decade, from *Django Unchained* (2012) to *12 Years a Slave* (2013) to *Birth of a Nation* (2016). Much has been written about these films and the strengths and weaknesses of their depictions of slavery. However, one recent film about slavery and memory has gone largely unnoticed: Chris Rock's 2014 comedy *Top Five*.

On its face, *Top Five* does not seem to be about slavery at all. The film's trailer does not mention the subject; it positions the film as a comedy filled with profanity, alcohol, and romance. Chris Rock portrays André Allen, an African-American comedian and movie star promoting his latest film. The trailer shows André hanging out with old friends played by Tracey Morgan and Leslie Jones, getting marriage advice from Whoopi Goldberg (playing herself as one of André's famous friends), and partying in clubs. The movie itself has several storylines and subplots unrelated to slavery.

Top Five unfolds on a single day in Manhattan, as André Allen promotes his brand-new film,

does an extended interview with a *New York Times* reporter, and prepares for his impending wedding to a reality TV star. The film also features physical and slapstick comedy, built around André's most famous movie character, Hammy the Bear. One of *Top Five*'s main themes is that André wants to do serious work, but audiences only want to see him as Hammy, the machine-gun-firing bear-cop whose films have raked in \$600 million worldwide (Fig. 1).

Reviews of *Top Five* by leading film critics recognized that it is deeper than the typical Hollywood comedy. Manohla Dargis described it as focusing on "issues of artificiality and authenticity, the spectacle of black celebrity and the imperative of personal meaning." Allison Willmore said that *Top Five* focused on concerns about "creativity, integrity, and fame." Other critics have pointed to the film's exploration of the challenges of sobriety and the beauty of hip-hop (Caramanica; Yuan; Rich).

Yet, while *Top Five* treats all these issues, one of its overlooked central themes concerns history and memory and the extent to which black lives matter in white views of history. The film that

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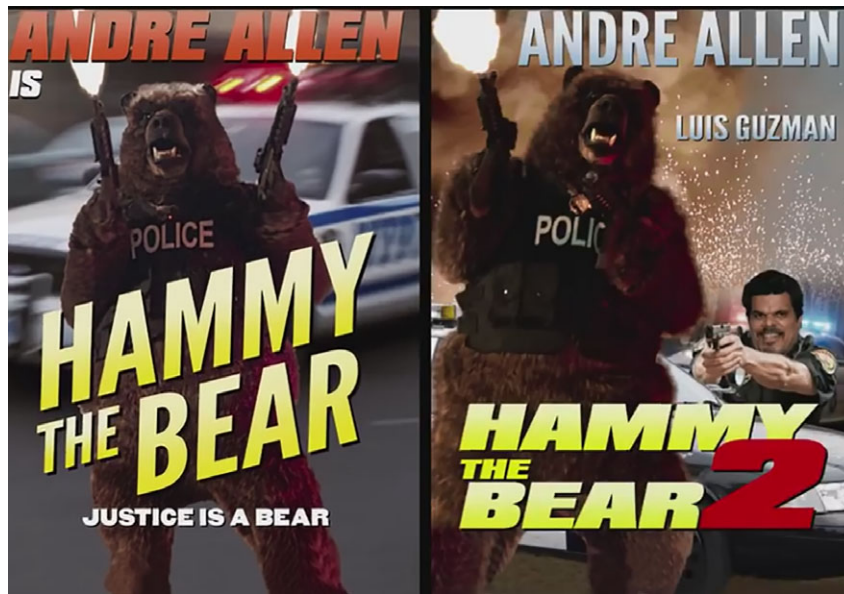


Figure 1 Screenshot of Hammy the Bear posters, *Top Five*. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

André is promoting in *Top Five*, *Uprize!*, is a Haitian Revolution epic. Paralleling *Top Five* (which Rock directed, wrote, and starred in), *Uprize!* is André Allen's labor of love. André wrote *Uprize!* and stars in it as Dutty Boukman, the self-educated slave who was a central figure in launching the Haitian Revolution. Unfortunately, *Uprize!* turns out to be as much of a box office flop as the Nat Turner film, *Birth of a Nation*, would be in real life two years later, something Rock commented on in a November 2016 tweet. Fleeing *Uprize!* as they later would *Birth of a Nation*, audiences showed a preference for comedy over a serious drama about slave revolt (@chrisrock, "We Both") (Fig. 2).

Like André, Chris Rock himself yearns to make a slave resistance epic but knows that he cannot. In one interview on *Top Five*, Rock spoke of his dream of making a Nat Turner film, but acknowledged that it was unlikely given Hollywood realities (Rottenberg). In another, Rock underscored the differences between Hollywood fantasies of a violent slave leader like Django in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* and what a real leader like Turner was like: "Nat Turner spoke different



Figure 2 Screenshot of Rock tweet comparing the box office struggles of *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) and *Uprize!* (*Top Five*'s film-within-a-film). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

languages.... Django was nothing compared to Nat Turner" (Rock, "Breakfast").

In still more interviews on *Top Five*, Rock criticized other recent films on racism and slavery. He commented that these films might help some whites to be more historically aware, but that overall, "Of the ones you just mentioned, the only one I really liked is *12 Years a Slave*, because it just didn't feel the need to make people feel comfortable" (Rich). In 2016, after Nate Parker rose to the challenge and released his own Nat Turner biopic, *The Birth of a Nation*, Rock lamented that it only proved *Top Five*'s point, since Tyler Perry's real film *Boo! A Madea Halloween* (released in 2016 in homage to *Top Five*) drew audiences away from *Birth* as much as its fictional counterpart had done to *Uprize!* (@chrisrock, "We"). It is more than ironic that *Boo! A Madea Halloween* not only beat fictitious and real slave revolt films at the box office but was also the one fictitious film from *Top Five* that audiences wanted to see made into a real film, rather than the Haitian revolution film *Uprize!*

Why did Rock make a film about slavery and memory that focuses on the Haitian Revolution, rather than on more familiar images from US history? Rock has shown a certain interest in Haiti over the years.¹ However, he is less interested in the country's history for its own sake than is a Haitian history specialist like me; instead, it serves two purposes for him. First, the Haitian Revolution signifies for Rock white ignorance about black history. Indeed, in contrast to other famous revolutions of its time, the Haitian Revolution has been subject to a kind of willful amnesia by whites around the Atlantic world, from the eighteenth century until very recently (Sepinwall, "Atlantic" and "Specter"). Second, Rock is acutely aware of the particularity of the Haitian Revolution. Against cinematic images of US slaves suffering their condition patiently while singing spirituals (a pet peeve of one character in *Top Five*)—or blaxploitation fantasies of slave revolt as in *Django Unchained*—the Haitian Revolution involved a real armed uprising by enslaved Africans. Unlike Nat Turner's rebellion, the Revolution was not only successful in abolishing slavery,

but also led to national independence, as Haitians assumed control of their own government (Fick; Dubois; Sepinwall, *Haitian*). For Rock, the Haitian Revolution thus forces consideration not only of US white persons' ignorance regarding the history of slavery but also their discomfort with revolutionary violence done by blacks, even when they were oppressed slaves yearning for freedom.

In this article, I highlight Rock's historical commentary on slavery and memory, as embedded in *Top Five*. But I first want to point out one reason that Rock's aims are not completely transparent in the film. The film falls into the trickster tradition of African humor in the Americas: Rock makes jokes that seem to be about himself, when he is actually shining a brutal spotlight on white *mentalités*. Rock follows a long tradition in African-American culture, dating from slavery, in which jokes are told in a "doubled" way. That is, jokes express resistance, but are told in ways that protect the teller from harm by making him seem to be the butt of the joke (Watkins; Littleton; Townsend; Wolk; Chamoiseau). As Glenda Carpio has commented, "Until well into the twentieth century, [African-American humor] had to be cloaked in secrecy lest it be read as transgressive and punished by violence. Hence, the popular slave aphorism 'Got one mind for white folk to see/'Nother for what I know is me'" (4–5).

As an example, Carpio cites a classic joke in which a slave is caught eating one of his master's pigs. The slave admits his guilt, saying "Yes, suh, Master, you got less pig now but you sho' got more n****" (4). Carpio explains the joke's doubled nature: white people overhearing the joke would think it was about a shifty, thieving slave, thus "catering to whites' belief in the inferiority of blacks" (5). But black people would read a different meaning in the joke; for them, the slave's response "effectively burlesques 'the entire notion of ownership in human beings,' as the slave carries the master's objectification of his body to its outmost absurdity" (5). *Top Five* draws heavily on this tradition of doubled or double-voiced humor, which is linked to the larger African-American tradition of signifyin(g) (H. Gates). Rock skewers the unawareness of

white people about the Haitian Revolution while seeming to be self-effacing.²

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), the first successful uprising by African slaves in the Americas, aroused fear throughout the Atlantic. As the slaves of colonial Saint-Domingue liberated themselves, the world was turned upside down; the words “Saint-Domingue” conjured up a terrifying alternative universe to white people in which they could lose their fortunes and their lives. For enslaved peoples, in contrast, the Revolution served as a beacon of hope as they imagined a world in which slavery could be eradicated.

Despite its importance, the Revolution’s memory has not been well preserved. Indeed, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued in 1995, the Revolution was “unthinkable” to white people in the eighteenth century because of widespread racism, and was therefore silenced. Even in the modern West, Trouillot noted, where racism is less overt, the Revolution has remained largely silenced. He explained that writing by non-Haitians about the age of revolutions either omits the Haitian Revolution completely, or acknowledges it but dismisses its significance. The latter occurs, for instance, when people do not treat it as an actual revolution and label it a mere rebellion—or when they suggest that Haitians did not rebel of their own initiative, but were puppets of white factions that manipulated them in order to benefit from disorder.

Elsewhere, I have traced how the Revolution has attracted increasing scholarly attention, and how this neglect has started to be reversed (Sepinwall, “Still” and *Haitian*). For instance, in 2000, Franklin Knight called the Revolution “the most thorough case study of revolutionary change anywhere in the history of the modern world” (103). Similarly, Laurent Dubois has argued that the Haitian Revolution was more radically egalitarian than either the American or French Revolution, and thus “forever transformed the world” (7). The Haitian Revolution is now regularly invoked in college history surveys, if not widely known among the public.

However, the Haitian Revolution still has not gotten its due in cinema, which reinforces the

general public’s unfamiliarity with it. Even films that do touch on the Revolution, such as the recent French television miniseries *Toussaint Louverture*, often distort or misrepresent it. In my current research, I have been analyzing those films that do treat the Haitian Revolution; I argue that many of them have significant flaws in their depictions of this event. These range from portraying the leaders of the Revolution as savages who revolted under the influence of drunk voodoo priests to implying that they were manipulated into rebellion by white opportunists (Sepinwall, “Happy as a Slave,” “Burn!” and *Slave Revolt On Screen*).

A few directors have tried to make better films on the Haitian Revolution, ones that better reflect the historical record and acknowledge black agency. For example, Danny Glover long sought to make an epic on Toussaint Louverture. However, the project ran into multiple roadblocks. Films on slavery often minimize its brutality, or feature a “white hero” in whose shoes white audiences can imagine themselves. *Amistad*, *12 Years a Slave*, and *Free State of Jones* all fit this pattern.³ Glover reported that the lack of a white hero in this story was precisely what prevented him from getting needed funding (AFP; Obenson, “Danny”). Glover has not been the only filmmaker who has proven unable to make a film on the Haitian Revolution. Other long-announced but unreleased projects include Toussaint films by the Martinican filmmaker Euzhan Palcy and the Nigerian director Jeta Amata (Jean; Gbadamassi; Obenson, “Nigerian”). Although Amata’s film was slated for a 2013 release, the film has not been completed; it is listed on IMDB.com as still “in development” without a confirmed cast (“Emperor”).

It is in this context that *Top Five* must be understood. Rock is painfully conscious of how difficult it is for African Americans to tell their own stories in Hollywood. When he hosted the 2016 Oscars, walking on stage to Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power,” his monologue included jokes about the ceremony being the “White People’s Choice Awards” and about Hollywood liberals not hiring African Americans.⁴ He has also

specifically chastised Hollywood depictions of slavery (Rich). So instead of seeking to make a film about the Haitian Revolution, Rock goes meta in *Top Five*. By making a film *about* making a film about the Revolution—and predicting that the latter would bomb spectacularly—Rock appears to be mocking himself, a safe topic for white audiences. In my analysis, however, Rock's real targets are those white people who are unaware of—and unwilling to learn about—the history of slavery and the Haitian Revolution.

Without this context, *Top Five* might seem too frivolous to be taken seriously by a historian. In addition to the trailer omitting mention of the Revolution, Rock offers other diversions in the film. These include gratuitous sex scenes (including a drug-fueled threesome) and a bachelor party at a strip club with André's friends Whoopi Goldberg, Jerry Seinfeld, and Adam Sandler. *Top Five* is also a meet-cute romance, as the audience is led to wonder whether the *Times* reporter (played by Rosario Dawson) may be a better match for André than his reality TV star fiancée (played by Gabrielle Union).

Amidst the nudity and broad comedy, however, are subversive lines about the Haitian Revolution and white views of black history more generally. The following scene offers a prime example of Rock's trickster humor. André speaks on the phone with his agent Charles, played by Kevin Hart. On its first day in theaters, *Uprize!* is not doing well.

Charles: Now, when you told me you wanted to do that movie about the Haitian Revolution, André, what did I say to you?

André: You said it wasn't a good idea, ok?

Charles: No, no, no, no, no, you're wrong, André, that's not what I said. I said: "N***, is you crazy?!" (*Top Five* 00:07:38)

Here, Charles appears to suggest that André is crazy for even thinking of making a film on the Haitian Revolution.

Under the surface, however, the line's humor is doubled. It is intended to be read by white viewers as an innocuous joke, a self-effacement in which Rock invites others to mock his ridiculous

idea. However, the line offers a different meaning for black viewers and for others with a greater awareness of black history. For them, the reason Charles calls André a crazy n*** is precisely because he expects that white people will not be open to seeing a film about the Haitian Revolution. The line can also be read in light of two other uses of the phrase. One is Malcolm X's comment in his address to Mississippi Youth: "You get freedom by letting your enemy know that you'll do anything to get your freedom; then you'll get it. . . . When you get that kind of attitude, they'll label you as a 'crazy Negro,' or they'll call you a 'crazy n***'—they don't say Negro. . . . But when you stay radical long enough, and get enough people to be like you, you'll get your freedom" (145). The line also evokes the title of an album made by one of Rock's comedy idols, Richard Pryor's 1974 *That N***'s Crazy*. André thus fits into a long line of "crazy n***s," as he highlights white amnesia about the history of slavery.⁵

While Rock has not commented explicitly about his construction of jokes like these, he has suggested that he learned to double his humor by necessity. Rock has explained that, when he started out as a comic in the 1980s, there were no spaces where black people could only entertain black people. There were no black comedy clubs, no *Def Comedy Jam* or UPN, and two black comedians were not even allowed on the same line-up. Noting that "you had to figure out how to make other people laugh beside black people," Rock commented that "we had to swing two bats" (Townsend 00:46:12). Working on *Saturday Night Live* likely also helped Rock perfect doubling his humor. The show's producer, Lorne Michaels, long had a reputation for tokenism in hiring African-American comedians and for not affording them the same creative freedoms as other cast members, with the possible exception of Eddie Murphy (R. Gates). On *SNL*, Rock often deployed doubled humor, especially in his Nat X sketches.⁶

Alongside the doubled parts of the script, other parts of *Top Five* speak openly about the gap between the Revolution's importance and white knowledge of it. While promoting *Uprize!*, André

tries to educate interviewers. He explains that he made *Uprize!* so that people will know about the Revolution, which he describes as the “largest slave uprising in the Western hemisphere” (00:43:44) and “the greatest slave rebellion of all time” (00:42:51). André adds that he had researched the film’s central character, the revolutionary Boukman, and had long wanted to make a film about him. André is eager to share this history, which he learned, it should be noted, outside of school.

Rock is careful in *Top Five* not to implicate every white person in his criticism of how white people ignore the histories of the Haitian Revolution and slavery in general. The character in *Top Five* most eager to see *Uprize!* is a white man familiar with Haiti’s history. The *Times* reporter’s boyfriend, a DJ named Brad, tells André: “I cannot wait to see the movie. I’m so glad someone is finally telling Boukman’s story.... I mean, no one talks about the maroon slaves!” (00:53:10). It is possible that Rock is mocking Brad as a cultural appropriator; Brad (who turns out to be secretly gay) is after all someone who not only dates a black woman but makes his living spinning black music. However, Rock has made it a point in other contexts to exempt individual white people from the generic group he skewers. In his 1999 HBO special *Chris Rock: Bigger and Blacker*, Rock told his audience, “Racism everywhere. Who’s the maddest people? White people. Not y’all, y’all all right. You paid money to see me; we cool” (00:47:12). Rock has also called out African Americans when he thinks they are more interested in entertainment than in history. When André sees a long line of African Americans and white people at the movie theater on *Uprize!*’s opening day, he is disappointed to learn that they are not there to learn about Haiti but to see the fictional Tyler Perry movie *Boo! A Madea Halloween*.⁷

Despite individual exceptions, however, Rock stresses that white people have been indifferent at best, hostile at worst, to learning the history of African-descended people. As would almost certainly be the case if a real film like *Uprize!* was released, the white people who interview Rock in *Top Five* share neither his enthusiasm for

Boukman nor for the Revolution. For one thing, they do not even know what a slave rebellion means (as André patiently explains: “it’s when slaves... rebel”) (00:42:46). More importantly, to them, André’s film is about one thing and one thing only: black people killing white people. In their view, it is inconceivable that white audiences will want to see it. André goes to see the DJs Opie and Anthony at Sirius XM’s studios, and he excitedly describes the film. Anthony asks skeptically, “what do you have to say to the white audience here that is insulted, disgusted, by your movie, watching 50,000 of their people being killed?” (00:32:43).

Rock gives André a powerful—and undoubted—response. He tells Anthony: “George Bush kills a lot of brown people! Nobody had a problem with that.... He *really* killed ‘em! I fake kill white people, and it’s a problem?!” (*Top Five* 00:32:56) Rock notes that when US forces kill civilians of color in war zones, little indignation follows. And yet when slaves killed the people who brutalized them in order to win their freedom, their agency is considered beyond the pale. Here, Rock is drawing attention to the hypocrisy of white Americans who are horrified by the deaths of other white people—but are oblivious to the deaths of nonwhite people. In this exchange, Rock parallels recent scholarship which has blasted depictions of the Haitian Revolution that emphasize the violence of the slave uprising, while ignoring the brutality by white slaveowners that prompted it (Dubois; Ghachem).

Rock has Anthony respond, “There’s outrage!” But before white audiences can absorb Rock’s critique enough to be angered, the editing cuts to another interview. None of the reviews of *Top Five* that I have found have remarked on this exchange at all. Rock drops this bomb into *Top Five*, but in trickster style, he allows Anthony to condemn his comments—and then moves away at lightning speed before it can explode.

Another way in which Rock illustrates gaps in white memory regarding black history is that the film’s white people are unable to acknowledge the Haitian Revolution as a revolution. Other than Brad, they have never heard of it, and they keep

calling it a revolt instead of a revolution. A revolt is normally more limited and does not succeed in overthrowing the regime in power. In addition, revolts are generally linked more to violence, while revolutions (although they may be just as bloody) are viewed as motivated by ideology and to have more substantial impacts. With one exception, the film's white people are wholly unaware of the global significance of the Haitian Revolution. The white characters' inability to call the Haitian Revolution a "revolution" fits Trouillot's discussion of how the Revolution is often banalized by white people even when it is acknowledged. Against this white amnesia about the Haitian Revolution, Rock continues a nineteenth-century African-American tradition of finding inspiration in it (Polyné, Clavin).

Interestingly, most of the reviews of *Top Five* by mainstream critics said little about the Haitian part of the film. When they did discuss it, just like the white people in the film, they generally did not acknowledge it as a revolution, but said *Uprize!* concerned "a slave revolt in Haiti." Although professional critics did not notice what Rock was doing historiographically, some perceptive Twitter users did. They highlighted the subtle way that Rock educated viewers about Haiti and black history while ostensibly mocking himself. One Twitter user (@bbelizak) wrote, "Shoutout to @chrisrock for slipping in details about the Haitian Revolution into the plot of the movie *Top Five*." Another (@TheKavita) wrote that Rock was: "Lettin' 'em know about the Haitian Revolution, and they won't even know they received it. Go see *Top Five*." Still another (@garethwareth) wrote, "In *Top Five*, Chris Rock jokes about making a film about the Haitian Revolution, knowing full well that wouldn't be accepted in Hollywood." These tweets confirm that Rock's doubled humor reads differently to different audiences.

If Rock's thinking on history and memory is often only signified in *Top Five*, Rock has been more explicit in interviews about the film. He has conceded that studios were not initially interested in a film that had the Revolution even as a secondary theme: "No, no studio would do a movie with a subplot about a Haitian revolution. Are

you kidding me?" (Bodey). Rock made the film outside the studio system, beginning with his own seed money; the producers he recruited included Jay-Z and Kanye West. Only after Rock completed the film and screened it at the Toronto International Film Festival did Paramount buy *Top Five* and fund its release.

In interviews, Rock has emphasized that black freedom—and white fear of it—is a central element of the film. The film's very title refers to hip-hop: throughout the movie, André asks others to name their top five rappers of all time. As he told one journalist, "Rap, for the most part, is made by free people. Free black people. That's what scares people so much about it. That's what pisses people off so much about it, it's like, 'Oh my God, it's fucking black freedom. Turn it down'" (di Rosso). Rock's implication is that if black freedom is threatening in music, then black agency in revolution is far scarier and does not belong on screen. Rock's comment on rap illuminates yet another layer of *Top Five*: white people expect André to keep playing Hammy the Bear, so they can laugh. They want a modern-day Sambo, rather than meaningful black self-expression.⁸ André's own desire, to stop being Hammy and make a serious movie about black revolutionaries, does not interest them; therefore it cannot be successful. This seems to parallel Rock's own experiences in Hollywood. His highest-grossing role by far has been as Marty the Zebra in *Madagascar* and its sequels, each of which grossed approximately \$200 million. In contrast, Rock's documentary *Good Hair* (which analyzed the desire of African-American women, including one of his daughters, to use weaves and dangerous straightening chemicals to conform to white beauty standards) grossed approximately \$4 million, while *Top Five* itself earned \$25 million ("Chris Rock"). Like André, in real life Rock earns more as a cartoonish animal character than when making serious films about African-American history and culture.

Several film critics have assumed that Rock was genuinely mocking the idea of a Haitian Revolution film in *Top Five*. Stephen Whitty described *Uprize!* this way: "Unlike Rock, [André's] career

is now on life-support, his desperate bid for seriousness — a revolutionary slave epic — dying in the theaters.” *Uprize!* clearly is a bad parody of what a Haitian Revolution film would look like. Its poster shows André as Boukman, brandishing a machete with a goofy expression; the one clip we see involves slaves yelling repeatedly, “Kill the white man!” (*Top Five* 01:09:24). However, as discussed above, Rock has made clear in interviews that *Top Five*’s Haitian theme is not meant as a joke signaling André’s pathetic attempt at gravitas.

Along with his media interviews, Rock’s stand-up illuminates what *Top Five*’s humor means and how it functions. Rock’s routines can be very raw, and he has faced criticism for his “regressive” treatment of gender issues (Haggins 82, 91–93; Acham 188–93). Nevertheless, even critics who call attention to his stereotyping on gender have praised his insights on race.⁹ Indeed, he has been widely acclaimed by other comedians—as well as prominent African-American intellectuals—for the wisdom in his comedy, even as he embeds his political jokes in lewd ones. According to comedian Katt Williams, Rock “brought intelligence back to stand-up comedy. He would talk about intellectual things and yet he was funny and would talk about nigga shit at the same time” (Littleton 258). For actor-director Robert Townsend, “Chris is a Jedi master. He elevates the game” (00:47:52). The social insights in Rock’s comedy earned him praise from no less a figure than Congressman Elijah Cummings, who explained that “Chris Rock has said things that I use in speeches. There’s so much truth in what he says” (Townsend 00:48:50). Kara Hunt, a specialist in African-American comedy, has emphasized Rock’s association with Cornel West and Nelson George (“Not”). Michael Eric Dyson has called Chris Rock the comedian he most applauds, based on Rock’s ability “to tell the truth about the underside of American practices as well as African-American practices” (Townsend 00:48:59).

Rock’s comedy *oeuvre* mirrors several of the themes in *Top Five*. While a young performer on *Saturday Night Live*, Rock began inserting counternarratives on white accounts of history into his

sketches, for instance on Columbus and on the United States’ treatment of Native Americans (Rock, “Weekend—17/11” 00:01:50 and “Weekend—16/3” 00:01:04). He deepened such critiques in his stand-up, most notably in a 1996 HBO special. Calling attention to the chasm separating black history and white memory, Rock told his audience:

I once took a black history class. I figured since I’m black I already knew everything. I figured I’d pass just by showing up.

Failed it.

Isn’t that sad, a black man failing black history? But I didn’t know anything about Africa. When you go to white schools you learn about Europe up the ass, but you don’t learn that much about Africa. The only thing I know about Africa is that it’s far, far away. A 35-hour flight. Imagine the boat ride. The boat ride’s so long there’s still slaves on their way here.

All I learned in school about being black was Martin Luther King. That’s all they ever teach. Martin Luther King. He was the answer to everything.

TEACHER: What’s the capital of Zaire?

ME: Martin Luther King.

TEACHER: Tell us the name of the woman who would not give up her seat on the bus.

ME: Oh, that’s hard. Are ya sure it was a woman? Okay. I got it. Martina Luther King. (*Rock This!* 26–27; cf. *Chris Rock: Bring* 00:40:05)

As in *Top Five*, Rock at first appears here to be mocking himself. He failed the class; he does not know any figures in black history other than Reverend King, not even Rosa Parks. Yet embedded in this joke is a harsh criticism of the American educational system (“white schools”), which teach a great deal about Europe, but nothing about black history except for Martin Luther King. Rock also sneaks in a signifying reference to the Atlantic slave trade. Clearly, Rock’s discussion of the Haitian Revolution in *Top Five* is not random. As Rock sought to educate himself about black history, he learned about Haiti’s revolution—but he also recognized that white schools never taught him about it. King was the only subject of black history that seemed non-threatening to white people, because his work was based in nonviolence. Haitian revolutionaries, in contrast, epitomized white fears and so were never discussed.

Another sketch by Rock highlights the gap between white and black memories of slavery. On a 2000 episode of the *Chris Rock Show*, Rock interviewed people in New York City about whether there should be reparations for slavery. He highlighted black people remembering that they were never given their “40 acres and a mule,” versus white people insisting that they bore no responsibility for slavery (“Chris Rock Show”). Rock has also provocatively invoked slavery in other comedy routines (*Rock This!* 10, 15, 30; *Chris Rock: Never* 00:49:00; and “Oscars”).

Top Five echoes still other themes Rock has expressed in his stand-up about white fears of black men and boys. In *Rock This!* he suggests that white people instinctively fear black men gathering, no matter who they are: “White people don’t know how to tell the difference between one black man and another. . . . They see two black men together and it’s a crowd. A dangerous mob. To white people, even Ed Bradley and Bryant Gumbel hanging out, waiting to cross the street together, is potentially scary. . . .” (10–11). Here, Rock explains that, since slavery, African-American men, even genteel newscasters, are still perceived as threatening. Rock has also made jokes about how he himself has been perceived. Another classic bit in *Rock This!* is the following:

Sometimes I hate life because I was born a suspect. All black men are born suspects.

When I came out of my mother, right away, if anything happened within a three-block radius, I was a suspect. . . .

If you’re born a suspect, everybody’s scared of you. . . . If I look up into the windows of the apartments I pass by I can see old ladies on the phone. They’ve already called 9-1-1. . . . and are just waiting for me to do something wrong. (9)

These jokes are not hypothetical; in 2015 on Twitter, Rock began chronicling each time his vehicle was stopped by police (@chrisrock, “I’m Not Even Driving,” “Stopped” and “I’m Not Even Gonna”).

In recent years, Rock’s Twitter feed has amplified these concerns about how little African-American lives (whether male or female) are valued. *Top Five* was made at the same time as the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, and



Figure 3 Screenshot of Rock tweet contrasting police treatment of Eric Garner and Dylan Roof. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Rock has often tweeted in solidarity with it from his account @chrisrock. On November 14, 2014, after a grand jury declined to charge the officer who killed Michael Brown, Rock tweeted a quote from W. E. B. DuBois: “A system cannot fail those it was never meant to protect.” On December 3, 2014, just before *Top Five* opened, Rock tweeted about the refusal of the NYPD to press charges against anyone in the death of Eric Garner: “This one was on film.” In June 2015, Rock juxtaposed the treatment by police of Garner (accused of selling contraband cigarettes) and Dylan Roof (accused of murdering nine people at a church) (@chrisrock, “This is how”) (Fig. 3). Following the death of Sandra Bland in police custody in July 2015, Rock tweeted, “If I were to die in police custody, know this. . . . I did not commit suicide.” In August 2016, he decried the fatal shooting of Korryn Gaines (@chrisrock, “WTF”) (Fig. 4). And two years before *Top Five* was



Figure 4 Screenshot of Rock tweet denouncing the fatal shooting of Korryn Gaines, an African-American mother, by Baltimore police in August 2016. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

made, in the midst of the outrage over Trayvon Martin's death, Rock harkened back to slavery with a tweet that attracted a great deal of notoriety: "Happy white peoples independence day the slaves weren't free but I'm sure they enjoyed fireworks" (@chrisrock, "Happy").

Top Five is thus clearly a historiographical intervention, even if framed satirically. Building on comments he has made elsewhere, Rock underscores the difficulty of making serious films in Hollywood about the history of slavery. He highlights how black lives are discounted not only in the present but also in the past; for white people like *Top Five*'s radio hosts, white lives matter much more than black ones, even when the former openly brutalized and enslaved the latter. Chris Rock, ever the trickster, is Michel-Rolph Trouillot's comic twin. Using the Haitian Revolution to signal white fears of black freedom, Rock

pushes us to confront why there has not yet been a successful Haitian Revolution film—one that values enslaved black lives as much as those of the white people that professed to own them.

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Notes

1. Like many in Hollywood, Rock participated in the 2010 Hope for Haiti telethon. But his interest in the country dates back longer. He visited Haiti in the early 2000s (Rock, "Ugly [African-]American"). And in his 2003 film *Head of State*, Rock's character responds to a nationalist politician whose slogan is "God bless America, and no place else!" with the question "How about 'God bless Haiti?' or 'God bless Africa?'" Rock's favorite artist is Jean-Michel Basquiat, a Haitian American (<http://www.chrisrock.com/story/favorite-artist-basquiat>). He has also been an admirer of the Haitian director Raoul Peck, and lauded the latter's film *I Am Not Your Negro* (@chrisrock, "Such a good documentary") months before its official release.

2. There is a small literature on the political content of Rock's humor; see especially Watkins (579–82); Acham (esp. 179–94); Hag-gins (chs. 2 and 3); Carpio (104–09); and briefly Martin (3–4). Most other scholarly references to Rock focus on his 1996 "Niggas v. Black People" skit, rather than on his jokes on history or slavery; see for instance Bailey; and Hunt, "Off." I have not found any scholarship on *Top Five* itself.

3. Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* presented a notable exception to this model. It neither hid the brutality of slavery nor featured a white hero; even the seemingly "kind" slaveowner proved to be violent and content to have his slaves raped. However, as Rock pointed out in his November 2016 tweet, that film did as poorly at the box office as Rock's fictional slave revolt film *Uprize!*, based not only on Parker's past as an accused rapist but also after historians of slavery criticized the film's treatment of female agency and its lack of strict fidelity to Nat Turner's own story (Rock, "We Both"; Sepin-wall, "Why").

4. For Rock's critiques of Hollywood, see also his *Rock This!* (189–93), as well as Nelson George's account (136–90) of the difficulties he and Rock had making *CB4*, their gangster-rap parody.

5. Rock often uses a black/white binarism in his comedy, in which the historical perspectives of Asians, Latinos and others are not discussed. See, however, his discussion of Native American perspectives on history in "Weekend"—16/3.

6. The Nat X sketches may have seemed to white people to be a parody of African-American militants, rather than something directed at themselves. But this character allowed Rock to raise subversive questions about issues such as white indifference to police brutality against black people (Rock, "Dark"). In the Nat X sketches, Rock also made explicit the different ways he thought white and black people would view his character, as he featured a "White Man's Cam" moment in each sketch for an alternate gaze.

7. Although *Boo!* was a joke film-within-a-film imagined by Rock, Tyler Perry made a real film with this title in 2016 following pleas from *Top Five* fans. See discussion below on how the real *Boo!* mimicked the fictional one in drawing audiences away from a much-anticipated slave uprising film.

8. On white preferences for black humor in a "Sambo" form, see Watkins (102–03 and passim); and Bogle. The name Hammy recalls another classic black archetype in Hollywood, that of the Mammy, although Hammy is hardly a Mammy character in a bear suit.

9. The principal exception has been Rock's infamous "Niggas v. Black People" sketch. Rock later retired this routine after others complained that it had empowered white people to use the n*** word (Bailey; Acham 179–83; Hunt, "Off" 849; and Haggins 83–84). Rock's treatment of female characters in his films has often been less regressive than in his stand-up. Both *Top Five* and *Down to Earth* have strong female leads, smart professionals with integrity and heart. At the same time, Rock gives Rosario Dawson's character in *Top Five* a Cinderella fantasy that is at odds with her modern-woman exterior.

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