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## Was It Something They Said? Stand-up Comedy and Progressive Social Change

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Was It Something They Said? Stand-up Comedy and Progressive Social Change

by

David M. Jenkins

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a concentration in Performance Studies  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## DEDICATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

From our earliest origins in every civilization across the globe, comic performances have fulfilled an important social function. Yet stand-up comedy has not attracted the serious academic inquiry one might expect. This dissertation argues that in the absence of public intellectuals stand-up comics are important to how we talk about and negotiate complicated issues like gender and race. These comic texts are sites of cultural critique, public discourse, tools for articulation, a means of persuasion, and serve to galvanize communities.

This dissertation argues that stand-up comedy performances are a vital part of modern American intellectual and social life and are heavily enmeshed in ongoing processes of progressive social change. In the absence of public intellectuals in what is generally an anti-intellectual modern America, Chris Rock, Sarah Silverman, and Louis C. K. are currently three highly relevant stand-up comics who generate and contribute to discourses that galvanize or polarize publics and counterpublics. Their comic performances, recordings, and other artifacts (like internet memes) that live on after the live event circulate in the public sphere and our most quotidian exchanges. They contribute to discourses that move us toward progressive social change and also act as a barometer for where we are as a nation during any particular moment. Through the discourses generated by their performances, their involvement in social dramas, and

their role they perform as public intellectuals, stand-up comics are capable of healing, reconciling, or otherwise mediating breaches in the social order.

This dissertation uses 1) a critical examination of the construction and performance of the comic persona, 2) a close analysis of the comic routine as an aesthetic text, and finally 3) an examination of social dramas and the discourses they generate to see where and how these comics possibly contribute to progressive social change.

This study finds Chris Rock to be a potent mediator, Sarah Silverman a transgressive instigator, and C. K. a subversive healer. This study makes contributions to a wide array of stakeholders: Communication, Sociology, Performance Studies, and Postcolonialism. Finally, I offer new terms to discuss the interaction of comic and audience and directions for future research.



## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people.  
Without hearing this chorus we cannot understand the drama as a whole.  
- Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*

There's no way in fuck I was ever supposed to be shit. – Richard Pryor

#### **Beginnings**

I grew up in the middle of nowhere before the rise of cable TV and the internet in a relatively conservative, *very white* southern environment: A double-wide trailer on the north side of Jacksonville, Florida, just minutes from the Georgia border. It was a time and place not usually very tolerant of those who didn't look or live like "us." My mother worked in the elementary school cafeteria; my father a mechanic, after an accident forced an early retirement from motorcycle racing. Some might refer to the environment I grew up in as *outlaw*, others might dismiss it as *redneck* or *white trash*, but most of us just called it Oceanway – the name of that part of town which still carries the same associations for the denizens of Duval County even 40 years later. As a small child I'm told I once audibly reacted at the sight of a black woman in a grocery store because the sight was so unusual. In this same period of time, a cross was burned in a yard down the street after a black family moved in. I was warned not to play with the black kids at school because they were dirty, and I'd get lice.

There was a rigid, clear hierarchy in the home (men in the garage, women in the kitchen, kids outside) and in the world (white is right, rich people may be uppity, but poor folks will rob you blind). As a child navigating this, I was told both directly and indirectly that all of these things just *were*. It's how the world worked. No one else seemed to notice anything wrong with it, and for a long while neither did I.

Many of my earliest memories of hearing viewpoints and ideas different than those of my family came from stand-up comedy records -- Cheech and Chong, George Carlin, The Smothers Brothers, Richard Pryor. All opened my mind in a number of ways, and all I believe are intricately linked to my development into the person I am today. In "Black Consciousness" from *Occupation: Foole* (1973) George Carlin not only avoided the use of racial epithets but let me know that a group of people has the right to choose the words that describes their identity. In "White Harlem" on the same album, he discusses race, class, and sexuality in a story describing his childhood neighborhood in New York as one where different groups co-existed, with some lines blurring even as others were reinforced. Listening to Richard Pryor albums *Is It Something I Said?* (1975)<sup>1</sup> and *Wanted* (1978), I learned black people seemed to have more in common with my white family than we did the rich whites and white authority figures I knew, and also that things weren't just *supposed to be* any certain way. Maybe there were people who just *preferred it that way*. Comics made me question taken for granted assumptions by including the excluded and by highlighting inequities through their relentless invocation of incongruities.

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<sup>1</sup>The title of this dissertation is a play on that.

Not only were these albums a resource for me to gain alternative streams of knowledge about the world-beyond-my-world, but they also served as some of my first experiences with live performances.<sup>2</sup> I listened to these routines over and over until I could repeat them word for word with matching inflection. Even if, as a seven-year old, I didn't really know *what* a comic was talking about, I could at least fake it. I then began to re-enact these routines at parties in our home, igniting a fire in my belly for the stage that still burns today. These routines not only provided me a voice in scenes where I previously had none, allowing me to be an object of attention, but empowered me in ways back at home, in school, and while at play.

As I grew older I collected more and more of these routines and performed them on the playground, in the lunchroom, and at sleepovers. These comic routines served to give me voice in my own home where I would have otherwise been asked to leave the company of adults and go in my room or, at minimum, quietly play somewhere out of the way. Ours was traditionally a family in which children were to be seen and not heard. These routines also gave me a certain status at school where I was previously picked on for my weight and "carrot top" of hair.<sup>3</sup> Looking back today, it strikes me how performance, stand-up comedy, and notions of progressive social change have been central and intertwined in my life at every step of the way. To look at where I came from, the Richard Pryor quotation that prefaces this introduction is a perfect fit.

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, these were mediated recordings, but they were mostly recorded live. There was something very thrilling, enticing, about hearing the interplay between comic and audience.

<sup>3</sup> Though I always fired back that carrot *tops* were, in fact, green. In the wake of Robin Williams' suicide, and in the face of so many comics who have killed themselves either directly or indirectly, I think a study of the creation of a comic mask in a person's development as a kind of armor to deal with the world would be an extraordinary site of inquiry for another study.

I am the first and still only member of my family to go to college. Most are either in the military or toil at minimum wage or backbreaking manual labor jobs. A majority of my family fits the description of *conservative working poor*, something that still bothers me to this day as I watch them vote against their own self-interests because heaven forbid their *hard-earned money* should ever go to support “them.” My mother worked hard to keep me on track in school, and my grandfather kept a steady hand in my life to make sure I’d turn into a responsible person, which he did by example and by shepherding me through the Boy Scouts. In countless ways I can’t help but look at it all and wonder how I got here.

I took my first acting class in middle school in an attempt to begin building the toolkit that would help make me the Next Great Comic. That dream quickly withered as I found it nearly impossible to write material of my own.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as I memorized the stand-up routines of other comics, I found a similar thrill through theater in the words of the likes of Samuel Beckett, William Shakespeare, and Tom Stoppard. I have now been a theater practitioner for over 25 years, but stand-up and other related popular<sup>5</sup> forms of comedy have never ceased to fascinate and engage me at a visceral -- dare I say spiritual -- level.

As a teen I discovered Bill Hicks, a self-proclaimed “dark poet” and maverick anti-comedian, who stretched my perspectives in all-new ways. Hicks urged his audiences to look past ideology, illusory normative constructions, and what the media feeds us as

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<sup>4</sup> Fitting then in many ways that some 25 years later I find myself struggling to find my voice as a writer having something unique to say about a topic I am still so passionate about.

<sup>5</sup> A more appropriate descriptor I think than the dyslogistic “low-brow.” I believe we’d be better off in thinking of art in simpler, fairer, “uni-brow” terms. Ugly as it might be, it’s more accurate.

truths and certainties. I took his pleading to “squeegee my third eye” to heart at a critical time in my development. To this day I am acutely aware that I invoke the wisdom of comics like Hicks, George Carlin, or Chris Rock as much as I do any traditional intellectual or spiritual leader.

Art, life, community, and our evolution as a social and civilized critter -- these things are inseparable for me. Over the past few years as a doctoral student, I have discovered the works of Victor Turner, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Kenneth Burke, all of whom seem to share many of my convictions and concerns, and who despite the similarity of their metaphors and vocabularies, approach things in very different ways. All note the links between the aesthetic and the everyday, between our cultural products and our ethical structures. All also worked hard to understand and explain the ongoing processural nature of how these things work.

During this same time, I’ve also been exposed to Martin Buber and those who have come after him who theorize about dialogue where I have become fascinated with another kind of *in-between* space. Finally, postcolonial scholarship has also informed my approach not only in terms of how it theorizes power and resistance, but also ideas of the *third space*, *hybridity/mimicry*, and the various strategies that marginalized figures can employ to resist domination in a postmodern global neoliberal landscape. All are tied to our imperial/colonial past. All of these academic concentrations — performance studies, postcolonialism, and traditional approaches such as rhetoric and dialogue — all factor heavily into this dissertation. I see patterns perhaps where others just see chaos.

Solo performances of comic monologues in the west have a virtually uninterrupted history that can be traced from ancient Greece to today. What we now know as “stand-up” experienced an incredible boom after World War II, becoming one of the most highly consumed forms of humor in America (Mintz 1985, Koziski-Olson 1988, Mendrinós 2004, Lewis 2010). Yet stand-up comedy has not attracted the serious academic inquiry one might expect. I offer three potential reasons for this gap: 1) jokes are *play*, that is to say *not serious*, and therefore a subject generally unworthy of “serious” study; 2) comedy is too slippery of a genre to talk about with much certainty;<sup>6</sup> and 3) discussions of ritualized behavior such as cultural performance, as Richard Schechner notes in *Victor Turner’s Last Adventure* (1985), do not leave us with much in the way of any kind of testable hypotheses, only speculation and opinion.

Stand-up comics occupy a unique space that, in many situations, allows them to say what they like with impunity, though our increasing sensitivity to certain topics, our absurd political polarization, and our increased access to and dependence on technology, like smart phones and the internet, have complicated this over the past two decades. The stand-up comic appears to us as an “authentic” person in that they give testimony to real experience and often say the things others think but do not speak, yet are also a constructed character or persona (from the Greek for *dramatic mask*), and, because of our culture’s obsession with celebrity, a person of authority. This freedom to speak their mind, to “tell it like it is,” is not given to many types of public figures. Just consider the often violent backlash other celebrities endure when they speak out on

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<sup>6</sup> Stand-up exists in an in-between space, it is largely up to interpretation, and is a form that we can’t *prove* produces social effects. These facts have also made this a very difficult thing to write about in a way that emphatically answers the question of “so what?” beyond musing.

current events. The frame specific to stand-up comedy provides an easy out to claim (for both performer and audience) that what's going on is nothing more than "just jokes" and therefore no real threat. I argue however that this is a genre where something far more complex is operating, and this dissertation seeks to uncover some of those mysteries.

From our earliest origins in every civilization across the globe, comic performances have fulfilled an important social function. This dissertation argues that stand-up comedy performances are a vital part of modern American intellectual and social life and are heavily enmeshed in ongoing processes of progressive social change. In the absence of public intellectuals in what is generally an anti-intellectual modern America, Chris Rock, Sarah Silverman, and Louis C. K. are currently three highly relevant stand-up comics who generate and contribute to discourses that galvanize or polarize publics and counterpublics. Their comic performances, recordings, and other artifacts (like internet memes) that live on after the live event circulate in the public sphere and our most quotidian exchanges. They contribute to discourses that move us toward progressive social change and also act as a barometer for where we are as a nation during any particular moment. Through the discourses generated by their performances, their involvement in social dramas, and their role they perform as public intellectuals, stand-up comics are capable of healing, reconciling, or otherwise mediating breaches in the social order.

## Why Stand-up Comedy?

We have grappled with and argued over the role of comedy in society for millennia, leaving a trail of writings that go back to Aristotle's lost second book of *The Poetics* that is alleged to have focused on comedy (popularized by Umberto Eco's novel and subsequent film, *The Name of the Rose*). Sigmund Freud (1905) attempted to link jokes to his model of the id-ego-superego and to notions of suppression and release which we now accept as part of the "relief theory" of comedy. Modern rock star philosophers Slavov Zizek (2005) and Alenka Zupancic (2008) have written recent works on comedy but with little accompanying fanfare on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. There is not much consensus as to what jokes really "do" or *how* they do it, but the established academic tenor toward comedy is that it is a lesser (and therefore not as important or effective) form of social influence. This examination of American stand-up comedy stems from and contributes to several ongoing conversations about comedy and its relationship to society and social change.

Aesthetic acts are capable of leaving lasting persuasive impressions on an audience, of altering their perceived reality. In traditional studies of communication and social influence, these kinds of "effects" were viewed to be the products of political speech, found most significantly on historically significant occasions (Bitzer 1971), and expanded over time to include other forms of "suasory" discourse such as journalism, informational genres, advertising, and propaganda (Bryant 1953). The work of literary critic and social philosopher Kenneth Burke prompted scholars of rhetorical communication over the next fifty years to expand their works even more broadly to



include literature and other popular genres (Burke 1945, Burke 1950, Burke 1966, Booth 1983). Yet Burke's "comic perspective," which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two, was largely ignored, and scholars were not led to comic genres or even to follow Burke's forays into analyzing works of satire (Burke 1935, Burke 1937). Meanwhile the Frankfurt school and the emerging schools of cultural studies and later media studies urged ideological critique of popular culture (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944), but more surprisingly to this day have not focused in any sustained way on comic entertainment forms. While jazz, popular music like rock and hip-hop, television genres, film, and countless other entertainment genres are seen as the well springs of modern ideological influence, mysteriously little attention has been given to the rise of stand-up comedy as a social phenomenon and source of political expression, and where situation comedies, the entertainment heart of broadcast television from the 1950s on, have been treated, virtually no attention has been paid to the fact that they are comedic exercises (Grossberg, Nelson et al. 1992).

As I stated earlier, there is a long-standing and patent distrust, if not an outright avoidance, of comedy in scholarship beginning with Aristotle's privilege of tragedy over the "baser" comedies. I believe this is because comedy is suspect, often subversive of society, marginal to the "serious" work of socialization, and in many ways protected as a marginal space where anything can happen (Bakhtin 1968). It is that marginal, liminal (Turner 1988) aspect of comedy where relationships are reversed, subverted, and made the object of laughter that draws me to the unusual study of stand-up as a source of social influence and a space in which to observe progressive social change.

I analyze the persona and texts of popular stand-up comics Chris Rock, Sarah Silverman, and Louis C. K. to show the moments that these comic performances contribute to systems of progressive social change, and alternately where their material perhaps reifies dominant logics and disciplines on behalf of the status quo. I also use recent events involving these modern comics who each produced or participated in a kind of social drama to investigate how they perform the role of a public intellectual and possibly even that of a healer to the social order. Chapter Two first offers a narrative walkthrough of my theoretical foundation while also providing definitions related to this work.

In stand-up and related comic performances we directly and collectively grapple in a non-combative manner with norms and ideology through talk. Even a cursory glance at stand-up since World War II allows us to see the potential links between comedy, culture, and society. Lenny Bruce and then George Carlin questioned what counts as acceptable language in public spaces and over airwaves. Carlin's routine, inspired by a similar routine he heard Bruce perform, "Seven Words You Can't Say on Television," was dramatized through a public court battle and eventually shaped legislation and institutional power in the FCC. Richard Pryor pushed how we talk about race as a nation: bringing in-group vocabulary to mainstream audiences through his use of the *n-word* while simultaneously shedding light on the culture and lived experience of blacks in America. In the 1980s Roseanne Barr emerged as a dynamic force in entertainment and forever changed the way women are seen as domestic figures.

These comics and the dramas they participated in obviously did not materialize in a vacuum but were all shaped by those who came before them, and the descendants of these lineages continue to shape the field and our society today. Looking back I am sure that few today would argue that Carlin, Pryor, or Barr were not turning points, watersheds. But what are some of today's comics offering us, and what might we be moving toward? Is Chris Rock's work helping to engage citizens and challenge the ways we think and talk about race in a time of crisis? Is Sarah Silverman contributing to the subversion and deconstruction of gender binary? Is Louis C. K. challenging taken for granted constructions of masculinity, whiteness, and American Exceptionalism? This study argues that they all do.

### **Key Arguments**

I advance three propositions pertaining to stand-up in an attempt to contribute to the "unending conversation" on comedy that I hope impacts both academic and social life.<sup>7</sup>

*An investigation of social dramas generated by stand-up comedy performances provides an alternate history of and way of looking at social change.*

We may look at social dramas instigated by a joke on the grounds that it has transgressed a moral or ethical line as embodied, performed power relation. These power relations are always in flux, enmeshed in a web of contextual variables. It's less of a "line," which necessarily exists in only two dimensions, and more of a three-dimensional field contested and negotiated among the individual, collective society, the state, and institutions. Jokes about race, gender, sexuality, national identity, vices,

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<sup>7</sup> A reference to Burke's (1973) metaphor of a parlor party, with guests coming and going over the course of an evening who all are part of the same event even if not in the same room at the same time, from *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (110-111).

trends, and so on offer clues to the temperature of the culture. At the same time, they might offer possibilities for alternative futures. This dissertation provides such an alternate history in how it shows the way that events, practices, and social dramas intersect with aesthetic realms. The application of postcolonialism to this examination further offers a theoretical departure from or deconstruction of epistemologies that privilege the dominant logics of “the winner,” an express aim of many postcolonial projects (Guha 1988).<sup>8</sup> Chapter Two provides a full account of how I link postcolonial, performance, rhetorical, and critical theory. Finally, current scholarship on comedy is lacking in the application of contemporary theory or methods in how it reads comic texts, personas, and performances.

While there are histories of stand-up comedy and histories of social change, my contribution is unique in the way it links history, social change, and stand-up as a performance genre in new ways. By linking these concerns and examining the intersections I hope to offer a better (or at least alternative) examination of cultural performance at several levels: as a live performance event, as a mediated artifact, as ground-up generated or propagated content for digital sharing, and as text for mimetic re-presentation in everyday talk.

*Performance analysis – of contexts, personas, and texts – is a more thorough way to engage questions of how change occurs across time in public spheres, how individuals contribute to ideological critiques through cultural performance, and how audiences might use those performances as equipment for living.*

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<sup>8</sup> I am very interested in looking at pure ground-up, culture-centered comics as the subject of a future study, building on this foundation. Dario Fo, for instance, has long been a figure I’ve been fascinated with.

While there are many analyses of specific stand-up comics or topics that comics engage, performance analysis – in the broadest sense – can move beyond isolated evaluative questions surrounding individual performances toward questions of social and political efficacy. Instead of being shackled to *either-or* logic in regard to examining aesthetics, ethics, or effects, examining the intersections allows us to see things in more robust, three-dimensional *both-and* terms.

Approaching the stand-up comedy act as part of a greater ecological system generative of both social maintenance and change allows us to see cultural performances in a clearer focus than has previously been undertaken. Not only are the aesthetic texts of the stand-up performance generated from what Turner (1998) describes as the “raw material” of social dramas, the comic personas used to deliver these texts are generated by and responding to the culture they are developed in. These personas may be drawn from archetypes that work to reify dominant logics, subversively work against norms, or possibly even break and remake what is deemed acceptable.

*Our understandings of social change are improved, both factually and ethically, by seeking descriptions of social change that capture polyvocality, particularly by including marginalized viewpoints and their expression.*

Theorists who use comedy to describe social change especially embrace polyvocality and also indeterminacy in their descriptions of social processes and outcomes. Comedy tends to see human events as contingent, open to change, and not at all certain, whereas tragic models tend to emphasize closed, certain, predictable, and

even fated outcomes of forces more powerful. And, as Kenneth Burke (1935) points out, a comic view sees people and their actions as more prone to error rather than evil.

Much scholarly attention is given to social change at the macro and meso levels (resource mobilization, political opportunity) that all tend to privilege a top-down or, at the very least, leveled point of view (a move that necessarily creates erasures). This lack of perspective invariably not only generates theoretical blind-spots,<sup>9</sup> but also creates epistemic erasures that perpetuate the very real, embodied violence inherent to systemic dominance and marginalization. Postcolonialism's critique of global capitalist hegemony provides a powerful and unique lens for looking at how these personas, comic texts, and social dramas can be catalysts for social change.

This lens is even more useful to examine how mobilization and resistance may be occurring in a ground-up fashion through the online sharing of videos, images (typically referred to as *memes*), and through quotidian interpersonal/mimetic re-presentations of comic routines. Pairing comedy and postcolonialism is a unique departure from the body of available scholarship, not only making a contribution to performance studies but perhaps also to other postcolonial projects which some may accuse of framing the world in tragic terms.<sup>10</sup> Existing postcolonial investigations of humor focus on everyday joke-

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault generally ignores gender in regard to how power works, as does Bakhtin in how he theorizes about the figure of the Fool in terms of the comic spirit, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Consider Gayatri Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves, or the general undercurrent present in postcolonial scholarship that cultural confrontation necessarily results in the dominant group co-opting or otherwise wholly absorbing cultural production. At the same time, it destroys the subordinated culture. A. Cheree Carlson (1986) notes the comic frame is useful for interpreting and assessing certain movements in contrast with the tragic frame so often employed that seeks a scapegoat (often the system itself) to be overthrown and replaced. In contrast, movements operating in a comic frame do not look to destroy but instead desire to "chastise the clown."

telling, mocking, and parody as micropractices of resistance and do not presently account for their relationship to society at large or to cultural performance.

Bakhtin's description of *centrifugal force* processes (Bakhtin 1986), Burke's notion of the *comic frame of acceptance* (Burke 1937), and the postcolonial aim of *decolonization of the mind* (Said 1993; hooks 1990) all require a polyvocal mode to escape the subjugation of perspectives, epistemologies, discourses, and ways of being inherent to their top-down counterparts. An examination of stand-up that privileges polyvocality may allow us to excavate or discover other ways in which humor, joke-telling, and laughter may be utilized as a form of resistance.

True to the carnivalesque comic frame I build on, this work negotiates the tensions between theory and praxis, reification and subversion, the local and global, the personal and political. In this dissertation I examine 1) the unique personas that stand-up comics create and embody to deliver their critiques, 2) a close formal analysis of the routines themselves as both rhetorical and aesthetic texts that are bound in certain contexts, and 3) how comics function outside of their role as an entertainer when they become part of social dramas where they may emerge as a kind of public intellectual. This approach allows me entry points to examine all three major categories of persuasion (ethos, logos and pathos) at work in the comic routine.

In the next chapter I offer important definitions for this study and my theoretical foundation. I also situate this dissertation within the available scholarship to show where I believe this work adds to our understanding of comic performances, resistance, and progressive social change.

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## **CHAPTER TWO: DEFINITIONS, FOUNDATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS**

If reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, and a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change? - Cynthia Willet, Julie Willet, and Yael D. Sherman,  
*The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter*

The laughter that derives from the perception of absurdity reforms the world. - Avnew Ziv

Heckler: "We don't come to comedy to think!"  
Bill Hicks: "Gee! Where do you go to think? I'll meet you there."

The purpose of this chapter is to 1) explain my methodology, 2) offer definitions and theoretical frameworks for the analysis to come in Chapters Three through Five, 3) position this work in relation to established research and where I hope to contribute, and 4) provide summaries of the remaining chapters.

First I turn to Victor Turner's (1975) "Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors" (from *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*) for its relevance to my overall orientation to knowledge production:

In moving from experience of social life to conceptualization and intellectual history, I follow the path of anthropologists almost everywhere. Although we take theories into the field with us, these become relevant only if and when they illuminate social reality. Moreover, we tend to find very frequently that it is not a theorist's whole system which so illuminates, but his scattered ideas, his flashes of insight taken out of systemic context and applied to scattered data. Such ideas have a virtue of their own and may generate new hypotheses. They even show how scattered facts may be systematically connected! Randomly distributed through some monstrous logical system, they resemble nourishing raisins in a cellular mass of inedible dough. The

intuitions, not the tissue of logic connecting them, are what tend to survive in the field experience.

This dissertation mines many a raisin out of many masses of dough. In examining comedy guided by insights from performance studies, rhetoric, postcolonialism, and a healthy dash of post-structuralism, I see connections that may appear scattered but for me are systematic. My goal is to bring these insights together in a way that will allow us to think about the complexity of comedy in a new way. Theories are, after all, nothing but metaphors and, where one might accuse me of mixing them here, I think of it as mapping them on top of one another to see where they agree, disagree, or offer new things in those third spaces in-between.

### **Methodology**

Chapters Three through Five all begin with a personal narrative account of the comics I encountered during my formative years, and how I continue to consume similar comedy today. This is a way to orient the reader and also serves as testimonial from my lived experience. This approach allows me to maintain a reflexive awareness of my distance (or lack thereof) from this study, both as a researcher and for the sake of transparency with my reader. Further, I argue that if comedy has had such an impact on me, surely it must do the same for others.

Comedy is no less vast a subject nor less complex for having been avoided by academic study. This study cannot presume to identify all the uses, functions, potentials, and effects of comedy or even of the culture of stand-up comedy in American society. My goal is to advance the task of describing the role of contemporary American stand-up comedy in progressive social change – itself a complicated and sometimes

elusive thing to characterize. I am a communication scholar who is a student, teacher, and practitioner of performance, and my focus will be on the communicational dimensions of comic performances and what they tell us about the role and function of comedy in social change.

In analyzing three contemporary American comics, I focus on three tiers or levels where I believe roles of stand-up in social change may be glimpsed: 1) in the development of certain kinds of comic persona, i.e., who the comic is to us as an agent of change and a spokesperson for certain political or ethical orientations; 2) in the comic performances themselves, where we may observe moments of play and reversal that question or challenge taken for granted assumptions, where there is at least the possibility that audiences may be moved from one orientation to another, or, perhaps more commonly, where the trajectories of social change are empowered and given linguistic force by the comedic moment; in short, in an aesthetic and rhetorical experience where actions, ideas, and opinions are called to the mat for observation, questioning, subversion, satire, or parody; and 3) when a stand-up comic becomes explicitly involved in a social drama and emerges as a public intellectual or healer/mediator of the social order.

My method of analysis operates at three levels: 1) a critical examination of the construction and performance of the comic persona, 2) a close analysis of the comic routine as an aesthetic text, and finally 3) an examination of social dramas and the discourses they generate.

## **The Comic Persona**

One way we may directly observe the symbolic or dramatistic role of stand-up comedy in progressive social change is in the development and performance of specific comedic personas as agents of change. Certain comics have been particularly unique, forceful, and committed in this regard: Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, Jackie “Moms” Mabley, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Sam Kinnison, Bill Hicks, Russell Brand, Eddie Izzard, Margaret Cho are all among the many who have pushed boundaries over the past century.

An analysis of the comic persona allows us a way to observe what kind of role comedy plays in social change. In this regard the comic becomes a direct source of data, each discretely constructed and performed. To the extent that the comic persona is accepted (as we find with Louis C. K. in Chapter Five) or not (as evidenced in Chapter Four with Sarah Silverman), we may see them in the context of the overall social drama of progressive social change in which they are participating. The comic persona may then function as an instigator, creating liminal space where we may have our perspectives altered or question taken for granted assumptions.

I analyze the comics’ uses of voice and body, their costuming, the archetypes they invoke and genealogies they belong to, and other performance choices that impact how audiences make sense of their works. My theater training (I hold an MFA in Acting) and 22-year professional career as a theater practitioner provides me with a unique perspective that current research on comedy lacks. This is one way that my project is distinctly different from the work of Joanne Gilbert (1998) and Dan French (1998), both

of whom offered insights based on personal experiences as stand-up comics. I view these stand-up performances and social dramas as a kind of theater and from the standpoint of a theater artist.

As Turner's social drama is critical to this study in terms of the interplay between social life and cultural performance, so are the works of both Kenneth Burke and Mikhail Bakhtin in looking at the comic spirit. A review of this scholarship is in the "Philosophy of the Comic Spirit" section that begins on page 15 of this chapter.

### **Performances of Comic Texts**

The second level of analysis allows me to focus on specific stand-up texts as an object of study. These textual analyses are based on digital recordings and transcripts: some of which I have created, and others which I have found online. All transcripts were vetted against a recording for accuracy and for nuance, which I have tried to detail. Here I offer interpretations and look for rhetorical moves, persuasive strategies, and how the comic constructs arguments and uses language to make appeals in an effort to show where the comic may create ruptures within "settled" sensibilities.

### **Social Drama**

I have selected comics who become part of an explicit *social drama* involving our comedic sensibilities. What makes these cultural moments interesting is that the comic steps outside of his/her role as an entertainer to address us as a public intellectual, an expert on an identity marker, or even possibly as an expert on how we should regard the function and effects of comedic performance. This kind of "meta-comedy" is one place where we can glimpse and even measure our commonplace assumptions about

the propriety and function of comedy itself. In these cases the comic as a public intellectual becomes a healer or mediator of the social order, and here we see them perhaps most clearly as agents of progressive social change.

The final tier utilizes Victor Turner's (1975) concept of *social drama*. I use media (stories, videos, etc.), scholarly reactions, and personal reflections on the events as they unfolded. Turner's anthropological approach to the *social drama* describes them as "units of aharmonic process, arising in conflict situations" which contain four phases: *breach, crisis, redress*, then either *reintegration* or *schism* (37-41).

Turner links social drama and our aesthetic performances into a mutual feedback loop. Simply stated he advances that the public aspects of social drama (slogans/speech, stagecraft/spectacle, embodied practical performance techniques) are guided by aesthetic principles and practices. All artists draw upon, consciously or not, social life not only for obvious inspiration but also in ways that appear subtly in a work.

Turner (1985) adds:

[I]f life itself now becomes a mirror held up to art, and the living now perform their lives, for the protagonists of a social drama, a "drama of living," have been equipped by aesthetic drama with some of their most salient opinions, imageries, tropes, and ideological perspectives. (301)

For my purposes of analysis the *breach* occurs when it is perceived that a comic has crossed some sort of line in public talk. Many of these issues (e.g. race, gender disparity, gun control) exist in social life prior to the comic's involvement but in these

moments the comic draws it to the forefront for examination. These breaches may occur in the comic performance, in an interview,<sup>11</sup> or over social media.

As Turner (1975) predicts, the ensuing *crisis* plays out publicly with side-taking, widening the initial breach as it exponentially spreads through the community. In this phase the comic “takes up their menacing stance in the forum itself, and, as it were, dares the representatives of order to grapple with” the issue (39). The crisis phase is irresistible for members of a community; Turner calls it “contagious” (34). The very nature of the breach itself can be questioned here. For instance, Daniel Tosh created an incident by joking about rape, and the focus of public outrage took many directions. Was the offense joking about the topic of rape? Was it that he directly addressed an audience member taking it from the realm of the aesthetic to the real? Was it that he offered no apology?

The *redressive* phase of these dramas play out in the court of public opinion where the drama is replayed with some distance from the initial breach, allowing for reflexive critique of the events to that point. The goal is repair of the social order, to fix the breach. Sometimes that comes with its own public performance like an explanation and apology on a talk show, or sometimes a public sacrifice when a comic is outcast through cancellations or public shaming. In the case of George Carlin’s free speech drama ending with *FCC vs. Pacifica Foundation* (Tremblay 2003), the redress was extremely formal and had material consequences in the form of increased regulation of public airwaves.

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<sup>11</sup> The talk show interview is often a manufactured opportunity for a comic to do a part of a routine, observe the way that hosts typically sets the comic up to tell a story.



These dramas end with either *reintegration*, when the comic is accepted back into the community, or *schism* (alternately referred to as *permanent breach*) when the two sides cooperatively fail to repair the breach. An example of social drama ending this way is found in the case of *Seinfeld* star Michael Richards' failed career after an *n-word* fueled tirade was captured on tape and circulated. Richards, once part of arguably the most popular sitcom show in television history, has virtually disappeared from the public eye after his transgression.

Turner's system is valuable to a study such as this one that seeks to clarify the associations and connections among comic performances, social dramas, and social change. It is not appropriate to look at these situations in terms of there being some hard invisible line, despite our cultural adherence to the metaphor, but instead should be envisioned as a three-dimensional field of ambiguous and negotiated space involving the comic, the public, and in many cases state and/or institutional power. Recent dramas may also be compared and contrasted with similar dramas played out in the past thus allowing us a way to pinpoint social change. Even the comic who *deeply* offends in a way that results in *schism* still has potential to function as an agent of change, as I show in Chapter Five, because of dialectical negotiations that follow a breach.

What is of interest to me in these comedy-related social dramas is that regardless of outcome, something has been put *at issue*. What counts as comedy, what is said by comics, is no longer irrelevant or "just joking." The comic performance in these cases reveals a kind of fault-line in otherwise sublimated processes of social change, i.e.,

“when and how can one use the *n-word*?” or “What attitudes can be had and what things *can* be said about rape?” Also of interest here is the role of the comic as a public intellectual who is expert on that very topic: what is the role of the comedy and of the comedian in embodying and expressing these contingent issues – issues and evaluations undergoing sublime change in social discourse and sensibility? Here the comic must step out from behind the comic mask, thus helping us to see the mask itself, and abandon the comedic performance: they must take on the role of an expert about the very stuff of comedy – the rights, rules, and rituals of social order that are made contingent and mutable in the ongoing enterprise of comedy itself.

Using social drama, applying the metaphor of all human life as a drama rooted in conflict as part of my method, acknowledges life as a kind of meta-theater and those who participate in these dramas as social *actors* operating from the ground-up (as opposed to being strictly “directed” from the top down). This is a unique way that using a dramaturgical method offers an alternative account of how social change might occur. Turner (1975) claims what begins as an “empirical social drama may continue both as an entertainment and a metasocial commentary on the lives and times of the given community” (39).

This creates a loop, what Richard Schechner refers to as a mobius strip, and with this examination of stand-up I not only consider the aesthetic works of the comic but also re-presentations by publics who embrace or reject the work and become participants in the greater drama. Elizabeth Bell (2006) similarly used the work of Turner to apply it to the ways cultural performances on the internet during the Clinton/Lewinsky

scandal contributed to heteropatriarchal dominance, in a way representing the other side of the same coin I observe. Bell's work focuses on the subtle and often insidious ways online "jokes" engaging current events enforce and discipline gender norms. I look for the ways comedy on the internet functions to challenge norms and potentially liberate.

Jokes often produce conflicting interpretations based on a number of contextual factors and personal standpoint, often resulting in public negotiation. Today the internet gives us an increased means to engage one another in such negotiation, which is further escalated by the relative anonymity of the internet and people's performances of online personas. Kenneth Burke (1935) privileges considering human behavior "dramatistically" as the best poetic metaphor because such an approach is grounded in theories of *action* rather than of just *knowledge* (266-274). Turner's social drama, working with both the Western metaphor of the aesthetic drama and an understanding of communication as a system of symbolic action, is a more than satisfying method to frame, observe, and analyze these fluid moments between the aesthetic and social processes where the stand-up comic operates.

### **Additional Notes on this Method**

My examination of the construction of the comic persona, and specific performances of comic utilizes personal notes culled from live and recorded stand-up performances that I have watched as well as the news stories, blogs, and scholarship available on

them. Considering how recent many of these comic texts are, there is very little criticism of these comic performances available.<sup>12</sup>

In my examination of each social drama, and of the personas and aesthetic texts in these stand-up performances, I seek to describe the role of comedy in social change. How are comics functioning as public intellectuals, and how do they work to get us to also see the world through a comic lens? I also look for other ways of being offered up by the comic, what is described later in this chapter as an “alternate ethical universe.” This allows me to identify what the comic sees as problematic and also what their alternatives might look like. An examination of conflict within these social dramas provides insight into greater social struggles, and how they have changed, evolved, or remained the same.

I also note where the comic reifies dominant logics. When I began this study, my aim was purely speculative and appreciative criticism, but this process has forced me to consider the consequences of making such moments invisible by exclusion. Who benefits from such moves, and at whose expense do they come?

One limitation of this method is that it does not allow me to make direct claims pinpointing *how* these performances generate change. That is also not my goal. I recognize this work is interpretive, speculative, and still largely appreciative. My overall orientation to comedy (and perhaps all performance) might be criticized as romantic. I stress that nowhere do I claim that stand-up *always* operates in a progressive fashion. Stand-up comedy is often contested due to the complexity and sensitive nature of the

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<sup>12</sup> Another pillar of support to my claim that stand-up is far too disregarded. Take a look at how much is available on serialized weekly television, from *The Walking Dead* to *Downton Abbey*. TV is clearly the current queen in critical-cultural circles.

topics engaged, and I recognize any of these acts may generate alternate and opposite readings. I am aware of this ambiguity and note it throughout.

If comedy simultaneously functions as *both* a vehicle for control and resistance and as means for us to identify or differentiate, scholars with an interest in feminist, postcolonial, critical-cultural, or other postmodern projects have much to gain from exploring how comedy contributes to human progress. This form of analysis and criticism is counter to the tenor of many current projects focusing on regressive or regulatory effects of cultural products. I am interested in looking at this topic from a different perspective, one operating through what I describe later in this chapter as Kenneth Burke's *comic frame of acceptance*. First I address what it I mean by "change."

### **Defining Change**

"Social change" is used in such a variety of ways by so many disciplines that it is practically meaningless without context. As Schechner says of the term ritual in the introduction to Turner's (1988) *The Anthropology of Performance*, "it means very little because it can mean too much." Here I put a finer point on what it is I mean by progressive social change.

Broadly speaking "social change" is used to refer to any alteration in the course of a society and can refer to material, institutional, systemic, or individual change. There are many theoretical models that offer explanations of how social change occurs. I privilege a diachronic, dynamic model that locates social change as the product of ongoing dialectical tensions. This perspective acknowledges the flow of time and that social change is an ongoing process. Change in such a model is the result of a complex

interplay of systems, what Sztompka (1993) refers to as a whole as the “socio-cultural field” (11).<sup>13</sup>

When I use “progressive social change” I mean any movement toward increased social justice or to equal access to opportunity and resources. A society with fewer barriers allows for fuller participation by its citizens and is therefore qualitatively *better*. Movements advancing progressive social change seek a more democratic society organized in a culture-centered, ground-up fashion where *the people* control their destinies, not *the elite*, the state, or institutions. My political orientation to progressive social change is one of the main reasons that I invoke postcolonialism, where ground-up participatory democracy is offered as a potent antidote to the violence of global neoliberal dominance (Dutta and Basu 2008, Dutta and Pal 2010).

The existence of such a thing as *social progress* is debated since it wedges an axiological dimension into any analytic effort that is widely regarded as subjective and therefore “unscientific” (Sztompka 1993). My work does not offer empirical proof of a direct cause and effect relationship between the work of stand-up comics and broader systemic change but instead uses interpretive, speculative criticism offering insight into *how* this change may occur.

The kind of change I speculate to be the outcome of comic performance is at the micro level, within individual and interpersonal spheres, where all change must occur first before it may move up within society and be measurable at a meso or macro level. This sort of change is much as I describe in the first chapter in regard to my own

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<sup>13</sup> A field is a core sociological concept introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1993) which describes a system of social positions structured in terms of hierarchal power relationships which act as an arena for struggles to occur over various forms of capital. In this case I am interested in intellectual capital.

awakenings. Looking at change at the micro level, searching for the operations that work in a ground-up manner also stands in contrast to other ways of looking at change that focus on structural, top-down views such as resource mobilization theory. From an analysis of the particular, in this case in my own reflection on lived experience, we may then advance up through the macro level to see how these strata inform one another and then possibly advance a more general proposition.

To the political end of disrupting top-down accounts of power, I purposefully incorporate myself into this research. These changes I seek to find are changes in conscience, of sensibilities, that could eventually lead to material or institutional change. These eventual shifts also feed back onto themselves and contribute to the ongoing dialectical tensions of the society that produced them. Taoists call water the ultimate agent of change, as it wears away even the hardest stone in a steady imperceptible fashion over time. Social actors may be viewed as collectively operating in such liquid fashion.<sup>14</sup>

When viewing social life, the socio-cultural field, as both dynamic and dialectical in nature, the most basic unit of analysis becomes the event. Like a single frame of a film it captures a frozen moment in time, yet it is still but a part of a greater context that is always in motion. My work uses recent events involving comics to analyze that specific moment in time and the social drama that resulted, and also attempts to place these events and comics in a broader genealogy. We may view the stand-up comedy performance as an emergent ritual, and the social dramas that play out in response to

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<sup>14</sup> None of this is to say social change isn't simultaneously working in other ways. We might still look at change from other angles using other models: Hegelian, Marxist, etc.

the words of a comic as a symbolic conflict that mirrors greater societal struggles. In examining these events I will be able to more clearly show how the comic's role as a public intellectual in social drama is in tension with their role as entertainers.

### **Philosophy of the Comic Spirit**

The work of Kenneth Burke and Mikhail Bakhtin are central to how I view the role of comedy in our lives. Both figures link comedy in some way to the very heart of human resistance and social change. Charlie Chaplin called the act of ridicule one of defiance and also referred to laughter as a "tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain." State and institutional structures have historically feared laughter, one of our most basic coping tools, as an antidote to the many control mechanisms that restrict us.<sup>15</sup> I believe comedic performances are at their core populist phenomena: we delight in watching the marginalized triumph over their oppressors from Plautus and Terrence's slaves, commedia dell'arte's Arlecchino, Chaplin's Tramp to modern "tactical" performances by the Insurgent Rebel Clown Army -- laughter functions as a kind of liberation, a release, however momentary.

Bakhtin (1968) theorizes on "the fool" in *Rabelais and His World*, a figure he locates first in the Middle Ages who was granted the access to mock institutional and state power during carnivale. Bakhtin's transcendent orientation toward human life and progress may be seen in his assertion that our "improvement is attained not by the rise of the individual soul toward the hierarchical higher spheres but by man's historical

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<sup>15</sup> I sincerely hope that no one finds this point arguable, but in that event I offer the 1221 edict, *Contra Jogulatores Obloquentes*. This law, enacted by Emperor Frederick II of Swabia allows anyone, *anyone*, to harass, abuse or even kill a fool/jester/clown for the offense of insult without any fear of reprisal. This example may be extreme, but I can offer dozens more.



development," which is to say our social development (407). He offers the ambivalent comic space of carnivale as an antidote for our compulsion to hierarchy. This brings me to Burke's (1937) descriptions of the *prophet* and *priesthood*, the latter an agent of conserving the past and the former a founder of possible futures. Burke describes the *prophet* as one who stands in direct opposition to the *priesthood*, those "members of a group specifically charged with upholding a given orientation [who] devote their efforts to maintaining the vestigial structure." In contrast, the *prophet* seeks "new perspectives whereby this vestigial structure may be criticized and a new one established in its place" (179). Bakhtin's "fool" functions in the same way. During carnivale the priesthood was symbolically inverted when the "fool" was elevated to the status of Lord of Misrule. Bakhtin adds that the fool can "defeat through laughter this extreme projection of gloomy seriousness and to transform it [...] preserving the past by giving birth to a new, better future" (395).

In contrast to the *priesthood* chanting away to maintain the status quo, what J. Marshall Beier (2005) refers to as a "hegemonologue," Burke offers the *prophet* who instead views the world through a comic frame – one that is wider, more accepting, polyphonic. Polyphony, Bakhtin notes, operates with centripetal<sup>16</sup> force, denying the certainty of a fixed center pushing a wide array of possibilities outward. To Burke (1937) the comic frame is dependent upon acceptance instead of rejection, "picturing people not as vicious, but as mistaken." When we realize that "every insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle" (41). Our blindnesses are

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<sup>16</sup> My use of Bakhtin's linked conceptions of centrifugal and centripetal force deal with verbal-ideological deconstruction or unification and should not be confused with the Hegelian/Marxist idea of a finite dialectical synthesis. For additional clarification, see Baxter (2004).

acute and manifold. We reject the Other, we reject other beliefs, and we reject anything not in agreement with our absolutes. Looking at the world using a comic frame puts us in relation to *one another*, not with the cosmic or divine as tragedy does. A comic frame of acceptance allows us to see the world in *both/and* terms instead of *either/or*.

Burke offers the comic frame as a way to rise above our tribal, war-like tendencies. Bakhtin (1968) similarly links comedy to progress and social development (407). It is agreed Burke and Bakhtin had no knowledge of the other, but both theoretically link comedy to liberation, cooperation, and progress. Bakhtin offers the ambivalent space of carnivale as an antidote to our compulsion toward hierarchy, a specific goading also noted by Burke. That compulsion necessarily drives us to extremely narrow and thus tragic orientations.

I believe certain stand-up comics embody both the “fool” and *prophet* functions in how they subvert, transgress, or otherwise offer a critical intervention to normative ideology.<sup>17</sup> They question the motives and logic behind established ways of thinking, knowing, or doing. They expose what might otherwise not be seen (because of the invisibility of privilege or as a result of direct obfuscation or subterfuge) and disrupt the taken for granted, questioning whom those ideologies benefit and at whose expense they come.

In stand-up and other forms of comedy hierarchy is leveled through polyphony, art and life blur together in this liminal space generated by the comic. I view this liminal space as what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) calls a third space, where liberation is plotted --

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<sup>17</sup> I use Eagleton’s (1991) definition of ideology: a socially necessary illusion; a process of the production of meanings, signs and values in social life; and a body of ideas characteristic to the dominant social group that help legitimate normative power.

a better future -- and a space where oppressor and the oppressed come together in a moment suspending or inverting the power structure.

### Comic Ambivalence

The *comic frame of acceptance* and the *carnavalesque spirit* containing light and dark, sacred and profane requires us to remain ambivalent rather than give in to our urge to simply deny. Burke calls that our urge to debunk and Bakhtin similarly calls it “bare negation.” Bakhtin (1968) adds that “humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time ” (11). For Burke (1937), the comic frame allows us to see “how an act can 'dialectically' contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both 'service' and 'spoils.' [...] A well-balanced ecology requires the symbiosis of the two" (167).

Bakhtin (1968) believes laughter "has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man ... the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint" (66). He accounts for the shift away from the ambivalence of folk humor as the result of interference by the hierarchal powers of church, state, and academy – all of whom I still find the *unholy trinity* of institutional power. As the 18th century began, the damage done by Cartesian rationalist philosophy destroyed the belief that any kind of “truth” could operate ambivalently. The result? What counted as sacred or profane, high or low art, serious or comic were completely divided and placed into hierarchy (Bakhtin 1968: 101-109). Burke (1935) also notes that our predisposition

for “harsh antitheses, impossible choices” makes us blind to the truth that enduring our many struggles requires cooperation, tenderness, charity, and humor (174).

When ambivalence is lost, we move to the *tragic frame* even when using mockery, parody, or irony. When a stand-up comic loses his/her ambivalence, she runs the risk of losing any transcendent, progressive power. I find this the case with certain “shock” comics or with those who lose their ability to see using an acceptance frame. The ambivalent comic frame gives rise to a laughter that lifts us to a “higher level of ideological consciousness, thanks to the victory over linguistic dogmatism” (Bakhtin 1968: 473).

### Gargoyles and Grotesques

Another area of theoretical overlap between Burke and Bakhtin is that they both speak of the *grotesque*, yet they offer different definitions. Burke (1937) calls the grotesque a transitional form rooted in mysticism, a phenomena he says “belongs to periods marked by great confusion of the cultural frame” but, unlike Bakhtin, he claims that the grotesque is not a comic form but quite serious in that it “is the cult of incongruity without the laughter” (57-58). In contrast, Bakhtin (1968) accounts for both humor *and* seriousness as aspects of the grotesque. He sees it, as with all things related to carnivale, as an ambivalent *both/and* phenomena.

To Bakhtin (1968) the grotesque both “degrades and materializes” (20). He then brings in Justus Moser’s definition that the grotesque is “chimerical” and that it “combines heterogenous elements” (35). Bakhtin adds that in “the logic of the grotesque” hierarchy and continuum collapse into a muddle, and “the object

transgresses its own confines, [and] ceases to be itself" (310). This is the same slippery, liminal position occupied by the stand-up comic.

Bakhtin's chimeric grotesque is not far from Burke's (1935) gargoyle, another *monstrueux assemblage* that challenges us in transitional periods through planned incongruity (112-119).<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the stand-up comic operates as a gargoyle incarnate in performance, a representative that Bakhtin says *blurs* and Burke claims *shatters* the boundaries between the old and new. In other cases the comic constructs verbal gargoyles within comic routines to the same end. In both cases the gargoyle creates a new perspective by incongruity generated through the violation of normative links of "what goes with what."

These violations can shatter previous associations and open up space for our orientations to shift, the prime function of Burke's prophet. Bakhtin (1968) adds that the grotesque accomplishes this primarily by mocking authority and emphasizing vulgarity – by in some way speaking the unspeakable. This process of flattening hierarchy, of *decrowning*, of shocking our personal sensibilities can function in an alienating way when witnessed in performance. This is what Bertolt Brecht (1964) called *verfremdungseffekt*, an intentional "making strange" to give us a new insight or force us to reckon with what we think we know. This shattering effect of comedy is more clearly on display in the work of some stand-up comics than others: consider Lewis Black's verbal tirades, Eddie Izzard's transvestism, Margaret Cho's multi-level assault on heteronormativity, etc. More often though we see the comic blur boundaries in more

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<sup>18</sup> What Burke terms *incongruities*, Bakhtin refers to similarly as *misalliances*. In either case, *this* doesn't go with *that*.

subtle ways. Positioning the stand-up as a monstrous assemblage, a *prophet* standing between an old order and a new allows us to see them as *transhistorical* figures -- links between past and present, living and dead.

Burke (1935) notes that aesthetic works are *formally strategic* and tied to the cultural and historical situations that gave rise to them, and that “so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies possess universal relevance” (1). Bakhtin (1968) has his own similar attitude toward history, stressing “the ancient link of laughter with time, with time's successive changes” (143), calling the figure of the fool an “accredited representative” for mockery (8). In some ways I believe this accounts for how certain stand-up recordings stand the test of time, not just a testament to the power of the comic but of our own tendency to repeat history. As much as some things change, there is still so much that stays the same and that insight demands we maintain a sense of humor.<sup>19</sup>

### **How Does Postcolonialism Fit In?**

Postcolonialism has a lot to offer any examination of power and resistance, not just those occurring between those of the third and first worlds. Postcolonial projects aim to create alternative histories and epistemologies by rupturing dominant white, Western, Christian, patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberal institutions and ideologies. In short, postcolonialism defies the logic that history should be written by the “winner.”

Postcolonialism grew out of the work of classical Marxism and the many

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<sup>19</sup> I just listened to “N-ggers vs. Police” from Richard Pryor’s 1974 album *That N-gger’s Crazy*. forty years old, and in light of all that’s come to front of national conversations about race and power in light of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, it really makes you question *what exactly* has changed.

poststructuralist thinkers who sought to step outside of traditional ways of talking about power that often mask power and privilege.

There are comics who are certainly more obviously *postcolonial*, but this study does not focus on them. I believe British comic Eddie Izzard is the best-known comic who looks at the world with a postcolonial perspective, but there are many other comics like Utpal Dutt, Aditi Brennan Kapil, Russell Peters, Margaret Cho, and the group collectively referred to as the Axis of Evil (Maz Jobrani, Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Krader, Won Hu Shung, Carlos Leon, Helen Maalik) who would all make good sites of study for another project focusing more directly on the subaltern, which is only one thread of postcolonialism.

Among the concerns of postcolonial projects is the recovery or amplification of otherwise lost or marginalized voices using a culture-centered, ground-up approach in an effort to counter the dominance of hegemony. To resist or otherwise subvert dominant institutional structures, one requires an intimate knowledge as to how those structures operate, and postcolonialism stresses the effectiveness of using networks and technologies of the colonizer to subvert and resist continued domination (Boehmer; Guha 1988b). In this way the master's tools may not be able to *dismantle* the house, but they most certainly will do the job if you're looking to do a massive renovation.

Postcolonialism looks for the ways that non-elites can operate as agents for political, social, economic, or cultural change. Using postcolonial theory to talk about mainstream stand-up comedy allows me the opportunity to say something different about comedy as an aesthetic act, a cultural performance, and as a catalyst for change. I am interested in

resistance in terms of comedy at two levels: 1) the resistant voice of the stand-up comic, and 2) how audience members then take that voice and claim or re-present it as an act of resistance on their own. Stand-up is a populist form, and the stand-up comic is of the people.

Though postcolonial theory has its roots in the Indian and Southeast Asian Diaspora, we are seeing an increased application across the globe (see: Carlson 1996; Duffy 1994; hooks 1990; hooks 1995; Stam and Spence 1993). As postcolonial theory moves beyond examinations of non-white, Eastern, and third world populations (sometimes called second-wave postcolonialism or post-postcolonialism), we begin to more clearly see that the many inequities across the globe and the continued violence stemming from our colonial past are more interrelated than most consider.<sup>20</sup>

Using postcolonialism is a self-consciously political move. It allows me to position normative ideologies and institutional structures as core symptoms of Western heteropatriarchal capitalism. Empires no longer only march only under the banner of the sovereign nation but appear in the form of transnational corporations, NGOs, and agencies like the World Health Organization, International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Globalization has been ongoing for millennia from the ancient Celts, the Roman Empire, to England's East India Company and beyond. This move on my part "confront[s] us with the recognition that institutionalized knowledge is always subject to forces of colonialism, nation, geopolitics, and history" (Shome and Hegde 2002). Victor

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<sup>20</sup> I've already positioned myself as coming from, pardon the expression, "poor white trash." My family came to America after a relatively long journey, first leaving Ireland due to economic and political factors before making a brief stop in England where they were unwelcome, finally landing here. Ireland is not exactly the first place you think of when considering the postcolonial condition, but I believe my family is still in some ways recovering.



Turner (1988) notes that any society's "redressive machinery" can fail to function at any time resulting in revolution, and that under the oppression of colonial conditions, vertical momentum of the *crisis* phase of a social drama can be blocked causing a small feedback loop in the drama that denies its completion (35). It is my belief that the stand-up comic in their roles of public intellectual may be able to function as a kind of short circuit to such a loop, opening new paths, in how they speak certain truths and provide agency to human actors.

Using postcolonial and related poststructuralist thought is an attempt on my part to resist the invisible power of a defined center and to begin to look for the ways the margins might penetrate dominant oppressive culture. These theories reject binary representations or single readings privileged and enforced by "authority" (the priesthood and their narrow view!) in favor of a polyphonous, ground-up orientation to knowledge production. In this dissertation I hope to show where these comics work to disrupt hegemonic power through their performances even as they may, in other ways, reify or enforce it. This unique third space created and manipulated by the comic is generative in ways far greater than we currently consider, and I hope that this approach is able to add to this conversation in a new way.

### **Stand-up Comics as Modern Public Intellectuals**

Discourses emerging from comic performances act as what Kenneth Burke (1941) refers to as "equipment for living" for those taking part. Burke claims that all great art provides us with strategies to deal with real life and shows us the ways in which we may succeed or fail. Consider the well-crafted comic barb that concisely defends or attacks a

position used by someone who viewed it that they may be in agreement with yet lacked the ability to articulate it, or conversely those moments when comic wit cracks through what someone thought they knew. Both events are potentially generative of a reckoning or epiphany. Much comedy holds us up to a kind of ethical standard. The comic routine is also capable of presenting what Burke (1935) calls an alternative “ethical universe.” These alternative ethical universes created by the comic are made manifest through the comic persona and texts they craft and engage audiences with in specific contexts. Maybe the alternative is just in how the comic presents herself on stage, challenging the taken for granted or giving agency to the marginalized. In some instances just the presence of a body on stage is an act of defiance, as I discuss with Sarah Silverman in Chapter Four. The difference between the world we currently inhabit versus potential worlds accessible to us is what Turner (1998) associates with the “moods of culture.” With stand-up we can look for how these comic events, practices, and social dramas (to Turner, the indicative “it is”) intersect with the realm of the aesthetic (his subjunctive, or what “could be”) (41).

I do not believe that the comic always has to directly draw the alternative into the open for it this process to occur. For example, consider this bit from Eddie Izzard’s (1998) *Dress to Kill*:

And the National Rifle Association says that, ‘Guns don’t kill people, people do.’ But, I think the gun helps, you know? I think it helps. I just think just standing there going (*sticks finger out miming a gun*), ‘BANG!’ That’s not going to kill too many people, is it? You’d have to be really dodgy on the heart to have that ...

Izzard never directly says “and this is why we should outlaw or better regulate firearms.” He is speaking of and to the world we occupy but through his use of irony and

comic hyperbole asks us to look at the bigger picture (the loss of human life) and not focus tragically on a specific part of the issue (the alleged “innocence” of an inanimate object). We laugh not only because the image Izzard conjures is silly, but also possibly in a way that vents fears because we know in our hearts that such a world would not be as dangerous as the one we are in.

This *equipment for living* and these *alternative universes* offered by comics give us alternate epistemologies or ontologies, and when those run counter to normative ideology, serve as a form of resistance – what Edward Said (1979) calls a *secondary or ideological revolution* and what Augusto Boal (1985) describes as a *rehearsal for revolution*. Victor Turner (1988) moves past traditional art to include ritual and other cultural performances as working in similar fashion, claiming them as a “design for living.” Turner offers that liminal space, those ambiguous and ambivalent “betwixt and between” locations where performance exists is a “realm of pure possibility.” In this way it seems to me that Burke and Turner share much of the same sentiment: whatever it is that performance does or does not do, witnesses can take it back into daily life and use it as weapon or shield, and performances are not about just generating thought or knowledge but *action*. Richard Bauman (1977), building on Burke and Turner, observes what I am describing within stand-up in noting that Dick Gregory was able to “take control of the situation creating a social structure with himself at the center” (44).

Related to Turner’s liminal space is the idea of third space, first presented by Homi Bhabha (1994) in *The Location of Culture*. I see stand-up comedy as a third space in two ways: 1) the physical room itself during the live event where the oppressor and

oppressed, elite and non-elite come together in a space that belongs to neither, and where hierarchy is suspended, and as 2) the stage as a site where liberation is plotted by the comic. Both are liminal in that they are “betwixt and between” what is serious and what is play, between public and private, between the real and the virtual, between a current reality and what might otherwise be possible.

Dwight Conquergood (1983), building on Turner, notes that the “relationship between social drama and cultural performance is dialectical and interdependent” (33). Turner claims social dramas “induce and contain reflexive processes” which generate certain cultural frames, and those frames in turn inform genres of cultural performance operating within the redressive phase of social drama. The comic verbally punishes “wrongdoers,” sometimes they attempt to make amends (even when ironically) for others of their kind (e.g. C. K. “apologizing” for white men). Comics publicly mock, educate, shame, and praise. These processes account for but one way comics function as public intellectuals.

There are other intersections to note. Burke, Turner, Said, and Boal are in agreement that art functions as an intervention well past the event and into the lives of audiences. We *use* this stuff – call it equipment, a design, a rehearsal, or an ideological revolution. Audiences return back to the society and may disrupt it in a ground-up capacity when they then act *themselves*. In the case of stand-up, this can happen through re-presentations of routines through digital or mimetic means. This effect is not simple, immediate, or guaranteed but instead a slow and complex reflexive process with countless variables moving in many directions at once.

Scientist and author Alan Lightman (1999) in an address for the MIT Communications Forum discussed the role of the modern public intellectual. He contrasts what Ralph Waldo Emerson believes the meaning and function of a public intellectual is versus what Edward Said more recently has had to say on the subject. Lightman first offers Emerson's idea of the "One Man,"<sup>21</sup> a complete person whose most important activity is action. "Inaction is cowardice. Emerson's public intellectual preserves great ideas of the past, communicates them, and creates new ideas." Emerson's intellectual is *of the people*, not just other intellectuals. Lightman paints Said's intellectual as one who advances freedom and knowledge, which Lightman notes means "disturbing the status quo" at times. Said's intellectual, in Lightman's estimation, is one who has to balance the public and private. Between Emerson and Said, Lightman establishes what he calls an "hierarchy of categories"<sup>22</sup> where there are "increasing responsibilities as one moves up the hierarchy."

Said draws heavily from Antonio Gramsci, specifically Gramsci's (1971) concept of the "organic intellectual" which he locates in the sphere of the working class where they use the language of their culture (not of the academic) to articulate on behalf of the public in situations where the public may not be able to do so on their own. Gramsci, like Said and Boal, desired an educated working class and as part of that stressed the urgency of creating working-class intellectuals.<sup>23</sup> I do not believe that critical thought is valued at large by our current culture, a loss for us all. Stand-up comics have an access

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<sup>21</sup> Lightman clarifies, and I agree, that if Emerson wrote today he would have used "One Person."

<sup>22</sup> Oh how very Burkean!

<sup>23</sup> Gramsci's organic intellectual has inspired many, from critical-cultural scholar Stuart Hall to educator and philosopher Paulo Friere to the agit-prop playwright, Nobel Prize winner and activist Dario Fo.

to both the public space and the rhetorical tools (not only in their ability to craft messages, but their ability to do so in the language of the people) that can make us think critically without the same resistance.

Lightman defines today's public intellectual as one trained in a particular discipline but who speaks to a wide audience (Neil deGrasse Tyson and Noam Chomsky work here as current examples). What, then, is the stand-up comic's *discipline*? Making us laugh. Entertaining. However, as I've argued there are comics who do much more than that. In Lightman's Level II category of public intellectual, he includes those who connect their discipline to the social, political, and cultural world, something most comics do. In Lightman's Level III category, he says the "intellectual has become elevated to a symbol, a person that stands for something far larger than the discipline from which he or she originated." I argue that Lenny Bruce is such a symbol, so are Jackie "Moms" Mabley and George Carlin.

Comics are asked their opinions on world events in interviews and take up important issues on stage in their acts. Now they access Twitter, Facebook, podcasts, and YouTube in ways that not only cut out institutional structures but also provide an immediacy and ease of access unavailable in the past. We use the comic as an authority. We draw quotations from them that we use in our interactions. Comics use the vernacular of the people. Their messages are crafted and compact and so easy for us to remember, repeat, and engage in for even the most attention deficient among us.

One final thing to note from Lightman's remarks on the public intellectual is his warning that you have a responsibility to the public, and that the higher they are in the

hierarchy the more responsibility you have. Public intellectuals often speak about topics beyond their area of expertise and so must be aware of their limitations and the consequences for what they do and say. Quoth Spider-Man, “with great power comes great responsibility.”

### **Major Theories of Comedy**

Contemporary scholarship on comedy relevant to this work falls into a three major pools: 1) studies of humor in everyday and organization settings (Duncan, Smeltzer et al. 1990, Norrick 1993, Lynch 2002, Lynch 2010); 2) studies of satire in contemporary media (Holcomb 2009, Jones 2010, Day 2011); and 3) studies of identity politics and representation (Rowe 1995, Gilbert 1998, Kibler 1999, Garber 2001, Shugart 2003, Kotthoff 2006, Pelle 2010). Owen H. Lynch’s (2002) “Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research” in *Communication Theory* has proven to be a foundational resource for this project. An express aim of Lynch’s paper is to provide a literature base that facilitates a “communication-based turn” in the understanding of humor (423). Lynch notes that looking at comedy through a communicative lens:

should examine a humor message as it unfolds over time, rather than attempting to form a generalized interpretation of humor. A communication perspective on humor could be used to interpret each humor expression as it occurs within a social setting. Close attention to the motivations of the humorist, the text of the humor, the audience reaction, as well as the time frame and the social environment the humor is delivered in, will increase the sensitivity of examining humor in social contexts (440).

This dissertation is grounded in such a historical, contextual, relational approach.

Scholarship on comedy argues that promoting social change or, alternately, stability is a *prime function* of humor even as the literature struggles with *how* this actually

occurs (Nelson 1990, Boskin 1997, Lynch 2002, Kercher 2006, Day 2011). Lynch observes that scholarship is "in almost complete consensus" that humor serves two paradoxical dualistic functions: control and resistance, as well as identification and differentiation (434). Joseph Boskin (1997) refers to the "consensual" comedian, and Lawrence Mintz (1985) speaks of the "button-down everyman." Both of these figures may be viewed as regulatory, even disciplinary figures whose work is designed to broadly appeal to some imagined *Everyperson* and maintain the status quo. Though not always an agent of discipline, the consensual comic may be viewed as upholding the status quo simply through invisibilities or erasures created within his act.

Alenka Zupancic (2008) observes in *The Odd One In: On Comedy* that comedy that works in opposition to the status quo thrives on the "short circuits" that link heterogenous orders, what Kenneth Burke (1935) calls perspective by incongruity. There are comics who treat the norm, what Burke calls *impiety*, and through either overt or subversive means work against the established order. I find Burke's language perfect for my purposes and so refer to these figures as *impious comic prophets*.

Comedy scholarship attributes how jokes "work" to a permutation of four non-exclusive categories: 1) superiority theories, 2) relief/psychic release theories, 3) identification theories, and 4) theories of incongruity. Comedy can serve as a galvanizing force for publics or counterpublics, fitting into both superiority and psychic relief theories. If a comic takes on a sacred or taboo subject, we might not only feel better in the collective moment in recognizing the absurd *piety* by which a topic is handled, but we also may enjoy *schadenfreude* at the expense of those who are



mocked. The release of group laughter in recognition that we are not alone, that we will endure difficult periods, cannot only make a community where there was none, but may also lead us to individual or collective action. Conversely, someone who did not share the *impious* view of the comic might, upon hearing the critique and/or experiencing the group laughter, have his perspectives altered. Comedian Bill Hicks routinely called upon his audiences to be open to this possibility, what he referred to as having them “squeegee their third eye.”

Superiority theories argue that certain jokes come from anxieties associated with changes in the social order, and they then work to enforce cultural continuity which makes those jokes fundamentally conservative in nature (Wilson 1979, Fine and Wood 2010). Superiority theories also offer that laughter may not only arise in these performances through the comic’s verbal exclusion of the Other, but also when the comic uses self-deprecation. In those moments an audience laughs *at* the comic-as-Other instead of *with* the comic as they talk about the Other. This use of self-deprecation might actually be capable of working in combination with irony or incongruity to expose the violence of hierarchal binary. It is difficult to continue to laugh in certain situations with the object of our laughter directly in front of us, and we can find many examples of such subversive use of self-deprecation, which I discuss in Chapters Three through Five with my analyses.

These tactics often produce a *polysemic laughter* in an audience, a term I offer in an attempt to build on Mintz’s (1985) concept of *anthemic laughter*. Anthemic laughter, in brief, is a laughter that lives in the body in a way that allows us to establish cohorts

based on age or values in an audience based on how they laugh. I do not believe that all laughter functions that way. Group laughter is by definition polyphonous. An example of *polysemic laughter* might present itself during a routine of an archetype known as the “unruly woman” (Rowe 1995) who use gendered humor (historically self-deprecating and essentialist) to the effect of provoking some in the audience to *laugh at* the performer, while others *laugh with* an embedded subversive message. All groups in the audience are laughing at the same time, but not at all at the same thing. This polysemic laughter leads to discursive possibilities that may last far beyond witnessing the act. I discuss *polysemic laughter* and the unruly woman in more detail in Chapter Four.

Relief theories of comedy are best articulated by Elder Olson’s (1970) study offering *katastasis* as the comic parallel to the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis*, the sense of purging an audience experiences with the resolution of a drama. *Katastasis* is also a purging, a restoration through laughter. This relief comes from a release of pressure generated by structural tensions, a collective moment of bonding that we will or have already overcome something. Laughter can provide relief when a fear we hold is exposed, debunked, and possibly neutralized. Laughter in this way acts as “the best medicine.”

Incongruity theories are the oldest and most explored of comedy theories. Perspective by incongruity (PBI) is central to Kenneth Burke’s work on comedy first introduced in *Permanence and Change* (1935). PBI short circuits how we make meaning through violating linkages we take for granted, such as when Louis Black responds to “fears” expressed by certain anti-gay groups that homosexuality is a threat

to the family by describing what they must be afraid of: a hostile armed home invasion during family dinner that results in the family being tied down and forced to watch gay sex. Bakhtin (1968) also strikes close to this territory when he references the critical importance of what he terms “misalliances” to carnivalesque space (123). I add that, with the employment of PBI as a rhetorical and aesthetic strategy, a comic is not only able to actively expose faulty linkages, but at the same time expose the very tragic frame surrounding them, which can create an epiphany for the spectator and a new frame of acceptance.

### **The Comic Persona, Redux**

Dan French (1998) offers insight from first-hand experience that the persona of a stand-up comic is ever-changing. These changes are not only generated from within the comic spirit but are also guided by external contextual forces. The comic persona is central to how audiences receive and make sense of comic messages. The persona acts as a frame for the material delivered. In some cases, the persona itself allows an audience to laugh at something that they would not find funny in another context not since it is generally accepted that the comic is playing a character and not always saying things that they personally mean (Fine 1984; Fine and Wood 2010; Sacks 1978).

Joanne Gilbert’s (2004) *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* paired with Kathleen Rowe’s (1995) *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* offer balance to what is otherwise largely androcentric theory that has generated what Shannon Jackson (2000) calls a “gendered blindspot.” Gilbert, critiquing Bakhtin’s account of carnivale and the fool, asserts that the comic space has

limits and is only “free” in an illusory sense. Institutions, for instance, control when carnivale begins and when it ends. These sanctioned moments where order is suspended may then be looked at as an additional method of control, offering the people just enough room to blow off steam but not do any lasting damage.

Another such limit for comics is the “differential access” that Patricia Sawin (2002) notes as problematic for all performers outside of the dominant group. Just as there was differential access during carnivale in terms of who was allowed to participate when and where and how, there has historically been differential access in comedy for women, for people of color, and so on through all categories of identity. Both Gilbert and Rowe reject Bakhtin’s figure of the fool as a metaphor for all comics, with Rowe offering Helene Cixous’s *Medusa* (1976) as “his” female counterpart. I extend on this in Chapter Four, where I focus on women in stand-up.

Gilbert stresses that the modern comic is also never *completely* free, despite identity, but always bound to institutional power (labels, networks, promoters, local institutional power where a comic performs). Postcolonial scholarship attends to this point as well: Bhabha (1994) discusses the paradoxical relationship between oppressor and oppressed and the tension created that he claims produces *hybridity*. Many stand-up comics may be viewed as hybrids. They are not quite the colonizer but certainly not the colonized. They are neither elite nor subaltern. This paradox exists too when we consider the comic as being positioned in a way that she is not quite a representative of power, but is also not able to be considered just a citizen. Hybridity is therefore also

liminal space. Fine and Wood (2010) note another paradox specific to the act of joke-telling: it embraces both the illusion and reality of community (299).

### **Why Rock, Silverman, and C. K.?**

I identified three comics – arguably at the peak of their careers when I began this project – who also allowed me to look at topics like politics, culture, race, gender, and sexuality. All three currently enjoy great success evidenced by high television ratings and box office receipts, as well as critical acclaim. All were included on a recent “Best stand-up specials on Netflix” list in the Huffington Post (July 2, 2012). Rock and C. K. are currently listed by IFC in the top 10 most innovative stand-up specials of all time. The inclusion of these comics is more about their popularity in this cultural moment, their visibility as top comics, than about my personal tastes or upon an evaluative claim that they are the *best* at what they do.

Chris Rock is a comic with a high degree of popular mainstream appeal. Rock was voted as the fifth greatest stand-up comedian of all time through an online poll hosted by Comedy Central in 2006. In 2010 the BBC listed him as the number eight comic of all time. Three of his albums have earned Grammy Awards, and he has also earned four Emmy Awards for his stand-up specials and cable talk show. Chris Rock provides an interesting site to explore blackness, masculinity, and contemporary politics.

Sarah Silverman does not conform to the typical look of what we have historically associated with the “unruly woman” comic archetype. From Phyllis Diller to Roseanne Barr, this comic archetype has traditionally been represented as an older comic, marked body, or one who otherwise does not conform to beauty standards of the day. Silverman

challenges not only what society thinks of and accepts from a female stand-up comic but of gender constructions at large. Silverman has released two comedy specials, had a sketch program that aired for several years on Comedy Central, and is currently building an online comedy empire through the Jash network.

In just the past year, Louis C. K. has released three comedy specials, the last two of which he self-produced and distributed. In another move to shift business control to the hands of the artist and to lower costs and increase access for his fans, C. K. is now also handling his own tour booking and ticketing. He is now the top-grossing American comic in terms of both album sales and tour receipts, and his innovations have inspired other comics to begin the same process. C. K., a straight white man of middle age, not only provides me the most historically dominant figure in American stand-up but also a figure whose frowsy sad-sack persona provides an interesting site to explore modern notions of privilege, whiteness, and masculinity.

All three comics have been part of broader social dramas generated by something they said in a performance, social media post, or interview. I examine specific recent events where Rock, Silverman, and C. K. became part of an American conversation through a clash with normative ideology, i.e., the social drama. These clashes may potentially lead to shifts in culture and consciousness and sometimes even feed back into the comic's routines. By isolating specific events and putting them in a broader context, I should be able to offer broader speculative claims derived from the particular example.

## Critical Reactions to these Comics

True to the ambivalent and ambiguous field that comedy operates in, critical reactions to all three comics is highly uneven. For every critic who lauds these comics, there is another that problematizes or condemns the work. Speaking from personal experience in interacting with other scholars for the past few years, there is a lot of disagreement about comics as to whether their work serves to advance or resist social change. What I find subversive someone else may find simply offensive. Standpoint theory teaches us that where we stand directly influences what it is that we see. There is also the difficulty in grappling with comics who provide a disruption to normative ideology on one hand while reifying it elsewhere. The impulse is often to make excuses or to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I find neither option satisfactory. We do not live in a black and white world. These are not *either-or* propositions but, like most complex matters, best examined in *both-and* terms while taking a close look at the spaces in between. It is important to note that the literature has yet to catch up to these recent events. The comics I examine and so many of the critical reactions to these comics are only a few years old and are from non-academic sources.

Most examinations of Chris Rock's work explore his black masculine persona as a site of inquiry and as a reflection of contemporary society (see: Bambi Haginns' *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-soul America* or Patricia Hill-Collins' excellent *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*). While the bulk of available criticism of Rock's work considers him a groundbreaking figure in how he provocatively challenges the rhetoric in popular black culture from hair

styles to music (Houston 2005, Robinson 2011) and what Collins (2005) refers to as “controlling images,” some alternately contend Rock’s work is guilty of racism and misogyny (Ellis 2010, Weaver 2011). These contested reactions of the same routines are typical of any comic who engages topics such as race, gender, or politics.

For a comic who is arguably “top dog” at the moment with successful tours, albums, and appearances on three award-winning television shows (*Parks and Recreation*, *Lucky Louie*, and *Louie*), there is still scant academic literature available on Louis C. K.. There has been, however, a lot of online debate over the past year with feminist and critical-cultural blogs such as BitchMedia, Jezebel and ThinkProgress who have focused on C. K.’s work, in particular an interview on *The Daily Show with John Stewart* where he was initially quoted out of context in saying “feminists can’t take a joke.”<sup>24</sup> Reactions to C. K. have also been predictably split. Monica Potts (2010) observes that while all of C. K.’s material doesn’t always hit its mark, he should be applauded for “going there” and further notes that a “significant number of his jokes are about race, class, and gender.” Potts also offers that we expect black comics like Rock to discuss race. What sets Silverman apart (and those who have come after such as Amy Schumer, Whitney Cummings, and Chelsea Handler) is that she is joking about racism itself through her use of irony and persona. In contrast to this, Potts notes that C. K.’s comedy is about being a white man in modern America and how others view them, not accepting

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<sup>24</sup> He was commenting on the backlash toward comic Daniel Tosh who made a joke in poor taste about rape which brought forth another debate about what was off limits to joke about, the full quote being that “*stereotypically speaking* feminists can’t take a joke *and comics can’t take criticism*” (emphasis mine). This incident is explored at length in Chapter Three.



“ignorance as a point of view” (30). Potts distinguishes both Rock and C. K. as a very small sample of comics who speak “realistically” about race and privilege.

Wendy Ide (2008) claims Sarah Silverman’s breakout special *Jesus is Magic* was uneven and that sections of it “seem to be more about getting a reaction than a laugh” (81). Ide also links Silverman to the comedy tree rooted by Lenny Bruce due to the taboo-skewering nature of her work. Ide notes that what makes her unique is “the juxtaposition between her sweetly girlish looks and the scatological profanity that spews from her rosebud mouth.” Alice O’Keefe (2008) claims Silverman’s routines do not at all challenge racial stereotypes but merely reinforce them. O’Keefe concedes, however, that Silverman’s work on gender is truly subversive to accepted norms. O’Keefe, like Ide, notes Silverman’s ability to successfully perform such material to such great attention is rooted in her physical attractiveness. Note the enforcement of a gender line in stand-up comedy, a line I examine in my analysis of female comics.

## **Remaining Chapter Summaries**

### *Chapter Three*

#### *Chris Rock: Race, Politics, and the Politics of Race*

Chapter Three focuses on Chris Rock and the topic of race in American stand-up comedy and beyond. I look for the ways Rock and other comics like him not only joke about race on stage, but how they function as a public intellectual and healer of the social order off stage. There are tensions in Rock’s work, not only racial but in terms of gender and how we interpret irony and his performance of black masculinity. If we are looking for the uses and role of stand-up in social change, black comics offer a dramatic

case. If we seek tangible evidence that comics have had a hand in progressive change, black comics perhaps present the most compelling argument.

#### Chapter Four

##### *Sarah Silverman: The Laughing Medusa*

Chapter Four examines comic Sarah Silverman, a figure whose work has been publicly contested, polarizing critics and audiences who make wildly varied claims about her work. Central to this analysis will be her performance of gender and her intervention into the “boy’s club” that stand-up comedy has always operated as. This chapter considers differential access for comics not in the dominant group, and how comic performances of gender may reinforce, subvert, or transgress normative gender roles. I continue to use the metaphor of Cixous’ *Medusa* as a theoretical counterpoint to Bakhtin’s *fool* and show how Silverman possesses a kind of *jouissance* in disrupting the established order.

#### Chapter Five

##### *Louis CK: Whiteness, Masculinity, and Privilege*

The fifth chapter focuses on Louis C. K., one of the most popular and successful comics working today. C. K. shares a lineage that can be traced back through the likes of George Carlin and Lenny Bruce in regard to his contested use of obscenity and handling of taboo subjects. C. K. presents an interesting figure to analyze in regard to his performance of self, which could hardly be more self-deprecating. I position C. K. as a hybrid figure who not only exposes and reforms our understanding of white privilege

and the trope of American Exceptionalism, but also urges us toward tolerance and equality.

### Chapter Six

#### *Conclusion*

This final chapter offers general critical findings of this dissertation synthesized from the previous chapters of analysis, details significant contributions generated by this study, provides additional discussion and insight generated by the process, addresses limitations of the study, and finally offers up possibilities for future study.

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## CHAPTER THREE:

### CHRIS ROCK: RACE, POLITICS, AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

You're killing yourselves ... I mean, how do you fuck up an Earth? You know what I mean? How do you fuck up a river? I mean, it's not that Hitler wasn't the bad guy ... it's the people that let the motherfucker do it. D'you know, it was like when people do some wrong shit to us, it ain't Nixon, you know, I mean it ain't gonna be Reagan, it's gonna be a motherfucker say 'I got mine, fuck you.' Because this shit is weird, man, motherfucker can't even breathe, here, do you hear me?

You go outside, there's millions of cars giving out shit killing people, people just dying 'cause motherfuckers don't love each other. And that's the greatest motherfucking power there is, is like, love. Fuck atom bombs, neutrons, fuck no money. It's like, you have a heart and love's about the only thing we have, man. We better take care o' it.

- Richard Pryor (*Wanted*, 1978)

This chapter examines black stand-up comics and the topic of race in American stand-up comedy. I first position myself as a researcher and an avid lifelong consumer of stand-up comedy who claims personal experience as proof of the power of stand-up comedy to affect progressive change. Then I offer an analysis of Chris Rock's comic persona and texts, specifically his most recent stand-up comedy special *Kill the Messenger* (2008), before examining recent social dramas that he has participated in. These dramas show us how comics like him not only joke about topics like race, but how they function as both a public intellectual and healer of the social order in a nation that still struggles to have honest conversations about complex issues. The tensions and challenges facing comics negotiating race in America reflect the ways we currently "do" race as a people. My analysis of stand-up as a site of progressive social change is problematized by Rock's treatment of gender and sexuality. Here his performances may be viewed as either ironic or as a reification of heteropatriarchal power. Finally my



analysis of recent social dramas involving Rock shows specific moments where he steps out of his role as an “entertainer” to become a kind of public intellectual and healer of the social order.

White culture, specifically white masculine culture, has dominated the field of stand-up in America since its emergence as a popular form of entertainment at the end of the second World War. Today there is a greater diversity of ethnic and gender representations in mainstream stand-up comedy than at any previous time, but due to the wonders of modern technology a wider array of options does not necessarily mean the average person consumes more diversely. Still, it is undeniable that the genealogy of black American comics from Dewey “Pigmeat” Markham to Kevin Hart has been vital to our broader cultural conscience. These comics have had a largely unrecognized impact on how we talk about and do race as a nation. If we are looking for the uses and role of stand-up in social change, black comics offer a dramatic case. If we seek tangible evidence that comics have had a hand in progressive change, black comics perhaps present the most compelling argument.

### **Was It Something They Said?**

I heard *the n-word* as a child more times than I can count. It was tossed around nonchalantly without obvious malice as often as I heard it spit caustically as invective.<sup>25</sup> The word was not used only to refer to black *people*, I also heard it as part of all sorts of phrases from “-town” describing a lower income neighborhood despite actual ethnic composition to “-rig” when used to describe shoddy repair work no matter who

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<sup>25</sup> In the unlikely event my mother reads this, the only relative of note still alive from this time, I know that you too have had a change in consciousness. I’m just being honest about that period of time.

performed it. When my room was dirty I was sometimes told it looked like “a n-gger lives there” as motivation to clean it. There was a period of time growing up that I was not even sure if or where it ranked in the grand litany of swear words, though I knew it was an undesirable descriptor.

I was relatively afraid of black people until my early teens.<sup>26</sup> This was partially due to a lack of contact, I simply did not know people of color, and also partially due to fears developed after hearing story after story, warning after warning about *them*. This was not just a family phenomena but deeply cultural. When I was seven years old a black family moved into our neighborhood. In less than 48 hours someone burned a cross in their yard. They clearly did not stay. My parents, though far from liberal, were even shocked at such an anachronistic act of hate for 1981 but also did not hesitate to lamely offer that *they probably should have known better* since it was, after all, a “white neighborhood.”

What I *thought* I knew about black people from sources other than family came first from sitcoms like *The Jeffersons*, *Sanford and Son*, *Good Times*, and then from stand-up comedy. My father had a copy of Richard Pryor’s *Wanted* record album that I listened to over and over, sometimes from my bedroom through the thin walls of our doublewide trailer when my parents had friends over late at night. Other times I would play it when no one else was around and attempt to match Pryor’s inflection and cadence. Even at that young age I did not quite understand how adults around me could

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<sup>26</sup> To be fair I was generally afraid of strangers. The country boys I went to school with freaked me out, too, because they always seemed to want to pick on me for being a nerd/fat/a redhead. I’m reminded of Bill Hicks’s Waffle House encounter as described in *The Flying Saucer Tour Vol. 1* (2002): (*aping a stereotypical Bubba accent*) “Whatchoo readin’ for? [...] Well, looks like we got ourselves a *reader*.’ (*in his voice*) What the fuck’s going on? Like I walked into a Klan rally with a Boy George costume on ...”

be so derisive about the people of color they encountered daily yet so enjoy records by Pryor or Cheech and Chong. Maybe I still don't. Racism is confusing.

My parents divorced in late 1981, and I moved in with my grandparents while my mother took some time away, clearing her head after the ordeal. My grandparents had cable, quite a luxury at the time and a major upgrade over the four fuzzy channels we got out in the sticks. I began to watch stand-up specials on HBO, some of which I was allowed to see (Jonathan Winters), while others I had to be sneaky about (Richard Pryor). A favorite trick was to pretend to fall asleep during a program I *was* allowed to watch if I knew they were planning on watching something later deemed too adult for me. This worked more often than not, they let me "sleep" while I peeked ever so slightly through one eye. Not laughing was the hardest part.

No longer just voices I was now able to study these comics' facial expressions, gestures, and other physical dimensions to add to my impersonations. There were two specials that captivated me so much that I learned them from top to bottom: Richard Pryor's (1982) *Live on the Sunset Strip* and Eddie Murphy's (1983) *Delirious*.

Murphy was a figure I already knew well from *Saturday Night Live*, *Delirious* however, was so no-holds-barred in regard to the language he used and the topics he engaged that it made everything I considered "cutting edge" about *SNL* absolutely tame in comparison. Pryor was not only known to me from records but from a string of films like *Stir Crazy*, *Bustin' Loose*, *The Wiz*, and even a cameo in *The Muppet Movie*. Both figures were more than just popular comic actors. They were *major* pop culture icons -- two generations of black comics working at the same time enjoying an intense amount

of mainstream American fame.<sup>27</sup> To me, a social outsider in a family where kids were to be seen and not heard, they were role models: those not supposed to speak talking back, the exclusion included, the marginal made central.

I began to make non-white friends in 7th grade when my mother and I moved back out on our own. This time to an urban area, I began to explore the world more as an individual. I went from overwhelmingly white schools to a junior high with more than a 50% black student body as well a large refugee Asian population. Despite (or perhaps due to) the clannishness and xenophobia of my family I was curious about people different than me. Embracing difference and trying to sort out what that even meant during my teenage years was an important part of who I was.

Richard Bauman (1975) claims that comic Dick Gregory's stand-up performances were something that allowed Gregory to "take control of the situation creating a social structure with himself at the center" (44). Bauman discusses the emergent nature of performance as a space where a comic like Gregory is capable of getting an audience so caught up in his act that he gains a certain amount of power over them, a power by which perspectives may be altered. This is accomplished through the genre itself (stand-up), the competencies displayed by both comic (performing) and audience (listening/accepting), and in how cultural performances generally function to enhance experience. Here Bauman also ties in Burke's (1950) concept of identification. Burke states "[c]ould we not say that, in such cases, the audience is exalted by the assertion because it has the feel of collaborating in the assertion?" (58). Bauman (1975), using

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<sup>27</sup> The film *Harlem Nights* (1989) would take this to an all-new level with bringing together three generations of black comic greats in Pryor, Murphy and Redd Foxx.

Burke (1950), argues that Gregory's competence as a performer in the emergent performance space gives him the "potential for transformation of the social structure" itself through a mastery of the available means of persuasion (44). Even through a use of self-deprecating humor, Bauman recognizes that Gregory is able to turn his humor against those who have victimized him about his race.<sup>28</sup>

In comic moments like this, any engaged audience member may open up, sometimes through surprise, and lean toward the Other in a moment of cultural empathy, cracking through layers of prejudices and taken for granted assumptions. Scholarship on interpersonal relations from Martin Buber (1937) to Ron Pelias (2011) note this physical, embodied relationship between speaker and listener that can occur from everyday conversations to traditional performance genres. In such moments we may also possibly see *ourselves* in an Other before us, and through this emergent, dialogic experience see how arbitrary our divisions can be and that the world doesn't have to be this way. Such personal experiences can serve, consciously or not, to allow us to take even the smallest steps toward greater human progress. This is my experience, and I cannot fathom that I am alone in it.

In 1983 Richard Pryor's career spanned over 20 years. He began performing in 1960 when discharged from the military, but it took him until 1969 to achieve mainstream success. His first comedy record hit shelves in 1971. In contrast Eddie Murphy's success came much quicker. In 1980 Murphy landed a spot as a regular on *SNL* at 19

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<sup>28</sup> Off stage Dick Gregory was, and still is, a tireless social activist. I truly wonder how a comic like him would have fared coming into his own in today's culture where the lines between on and off stage lives, activism and entertainment have become so much more blurred. I think the fact comics like Chris Rock have been able to fuse these things is in itself proof of progress in terms of race.

years old and recorded his first comedy special at 20. Times had changed in regard to access for a male black comic from the early '60s to the mid '80s, and Murphy frequently cited Pryor's importance to his success and influence on his career. America had broadly popular black comics before Pryor and Murphy, but they were either "safe" for mainstream audiences (Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson), relegated to the fringes and in-groups (Dick Gregory), or were better known as comic actors and not necessarily for their often raunchy stand-up (Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, Redd Foxx).

Jackie "Moms" Mabley is a figure who blurred those boundaries and made several important breakthroughs. She was a closeted lesbian who was as politically engaged as Dick Gregory, worked as "blue" as Redd Foxx, mined and subverted the lingering tropes of American minstrelsy as did "Pigmeat" Markham, but to the many who knew her only from television, was regarded as inoffensive as Flip Wilson. I look at Mabley more closely in the next chapter as I consider gender in stand-up.

By 1983 Murphy was a crossover mainstream megastar. He made being black *cool* to a white southern kid like me. Black culture was being co-opted and repackaged all around me: rap music and videos, hip-hop fashion, breakdancing were now all made mainstream. This was of course to the chagrin of my family who stuck to strict criteria of what was for blacks and what was for whites. It was typical to hear people lament that black culture was *taking over*.

Even if we accept that dominant cultures continually co-opt successful interventions from the margins, we must also accept that the dominant culture changes as a result. Social movement theories and postcolonial theory agree that it is a tactic of the

dominant elite to absorb opposition,<sup>29</sup> but postcolonial theory also offers that the oppressed can use the technologies and systems of the elite in order to affect change (Boehmer 2002; Guha 1988). In this way the master's tools may not be able to dismantle the master's house, but they can offer a radical renovation.

Somewhere in my exposure to other cultures as a youth, I began to see that blacks were not *out to get me*, nor were they as a rule any of the things I was told they were. I started to feel duped, and I could not understand where all of this hatred was coming from. Through routines like Murphy's "The Barbecue" on *Delirious* (1983) and encounters with Pryor's recurring character Mudbone,<sup>30</sup> I surmised that blacks and whites had far more in common than anyone around me seemed to want to see or at least admit. The situations I heard described, the family members they talked about, the struggles these comics endured – most of these were in no way foreign to me. Having access to these voices and their stories allowed me to make connections that broke down the constructions of race offered to me and allowed for a more open meeting and connection to the Other as I entered my teens. I developed a wider frame of acceptance through comedy.

Perhaps I would have rejected the prejudices I was steeped in some other way, but I believe my exposure to stand-up expedited that process.<sup>31</sup> In particular I was made

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<sup>29</sup> This might come in the form of a governmental agency giving the opposition leader a post, thereby neutering dissent, or manifest culturally in how sub- or countercultural expression is absorbed by the status quo in an effort to repair the ideological rupture.

<sup>30</sup> Pryor's Mudbone routines were not really about jokes, but character and storytelling. Whoopi Goldberg did quite a bit of this in her stand-up days, as does Dave Chappelle now with his character Iceberg Slim.

<sup>31</sup> In an effort to remain as reflexive as possible here, storytelling was a prized skill in my family and so perhaps I was attenuated to stand up in a way that others may not get. My grandfather also ascribed to the logic that the Irish were the "blacks of Europe" and to tread carefully in generalizing about people – something he never let me forget about when recounting his difficulties immigrating.

aware of class struggles through these routines that transcended race altogether. Like Murphy and Pryor, I also grew up close to if not below the poverty line in a large blue-collar family. I laughed in recognition, in identification, and also defiantly at the idea that blacks and whites were locked in hierarchal binary. I learned from them how blacks and whites were treated differently and was able to see the arbitrary nature of that treatment. Something my family never acknowledged was the existence of class. We were white but *poor* and white. They would have claimed middle class (don't we all?), yet I had great empathy for the stories Pryor and Murphy told about growing up because poverty seemed like a great equalizer. Race had little, if nothing, to do with it.

Stand-up creates an important and unique space where the marginalized may reclaim voice and disrupt the structure keeps them outside. During a stand-up performance the marginal is made central, as Bauman describes Dick Gregory. This is a space where audiences who share an identity may be lifted up, where those who differ may be enlightened, and perhaps most importantly, a space where all may come together and not only learn from but be given permission to laugh at ourselves and each other.

Stand-up generates ambivalent, polyvocal space that is just as effective at legitimizing and deploying oppressive logics as it is in undermining them. Cultural products reflect *and* create cultural practice. Here I depart from my central aim of discussing the capacity of stand-up comedy to generate progressive change to note my dis-ease at some routines by Pryor and Murphy's that struck me as I prepared for this chapter. In recordings from the '70s and '80s, homosexuality and the AIDS crisis are



discussed in ways shocking to a modern enlightened sensibility even if one contextually accepts both topics as widely misunderstood at the time. Before this project I didn't recall the bigotry or misinformation contained in those albums. Was that just part of *who we were* then, and today I am much more sensitive to these issues? Probably, but I would be remiss not to include that both comics performed material that perpetuated stereotypes of gay men as sexual predators and AIDS a disease as transferable as the common cold.

In *Delirious* (1983), Murphy admits he's "afraid of gay people" within the first few minutes as he scans for the audience for the "gay section" so he can keep his rear end from pointing in that direction. He later expresses concern his girlfriend has gay friends because one might kiss her goodbye and she might "come home with that AIDS on her lips."<sup>32</sup> Pryor's material from that period mined the same stereotypes.

We still see this complicated dynamic at work in comedy when it comes to material on race, sex, sexuality or gender – anything that can be distilled to a binary. Hackneyed routines that can be summarized as "black people are like *this*, and white people are like *that*" are common ground for comics, as Dave Chappelle brilliantly skewered in a sketch parodying Def Poetry Jam on *Chappelle's Show*. We also see this with routines that observe the "fundamental" differences between women of different races, gays and straights, men and women. These routines, playing to the lowest common denominator, are easy for the comic to get laughs from but also carry consequences in how they reify these binaries and associated power structures.

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<sup>32</sup> Murphy apologized for that particular joke during an interview in 1990.

Have we progressed so much that we no longer make these sorts of jokes? No. Even as I dug into the important comedy of Chris Rock I still found women and gays locked in stereotypes. I explore this discomfort later in this chapter. In no way is my intent to diminish the important ways stand-up comedy helps generate progressive social change, only to acknowledge that not all change happens at once, or at the same time, or with the same people. Here I apply Burke's (1937) comic corrective to my work in choosing to picture "people not as vicious, but as mistaken" (41).

In the absence of public intellectuals stand-up comics are important to how we talk about and negotiate complicated issues like race. These comic texts are sites of cultural critique, public discourse, tools for articulation, a means of persuasion, and serve to galvanize communities. The topic of race is incredibly troubled, and comic texts are rarely if ever anything less than contested in regard to what they "mean" or "do." Even in the case of Chris Rock, some fail to see his irony and use his material to promote racist stances, something I address later. The ambiguous nature of comedy creates space that allows some to claim Rock is racist against blacks just as others claim he is racist against whites. Still, these texts urge us to think critically, get us talking, and are an important site of inquiry as a generator and/or accelerator of discourses capable of leading us to deeper understanding and cooperation.

Patricia Hill Collins (2005) notes in *Black Sexual Politics* that anti-racist politics depend on the public keeping "race, class, gender, sexuality, and age in dialogue with one another" (51). Chris Rock's comedy works in a way that intersects difference categories even when he mines from tropes and stereotypes. As I analyzed *Kill the*

*Messenger* (2008), I found myself handling a Gordian knot of race, gender, and sexuality. Even as I find Rock's performance in *Kill the Messenger* compelling in how he handles race, there are moments where it maintains heteropatriarchy. This is but one of the many tensions in examining stand-up comedy.

We have not come close to sorting race out in America. In Chris Rock's 2008 special *Kill the Messenger* he is extremely hopeful about the by-products of electing our first black President. Seven years later, in light of how many still negatively regard Barack Obama and how the nation is dealing with the deaths of blacks at the hands of police, Rock is once again front and center in this dialogue. Just this year we can see how highly Rock is regarded as a public intellectual in the extensive interview with *New York Magazine's* Frank Rich where he responds as an authority on current events ranging from police shootings in Ferguson, Missouri, to Bill Cosby's rape allegations.

### **Chris Rock: Never Scared**

Chris Rock was born Feb. 7, 1965 in South Carolina and raised in a working-class neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. Rock's success has afforded him a high degree of agency over his career not just as a stand-up comic and actor but also as a producer and director of film and television. Rock consistently ranks high on all-time "best of" lists for comics. He credits Eddie Murphy for discovering him and helping him break into the mainstream. Rock opened for Murphy on tour and then, also like Murphy, went on to become a popular cast member of *SNL* before moving on to other higher-profile projects. Chris Rock has notably influenced and helped the careers of a number of other

comics, from Louis C. K. to most recently *Totally Biased's W.* Kamau Bell who calls Rock the “Yoda of Comedy” (Moncada 2014).

Rock balks at comics quick to accept a niche that forces them to work “situationally” or to just one type of audience. Rock says “[w]hat we have now is black comics that work only black crowds, gay comics that do only gay crowds, and southern comics that only work down South” (Apatow 2013). This is a failing of the culture at large as much as it is of any particular comic as I mentioned, we have so many specialty channels from which to select whatever it is we are interested in. Perhaps comics today can find a niche audience more easily and, by playing to them, guarantee some level of success instead of reaching for higher more competitive levels within the mainstream. In transcending the label of “political comic,” just as he has transcends being a “black comic,” Rock’s audience is not only more diverse but I argue more open to his influence.

Chris Rock is no stranger to controversy on or off stage. To look at the titles of his specials we might even say he welcomes it: *Bring the Pain, Never Scared, Kill the Messenger*. Rock has also had his fair share of controversy over comments made on Twitter and in interviews that have generated or been a part of existing social dramas. These dramas highlight another important function of the comic as a social healer, which I examine at the end of this chapter.

### ***Kill the Messenger***

The analyses performed in Chapters Three through Five are built on an evaluative model that looks at each performance as both an aesthetic act and a cultural process.<sup>33</sup> These public performances should be accepted as coming from constructed characters, personas, and not as a presentation of an authentic person – if such a thing even exists. This is not to imply that every choice a comic makes in the public eye is conscious or crafted. As Gregory Bateson first offered and as many have since reiterated, *we cannot not communicate*, and our performances are constituted not only by the thing *given* but the thing *given off*.

Nothing *truly* escapes an audience's senses when watching a performance. From the style of clothing a performer wears to the backdrop and set-dressing on stage, these things all work to define the experience. In stand-up comedy, the line between "real" and make-believe can be muddled. For instance the lights do not typically come up or black out on a comic as they would in a theatrical play, but instead the comic typically enters and exits from the wings under general stage lighting. In comedy clubs, the comic often enters and exits directly through the audience. The presence of a microphone and possibly a spotlight signifies the comic is the one we are to pay attention to, but there is still ambiguity leading an audience to believe that it is acceptable to talk back (heckle) or amongst themselves during a performance. The stories comics tell may also be completely true, an amalgam of truth and fiction, or wholly made up and presented as real.

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<sup>33</sup> Turner (1988) notes that we can only partially understand and hence appreciate aesthetic performances if we do not consider factors such as the political, social, or economic contexts that generated them.

Unlike most we would label an intellectual, the comic is by and large *one of us*. Though it is generally agreed a comic is there to entertain and we are there to be entertained, audiences may be informed or persuaded at the same time. Despite the contextual ambiguity of stand-up, an audience understands the experience sits above the everyday and carries some awareness it is at least *playful* if not *fully play*. Harkening again back to Bateson, the ambiguity of the stand-up context makes it slippery for an audience to discern if any particular statement is a *nip* or a *bite*. Lynch (2002) observes literature on comedy is in agreement that humor always serves two paradoxical dualistic functions: control and resistance as well as identification and differentiation (434). Audiences, too, interpret and draw lines as to what is a joke or what is serious and judge what critiques are worthy of consideration or simply hot air. This comic space, using Turner's vocabulary, is liminal. It is "betwixt and between:" not all serious or all play, neither philosophy or fantasy. In addition to these dialectical tensions comedy also works to police and maintain (through ridicule, shaming, or satire) the status quo at the same time it resists and/or subverts it. It is difficult to prove what exactly it is comedy does. It is much easier to speculate on what it is capable of.

It is interesting to consider Rock's 2008 Emmy Award winning special *Kill the Messenger* in terms of both postcolonial theory and male privilege. Aired on HBO, the special had a global scale to it in how it spliced together three different live performances into one broadcast: London, Harlem, and Johannesburg. I was also fortunate enough to see this performance in Tampa while Rock was workshopping the material prior to the recordings. The multi-city approach for the recording allowed Rock

a unique way to mediate the material. Certain bits are presented all from one location (a story about his trip to Africa is solely from Johannesburg) while others splice locations line by line. Most of the sections discussing race — particularly the antagonism between blacks and whites — are almost exclusively from Harlem’s Apollo Theater. In doing this, Rock captures the best reactions to, if not the best performances of, any given part of his set. I found little variation between the material performed in Tampa and what was recorded other than a few minutes in the beginning tailored to the city that Rock used to warm-up the crowd.

The overall impression gleaned from watching the HBO special contrasted with the Tampa show is that it was a major global event, not just in the performance but also in the framing at the beginning and end. The special begins with footage of people waiting in anticipation at all three venues and, for the first several minutes of the special, a slate at the bottom of the screen reminds us of the location. As the credits roll, we again see people of all kinds in front of all three venues speaking with a variety of accents heartily endorsing Rock, charged as they carry the event with them into all parts of the world.

Chris Rock projects an on-stage persona of mid to low status. His speech is a working-class blue-collar dialect that fits his Brooklyn upbringing. In contrast to C. K.’s oafy “Everymanness” examined in Chapter Five, Rock is more burdened and angry. He wears a different outfit in each of the three locations: in London, a smart black ensemble with an open-collared button-up shirt and sports coat; in Johannesburg, a traditional black suit and tie with a white shirt; and at the Apollo, black pants and shirt with a shiny leather jacket. We can read into those choices or allow them to speak for themselves,

but from a standpoint of appropriateness they make sense to me: the most informal look in his most comfortable location, the most formal look in his least familiar, with London as an in-between. Perhaps these choices were more audience-centric: the classic suit and a tie look for the African audience to the flashier outfit for the home crowd.

Practically, his clothing helps us remember where we are as the special proceeds.

Rock works without a microphone stand, stool, or without taking a single sip of water over the duration of one hour and twenty minutes.<sup>34</sup> He almost never stops moving: his segues and beat changes come fast and furious from start to finish as if consciously trying to stay a step ahead of his audience. Pacing quickly from one side of the stage to the other, his strut is reminiscent of Eddie Murphy's from his stand-up days. Rock is dynamic and agitated, his inflection sharp and pointed. He literally chews through every sound of every swear word — popping every plosive, overemphasizing every fricative. The angrier Rock gets the higher goes his pitch, echoing traces of Richard Pryor. Despite these similarities Rock cites George Carlin as his greatest comic influence. As I analyzed *Kill The Messenger* and began to track how much time he spends on each topic, that influence seems very clear.

Rock publicly talks of his comic persona, acknowledging it as a self-conscious construction: “When I start to do stand-up, that’s not my true personality [...] It’s the personality of a guy who hasn’t been able to say what he wanted to say” (Keeps 2007).

This personality reaches audiences in different ways dependent on their unique

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<sup>34</sup> At least not with what aired. This isn't to say he didn't drink during any of the three individual performances. Perhaps it was just edited to make it look as if he didn't.



standpoint. For white audiences it demands we listen. For black audiences, it appears to galvanize.

The title, *Kill the Messenger*, is a play on the saying “don’t kill the messenger,” showing an awareness of not only the reaction he anticipates but perhaps that he is inviting it. Throughout his set, he defiantly caps observations with exclamations like “Yes, I said it! I’m looking right atcha!” Rock positions himself as a teller of hard truths that some don’t want to hear but that others wish they could say. This is a conscious inversion of the established power structure as he stands before us a lone figure pushing back at the world holding him down. We might also compare his tone of defiance – as a marginalized figure pushing to the front and center – in the title *Kill the Messenger* with other titles of previous tours: *Born Suspect*, *Bring the Pain*, *Never Scared*, and *Black Ambition Tour*. He embraces and glorifies his status as an outsider and iconoclast.

He spends a majority of the time in *Kill the Messenger* on three topics: American politics (29 minutes); race (16 minutes); and dating, sex, and differences between men and women (20 minutes). Secondary topics include political correctness (5 minutes) and the differences between a job and a career (7 minutes). In contrast, Louis C. K. seems to almost avoid political talk (which we might also attribute to C. K.’s privilege: he doesn’t *have* to) until the very end of his special *Oh My God* when he delivers a potent, compact *coup de grace* with his “Of course ... But Maybe” routine examined in Chapter Five. Rock works in the reverse manner with most of the first half hour focused on the 2008 election. Considering the candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, race is a

significant part of that routine. He also touches on the intersection of race and gender in a bit about Michelle Obama that plays on cultural stereotypes of black women.

The first third of *Kill the Messenger* is pointedly political. He calls out the mess he believes George Bush created (“Bush fucked up so bad that now it’s impossible for a white guy to run for President” and later “if he had a pocketful of fucks, he wouldn’t give you *one*”), how he both hopes for and worries about an Obama presidency, and takes direct shots at John McCain (“McCain is so old he used to own Sidney Poitier”) and Sarah Palin (“I see her holding a dead moose and I’m like, ‘*What the fuck is Michael Vick in jail for?*’”).

Rock’s purpose does not come across as to merely complain about the Bush years or detail why he thinks McCain/Palin is bad for the country. This is outright ridicule, a shaming of the GOP and the damage Rock believes they did in Bush’s two terms. In *The Theory of Comedy* (1970), Elder Olson observes ridicule is the most extreme form of deprecation and that “we cannot ridicule simply by showing he is not the object of serious concern; we must exhibit the sheer absurdity of taking him serious at all” (13). Rock states from the start of *Kill the Messenger* that “this is the time to do a special because this is a special time” while speaking from the heart in his hopes that Obama wins so that he can stop telling his children they can “be what they want when they grow up.” He claims white parents don’t have to offer that phrase “because it’s obvious.” Angry, Rock bemoans hearing “Is America ready for a black President?” repeatedly in the media, exhorting “We should be. We just had a retarded one” (Rock 2008).

Here we enter the realm of privilege, and though Rock never says it by name, the concept presents itself over and over in his commentary on race. At one point he describes the wealthy neighborhood he lives in that has only three other black residents: singer Mary J. Blige, Eddie Murphy, and rap mogul Jay-Z. He asks:

know what the white guy next to me does? He's a fucking *dentist* [...] He ain't going to the Dentist Hall of Fame [...] He's just a yank yo' tooth out dentist [...] You see, a black man's gotta *fly* to do something a white man can just *walk to* [...] Do you know what a black dentist would have to do to move into my neighborhood? He'd have to *invent teeth!*

Even before the *post-racial* rhetoric after Obama was elected, Rock observes Americans are already too willing to treat race as a problem of the past. He insists he is “always looking for racism” and that it is disingenuous to act surprised when it is encountered. Rock provides an hyperbolic example: if he went on Regis Philbin promoting *Madagascar 2* and Philbin were to stab him in the neck, Rock would have to admit “I shoulda seen it comin’ ... I’ll be mad at *me* (*assuming a dopey voice*) ‘I left my neck out.’” In all three of these examples Rock calls out the invisibility of privilege and the disparity between races. In doing so, the audience must also struggle with that privilege and disparity, whether we accept it in the end or not, and he galvanizes those attendant on his words who have felt the yoke of oppression.

In examining the structure of Rock’s act, I notice a similarity to comic Bill Hicks’ highly political act. Hicks often reminded audiences in mock-reassurance: “the dick jokes are coming ... Here’s the deal; I editorialize for 45 minutes, the last 15 minutes we

pull our parachutes and float down to dick joke island together” (Hicks 2002).<sup>35</sup> Rock, unlike Hicks, uses political material to speak more broadly, as he does in also talking about race in the 2008 election, and in his use of Barack and Michelle as a way to comment generally about race and relationships.

The structure of Rock’s act gets the heavy political material out of the way first then works to a climactic crowd-pleasing finish with observations on men and women. Perhaps it is all of the repeated critical viewings,<sup>36</sup> but what troubled me about *Kill the Messenger* is exactly the thing that has me charged about C. K.’s *Oh My God* (examined in Chapter Five) — the ending.

### **A Problem of Both/And Logic and the Invisibility of Privilege**

The last 20 minutes of Rock’s set, his “dick joke island,” is a tirade about the difficulties of being a man, complaints about women’s power in relationships, and blunt discussions of sex. The routine reifies countless tropes about race, gender and the intersection of the two. I do not mean to imply that it is any comic’s *responsibility* to challenge stereotypes, but there is a double-standard here that is almost hypocritical.

Earlier in *Kill the Messenger*, there is a five-minute bit where he complains about our modern politically correct climate that he says is so bad that “white people now have to apologize” for saying things. He cites this as evidence of human progress because “sometimes people with the most shit get to say the least shit, and the people with the

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<sup>35</sup> Hicks, unlike Rock, failed to achieve what counts as mainstream success. Despite a much larger profile abroad, in America he played smaller comedy clubs in cities at a time where comedy was less accepted as a place for people to think and engage ideas than it is today – another significant sign of progress.

<sup>36</sup> G. Wilson Knight (1930) in *The Wheel of Fire* notes that a complication with any critical act is that the very nature of critical work lends itself to us finding faults that aren’t necessarily there. Which is not to say that every audience does not perform the criticism in some fashion. To paraphrase Lyotard and Thebaud, “judgment happens.”

least shit get to say the most shit, so if you wanna say mo' shit, get rid of some of your shit." Rock then launches into more examples: overweight girls can talk about skinny girls, short men can talk about tall men, poor people can talk about rich people – but none of these work in reverse "because that's just mean." Rock then takes issue with how our political correctness can come at the expense of free speech, stressing the importance of context in the use of words like "faggot," which he defends is not always a derogatory term referring to a homosexual. Interestingly, C. K. has a similar routine also in a 2008 special, *Chewed Up*.<sup>37</sup>

Rock says "you don't have to be gay to act like a faggot. You don't even have to be a *man* to act like a faggot. Anyone can act like a faggot." Rock illustrates his point by saying he loves singer Gwen Stefani, but that fact doesn't make him "a faggot." He clarifies, however, by offering that if he's at a stoplight "rocking out," singing along and dancing in his seat when the light turns green and then yellow, the person in the car behind him has the right to yell, "Hey faggot, the light's about to change! [...]" Even Elton John would call me a faggot [...] It's not the word, it's the context ..."

To follow Rock's previous logic, wouldn't this work in a way that gays can talk about straight people but not vice versa *because that's just mean*? Better yet, does Rock allow the same defense of context in use of the *n-word*? He says "not really" then offers one extreme set circumstances that would allow for a white person to use it:

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<sup>37</sup> C. K. said in that special, "I miss that word." "I would never call a gay guy a faggot, unless he was *being* a faggot, but not because he's gay" He offers an example, putting on a nerdy voice "'people from Phoenix are Phoenicians' ... I'd be all 'shut up faggot' ... 'quit being a faggot and suck that dick.'" C. K., however, provides a statement about the consequences of language in the first episode of *Louie*, discussed in chapter five.

Here goes, listen closely, coz I may never say this shit again [...] If it's Christmas eve, and it's between 4:30 and 4:49 in the morning, if you're white, and you're on your way to Toys 'r' Us to get your kid the last Transformer doll, and right before you walk into Toys 'r' Us some black person runs up beside you, smacks you in the head with a brick, knocks you to the ground, stomps you in the face, 'take that you cracker ass motherfucker' (*quick cuts to him in each city doing the stomping routine in different ways, emphasizing the violence in an increasingly absurd fashion*) takes your money, pisses on ya, and runs away ... if you white, at that moment, you can say 'somebody stop that nigger!'

Defenders of the flip use of words like “faggot,” “retarded,” “bitch,” etc often do so by saying they use the word in a different way than as a derogatory reference to a group.

C. K. goes as far as to say he used “faggot” before he even actually knew what a homosexual was, and so he’s *never* referring to a gay person. Only a person with privilege can make such a claim. For all the noise Rock makes about the disparity between races, in *Kill the Messenger* he doesn’t make the same connections in regard to gender or sexuality. It is perhaps interesting to note that in situations like these we find the comic performing an ethical analysis of semiotics.

Just as I was shocked by recordings of Murphy and Pryor perpetuating stereotypes and misinformation about homosexuality and AIDS, I am uncomfortable with how certain comics today defend their choices in cases like this. Can I see progress in how comics deal with these topics?<sup>38</sup> Yes. Just in this particular genealogy we no longer find AIDS treated the same way in comedy. However, stand-up comedy is still structurally a “boy’s club,” and we still generally find that patriarchal heteronormative logic is dominant. How comedy handles AIDS, gender, and sexuality continues to mirror the status quo. I offer

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<sup>38</sup> And by progress allow me to be clear, this is male progress and straight progress, not women or LGBT+ – just as Rock says that it is absurd to use black progress in regard to race relations because it is whites who have “progressed” in these instances.

an analysis of how certain comics are attempting to disrupt these norms in the next chapter.

We may also look at Rock's bit on the acceptable use of *n-gger* contrasted with that of *faggot* as purposefully ironic. Linda Hutcheon (1994) offers that certain instances of humor playing on stereotypes serve an ironic function in that they specifically target a particular identity group's internalization of the dominant group's stereotype (20). Irony, however, can be tricky to locate because it not only operates in an in-between space, but it depends on an audience's competence to identify it and is also subject to interpretation.

Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the relationship between colonizer and colonized (for our purposes adaptable to oppressor and oppressed) paradoxical. Bhabha notes that the colonizer, in an attempt to resist equality or independence, stigmatizes and enforces stereotypes. The colonized in turn may begin to create paradoxical hybridized identities, submitting to and resisting the stereotype all at once. bell hooks (1995) borrows from postcolonialism in describing the relationship between blacks and whites in America not just as physical colonization but a colonization of the mind. In concert with Hutcheon, Bhabha, and hooks, I argue there are comics who play on stereotypes to perform a subversive act. If we view their work as ironic, we might consider some routines as purposefully generating discomfort in the audience through perspective by incongruity. These incongruities may lead to a wider perspective in the moment for an individual or even help generate dialogue after among audience members. I will explore this sort of irony in the next chapter in my analysis of the hyper-ironic persona of Sarah Silverman.

In *Kill the Messenger*, Rock's audience laughs with gusto through all of the material on gender and sexuality. Rock is transparent about his artistic process whereby he generates material specifically to push an audience's comfort level to *just shy* of crossing a line that would have them turn on him. What counts as *funny* is always negotiated, bound in context. Comics — right, wrong, or indifferent — serve Burke's "prophet function" no matter what aspect of the status quo they target. Has political correctness become part of the structure of the status quo? If you take the word of comics like Rock and C. K., the answer is yes.

Should we be able to laugh at ourselves? Absolutely. Should we accept that all representations are necessarily a reduction and therefore never three-dimensional or accounting for all persons? Yes. We also need to be able to look at how even a comic like Chris Rock works in ways to maintain the status quo. As Bonnie Dow (1996) discusses at length, it is naive to think that performances do not influence people, even in the case of stand-up comedy where many will be quick to write off any harm as "just jokes." Do I suggest it is the comic's *responsibility* to do otherwise? Not really, though rarely is any joke *just* a joke. Burke (1935) says the "[t]he mind is a social product, and our very concepts of character depend upon the verbalizations of our group. In its origins, language is an implement of action, a device which takes its shape by the cooperative patterns of the group that uses it" (173). Who speaks when Rock says these things? He says he is "the guy who hasn't been able to say what he wants."



## Chris Rock and Social Drama

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1975) describes social drama as a unit of “aharmonic process, arising in conflict situations” which contains four phases: *breach*, *crisis*, *redress*, then either *reintegration* or *schism* (37-41). In some cases the comic creates a *breach* when crossing an ethical line on stage (usually in choice of word or a topic of humor) that then transfers into the public sphere as the drama moves to *crisis*, where the public takes sides and the initial breach widens. The *redressive* phase occurs when either formally or informally repairs are enacted which might come in the form of a public apology for the transgression or the comic is otherwise censured. If the redressive measures are accepted, the drama will end in a *reintegration* of the comic. If not, then a permanent breach (or *schism*) occurs between the sides.

Beyond the stand-up comedy performance, comics function as public intellectuals when they step outside of their role as entertainers to address a greater *breach* in the social order as we have seen Chris Rock do in matters of race. Through negotiating the tensions between their dual roles of entertainer and public intellectual, certain comics are not only capable of widening our perspectives but also of healing, reconciling, or otherwise mediating these breaches. In this way the comic functions not only like Burke’s *prophet* but also Bakhtin’s *fool* -- liminal figures who operate between the worlds of what *is* and what *could be*.

In the past few years, two Twitter incidents involving Chris Rock prompted swift criticism and an attempt to draw him into a social drama. First a 2012 tweet on Independence Day and then a 2013 tweet in response to the George Zimmerman

verdict. On July 14, 2013, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of murder after killing Trayvon Martin even after a 911 operator told Zimmerman not to pursue the minor. This prompted Rock to post “So the police tell you to do something you ignore them somebody ends up dead. Isn't that in itself a crime[?]” Within hours, conservative blogs such as twitchy.com, a Twitter “curation site” founded by Michelle Malkin, were berating Rock and his online followers as this drama, initially *breached* by the ruling in favor of Zimmerman, moved to the second phase of where sides are taken and the breach itself widens, *crisis*. The Zimmerman social drama has yet to come to either *reintegration* or *schism* as Zimmerman continues to find himself in the public eye with additional incidences. The Martin murder itself has been integrated into a far greater drama involving the killings of unarmed black men by law enforcement and private citizens.

That tweet was not the first time Rock spoke up about the case. A week prior, Rock appeared in a segment on protégé W. Kamau Bell’s *Totally Biased*, offering the one-line editorial “George Zimmerman can eat a dick.” Rock’s six-word appearance was covered by multiple websites and then again by *The Huffington Post* who released it the day before the verdict was delivered. Both left and right attempted to draw Rock into the *crisis* phase of this drama and use him as a lever with which to advance their positions. The public failed to grab onto in either case.

A tweet from Independence Day 2012 created a bit more of a stir: “Happy white peoples independence day the slaves weren’t free but I’m sure they enjoyed

fireworks.”<sup>39</sup> Rock’s *breach* here can be viewed as dividing the country on racial lines on a day we are supposed to be united in celebration, which comics like Rock (and, as show in Chapter five, Louis C. K.) point out has come through great violence being inflicted on many. The right attacked Rock with an expected level of indignance and outrage as this drama then moved to *crisis*. In August of that year in an interview with *The New York Times* (2012) Rock defended his message:

“That’s the kind of joke I would have told on Letterman. We just live in a world where the audience gets a say now. My actual belief? Only fans should be allowed to criticize. Because it’s for the fans. When I hear somebody go, “Country music [stinks],” I’m like, well, country music’s not for you. You’re just being elitist [...] Same thing with jokes.”

Rock did not use the incident to further editorialize on our racial climate but both of these tweets have been re-presented online as quotes and image memes, becoming an alternate epistemology. When pressed on entertainers coming under fire for commenting on current events and the subsequent social dramas they often produce, Rock asks:

Are they real fires? [...] Just because there’s an alarm going doesn’t mean it’s a fire. And I think that people are confusing the two. It’s only a fire when it offends the fans, and the fans turn on you [...] When you’re workshopping [jokes], a lot of stuff is bumpy and awkward. Especially when you’re working on the edge, you’re going to offend. A guy like Tosh, he’s at the Laugh Factory. He’s making no money. He’s essentially in the gym. You’re mad at Ray Leonard because he’s not in shape, in the gym? That’s what the gym’s for [...] Just look at some of my material. You can’t imagine how rough it was and how unfunny and how sexist or racist it might have seemed. ‘Niggas vs. Black People’ probably took me six months to get that thing right. You know how racist that thing was a week in? (Itzkoff 2012).

Here Rock not only gets at our cultural knee-jerk response to certain kinds of comedy but also our broader “argument culture” (Tannen 1998). We love to get involved

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<sup>39</sup> This is a direct quote of this tweet, typographical errors and all.

in the *crisis* of a drama, even when we don't have the facts or even a "dog in the fight." The internet is an important stage for the performance of today's social dramas, one Victor Turner would never know, and our ease of access and relative anonymity helps feed the discord. Rock also gets at one of the societal functions of a comic as he acknowledges how they negotiate the tensions between the status quo and wider perspectives. As a comic tests material he is asking, "is this too far? How about now?" In doing so he is taking the temperature of any culture in any given context assessing how far he can push that particular issue before deciding what side of the line to live on. The more well known the comic, the more likely it is a social drama will generate when she crosses a line.

Chris Rock's blunt commentary on events outside of the comedy club has been called out by critics attempting to invoke anti-intellectual (and, unsurprisingly, anti-aesthetic) sentiment by deriding the comic as unqualified to have opinions outside of their role as an entertainer.<sup>40</sup> In both Twitter incidents mentioned here, the social drama never escalated or neatly resolved itself in the way seen in Chapter Five with Louis C. K., which ends in *reintegration*. In contrast, there is a *schism* in the next chapter with Sarah Silverman. In the cases of all three comics, however, their dramas were all sites of public dialogue and live on as content in the form of articles and memes still used in ground-up, participatory ways and are potentially generative of social change.

Comics like Rock also function as public intellectuals through the ways the media directly draws them into dialogue on current events. Rock gave an interview to Charlie

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<sup>40</sup> The crassest example I know: country music star Toby Keith after The Dixie Chicks made a critical statement of then-President George W. Bush said, "the fat one should shut up and sing." Nice.

Rose on Nov. 15, 2014, where he detailed the many burdens of being black and famous. The media expects Rock to be an expert on black experience and black people at the same time he says he feels intense pressure from his own community:

[n]o one says ‘Hey, Tom Cruise! Stay white! Don’t forget your whiteness! Come back and visit white people! What-chu doin’ for white people, Tom Cruise?!’ [Black people] want to know that Denzel loves his people. That’s he doing stuff for his people. They feel his highs and lows more than white people.

Chris Rock recently again assumed the role of public intellectual in a December 2014 interview with *New York Magazine*. Within hours of release, this interview was trending at just about every corner of the internet. In the interview with noted journalist Frank Rich (2014), Rock responds to dozens of questions on topics like American politics and race. Specifically he takes on class and race, calling class the “elephant in the room” that no one wants to address. Ignoring class creates illogical assumptions like “rich people are smart.” He makes an interesting observation about a shift in youth, specifically on college campuses, calling them more conservative than he has seen in the past -- “not like they’re voting Republican – but in their social views and their willingness not to offend anybody.” As a college instructor of 20 years, I agree with his estimation. Rock says a result of this conservative shift is that touring campuses is not as much fun as it once was. Similarly, I find it more difficult to achieve dialogue in the classroom about pressing issues of the day.

Rock points out a critical flaw in how we language ideas of racial progress, calling it:

nonsense [...] White people were crazy. Now they’re not as crazy. To say that black people have made progress would be to say they deserve what happened to them before [...] So, to say Obama is progress is saying that he’s the first black person that is qualified to be president. That’s not black progress. That’s white progress.

In all of these cases, Chris Rock fits Alan Lightman's (2014) definition of a Level III Public Intellectual in becoming:

elevated to a symbol, a person that stands for something larger than the discipline from which he or she originated. A Level III intellectual is asked [about] a large range of public issues, not necessarily directly connected to their original field of expertise.

In addition to talking about the entertainment industry in these interviews Rock is asked about current events, politics, race, class, and the media. This phenomenon is not limited to Rock. Any comic achieving such a high level of success and credibility is typically placed in such high regard, a privilege in many ways unique to stand-up comics.

Another interesting phenomena occurring between the Ferguson decision and the *New York Magazine* story is how conservatives and progressives *both* used Rock in an appeal to authority regarding police violence but in strikingly different ways. In the wake of the Ferguson, MO, grand jury decision where there was not enough evidence to indict police officer Darren Wilson for the shooting of Michael Brown, both sides used the *same comic sketch* to support their polar opposite positions.

Many in support of Officer Wilson shared a video of Chris Rock's sketch "How To Not Get Your Ass Kicked By The Police" from *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000) which plays like an educational video, giving advice like "Don't Break the Law," "Use Common Sense," "Be Polite," "Shut The Fuck Up" and "Get a White Friend" to avoid a beating. It even appeared as support in a letter to the editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* from September 1, 2014, pleading for people to take Rock's advice to heart. A YouTube video of the sketch accompanied the letter on the *Dispatch's* website. Rock's sketch is

cited throughout: “Chris even mentions Rodney King and that if he had paid attention to those tips, that event would have never happened. The same is true for Michael Brown.” At the end of the letter, the author asks, “[p]lease, Chris, come and talk to Ferguson. Tell them they don’t need to be afraid of police” (Setnicka 2014).

I was stunned to see this video used non-ironically. Yes, on the surface, Rock is saying that if you don’t break the law and cooperate with law enforcement, you shouldn’t come to bodily harm. There is, however, an extreme amount of satire in his approach with it ringing clear to me in moments where he is pointing out racial inequality at the hands of police (N.B.: one of his tips is to “*keep a white friend with you*”). Rock’s sketch is critical of *both* sets of behaviors: behaviors that would put one in a position to be beaten as well as the institutionalized racism within law enforcement. Here is a very clear example of how *polysemic* laughter can be: Both sides presented here are laughing at the same sketch but for very different reasons. For those using the logic of the dominant elite, Rock’s satirical take on power is wholly lost as they re-present Rock’s work in a manner that upholds white supremacy and the infallibility of the state.

Chris Rock has been one of the most prominent online voices in the past few years amidst the great drama still playing out concerning police killings of unarmed black men. Here Rock *directly* functions as a public intellectual on race relations. On November 24, 2014, he tweeted, it “[d]oesn’t take 100 days to decide if murder is a crime, it takes 100 days to figure out how to tell people it isn’t.” That message was retweeted over 51,000 times in two days and made into an image meme still in distribution. On November 26, 2014, he adds, “I read the whole testimony. My opinion, the cop used excessive force.

Brown, should not have been wrestling with a cop. Both made mistakes.” That was retweeted over 44,000 times in *just seven hours*. In other messages over the following days, Rock relentlessly critiqued not only those directly responsible for Ferguson and the nation’s reaction but also the displays of violence and disorder that followed. One tweet in particular stands out as illustrative of his role as public intellectual and healer in how he urges us toward a wider frame of acceptance: “Not all black people are criminals. Not all cops are bad. Not all white people are racist. Let’s stop the labeling, it’s 2014, don’t judge.”

Here Rock eschews *either/or* binary logic, necessarily tragic in its limitations, and offers perspective not generally given voice in a culture prone to polarity. Rock has a message for whites *and* blacks, conservatives *and* liberals: things are not as easy as we would like them to be, and both sides can do better. If those grand jury decisions created *breaches*, Rock’s words currently function as part of the *redressive machinery*.

The comic’s role as intellectual and/or healer is complicated. On December 3, 2014, after the grand jury decided not to pursue a trial in the death of Eric Garner, already ruled a homicide by the New York coroner, Rock offered the powerfully simple tweet “[t]his one was on film.” While urging us toward cooperation, he still criticizes the wrong he sees in the world. The comic frame of acceptance is not “anything goes.” Rock’s words on race and institutional power from his live act, interviews, and social media posts are shared as widely as those by Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malcolm X, yet those opposed to his views are quick to dismiss his opinions as nothing more than the rants of



a racist or meanderings of an entertainer. Of course, until they “Like” the “How To Not Get Your Ass Kicked By The Police” when they fail to see the satire.

## **Conclusion**

In Chris Rock’s *Kill the Messenger*, I have argued he harshly critiques the status quo on race while simultaneously upholding it in terms of gender and sexuality by invoking heteronormative tropes. Despite Rock’s awareness of and commitment to racial equality and cooperation, he possesses blind spots when it comes to other identity categories. His comedy in *Kill the Messenger* isn’t exactly setting feminist or LGBT+ movements *backward*, but he does nothing to advance progressive thought past essential binaries. However, he gives us an incredible amount to consider in terms of American race relations, the invisibility of institutionalized power, and the better world we might occupy if we would only widen our frame of acceptance.<sup>41</sup> It is a world where he doesn’t have to tell his daughter things that a white person takes for granted, a world where what counts as right and wrong in terms of justice is in not altered by the color of one’s skin.

In his act, Rock contributes to cycles of progressive social change as a black comic talking about race. He not only provides voice to the black experience, which may potentially widen the perspectives of those who watch him, but he possibly also

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<sup>41</sup> It should be noted that this special is seven years old. I’m certainly a different person now than I was then, and perhaps if a special were to come out today we wouldn’t see the same things at work in his act. Louis C. K., as we will see in chapter five, freely admits his own evolution of thought and sensitivity to the consequences of his words since his 2008 special *Chewed Up*. I was unable to find interviews where Rock had similar discussions about the construction of his act, and he has not recorded another special since by which to compare it. He still plays up essentialist ideas of men and women in his Twitter feed like this one from November 10, 2014: “Ways to tell a woman’s mad at you” 1. She’s silent. 2. She’s yelling. 3. She acts the same. 4. She acts different.” On the other hand, he has on many occasions spoken in favor of gay marriage on talk shows and in some routines. Rock divorced his wife of 19 years at the end of last year. Perhaps his frustrations in his personal life were somehow elevated to the level of the universal in how he talked about women and marriage.

provides agency to blacks and allies of black causes through a process of galvanization. The ability of a comic to impact an audience directly through the stand-up comedy performance is, however, only one way she potentially generates change.

In both my analysis of his act in 2008 and his current interventions as a public intellectual, I have shown Chris Rock functioning as a mediator and healer of the social order during critical times. His observations on race, class, and politics are important and his voice unique as we continue to come to terms with race in America. I've shown that he not only has proven himself a credible, politically aware messenger but also a balanced and reasonable mediator working to diffuse conflict and heal the ongoing breach between whites and blacks. Rock's messages to all sides resonate strongly yet the nature of comedy is also ambiguous; both sides claim his messages as a tool against the other just as some within all sides cry out his act is racist.

In *Kill the Messenger*, he sells Obama not based on his party or platform, but by notions of *hope* and *change* – the two banner words of Obama's campaign though Rock never invokes them directly. As he says just a few moments in, the timing was right for the special "because this is a special time." Rock contrasts Obama with who the candidate *isn't* – an old, conservative, wealthy, white elite. Set on a world stage, this performance is not just a critique of conservatives in America but of all Western power. If we accept the roar of the audience as evidence, Johannesburg and London are just as engaged, just as responsive to his barbs, as the audience in Harlem.

We bestow a degree of authority to Rock to talk about the election in terms of race because he is a black man. Yet his position as a comic makes him even more effective

as a persuasive force. As *one of us* we trust him more than a “true” black intellectual (such as Cornell West) or black politician (like Jesse Jackson) who often carry negative baggage in the eyes of a general (read: white) audience.

His critique of power, though rooted in American politics, is universal. In the 2014 *New York Magazine* interview, he muses, “[America] started in England and was ruled by kings and queens and had a class system. I’m almost of the mind that that’s what America wants at the end of the day [...] It’s hard for me to figure out people voting against their own self-interests.” I am painfully aware of this in my own family where the working poor continually vote against their own reality in favor of what they aspire to.

Recently Rock has become an even more highly regarded public intellectual through the drama playing out after the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner. Through this drama, Rock continues to contribute to discourses through social media and interviews where he is frequently called on to discuss race in current events.

Rock’s insights on race as both comic and intellectual are being used interpersonally and online as tools – or weapon, shield, or salve (pick your metaphor) – to help navigate racial complexities. Racism clearly didn’t end with Obama’s election. In many ways, it has only been exacerbated. The comic is one of few public voices that consistently escapes tragic either/or logic and asks us instead to look at things with a broader perspective. Chris Rock is able to reach all sides, critiquing any position as necessary while urging us toward honesty, understanding, and cooperation. Chris Rock functions as a mediator of race relations both on stage and off. He moves past performing “black” comedy, what he describes as *situational* style, and also beyond just giving voice to the

black experience or highlighting the differences between the races (what I referred to earlier as material best described as “black people are like *this*, and white people are like *that*.”).

Due to the ambiguity inherent to comedy and the ambivalence of the comic frame, his messages can also reach people in a way that generates competing interpretations as we saw with in the reaction to “How to Not Get Your Ass Kicked by the Police.” These moments, too, are potentially generative of progress when at the macro, meso, or micro level of society we are drawn into dialogue about our interpretations.

In terms of progress and social change, I cannot shake Rock’s words that he finds the idea of racial progress in America “nonsense” adding “[w]hite people were crazy. Now they’re not as crazy.” Rock isn’t wrong. I argue that comics like him have contributed to that shift in white consciousness, as I believe that Pryor and Murphy shifted mine. I also believe that not only did comics like Pryor and Murphy help set the stage for a comic like Rock, but so did more marginalized comics like Dick Gregory. Rock’s act is highly politically and socially situated at the same time he enjoys a certain *rock star* celebrity.

In my analysis of Chris Rock, gender presented itself as problematic in discussing stand-up as an agent of progressive social change. In the next chapter, I analyze Sarah Silverman, one of today’s most popular and polarizing comics. I examine her not only in context of the genealogy of women comics in America but also offer her in contrast to male comics studied here. Does she handle gender, sex, and sexuality in different ways than her counterparts? Does she have the same access they do? Is she progressing,

reifying, or subverting assumptions about gender? How might we consider her in terms of operating at all three levels?

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## CHAPTER FOUR:

### SARAH SILVERMAN: THE LAUGHING MEDUSA

Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it "first" in laughter? -- Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985)

Don't forget, God can see you masturbating ... but don't stop, he's almost there!  
I'm just kidding ... there is no God. – Sarah Silverman, *Jesus is Magic* (2005)

#### **Boy's Club Crashers: American Women in Stand-up Comedy**

This chapter considers women comics and their role in promoting social change, especially in attitudes about gender roles. I begin by recalling my own experiences with women comics and my own experience of changing personae for women in stand-up. This chapter then considers scholarship about and examples of where the identity and performances of women comics has undergone transformation in the last few decades. I recall three early women comics: Gracie Allen, Phyllis Diller, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Finally, I focus on contemporary comic Sarah Silverman, her persona, performances, and her role in recent social dramas.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there has been far more scholarship on women comics and their changing roles and identities. This is due in part to the driving interest in feminist criticism generally, but it also represents a recognition that women's public roles *are themselves* the agencies of social change. That is, changes in female comic persona are not merely mirrors of changing women's roles in society, they are productive of such change by the mere presence of women acting in these ways and

succeeding in doing so. For a woman to be on stage at all was initially disruptive of social rules; for her to be a stand-up comic has traditionally been a transgressive act and early women stand-ups, one will note, operated under severe restrictions about their identities or personae. Karlyn Campbell has noted the same thing about women speaking out in politics, so feminists speaking for their cause were part of a basic “oxymoron,” a fundamental contradiction about being both a woman and a public advocate. Campbell further notes the strategy of “enactment” that grows from this basic problem: the mere presence of a speaker like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her transgressive act of speaking *enacts* and gives self-evident proof of the problem of which she speaks (Campbell 1973, Campbell 1980).

It therefore makes sense that I, and other scholars looking at women’s roles, observe their contributions to social change by looking at the changes *within* comedy itself, as these enactments and performances are themselves the means of creating new possibilities for women’s identities and roles. In my own approach to the topic, I have discovered what Shannon Jackson (2000) called a “gendered blind-spot” in not recognizing that women comics are already performing a resistant or subversive act: how can a lone woman with a microphone under a spotlight commanding a room be anything less than dangerous to heteropatriarchy? And to have her speak of such sacred taboos as sexual pleasure or its lack, incompetent husbands, foolish leaders and bosses, childbirth and parenting, or any of the other “truths” with which women comics disrupt the gendered norms for female speech and behavior? To some degree of course, the same could be said of Chris Rock or other black comics: to merely have a



black man on stage say the kinds of things about race and social order reflects social change, but getting by with such speech through comedy – where he could not in other walks of life – is itself part of the change.

From the beginning of the modern era of stand-up after World War II,<sup>42</sup> stand-up comedy has operated as a “boy’s club.” A secondary goal of this chapter is to bring to light a few of the ways that women comics operate in a different space than their male counterparts. It is a space full of double standards and differential access, mirroring women’s struggles in other workplaces. Before my analysis of Sarah Silverman, I note contributions of Gracie Allen, Phyllis Diller, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley whose legacies endure in contemporary comedy. Each crafted a unique comic persona that not only allowed them access to the stage in their day but also created space for them to subvert or transgress available roles. In an examination of how comic personas affect shifting perceptions of identity and the roles available to a group in society, women provide perhaps the best argument.

### **The Sound of Women’s Laughter**

I didn’t have the same connection to women stand-up comics as I did to men in those formative years discussed in previous chapters. This is not something special about my family or upbringing, but the fact that there were very few women stand-up comics in the ‘70s and ‘80s. Women comics have historically had far more difficulty

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<sup>42</sup> I pinpoint this as the start of the modern era due to the shift from Vaudeville/Music Hall style performances to that of the club act that we now commonly associate with the form. American and British GIs developed a taste for what we now accept as stand-up during the war through USO and other similar entertainments. Stand-up was not only a popular style because of the effectiveness of humor in taking people’s minds off of more pressing matters even for just a few moments, but also very popular with producers and organizers due to the low costs associated with the style (Fisher 2006).

accessing the stage due to institutional controls such as club management, label and studio executives, local authorities, and even husbands who often controlled how family entertainment money was spent (Gilbert 1998, Kibler 1999, Kotthoff 2006, Lewis 2010, Mizejewski 2014, Rowe 1995, Shugart 2003). Still, funny women were readily present in other genres and I vividly recall the matriarchs of my family howling with laughter along with Lucille Ball, Carole Burnette, Lily Tomlin, and Gilda Radner on television. These, too, were among my favorite comic actors, especially Ball and Burnette. The men in my family also belly-laughed at those performers and at the antics of personalities like Jean Stapleton, Phyllis Diller, and Bea Arthur on sitcoms, game shows, and talk shows. I simply cannot remember watching a female stand-up comic until probably the late 1980s.

I was raised by what I realized later in life to be a disproportionately large number of women. Among my mother, grandmothers, aunts, and all of their friends, I was witness to innumerable uncensored conversations inclusive of joke-telling as far back as I can remember. They would often forget I was in the room, under a table or behind a couch quietly playing, until eventually someone remembered my presence, inducing a pointed throat-clearing and an abrupt change in conversation. In contrast, when in the company of men out in the driveway or garage they *never* unsalted their talk and took pleasure in telling raunchy jokes that were well over my head.

With any gathering, the company we're in typically dictates the types of jokes we tell and their. In my family women generally were not so bawdy in the company of men. When "dirty" jokes came up in mixed company, some women kept their laughter to

themselves while others laughed with gusto, typically to the chagrin of any present men. In extreme cases in mixed groups, emasculative humor was tactically deployed in an effort to level the playing field.

Stand-up comedy has always been a “boy’s club.” Even prior to the rise of the form, the politics of and types of roles available to women on stage have also been problematic in theater, vaudeville, and burlesque. As attitudes toward race and more recently sexuality have shifted in the world of stand-up, women are still mired in an unforgiving bind. This bind serves to regulate the aesthetic production of these comics, also assists in overall societal regulation through the enforcement of hierarchal gender binary, and shapes the personas women comics develop as positive or negative behavioral prescriptions.

In the late 1980s, I became exposed to stand-up comedy from women like Roseanne Barr, Rita Rudner, Ellen Degeneres, and Margaret Cho. In 1987 HBO aired a special called *Women of the Night*. Despite the embarrassing title, it was as a breakthrough for women comics in reaching a mainstream audience. I find the title somewhat of an embarrassment due to the way it sexualizes women comics, and how it continues the anti-theatrical bias linking female performers with prostitutes. The cover art for *Women of the Night* reinforces these links: they all stand in sultry poses on a dark street corner wearing silky robes and heavy make-up. Male comics take on marginal personas, Bakhtin’s “fool” is one, but women are sexualized where men are not.

In terms of progress, consider Showtime’s 2013 special, *Women Who Kill*, featuring Nikki Glaser, Marina Franklin, Rachel Feinstein, and Amy Schumer for evidence. On the

cover, the first three appear in relatively normal clothing; however, Schumer is posed in the foreground behind a microphone wearing a black sequined dress and holding a carving knife. Showtime's website for the special advertises, "[i]t's okay to feel intimidated - it's one night out with four talented women who are probably smarter than you, most likely sexier than you and definitely funnier than you." Kathleen Rowe (1995) might note both specials play up the notion of the female comics as *femme fatales* (in contrast to the virginal *Madonna*), but note that the 2013 special puts an emphasis on intelligence and wit not present in *Women of the Night* even as it simultaneously plays up the stereotype of the knife-wielding "crazy" girl with the cover art.

White male comics in my formative years allowed me to see others like me who questioned the world as it was presented to them; and black comics humanized those often made out to me as inhuman and showed me people are often not quite so different despite our differences. Women stand-up comics have contributed to how I question power, privilege, and gender. They have also helped galvanize and provide agency to the women around me. The barbs, insights, and wisdom of women comics have the potential to move well beyond the live event or mediated broadcast through mimetic and digital re-presentations in everyday life.

Through the defiance of accepted gender performances and their use of irony, comics like Sarah Silverman act as public intellectuals in regard to how we talk about and "do" gender. They provide balance not only in the male-dominated field of stand-up but also more broadly in what is still an androcentric modern America. On stage or off, these comics create impious personas and invoke a comic frame that begs us to adopt

a wider frame of acceptance. Simply the *appearance* of a woman on stage in stand-up is a challenge to the established heteropatriarchy, and the comic personas performed by women through the decades have even more broadly destabilized gender binary.

### **Accounting for the Unruly Woman: a Departure**

Kathleen Rowe (1995) problematizes androcentric comedy theories offered by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) in *Rabelais in his World*. Her book, *The Unruly Woman*, is foundational for this chapter. Rowe, unsatisfied with Bakhtin's *fool* as a ur-metaphor for all comic spirits, invokes Cixous's (1976) *Medusa* as a theoretical counterpoint. Rowe gives examples of *unruly women* in popular culture ranging from Miss Piggy to Roseanne Barr. In Greek mythology Perseus slays the once-beautiful Medusa by avoiding her eyes, using his shield to catch her reflection. Rowe claims "[f]rom Cixous' perspective, that power becomes deadly only because of Perseus's refusal to meet her gaze. A more courageous meeting of her gaze would allow Perseus to apprehend not petrifying monstrosity but beauty [...] As long as men avert their eyes from her, fearing the sight of her *and* her gaze, "woman" can be only a phantasm of castration for them, deadly and grotesque. And more important, as long as women do not look at *each other* straight on, they can see only distorted reflections of themselves" (262).

Rowe argues the "unruly woman" is more Bakhtin's *hag* than *fool*, representing:

a special kind of excess differing from that of the femme fatale [or] the Madonna who in contrast either do not laugh or whose laughter we have long forgotten about ... [her] sexuality is neither evil and uncontrollable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/Madonna. Associated with both beauty and monstrosity, the unruly woman dwells close to the grotesque [...] Through her body, her speech, and her laughter, especially in the public sphere, she creates a disruptive spectacle of herself. The tropes of unruliness are often coded with misogyny. However they are also a source for potential power, especially when they

are recoded or reframed to expose what the composure conceals. Ultimately, the unruly woman can be seen as a prototype of woman as subject – transgressive above all when she lays claim to her own desire. (263-264)

Rowe's *unruly woman* as "hag" does not work well with a modern comic like Sarah Silverman who is generally considered normatively attractive. However, she is "unruly" in her sexual and politic talk. Cixous' Medusa still fits Silverman well. We should regard this difference as a kind of progress for women in the 20 years since Rowe's work as exemplified in the presence of attractive, yet "unruly," women in stand-up.

### **Comic Personas of Women in Stand-up**

A look at the diversity of women stand-up comics today shows a much wider array of voices than just a few decades ago. It is interesting to look back at certain comics' work from the mid-80s to observe the ways they differ from who they are today, but also for how much they all resembled one another in appearance -- as if there was just one look for a woman in comedy, one that mirrored gender norms. *Women of the Night* is all big hair, shoulder pads, and pastels. Margaret Cho is *wholly* unrecognizable as the punk-rock LGBT+ champion we know her as today. In hindsight perhaps we might consider her appearance as a kind of parody of that normativity?

The present diversity of women in American stand-up mirrors overall sociocultural shifts that have in some ways destabilized heteropatriarchy, and deconstructed essentialist notions of gender. Clearly there is still much work to be done, and any claims of advancement may be contested. To riff on Chris Rock's dismissal of the idea of "black progress" presented in the last chapter where he observes it's really white people who have *progressed*, not blacks, I similarly argue in regard to gender it is not

women who have progressed by becoming better comics but male-dominated structures that have progressed to allow for more voices. Many men today still hold the opinion that women just aren't as funny as men as evidenced by the words of Jerry Lewis (1998), Christopher Hitchens (2007), and multiple male comics featured in the documentary *Women Aren't Funny* (2014).

There are two distinct sets of double standards operating within comedy for women. The first is that women in stand-up who successfully take control of their own careers and carve out niches for themselves are in turn referred to as *bitchy* or *bossy*, as Tina Fey (2011) explores in *Bossypants*. The other is that women in comedy are typically only accepted as either attractive with limited skills or as skilled but not an object of desire as Linda Mizejewski (2014) interrogates in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*. Mizejewski observes that traditionally women could be one or the other, but more and more women comics challenge that binary.

Joy Behar discusses this in the documentary *Wisecracks* (1992), noting women were not even supposed to speak up in public when she began her career -- how was it appropriate for them to take a stage telling jokes to a room full of men? In *Women Aren't Funny* (2014), a nice companion to *Wisecracks*, it is offered that a reason some might struggle to come up with a satisfying list of "great" women comics contrasted with compiling a similar list of men is that women only account for around 5% of all working comics. Wanda Sykes astutely observes that, if you consider that statistic, there are actually far more working male comics who "aren't as funny" as women.

Women comics, in fact any comic belonging to a non-dominant identity group, have always operated from the margins and so have necessarily worked in a number of resistant ways from subversion to transgression. Representations of women in comic culture evolved from constrained domestic roles like the pretty-but-daft sidekick or anarchic-yet-mostly-harmless screwball to the *unruly women* of the '70s and '80s. Our current postmodern landscape confuses and collapses categories, generating an entire field of alternative and hybrid comic personas. Similar to other battlegrounds involving gender, women working in stand-up have had an even more difficult time when their identity is also marked by class, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, or religion. This dissertation cannot possibly begin to address these many intersections. I want to be clear that I do not pass this off as a “one size fits all” view.

### **The Evolution of Comic Personas for Women**

Though any comic can generate laughter through self-deprecation (simple *schadenfreude*, which fits into both superiority and identification theories of laughter), women stand-up comics of mid-twentieth century America were primarily constrained to specific kinds of domestic performances placing stigma on them as women, mothers, and wives. Erving Goffman (1963) traces the roots of stigma to three major sources which may also be found in these comics' construction of persona: physical deformities, negative personality traits, and “tribal” markers. Joanne R. Gilbert (1998) and Kathleen Rowe (1995) both identify the act of self-deprecation by women comics as a subversive tool in regard to identity construction and a form of cultural critique. To more fully appreciate the progress of women in comedy and to better understand the challenges



they continue to face, I offer three women comics who used stigma in different ways: Gracie Allen, Phyllis Diller, and Jackie “Moms” Mabley.

Gracie Allen: a Bridge from Vaudeville Hall to Comedy Club

Gracie Allen (1895-1964) is best known as half of the comedy team Burns and Allen — the zany, pretty foil to George Burns’ cigar-chewing stoic straight-man. Allen began in vaudeville before transitioning to full-length stage performances, radio, television, and film. At that time only men were taken seriously as verbal comics — those who used wit. Women in vaudeville were relegated to archetypes based on their appearance like the ingénue, showgirl, or dowdy matron. Stock archetypes existed for male comics of the day, too, but were more varied. The lines that defined what was acceptable from women in vaudeville were near impossible to transgress yet comic men like Milton Berle could slap on a dress without raising an eyebrow. George Burns describes their early on-stage dynamic after the vaudeville period as the opposite of what we know in that he provided the punch-lines to Allen’s straight work. As they developed their act, audiences insisted on giving Allen more laughs than Burns, and so they made the switch.

Allen only then adopted the ditzzy “Dumb Dora” vaudeville stock familiar to audiences of her day. In making the switch, the gender norm was re-established in having the male act as the dominant partner. Gracie Allen’s persona, like any comic persona, may also be looked at from more than one angle. In one way we might consider Allen’s mere physical presence on stage (not to mention her wild success) as proof that women could in fact be funny and hold their own next to men, but others might claim her persona and the on-stage relationship with Burns as reifying heteropatriarchy. I see Allen in many

respects as a representative of chaos, joy, and a challenge to normative order a la Bakhtin's *fool* next to a partner like Burns in his role of power and order. None of these interpretations are wrong; it's purely a matter of standpoint. A "screwball" type character like Allen is capable of generating what Jacqueline Bobo (1998) refers to as a "schizophrenic reaction" in how she can be viewed as simultaneously maintaining the norm and providing a degree of agency to other women. Allen was safe to audiences of her day: a non-threatening attractive domestic character who was (mostly) under the control of a man.

#### Phyllis Diller: an Iconic Unruly Woman

In the 1950s Phyllis Diller (1917-2012) broke into the "boy's club" by establishing herself as a successful *solo* stand-up comic. In an interview with Larry King, she emphasizes her success was not just important for women but *all* comics since the favored form of the day was still the comedy team like May & Nichols, Lewis & Martin, or Burns & Allen (Diller 2002). Diller is another comic who generates schizophrenic reactions in that her performances may be simultaneously read as both transgressing and reifying normative gender roles. Diller's persona was considered eccentric, a "loudmouth." She costumed herself in wigs, clothing, and make-up that gave her an outlandish appearance. She used cigarettes and alcohol as props,<sup>43</sup> deprecated her looks and sexual life, and was known for tirades about her husband, Fang<sup>44</sup>, that drew attention to her failures in domestic activities like cooking and cleaning. Visually Diller

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<sup>43</sup> They were only props. She never actually lit the cigarettes or drank alcohol on stage.

<sup>44</sup> The bird-like costuming choices and criticism of her husband directly invokes a physical manifestation of the metaphor "hen-pecking wife."

manifested a Bakhtinian grotesque and is a classic illustration of Rowe's "unruly woman."

Like Allen, Diller is a comic whom men could safely *laugh at*. As a comic object Diller was incongruous with everything that defined a 1950s woman, a model of *who not to be*, and thus regulated what counted as woman. This move also gave her the means to cut through that same ideology through subversion, incongruity, and irony. I argue Diller was permitted her access and subsequently achieved her success as a comic because of the absurd persona that she cultivated that neutralized her as an object of desire. Allen used her natural good looks but had to play dumb to gain acceptance, maintaining her as essentially a comic object more than speaking subject. Diller spoke critically of men and of androcentric society, though ostensibly she was only able to do so at the expense of her appearance.

Diller's stand-up potentially galvanized women as a kind of counterpublic lasting beyond the performance itself, thus creating further rupture to patriarchy as audiences settled back into daily life. It's empowering, unifying, for any group of people to rally around a comic insight through remembrance or retelling whether in private or mixed company. In the 1950s watching Diller's act may have been an awakening for some women in being allowed laughter at men in a public space even as men laughed *at Diller*. This is a paradox inherent to the liminal, ambivalent space that stand-up generates and another example of polysemic laughter.

## Jackie “Moms” Mabley: Intersections and Crossing Over

Jackie “Moms” Mabley (1894-1975) was a mixed-race comic, though she identified as black and the first comic who lived openly as a lesbian. Unsurprisingly her sexuality was never picked up by the media during her lifetime despite it being common knowledge to those around her (Stern 2009). She began her career performing in minstrel shows before going on to the “chitlin’ circuit.”<sup>45</sup> In the 1950s and ‘60s, she was the highest paid performer at Harlem’s legendary Apollo Theater, commanding \$10,000 a week. Mabley, known for working exceptionally *blue*, or vulgar, was one of the first comics to receive a XXX rating on her albums.

The majority of Mabley’s lengthy career existed outside of mainstream culture. After her death, *The New York Times* remarked she was already “a star for half a century when white audiences began to discover her” (Bennetts 1987). As she gained success, the general public only recognized one of her many stage personas, “Moms,” a dirty old woman archetype with a penchant for young men. For this persona, she removed her dentures, added an old lady wig topped with a large hat, a housecoat, and ratty bedroom slippers.<sup>46</sup> Mabley used her “Moms” persona to deride older men, particularly their sexual inadequacies, and so worked in similarly subversive ways as Diller. However subversive the “Moms” persona may be considered, just like those created by Allen and Diller, this persona constrained her to the position of comic *object*.

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<sup>45</sup> A play on the Jewish touring circuit referred to as the “borscht belt.” The chitlin’ circuit looped the eastern coast and south. In recent years, black entertainers such as Tyler Perry have begun to resurrect the name to describe the routing of their theatrical and variety shows.

<sup>46</sup> Speaking of Tyler Perry, I clearly see vestiges of this persona in his Madea character.

Once Mabley crossed over into mainstream white culture, her performances can also be read as regulatory, almost a kind of postmodern minstrelsy. I think the case can be made that predominately white audiences may have been *laughing at* some combination of her age, gender, and race. Jackie Mabley took visibility and voice for women comics to an all-new level, continuing to stretch the boundaries of acceptability with the most uncensored talk audiences had ever heard from a woman. I argue that Diller and Mabley were afforded this space because they were ready examples of who not to be, undesirable and stigmatized. To this point, there still had not been a woman comic who was normatively attractive *and* openly defiant or transgressive of gender norms.

Jackie Mabley, Allen, and Diller all show us a fascinating paradox found in stand-up. There is a complex, dynamic dialectic that exists not only intradiegetically in the text of the comic performer, but also in the complex web of relationships between performer and audience, among the audience itself, and between individuals who share it in one form or another. Martin and Nakayama (1999) stress the relationship between our communication and our culture is “both reciprocal and contested.” I believe these tensions are always productive. These comics not only helped pave the way for those who have come since but have also contributed to broader systems of social change when it comes to how we “do” gender. In these comics, I’ve shown that a woman’s ability to have access to the stage and to “be funny” have all been tied directly to the persona, their physical appearances and performances of gender. Today we find

women comics who are not only normatively attractive but who are hypercritical, strong, and as *blue* as their male counterparts.

### **The Comic Persona of Sarah Silverman**

Sarah Silverman (born 1970) has enjoyed a successful career spanning over two decades. She had a stand-up career for a few years before becoming a writer and cast member of *SNL*. She lasted for only 18 weeks before being fired: not a single one of her sketches aired. She then went on to be a regular on the sketch series *Mr. Show* and has since been featured in dozens of television shows and films. Silverman has two stand-up comedy specials, *Jesus is Magic* (2005) and *We Are Miracles* (2013), and is the winner of six Primetime Emmy Awards, a Writers Guild of America Award, a Grammy, an American Comedy Award, a GLAAD Media Award, and a Teen Choice Award.

Though Silverman does not have the number of stand-up specials as Chris Rock or Louis C. K., there is not a more influential or contested female figure working in stand-up today.<sup>47</sup> She invites social drama in response to her work both on stage and online where she has embraced the platform to bypass corporate entertainment machinery. Of the three comics treated in this project Silverman is the most controversial, polarizing, and most likely to be called the “raunchiest,” not necessarily because she actually the most vulgar, but because she is a *she*. Her beginnings remind me of my start as a performer: her father taught her a litany of dirty jokes and would bring her out around drinking buddies to give them a laugh, often waking her up to do so. Silverman performed in her kitchen late at night, “an angelic little girl in her nightie, swearing the place blue” (Leith 2014). As that little girl became a woman, not everyone was

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<sup>47</sup> Though Amy Schumer is certainly hot on her heels.

enamored with Silverman's way of working. I believe a degree of Silverman's access to the "boy's club" and acceptance by male comics comes from the incongruity of her "cuteness" paired with her vulgarity, but it has not made her an undisputed darling to the mainstream. She has created a number of controversies in recent years by using ethnic humor, making rape jokes, and telling jokes considered by some to be misogynistic. A cute, potty-mouthed girl-child is novel, non-sexual and harmless. A cute potty-mouthed *woman* is a threat to the established order. She is not strictly *Madonna*, *femme fatale*, or *unruly woman*.

Wendy Ide (2008) was critical of Silverman's first special, *Jesus is Magic*, calling it on the whole uneven and claiming that sections of it "seem to be more about getting a reaction than a laugh" (81). Ide positions Silverman as a descendant of the comedy tree rooted by Lenny Bruce due to the taboo-skewering nature of her work; what makes her unique is "the juxtaposition between her sweetly girlish looks and the scatological profanity that spews from her rosebud mouth." Perhaps Silverman is fruit born of the tree rooted by Bruce, but she comes most directly from the branch of Joan Rivers. Silverman made many public appearances after the death of Rivers to eulogize her in a number of ways, including playing Rivers in several sketches when she hosted *Saturday Night Live* on October 5, 2014.

Andrew Krukowski (2008) argues Silverman's success is largely owed to public dramas such as a mock affair with Matt Damon that played out on her now ex-boyfriend's show *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and her involvement in "The Great Schlep" campaign to elect President Obama in 2008 (26). O'Keefe, Ide, and Krukowski all link,

directly or indirectly, Silverman's effectiveness as a comic with her appearance. Silverman has in fact placed numerous consecutive years in Maxim magazine's "Hot 100" list, even appearing the cover in 2007 with a headline reading "SEXY BEAST: Sarah Silverman – The New King Kong of Comedy." The cover presents another incongruity: she is halfway in a gorilla suit, the head sitting to the side of the frame as she lowers the pants exposing a tight tank top and panties. This is a reversal of the image that many, particularly her critics, might associate with Silverman: that of a gorilla wearing a pretty girl suit.

Her persona is consistent between her two comedy specials. In both *Jesus is Magic* and *We Are Miracles*, she appears in a relatively standard, neutral mode of dress, but not the complete casualness attributable to Ellen Degeneres or the stylish flair associated with Amy Schumer. In *Jesus is Magic*, she wears a black sleeveless top with a few inches of midriff exposed and fitted black pants. In *We Are Miracles* she wears a black long-sleeved button-up and rolled up jean shorts with black stockings. She doesn't wear much make-up, only the slightest bit highlighting her natural features with her hair casually pulled back to keep it out of her face. Generally speaking, her look might be described as a slightly alternative girl-next-door.

In promotional photos of Silverman, like the gorilla suit cover, she is often presented in some scene of over the top comic sexiness or in a pose that plays up her girlishness. She has appeared in lingerie making an over-exaggerated sex face while holding an invisible partner, as an angry prostitute in a police lineup, and in pigtails and knee-high stockings that fetishize her youthful look.



Her body language and physical mannerisms are situated between an expected level of femininity and that which suits more abrasive content. She puffs out her chest, her shoulders roll and slouch, she shifts her weight from right to left in a solid stance. Her gestures are typically broad, arms outstretched with fingers wide. She plays the extremes of innocent femininity and harsh masculinity as she works through her sets, feigning doe-eyed wonder in one moment and grabbing her crotch in the next. I find her persona satirical and self-aware. There is always an air of mock-seriousness. Silverman has a few “tells” when it comes to her hyper-irony: at times her eyes widen and her pitch shifts high. At other times her tone shifts down as she drops into stone-faced deadpan.

Her vocal qualities amplify her tomboy image. With just enough vocal fry and nasality to give it the slightest edge, her cadence and tone is more northeast than west coast, where she has lived for the past 21 years. Even at 44 she comes off as the youthful, carefree, tomboy next door. *One of the guys*. She fearlessly physicalizes bodily humor, from pantomiming masturbation techniques to using a microphone as a penis. Her embodiment of crudeness adds extra punch to her performances. This exists in every bit of the realm of the crude, of excess, and of the body that Bakhtin reads in Rabelais’ carnival – she is Gargamelle<sup>48</sup> wrapped in the body of a pixie.

Silverman embodies a kind of comic *jouissance*<sup>49</sup> – she appears to be having the time of her life performing. It is all fun, even enjoying mixed reactions and moments of discomfort in the crowd. In *We Are Miracles*, she plainly states, “I’m at a show, too [...]

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<sup>48</sup> Mother of Rabelais’ twin giants Gargantua and Pantagruel. Maybe even more fittingly the name is derived from an old French word for throat.

<sup>49</sup> French for a kind of enjoyment as well as for sexual climax. In feminist theory, Cixous uses it as the site of women’s creative power, the suppression of which will render one voiceless.

*You're my show,*" commenting on her enjoyment of getting a rise out of the men in the room. Here, after a bit where she tells a joke about fellatio with a shocking twist, she casts the gaze back at the men and in that moment becomes galvanized with the women. Her audiences are alternately seduced and repulsed by her performance, sometimes even both in the same moment. This unique ability is a large part of why her work can be so divisive and often generates such vociferous opposition. She *is* the Medusa, and she constantly entreats us all to not be afraid but instead meet her gaze.

Like one of Rowe's *unruly women* Silverman violates boundaries, speaks of excess, and creates a grotesque through the incongruity of her looks and words, although she is not the large or otherwise marked body (though some might argue her Jewishness qualifies) that Rowe defines as qualities of the unruly woman. Nor is she the sweet, attractive, harmless female found in romantic comedy. Silverman is both at once, the sexy girl in the gorilla suit. Well, as I offered before: the gorilla in the sexy girl suit.

This incongruity creates a tension that audience members have to negotiate. I believe that tension also causes sharply critical reactions to her work just as it drives some to new perspectives. In those reactionary moments, people fall back on a tendency to act as cognitive misers, taking mental shortcuts instead of thinking critically or remaining open to new ideas. Binary frames (such as Madonna/whore) cannot always be cracked by the comic, and the result is usually an angry rejection.

Like Louis C. K., Silverman's persona is consistent from her stand-up specials, to her viral videos, to *The Sarah Silverman Program* on television. Whereas Louis C. K. casts himself directly as abject through his words, Silverman *creates* the abject through

her incongruous persona and performance. Bakhtin (1968) notes the grotesque is always embodied, it *is* the body, it is excess. He says of the carnival grotesque that it permits “the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted” (34). This is similar to how Burke describes the “planned incongruity” of his gargoyle. In *Permanence and Change* (1935) Burke argues that gargoyles, belonging to the realm of the grotesque, violate one order of classification while stressing another (112). I see Silverman’s persona and performances also as planned incongruities, purposefully grotesque gargoyles.

I see her performances as a form of mimicry. Silverman borrows qualities attributable to the dominant group in comedy, men, “fitting in” to create space where she may subvert or directly transgress that very power structure. True to any hybrid form, this isn’t always a peaceful mixture as it can be disruptive to an audience’s anticipated experience, resulting in a harsh rejection (Hall 2003).<sup>50</sup>

Silverman’s perceived lack of femininity, her liberalism, and her Jewishness are the typical targets for ad hominem attacks against her comedy, sometimes all at once in comments like “that raunchy, liberal, Hollywood Jew.” Silverman is attacked in ways that comics who neatly fit the *unruly woman* mold (those who are not an object of desire), such as Lisa Lampinelli, are not. Silverman is held to different standards and punished

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<sup>50</sup> My use of postcolonialism to talk about things like race, gender, and class in America is a political move as it gets at not only the many ways that I see modern global neoliberalism as an extension of the postcolonial condition and also in the way it contextualizes the relationship between institutional power and the individual. This is similar to Turner’s descriptions of structure and communitas, or Burke’s account of the priesthood and prophets. For me, postcolonialism gets at these things in a more concrete way and is a political way to fuse all of the major areas of contemporary critical theory.

for her performance of gender. Sarah Silverman and contemporaries like Amy Schumer, Whitney Cummings, and Chelsea Handler are redefining the roles available to women in comedy. Women in stand-up now come in more varieties, even as they are still held to and compared against standards that do not define their male counterparts' worth.

### **Sarah Silverman: *We Are Miracles***

In this section, I analyze Sarah Silverman's second stand-up comedy special, *We Are Miracles*, to look for the ways she challenges socially accepted performances of gender. This is where I believe that Silverman potentially contributes most to social change: here is a "cute girl" talking openly about her sex, her sexuality and sex life, and about all those things a "proper" woman (as opposed to those of the *unruly variety*) shouldn't discuss in public – like defecation and the inner workings of her vagina. She gleefully revels in these topics while actively enjoying her audience's mixed and sometimes negative response. She transgresses societal norms by attempting to widen the perspectives of those locked in binaries and also offers agency to those who feel trapped in it.

*We Are Miracles* was recorded in the tiniest of rooms at L.A.'s iconic Largo nightclub, a space that seats 39 people, and was directed by Liam Lynch who also directed *Jesus is Magic* and *The Sarah Silverman Program*. The special begins with a sketch showing Silverman in the alley behind the club waiting to go on when she is harassed by a carload of men who initially do not believe she is a comic. After proving herself, she asks if she can have some of the joint the men are smoking. The conversation turns friendly, and then they wish her luck as she goes in. I find this compelling, it serves as a

nice metaphor not only for Silverman but for all women in stand-up: they are first cast as a sexual object who then have to overcome their gender to prove they are “one of the guys” before taken seriously as a comic.

Her act begins with a graphic story about her late-night iPhone porn viewing habits, setting the tone for what is to come, then briefly goes in to a few background stories about her childhood, her Jewishness, and growing up in New Hampshire. The rest of the hour-long special is mostly dedicated to the topics of sex and bodily humor.

Several routines in *We Are Miracles* ironically critique beauty standards for women. In one bit she laments how early in life girls are sexualized, claiming that they are no longer given childhoods. She confesses in low tones that she recently changed the diaper of a friend’s baby, and the girl was “totally shaved ... six months old.” She later uses self-deprecation to set up a critique of the numerous feminine hygiene products women are told they need. She begins confidently that men have often said her vagina “smells like a, umm ... a peach (*quickly correcting herself, brightly*) a peach-tree ... (*audience laughs, then certain*) a peach-tree dish, is that a thing?” She later comes back with: “I want to tell all the women in here that you don't need a vaginal deodorant,” claiming greedy money-addicted corporations prey on women’s insecurities with fabricated problems to take advantage of their fear. “Just use whatever you wash your asshole with, how about that, surely that's strong enough for your 'disgusting' vagina. *Rinse*. And if when you get out of the shower there's still, like, something, a rancidness, go to the doctor. Don't spray perfume on it, that’s fucking crazy, that's what a crazy person would do.”

She doesn't just fault men and the media for these obsessions: "It's *us*, too, we have to take responsibility [...] we shit on ourselves [...] we think that self-deprecation is modesty, it's not, it's self-obsession. [...] Do you think Mother Teresa walked around complaining that the tops of her thighs didn't touch? I mean they didn't, she was stick thin ... *bitch* [...] but she was busy, she had things to do."

There are moments in *We Are Miracles* where Silverman directly attacks our sensibilities and actively works to transgress boundaries. Of the three comics examined here, she is the only one to do this with such force so frequently. Louis C. K. can come off a touch passive aggressive as if he's already given up but will still take time to complain. Chris Rock's anger comes off as if he is getting things off his chest that have been bottled up for too long. Silverman, however, impiously enjoys every second of pushing the buttons of an audience. Her performance is much more dialogic than the others examined here in how she plays off of the reactions she gets. The clearest example of this may be found here:

Ok this would be terrible if I had just made it up [...] The University of North Carolina did a study and what they found was 9/11 widows give great hand-jobs. (*audience reacts between groans and laughs*) Don't shoot the messenger! I'm happy for them, and their new boyfriends (*more mixed reactions, then a silence*). I made that up, I'm sorry. I made that up. I thought of it and it made me giggle, and then I got really sad, and then I still needed to say it to you. I don't know what part of me needs to say to you that '9/11 widows give great hand-jobs.' That's dark. That's something I'm going to talk about in therapy. But, I wanted to say it, I needed to say it to you and so I built a frame around it that forced you to not be able to blame me for saying it.

These moments build in a well-structured way serving to soften up the crowd for the Himalaya of off-limits subjects:

I need more rape jokes [...] rape jokes are a hidden gem in comedy (*mixed reactions*), let me explain: rape obviously is the most heinous crime imaginable ...

rape *jokes* are great (*laughter*). No, because they make a comic seem so *edgy* and so *dangerous* and the truth is it's like the safest area in comedy, I mean who's gonna complain about a rape joke? I mean I would say rape *victims*, but they're traditionally not complainers (*mixed groans and laughs*). I know, that's a tasteless joke about the fact that rape victims often don't report rape (*laughs*). I mean the worst thing that can happen really is someone comes up to you after a show and is like, 'Look, I'm a victim of rape and I just wanna say I thought that joke was insensitive and inappropriate and totally my fault and I am so sorry' (*laughter*). (*proudly*) YEAH! Right?! Let's take back the night back!!! (*laughter, silence, then earnestly*) Omigod, I hope I don't have to say that no woman is asking to be raped. (*quick beat*) I do think there are some women who are asking to be motor-boated (*laughter*).

In that routine, Silverman not only tackles the grand-daddy of offensive jokes but manages to invoke three tropes involving rape victims, anticipates and deflates attempts to critique the joke, returns to offer a moment of clarity in ensuring her position that the act of rape is not acceptable, then once again defuses any seriousness established with the motor-boat quip. These dime-turns are definitive of Silverman's performance style and go a long way to keep the audience laughing in spite of themselves because the stream of transgression is unexpected, no matter how many times she continues to pile on. This is not profanity for profanity's sake, or just one-upping an offensive statement with another offensive statement. Silverman eases us back to safer territory or offers moments of reason before hitting us again with something outlandish or incongruous.

In the next routine, she methodically does her best to violate any remaining shred of piousness remaining in the crowd. Her delivery in the beginning of this is slower than other part of the special. She methodically seeks eyes contact with individual audience members, an easy feat in the well-lit 39-seat room.

Pussy ... pussy is a word that used to have so much power over me, like when I was in high school the word pussy it was so ... it grossed me out and yet it was titillating and I just felt like I had Christmas lights inside me like it just affected me so much I don't even understand how. But when I was young it was like if somebody said it or if

I read it somewhere or sometimes I would write it down and look at it (*makes a shocked face, pauses, audience laughs*) Now I'm dead inside. (*deadpan*) Pussy ... Pussy ... Who cares? I found a way to make pussy gross again. It's so simple. All you have to do is puff out your cheeks when you say it like (*doing so*) 'Pusshy.' 'Pusshy.' 'Pusshy.'<sup>51</sup> (*audience laughs*) Now say *that* becomes old hat. You can add some elements. A deadness in the eyes. A lisp. (*which she adds*) 'Puthy.' 'Hey man, you wanna go out and look for some puthy?' Puthy. (*she laughs, then says to an audience member*) You look so confused. You don't know how to feel, just like me when I first heard 'pusshy' (*audience laughs, then she quickly comes in on top of them with renewed vigor and delivery through the rest*) If you're drunk and throw up on a man's penis mid-blowjob, you can save the moment if you can manage a "Ta-da!" (*audience laughs*) You guys, this is embarrassing, this is a confession. Ok? Ugh. (*beat, silence*) Sometimes I get an orgasm from giving a blowjob. Is that normal? To get an orgasm from giving a ... (*dime-turn*) Oh! Not giving a blowjob, taking a shit (*wild laughter, groans, murmuring in the audience*). Uhhhh ... I ... you don't understand, I'm at a show too, *you're* my show. And that joke is so fun to tell because at the first juncture the guys are like this (*leans forward, smiles*) and girls are like this (*shifts back, squints*) and then it just goes *WOOOP* like a wave.

Silverman spends less than five minutes on politics, all roughly three-quarters

through the special when she makes the personal political in segueing from her body to government regulation of women's bodies:

We're so divided [...] it's crazy, you know, it's not even about ideas anymore it's not even about ideals anymore, it's just teams. It's just the Red Sox and the Yankees. It's just hatred. You know, and I think whether you're liberal or you're conservative it's so important to remember that we, all of us, love our families, love our country, um, believe what we're doing is right, you know maybe liberals are a little more open minded, a little more, uh, progressive and maybe conservatives are a little less progressive a little more (*quick beat, another dime-turn*) faggotish (*audience laughs, she returns as she was before*), um, but I pray for them. I do. I was just literally praying for the billions of teeny tiny republicans that die every single year in hooker's assholes. (*audience laughs*) I know what some of you're thinking, and you're right, you're right, 'Really? That's what you're going to pick on? The Republican party? That's what you're choosing to pick on? You know, surely there are Democrats that have butt-sex with prostitutes.' You're right. You're 100% right, there are. But Democrats aren't trying to take my rights away. So when a Democrat gives a hooker anal warts, she can go to a clinic and get that shit zapped (*laughter, applause*). It's just bewildering to me that a party that is so about having big government out of their backyard is so intent on legislating my (*another dime-*

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<sup>51</sup> You just quietly said it to yourself, didn't you?



turn) *pussy* ... *PUTHY* ... *puthy* ... (applause) People don't make the simplest connections ...

Silverman ends the special with a song she accompanies on guitar. This is a signature of hers: it is the same way she ends *Jesus is Magic* and was a regular feature on *The Sarah Silverman Program*. Her song presents another incongruity in a cheerful Silverman performing in bright, folk-like fashion lyrics that would make a sailor blanche. She first thanks the audience for doing "a great job," offering the song as a reward. "Diva Song" is a critique of the cultural fascination in proudly calling a person a *diva*, claiming what people really mean is *cunt*, a word she repeats over 30 times in a row to a tune that would be at home in the folk parody *A Mighty Wind* (2003). The first half of the song can be summed up in the lines "If you call yourself a diva/you better sing a solo/and not be someone/treating me unkind." She lists bad behavior like cutting her off in traffic as not a diva-like quality before launching into her profane chorus. After the release of *We Are Miracles*, Silverman created a viral music video of the song costumed in traditional folk-singer clothing against a cartoon rainbow background. The result is simultaneously sweet and scalding.

Sarah Silverman's stand-up comedy potentially contributes to social change at several levels: 1) she disrupts expected/accepted performances of gender in being a normatively attractive woman who performs transgressive material not only possibly widening our frames of acceptance but providing a role model<sup>52</sup>; 2) in performing such material through a hyper-ironic persona she contributes to dialogue on public talk in

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<sup>52</sup> Beauty is, of course, always in the eye of the beholder. Should someone disagree that Silverman is attractive, I would counter that even at that she is not a marked or grotesque body – those society typically only accepts such performances from.

regard to topics like race, gender, sexual violence, etc; and 3) she is an important transitional figure in the genealogy of women in comedy, hopefully serving as a bridge for future comics to help guide us toward an even more just world.

### **Sarah Silverman and Social Drama**

In this section I examine the ways that Sarah Silverman's stand-up performances, public appearances, and use of the internet have created social dramas potentially generative of social change. In her capacity as a public intellectual off stage, she continues to challenge accepted/expected performances of gender in all of these. Because of the hyper-ironic persona that she performs even off stage and the general ambivalence of comedy, the reactions to her messages are strongly divided with the resultant dialogue always positive. Silverman also directly and indirectly asks us to widen our frame of acceptance and to be a more critical receiver of messages through these dramas.

Of the comics analyzed in this project, Silverman has best harnessed the internet to advance her career. She is on the ground level of a movement composed of heavyweights like Ben Stiller and Michael Cera who aim to "reboot" the entertainment industry online through a company called the Jash Network (Laporte 2013). This endeavor is allowing artists to take more control of their art, and another instance where I see marginalized figures using what Elleke Boehmer (2002) terms the "networks of resistance" in a ground-up, participatory manner in to make change. In working through non-traditional digital channels, she removes corporate middlemen and avoids "interference from executives or networks or standards and practices [...] Nothing is off-

limits.” Her work online is not a side business but is meant to be her principal stream of income (Laporte 2013). This not only allows her more control over her career and her work, but the internet as a virtual community is a powerful site for directly engaging fans who redistribute and generate dialogue in response to that work.

Silverman is very politically active through the creation of online videos. She developed several for Barack Obama in 2008 including “The Great Schlep” voter awareness campaign and again in 2012 with the controversial “Scissor Sheldon” video where she offered to “scissor”<sup>53</sup> billionaire Sheldon Adelson if he agreed to donate the \$100 million pledged to Mitt Romney’s campaign to Obama’s instead (Goldman 2012). These videos were clearly intended as persuasive political messages, and some were angry that a comic, much less a female comic, was interjecting so directly into the presidential race.

Silverman elicits the most negative reactions when her irony fails with her audience. She, like Stephen Colbert, plays a hyper-ironic character that pokes fun of logic she finds foolish: racism, sexism, jingoism, etc. There is admittedly some very ambiguous territory here that an audience must traverse when trying to separate the creator of an aesthetic text from the persona acting as mouthpiece for it, but this – like all aesthetic exchanges – is a two-way street. Audiences must approach comedy about “serious” issues with a wider frame of acceptance even as the comic works to shatter those same narrow lenses. Merely shutting down because a performer uses profanity, touches a hot

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<sup>53</sup> Scissoring is a sex act, typically between two women, where the genitals directly rub each other, but there is no penetration.

button, or transgresses a norm never allows for any kind of meeting or for our perspectives to be altered through engagement with the Other.

Moments where Silverman's audiences failed to see the irony in her work have resulted in social dramas, units of "aharmonic process" with four phases (*breach*, *crisis*, *redress*, then either *reintegration* or *schism*) that arise in conflict situations not unlike the stages of a theatrical drama as theorized by anthropologist Victor Turner (1975). In the first instance, Silverman came under fire after using "chink" on the July 11, 2001, episode of *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*. In her interview, Silverman talks to Conan about strategies for getting out of jury duty, saying a friend suggested writing something offensive on the selection form like "I hate chinks." Silverman rejected this as racist then quips with a smiling coo, "I love chinks!" The social drama begins with her casual use of an epithet on public television.

This *breach* saw a quick response from the Media Action Network of Asian Americans (MANAA), a watchdog group led by Guy Aoki, who released a condemnation of the joke then subsequently appeared on several news and talk programs as this drama built to *crisis*. As Turner predicts this phase was irresistible, "contagious," for the public while Silverman entrenched herself in a way that dared "the representatives of order to grapple with" the incident (Turner 1975: 34-39). As the drama entered the *redressive* phase where Turner (1988) observes the "community, acting through its representatives, bends, even throws itself back upon itself" to measure the offense and begin the process of repair, both NBC and O'Brien offered apologies while Silverman refused (34). During a *Politically Incorrect* appearance on July 26, 2001, she called the

outrage disingenuous and said that she was being drawn into a media stunt to gain MANAA and Aoki exposure. This drama concluded in *permanent breach* between the two sides, when Silverman and Aoki squared off on another episode of *Politically Incorrect* on August 22 of the same year. Silverman, Aoki, and the other guests (including Anne-Marie Johnson, chair of the Screen Actors Guild Ethnic Opportunity Committee) failed to reach consensus on the appropriateness of racial epithets in satire. Silverman defended her routine by saying it purposefully exposed the faulty linkages in racist logic. Aoki's main pillar of support was that there is too much risk viewers might fail to see the irony in such a joke, resulting in a legitimization of the use of hate speech on public airwaves.

This was a messy ending to the drama but, as I have emphasized, the discourses generated in such an event are *always* productive. A few years later Silverman addressed the drama again in her book, *The Bedwetter: Stories of Courage, Redemption, and Pee* (2010) with a chapter devoted to the incident, "Guy Aoki: Heart in Right Place, Head Up Wrong Place." In it she begs for those like Aoki who attack comedy to keep a "more nuanced perception of irony and context [...] not only are the progressive messages out there more refined and sense-of-irony dependent, but racist messages are more oblique too." She goes on to give examples from Fox News (which she describes as a "twenty-four-hour-a-day racism engine") and the KKK using coded racism toward Obama in the form of speculations that he was born in Africa or that he is a Muslim. Silverman asks where watchdog groups are in those situations, and I believe her point is valid. Here we find Silverman as a public intellectual, moving past the

specific incident and beyond her role as an entertainer, to offer critical insight on public talk.

In 2013, a year after the death of Trayvon Martin and just a few months after George Zimmerman was found not guilty of Martin's murder, Silverman made a *Funny or Die* video, "Black NRA," featuring black comics Deon Cole and David Alan Grier where she facetiously announces her belief in the constitutional right of *all* people to bear arms that has inspired her to start a NRA sub-group that will help "put guns into the hands of those who need them most ... young, black males." Others appear in mock-support with endorsements like "Now that I have a gun I feel safe doing normal, everyday things [...] Like wearing a hoodie ... or being in Florida." This video took heat from multiple sides: white conservatives, black members of the NRA, and both blacks and whites who condemned the video as racist in how it upheld stereotypes linking black youth to gun violence. "Black NRA" was released a few months after the death of Trayvon Martin, yet Silverman's satire was lost on many. Alice O'Keefe (2008) claimed prior to this event that Silverman's routines on race do not at all challenge stereotypes but merely reinforce them, even as she concedes Silverman's work on gender is subversive. This drama stalled as it played out, staying mostly confined to the internet in the form of blogs and video responses to "Black NRA." It would appear this is another instance of a *permanent breach*, though I would again argue the associated discourses generated in the wake of this drama were productive.

Finally, Silverman was most recently scrutinized for a tweet about Bill Cosby. Once again Twitter becomes the locus of internet outrage toward a comic, as we will continue

to see in the next chapter. The offending tweet: “Bill Cosby gave me one of those ‘don’t be dirty’ lectures but I was unconscious & he was talking about my a-hole.” She is referencing Cosby’s history of lecturing comics who work *blue*<sup>54</sup> and clearly the hypocrisy she finds between Cosby’s image contrasted with the multiple rape and sexual misconduct accusations that have been in the news.

Silverman was immediately critiqued in responses that the joke was in poor taste, in some cases simply because it targeted Cosby and in others because it was a “rape joke.” Without deleting the tweet, she later offered a tamer version, asking if it was better: “Bill Cosby gave me one of those ‘don’t be dirty’ lectures but I was rendered unconscious.” Several reports of the incident carried headlines worded in a way that intimated Silverman offered a *mea culpa*, which was not the case. A *Los Angeles Times* headline read “Sarah Silverman indicates her Bill Cosby rape joke may have gone too far” (Parker 2014). In truth Silverman just offered a less vulgar variant of the same joke. Silverman has never shied from sexual violence as a topic, from offering a graphic satirical account of being violated by a manager [in her segment of *The Aristocrats* (2005)] to the *We Are Miracles* routine on rape jokes examined earlier.

Silverman actively works to build an online following, and all of these dramas have contributed to that success. Good, bad, or indifferent, traffic is traffic, and active comments sections keep people returning and increasing the page views that advertisers crave.<sup>55</sup> I won’t go as far as to say that this is Silverman’s *motive* in generating this content, she was a controversial figure well before she turned to the

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<sup>54</sup> A habit most famously addressed by Eddie Murphy in a routine on *Raw* (1987).

<sup>55</sup> Just as we have the phenomena of people *hate-watching* a program just so that they can complain about it or otherwise mock it, we see the same with *hate-reading* and *hate-clicking*.

internet, but it is safe to say these dramas help her remain relevant. As these dramas with Silverman play out, they also illuminate our public *offense mechanism* and the tragically narrow frame of acceptance that impedes our ability to cooperate.

Whenever irony fails, from people taking Chris Rock's "tutorial" to heart in the last chapter to audiences not understanding Silverman's persona as satire in the Archie Bunker mold, we are presented with a fascinating phenomena -- one that is beyond the scope of this project. How we navigate comic messages and then ultimately embrace or reject them based on what we believe the intent is would be a good topic for future research.

In these dramas and beyond, I argue Silverman functions as a public intellectual who potentially generates progressive social change in: 1) how she continues to challenge accepted gender roles even away from the stand-up event; 2) how she challenges us in events like Aoki/MANNA drama to widen our frame of acceptance, urging us toward a "more nuanced perception of irony and context," not just in jokes but all messages; and 3) how she blurs activism and entertainment through her tweets and online videos that contribute to ongoing discourses as each event plays through the *crisis* phase of a given drama.

## **Conclusion**

Silverman's critics quickly accuse her misogyny, racism, or shocking for shock's sake. I have argued that the buttons Silverman presses are always purposeful, ironic, and to the end of exposing faulty logic and acting as an example of *who not to be*. Through her defiance and use comic irony Silverman also acts as a public intellectual in



how we talk about and “do” gender, More generally, she underscores the importance of satire to public discourse. As a woman, she provides balance not only to the male-dominated field of stand-up comedy but also to all life in what is still an androcentric modern America. It is difficult to see how she functions as a healer, mediator, or reconciler of the social order in these moments because her construction and performance of persona is, as I have shown, intentionally antagonistic. Outside of the stand-up performance, I have shown Silverman to be outspoken and defiant in stepping outside of her role as entertainer and into the role of a public intellectual on talk shows, in print interviews, and in her creation of public service announcements. On stage or off, she is uniformly impious and strongly invokes the comic frame through which she urges us toward justice, cooperation, and acceptance. Does she push it all too far to some, losing those along the way who conservatively react by invoking the tragic frame? Or, is *that very reaction* possibly a kind of “medicine” she offers as a comic healer?

Considered another way, perhaps these dramas Silverman has participated in with Aoki/MANAA, the NRA, and the GOP serve not only to irritate those she engages to a wider perspective but also to expose those same groups, galvanizing the opposition. Discourses generated by dramas that never re-convene after intermission or end in permanent breaches are no less productive than those ending in reintegration.

I find that what makes something funny or not, despite our best attempts at theorizing, is more often than not a matter of personal standpoint and subjective taste. The things that mean the most to us are typically the least acceptable of comic subjects, surely because those are the things are, well, *serious*. Silverman has taken sharp

criticism from more groups than she probably has seen praise from over jokes about gender, sexuality, race, ability, and a whole range of topics from guns to sexual violence. There is nothing off-limits in her act. Of all the comics analyzed here, Silverman demands the widest comic frame from her audience. She also avoids the either/or “us and them” logic used by many comics (men/women, gay/straight, white/black) in favor of confusing and collapsing categories.

To be clear: in these routines I do not believe she trivialized the realities of a topic like rape, nor does she excuse wrong in the world. Though this chapter supports the idea first advanced by Rowe (1995) that Bakhtin’s (1968) account of the fool does not account for women in stand-up, I still believe that Silverman’s persona and comic performances are perhaps the best illustration of the inversion of structure Bakhtin attributes to *carnivale*. She disrupts with such virtuosity at such a high level we might metaphorically consider it a performance of Clement’s (1986) *tarantella*, something that seems purely mad to those who do not understand the “spider dance.” It is a “madness that cures.” Silverman also perhaps best epitomizes Burke’s (1935) notion of *impiety*. Silverman has no regard whatsoever for *any* priesthood unable to laugh at itself. She boldly leads the charge with a laughter all her own, like Cixous’ Medusa.<sup>56</sup> Some find this impiety dangerous, worthy of scorn or shame. As I have described, the construction and performance of her persona is a planned incongruity. Through comedy from comics like Silverman, our narrow, tragic frames may shatter allowing us a new perspective. It

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<sup>56</sup> I mean this literally. Of the three comics examined, Silverman is the most prone to laughing at her own jokes or directly showing enjoyment of how the crowd reacts to a punchline, positive or negative.

may also entrench us in our positions with even more fervor as our perspectives become tragically narrower and narrower. This is the ambivalence of comedy.

Burke (1941) understands that art is always a reaction to certain social situations. It is as he notes “equipment for living.” Burke (1935) also uses variations of the word *violate* several times in describing how perspective by incongruity works in destroying convention or making the invisible visible (90-91). This same sometimes violent perspective by incongruity is what he offers as the primary means to accomplish the work of social change through art. Sarah Silverman perhaps best exemplifies the embodiment of this notion of the comics studied here.

Silverman functions as a gargoyle between traditionally accepted roles available to women in both comedy and society in general and what is hopefully a more diverse, egalitarian playing field somewhere in the future. Her work, which I read as intentionally ironic and transgressive, is a site for critical thought and discussion about the status quo, a kind of populist pedagogy. bell hooks (1994) claims acts of transgression give us the tools to push past the boundaries of ourselves and take in multiple perspectives (12). In doing so, we have the capacity to escape the binaries of dominant logic and move toward plurality.

The next chapter is my final piece of analysis focusing on the comic persona and texts of Louis C. K.. I position his most recent work as reflexive on his part and indicative of personal growth stemming from his participation in social drama. Here is the clearest example of how a popular mainstream comic functions as a public intellectual and healer of the social order.

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## CHAPTER FIVE:

### LOUIS C. K.: WHITENESS, MASCULINITY, AND PRIVILEGE

I'm not saying that white people are better. I'm saying that *being white* is clearly better, who could even argue? If it was an option, I would re-up every year. 'Oh yeah I'll take white again absolutely, I've been enjoying that, I'll stick with white thank you.' Here's how great it is to be white, I could get in a time machine and go to any time, and it would be fucking awesome when I get there! That is exclusively a white privilege. Black people can't fuck with time machines. A black guy in a time machine is like 'Hey, anything before 1980, no thank you, I don't want to go.' But I can go to any time ... in the past, I don't want to go to the future and find out what happens to white people, because we're going to pay hard for this shit, you gotta know that ... we're not just gonna fall from number 1 to 2. They're going to hold us down and fuck us in the ass forever, and we totally deserve it, but for now: Wheeeee! If you're white and you don't admit that it's great, you're an asshole! It is great *and* I'm a man. How many advantages can one person have? I'm a white man, you can't even hurt my feelings! - Louis C. K., *Chewed Up*

I looked away from the implications of these representations of race, color, and culture. I tried not to see ... trying not to believe it, all the while knowing that my blindness to it, my inability to see it, was part of the social mechanisms that generated the availability of the stereotypes in the first place ... I am not meant to see them because I am part of a social system that we all, every one us, participates in maintaining. The uses of color spring from a historical legacy that hides its tracks, covers its beginnings, and alludes detection by relying on a rhetoric of normality that makes such images flow over us without suspicion. - John T. Warren, *Absence for Whom*

There is something about the comedy of Louis C. K. that I find comfortingly familiar.

He reminds me a lot of myself: a “ginger” struggling with all that comes with aging, prone to social discomfort, critical of the world around him, and embarrassed in some ways not only for his privileged position in the world but also for the less savory aspects of humanity on display around him. He isn't the most overtly political comic, particularly compared to say Bill Maher or Louis Black, though he has his moments. C. K. is more of a storyteller, a sardonic observer of daily life. When he does, however, take a swing at the status quo or our sensibilities, it is a haymaker. I believe this economical use of politics is a large factor in what makes his satire so effective. He speaks more generally

of our human foibles that are not really *red* or *blue*, instead finding the many ways we are frustratingly *purple*. By not being marked “political,” he generally avoids being labeled either conservative or liberal and therefore maintains a wider mainstream audience. When I tell people about my research his name is always one of the mentioned as a favorite no matter with whom I’m speaking to, from conservative frat-boy to lefty vegan feminist.

As a young person, I fell in love with George Carlin, who destroyed sacred idols, exposed the great lie of American Exceptionalism, and offered razor-sharp observations on the everyday ways we deceive ourselves through our peculiar uses of language. As Carlin’s career progressed, his comedy became much more dark and politically didactic, a fact that distanced many who once considered themselves fans. Comics evolve over their careers, just consider the conservative comedy of Dennis Miller now versus that of the loquacious liberal who led *SNL*’s Weekend Update for all those years.

Carlin was often talking about communication in his routines, and it impacted me deeply. Carlin talked about *talk*. Like “[h]ave you noticed that [other people’s] stuff is shit and your shit is stuff?” or “[h]ave you ever noticed that anybody driving slower than you is an idiot, and anyone going faster than you is a maniac?” cracked through the insular walls into which I was tucked; challenging the forms of logic in regard to the Other with which I had been inculcated. This was three decades before I discovered another way to think about those same things through “word man” Kenneth Burke’s description of “eulogistic coverings” first offered in *Attitudes Toward History* and further explored in *A*



*Rhetoric of Motives*. I like to believe that Carlin and Burke would have gotten along famously had they ever met.

I believe Carlin functioned as Burke's (1935) "impious prophet," one who directly confronted the power of the priesthood, as he fought for his right to exercise free speech from local police to the FCC in a social drama that played all the way to the Supreme Court over what counted as acceptable language in public. Carlin was the first entertainer to fight such a case to the highest court in the land. The result was one of the worst First Amendment rulings in our history. But now it proves how arbitrary rules governing language can be and how sensibilities shift over time. Today a great number of words on the "obscene" list are now in fact permissible on air. My understanding of the significance of this case and how it impacted more than just stand-up but all public talk urged me to look around for who in comedy today might be contributing to similar cycles of progressive social change. In this chapter, I argue Louis C. K. is one such comic through his performances and in the way he functions as a public intellectual off stage.

This chapter first examines the stage persona of Louis C. K. and the text of his most recent special, *Oh My God*. I look for the ways his performance destabilizes what J. Marshall Beier (2005) terms the "hegemonologue," a tragically narrow field of possibilities that maintains the status quo. Finally I analyze social dramas involving Louis C. K. where we can see the ways he functions as a public intellectual outside of his performances. Beyond the stand-up performance context, the work of a comic like Louis C. K. works in a destabilizing fashion when appropriated by social actors and re-

presented in ground-up, participatory ways like interpersonal and digital exchanges.

Louis C. K.'s persona and performance on stage, as well as his contributions as a public intellectual offstage, are reforming our understanding of white masculinity and American Exceptionalism, urging us instead to tolerance, equality, cooperation, and dialogue.

This chapter argues even stand-up comics who are members of the “elite” can function as counter-hegemonic public intellectuals in an anti-intellectual modern America. Stand-up comics illustrate what Kenneth Burke (1937) terms a “comic frame of acceptance.” The comic can offer what Burke calls “alternate ethical universes” in spaces created by the interplay of what Victor Turner (1975) refers to as the indicative and subjunctive “moods of culture” — what *is* versus what *could be*. Specifically, I look for the ways C. K. exposes, challenges, or subverts what is assumed or obfuscated by privilege inherent to heteropatriarchy and the trope of American Exceptionalism. Through recent social dramas, C. K. has emerged a public intellectual and healer of the social order.

Victor Turner and Kenneth Burke both refer to aesthetic genres as essential human tools — what Burke calls “equipment” and Turner a “design” for living. Following Turner, I claim stand-up comedy operates in a liminal space, a space “betwixt and between” the world that is (the indicative) and the world that is possible (the subjunctive). This is where “jokes” collide with ideology, our assumptions of “what goes with what” are violated and our orientations are altered. Burke calls this “impiety.” In such moments new possibilities may arise that move beyond the individual into society thereby contributing to complex systems of progressive social change.

The liminal space that stand-up operates in is also one we may consider what postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha (1994) refers to as a *third space*, where the oppressed and their oppressors may be brought together, a space where revolution may be plotted. These “revolutions” may be in the comic bringing together different genders, or races, or any category of difference and showing us not only the error of our ways but that there are other options. The “revolution” may also be in bringing the people together against the state or what Althusser (1969) terms *ideological state apparatuses* (organized religions, the academe, the media, et al). If we follow Burke, any change at all to the established order is an “impiety” the established “priesthood” would resist. The stand-up comic is capable of “making worlds that never were on land or sea but that might be [...] suspending disbelief and remodeling the terms of belief” (Turner 1988). This is the domain of the shaman. Those who function as intermediaries and healers.

### **The Comic Persona of Louis C.K.**

Louis C. K., born Louis Szekely,<sup>57</sup> in many ways epitomizes the American Melting Pot. His heritage is Irish, eastern European Jewish, Hungarian, and Mexican. He moved to America at the age of seven from Mexico and claims English as his second language. Despite his diverse background, C. K. passes in mainstream American culture as just another middle class, middle-aged white guy. From an interview in *Rolling Stone*:

I grew up in Boston and didn't get the accent, and one of the reasons is that I started in Spanish. I was a little kid, so all I had to do was completely reject my

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<sup>57</sup> The stage name “C. K.” is derived from the pronunciation of his last name, a move he made based on the difficulty people have in saying it. In a way this also further normalizes the comic as more all-American through de-emphasizing an “ethnic” marker. Most people that I have talked to assume that C. K. represents his middle and last initials.

Spanish and my Mexican past, which is a whole lot easier because I'm white with red hair. I had the help of a whole nation of people just accepting that I'm white [...] My experience is as a Mexican immigrant, more so than someone like George Lopez. He's from California. But he'll be treated as an immigrant. I *am* an outsider. My *abuelita*, my grandmother, didn't speak English. My whole family on my dad's side is in Mexico. I won't ever be called that or treated that way, but it was my experience. (Finocchiaro 2013).

C. K.'s obfuscation of his cultural past may be viewed as a kind of "mimicry." In "Of mimicry and man," Homi Bhabha (1994) works backward through Lacan's notion of mimicry as a form of camouflage and Derrida's reading of J.L. Austin's idea of the performative to arrive at his contribution that mimetic performances show the hollowness of symbolic power. In C. K.'s case, his mimicry does not carry the stigma or present the challenges associated with a dark-skinned individual taking on the identity of the oppressor because C. K.'s *passes* -- his skin is white. There are assumed linkages here C. K. exposes with that comment. Simply stated white equals American, and brown equals Mexican. In his case this is not technically true. Might this ease in passing somehow contribute to the shame he so often assigns his place in the world in his performances? Or perhaps the performance of shame itself is intentional and therefore subversive? If we consider C. K.'s admitted adoption of middle-Americanness as a kind of mimicry, that mimesis can be viewed as subversive. C. K.'s performances, though coming from a figure we accept as "dominant" or "elite," consistently expose the hollowness of his privilege while accepting it as a fortunate, if arbitrary, position to occupy.

In my research of C. K.'s performances, he has never mentioned his heritage in a single routine even though he has spoken of it openly in interviews. This is only possible

for him to ignore due to his privilege. Marked bodies of any kind operating in stand-up comedy rarely (if *ever*) have that freedom. Chris Rock is just as expected to talk about race as Sarah Silverman is gender. As I noted in Chapter Three, Chris Rock even warns that it's a trap comics too often fall into in becoming a "situational" comic who only plays to a single niche audience (gay, black, southern). Audiences are accustomed to comics performing material based on identity even if done so in obligatory fashion as a small part of the comic's set. I consider C. K.'s performance of whiteness, of Americanness, of masculinity as subversive in how he uses those categories to raise questions about privilege and what the consequences of that privilege system are. Through certain routines like "Of Course ... But Maybe" and "Everything's Amazing and No One is Happy" examined later, C. K. offers insight into collateral damage of these systems – from our every day relationships to hierarchal violence at a grand scale. He does this in the camouflage of "just another white guy" despite his lived experience. I believe his position, his white masculinity, make his comic urgings all the more effective, particularly on others in "elite" categories who, through identification, are more receptive to him. White audiences can reject Chris Rock for "playing the race card." Silverman can be dismissed because her gender. Izzard isn't even American. Louis, however, is *one of us*. He is literally and figuratively *the man*.

Like most comics of his cohort, C. K. cites the greats from the '70s and '80s as his influences: Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Steve Martin. His parents divorced when he was young, and he is the divorced father of two (both daughters, a major part of both his current live act and *Louie*). The topics he engages have shifted dramatically

(as has his tone) since the birth of his children and divorce. This is to be expected from any comic, from any artist more specifically, who undergoes major life changes. After all, we tend to do what we know.<sup>58</sup> Dan French (1998) offers a first-hand account of the shifting sensibilities of a comic passing from one period in life to another that underscores the importance of context to a comic's persona, style of delivery, and the topics he engages or avoids. C. K., like many comics, develops a lot of his material from his appearance that has also naturally changed over the course of his career.

He has a look that in most respects aligns with what we expect a middle-aged, divorced white guy to look like: balding, slightly out of shape, not particularly fashionable, and on the "wrong side of 40." He costumes himself simply: dark jeans, a dark t-shirt and/or polo, black leather shoes somewhere between sneakers and work boots. He is, as Douglas Adams might say, *mostly harmless* (aren't all gingers?).<sup>59</sup>

Physically C. K.'s performance is normatively masculine and illustrative of the awkward, grotesque oafishness he paints himself with verbally. Throughout his performance in *Oh My God*, the camera catches him nonchalantly picking his nose, adjusting his clothing and anatomy with slight discomfort, showing close-ups of a gleamy layer of perspiration covering his face and seeping through his shirt. At one point, he spills water down the front of his shirt with no recognition of the act. The film quality here is much more saturated than his past few specials, dark, like the cinematography in *Louie*.

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<sup>58</sup> I'm reminded here of the hilarious bit in Eddie Murphy's breakout special *Delirious* in which he describes the first routines he wrote as a child which were written and performed in the style of Bill Cosby or Richard Pryor but were all about defecating, the only lived experience at the time worth mining.

<sup>59</sup> Isn't that another marker of shame? As a fellow redhead, my lived experience says yes.

His performance of shame over his appearance, his privilege, his poor parenting and relationship skills, and his lack of sexual prowess are all recurring narrative threads in his comedy. His self-shaming highlights two of the three ways scholars attribute to how jokes “work:” theories of superiority and theories of psychic release. These categories are not mutually exclusive and are difficult to pin down due to the unique nature of why we laugh. Laughter is dependent on where an individual stands which necessarily influences what it is she sees.

Under superiority theories, a joke elicits laughter in these moments: audience members find themselves feeling, well, superior in hearing the comic’s story. Or in “us” against “them” comedy where members laugh *at* an Other the comic mentions. Under psychic release theories, laughter comes when audiences are comforted they are not alone in thinking or feeling something. These two reactions can of course occur at the same time in an audience. The result is a group of people laughing together but for different reasons. I offer an example from C. K.’s *Oh My God* where he laments his age by describing his body breaking down:

I have moments where I’m like, ‘Wow, this seems early for this.’ Like, this is something that happens to me a lot. I’ll be sitting watching TV or doing nothing, and all of a sudden I’ll realize, ‘*I need to wipe my ass right now.*’ ‘I mean, nothing happened, but I *really* gotta wipe my ass right now. *Right now.*’ Gotta make trips to the bathroom just to wipe my ass. How does this happen already? I’m 45. Already, my asshole’s like the waistband on old pajama bottoms, just kinda loose and ineffectual. My asshole’s like a bag of leaves that nobody tied up. It’s just sitting on the lawn, full and open, puking leaves onto the grass with every wisp of wind. Some kid kicks it over on his way home from a tough day at middle school. (*imitating a child kicking a bag*) ‘*Rats!*’ That’s a pretty accurate description of my asshole.

Some might dismiss this bit as nothing more than “potty humor” that plays to the lowest common denominator; however, I offer another reading. In this routine C. K.

inverts the traditional power associated with the white male body. 45 years is not yet *that* old,<sup>60</sup> yet C. K. takes the elite body and makes it not something to aspire to but turns it abject. Through his account, C. K. makes his body grotesque, no different than those analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968) in *Rabelais and His World*. Audience laughter at this routine might come from 1) identification with the comic's plight, 2) through a kind of *schadenfreude*, or even out of 3) good old-fashioned gross-out shock or disbelief that a comic "went there." We laugh because we judge, we laugh because we commiserate, and we laugh because sometimes what is said is "just wrong." Despite the origin, the laughter here can produce *katastasis*, a purging release. Elder Olson (1970) offers *katastasis* as the comic counterpoint to *katharsis*, the purge of emotion through viewing tragedy. In laughter coming at the expense of the male white body, in that body being made abject, it is less powerful.

We distinguish between *laughing at* and *laughing with* someone. Group laughter is always both ambivalent and ambiguous, we cannot necessarily pin it down to a single origin. Group laughter is therefore also *polysemic*, and contains many possible meanings at once. This contrasts with Lawrence Mintz's (1985) theory of *anthemic* laughter: moments when we may claim to see agreement or group membership in an audience based on the way they are laughing at a given joke. Group laughter (or its absence) exists in polyvocal space (the comic text itself is dialogic, we are able to come to multiple conclusions about it), it is ambiguous and paradoxical, and observing laughter at any routine gives us no real insight into what resonated at the level of the individual, only that "the audience" found it "funny."

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<sup>60</sup> Says the 41 year old.



Beyond the shaming of his body, C. K. seems to have something nagging at him in his recognition that he (nor any of) deserve it as good as we have it. There are parts of *Oh My God* that mark C. K. as part of the establishment, a product of another time -- a throwback. Particularly note that, during the opening credits, the camera shows him backstage nervously winding a watch. Who wears a watch that requires winding these days? Perhaps more broadly *who wears a watch?* It is a very nice-looking large model analog watch<sup>61</sup> like we might find in a *Skymiles* catalogue sporting a large silver face and dark brown leather strap. It sticks out to me like a sore thumb because the sheer size and flashiness of it seems wholly incongruous with the rest of his subdued appearance.

The camera's focus on him while he checks and winds the watch during those opening credits serves as a frame for what's to come and must be considered purposeful since it was self-directed. C. K., despite how forward-thinking he comes off in so many of his routines, admits to an old-fashioned luddite sensibility. He bemoans our increasing over-dependence on technology that not only diminishes our relationships but turns us selfish in bits that range from complaining that parents seem to only ever watch their children from behind two and half inch video camera screens ("...the resolution on the kid is unbelievable if you just look ... *It's totally HD*") to ranting about how impatient we are with things loading on our electronic devices ("... it's going to space, would ya give it a second to get back from space?"). Insights like these highlight that our modern American privilege is, as Spivak (1999) asserts, often our loss.

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<sup>61</sup> In a prior stand-up performance, he joked that he can't wear a digital watch because all of the numbers look to him like the album cover to The Police's *Ghost in the Machine*.

Routines like these literally urge us toward a wider frame of acceptance: stop looking at your child through a device when she's in front of you as part of an emergent performance, widen your perspective about this tiny little device in your hand that's part of a far greater network than just *you*. "Everything's Amazing and Nobody's Happy," indeed.

In ambivalent fashion, C. K. also acknowledges the positive aspects of being over 40, particularly for men who were not exactly considered peak physical specimens in their youth or even simply normatively attractive. Where the physical form suffers with age other things may improve. He ruminates creating an "it gets better" ad for dumpy young men, giving them hope for later in life: "you'll be the branch she catches before she hits the ground" and offers the equation for middle age success in romance as "pussy plus time over income squared." C. K. privileges lived experience over "book smarts," saying that any 45-year old garbage man is smarter than a 28-year old with three Ph.D.'s because the former "hasn't been thinking about the same three things for the past 15 years." Here C. K. successfully reflects our American anti-intellectualism, the jab gets laughter and applause, and such a move helps set himself up as a more credible speaker, an authority, which serves to benefit him in those moments where he functions more as a public intellectual than entertainer. Louis is not only *the man*, he's *one of us*.

Comic space is necessarily ambivalent and a comic worldview — as Burke observes of the comic frame — accepts the good with the bad. As a consumer of comedy, I more often than not negotiate this space when I watch stand-up. As noted in Chapter Three in

regard to Chris Rock, I often find that comedy can be progressive in how it handles *this issue here* at the same time it is regressive in *that issue there*. To paraphrase *Pollyanna*: I believe that if I look for the bad in people, I'll surely find it, and if I look for the good in people, I'll find that, too. Defending our laughter, or lack thereof, whether to others or just to ourselves, is a reflexive and critical act. We not only have to bend back and reflect on why we felt something was funny or not, but articulate our position and consider the Other. Comedy does this to us while asking for us to look at things through a wide frame that encourages cooperation over conflict.

For me the negotiation is part of the experience: comics force me to think critically. Even when I laugh until my sides hurt at a statement like this one, I know from taking in the whole of his work that he wants better for society and believes that we are capable of it should we choose to open our eyes and minds:

People suck, and that's my contention. I can prove it on a scratch paper and pen. Give me a fucking Etch-a-sketch, I'll do it in three minutes. The proof, the fact, the factorum. I'll show my work, case closed. I'm tired of this back-slapping "Aren't humanity neat?" bullshit. We're a virus with shoes, okay? That's all we are. (Hicks 2002)

Louis C. K. is not a *revolutionary* comic figure. Not in the way I consider Sarah Silverman, Russell Brand, or Bill Hicks. I do not think he is actively or aggressively raging against some machine. When I began this research, this was the figure that I thought I was searching for. I referred to *comic prophets, anarchic iconoclastic fools*, who wielded their microphone like Thor's hammer *mjolnir*. This is not what I have in fact found. Yes, these comics disrupt, invert, subvert, and transgress, but they also reintegrate, galvanize, and heal.

What C. K. has that those “revolutionary” comics do not (precisely because he is *not* alienating many in his audience through so many partisan attacks) is a global mainstream audience paying attention to him. Most audiences do not view C. K. as being in any way dangerous or threatening. Even Carlin, despite his ‘hippy dippy weatherman’ beginnings, was an iconoclast and gained a reputation for his didacticism as he aged which limited his audience over the years. At this point in his career, Louis C. K. comes off to audiences as the overweight sad-sack divorced dad of two young girls who run all over him between his trips to the bathroom to make sure his rear end isn’t leaking. America loves him for that.

I argue that Louis C. K. is pulling an “inside job” in how he inverts the taken for granted assumed power of whiteness, masculinity, and of American Exceptionalism. Through a routine like “Of Course ... But Maybe” in *Oh My God*, Louis C. K. offers us alternative narratives, histories, and voices silenced by the “hegemonologue.” Though C. K. is an immigrant with a polyethnic background, he does this while mimicking middle-American whiteness. He does this while maintaining a wide comic frame, sheepishly recognizing the benefits of his privilege in a way less threatening than any non-male, non-white comic.

### **Louis C.K. in *Oh My God***

*Oh My God* was recorded in February of 2013 and originally aired on HBO in April of the same year. *Oh My God* takes his self-deprecation to an all-new extreme. This time C. K. speaks not just of his declining appearance or about the quotidian concerns of parenting and dating but also how he continually questions his own fame and privilege. I

saw this performance live while it was being workshopped on November 29, 2012, in Tampa. This section uses notes taken from that performance as well as those generated from multiple viewings of the recorded special.

First, the performance venue and physical space chosen for the taped performance of *Oh My God* is interesting to consider. When I saw C. K., it was in a 2,600 seat proscenium opera hall, and so there was a very clear line separating the performer and audience with significant space between. Prior to the performance, several announcements were made asking attendees not to talk back to or otherwise heckle C. K. during the show. This warning was delivered first by C. K. himself over a microphone while he was backstage and then again reiterated a few times by the warm-up comic. During the performance, unsurprisingly,<sup>62</sup> mid-routine an audience member started to speak to him loudly, resulting in a solid few minutes of chiding from C. K. in light of the repeated requests. This was an unusually stressed point of emphasis compared to the rest of my experience at comedy shows, even his, and so I assumed it was due to his desire to work toward some kind of consistency from night to night that would allow the show taped for broadcast to be as flawless as possible. I can contrast this with the tour where he played an outdoor amphitheater as part of a festival. He spent the majority of his act playing with the audience and not performing a set routine, even doing a rare series of impersonations.

The major difference between the live experience and watching the taped set is that the Celebrity Theatre in Arizona (also a 2,600 seat venue) is a theater in the round with

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<sup>62</sup> Audience members lacking the appropriate competence specific to any kind of performance is the biggest barrier to getting me out to live shows most of the time.

a unique design where all seats are 70 feet or less away from the stage. Every camera shot shows C. K. seemingly *engulfed* by the audience, a sea of faces staring back at the camera regardless of the angle, giving it the feel a much more intimate comedy club (such as fans of *Louie* are used seeing him in on TV). This contrasts to a large theater like Morsani Hall in Tampa where those who sit in the upper levels often bring binoculars to better see a performer. C. K. notes on his website's blog that the Phoenix venue was "specifically chosen," as the location for the taping with no further explanation. Curious as to why that particular venue in that particular city was "specifically chosen" I researched the venue and discovered it is in fact significant as the same stage George Carlin, a figure C. K. has cited a number of times as a major influence on his work, filmed his 1978 special *Again!*

#### Questioning Privilege and History: "Of Course ... but Maybe"

As noted, C. K. spends significant time in his recent acts griping about his place in the world as a middle-aged divorced dad of two young girls and largely avoids politics or divisive current events, focusing instead on a more observational form of humor generally critical of humanity in everyday situations. However, in the last few minutes of *Oh My God*, he lands a critical *coup de grace* almost out the blue after only feinting a few jabs for the 90 minutes that came before.

"Of Course ... But Maybe," is constructed using an ambivalent, wide comic frame that accounts for more than one point of view or reading. Here is a transcript of the routine as aired on HBO, quoted at length for the purpose of analysis:

Everybody has a competition in their brain of good thoughts and bad thoughts. Hopefully the good thoughts win. For me, I always have both. I have like the thing I

believe, the good thing, that's the thing I believe. And then there's *this* thing. And I don't believe it, but it is there. It's always (*gestures and shifts pitch higher*) this thing, and then (*gestures and shifts pitch lower*) this thing. It's become a category in my brain I call 'of course ... but maybe.' I'll give you an example, ok? Of course children who have nut allergies need to be protected [...] but maybe if touching a nut kills you, you're supposed to die. (*scrunching his face up as if making a painful admission while crowd reacts a bit negatively, groaning, etc.*) Of course not ... of course not ... of course not ... Jesus. I have a nephew who has that. I'd be devastated if something happened to him. (*quick beat*) But maybe, maybe if we all just do this (*covers eyes with hand*) for one year, we're done with nut allergies forever [...] Of course if you're fighting for your country and you get shot or hurt it's a terrible tragedy ... of course ... of course ... but maybe, maybe if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot it's not that weird. Maybe if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it's a tiny bit your fault [...] Of course slavery is the worst thing that's ever happened (*crowd audibly disapproves*) ... listen, listen you all clapped for dead kids with the nuts ... for kids dying from nuts you applauded, so you're in this with me now, do you understand, you don't get to cherry-pick, those kids did nothing to you. (*crowd laughs, relaxes*) Of course slavery is the worst thing that ever happened, of course it is, every time it's happened. Black people in America. Jews in Egypt. Every time a whole race of people has been enslaved, it's a terrible, horrible thing. Of course. But maybe, maybe every incredible human achievement in history was done with slaves. Every single thing where you go 'how did they build those pyramids?' They just threw human death and suffering at them until they were finished. How did we traverse the nation with the railroad so quickly? We just threw Chinese people in caves and blew 'em up and didn't give a shit what happened to them. There's no end to what you can do when you don't give a fuck about particular people. You can do anything. That's where human greatness comes from, is that we're shitty people, that we fuck others over. Even today, how do we have this amazing microtechnology? Because the factory where they're making these, they jump off the fucking roof, 'cause it's a nightmare in there. You really have a choice. You can have candles and horses and be a little kinder to each other or let someone suffer *immeasurably* far away, just so you can leave a mean comment on YouTube while you're taking a shit.

With that the set is over, and he exits. Throughout the special he has commented about how great it is to be white, or American, or male but it is only in this routine at the end where he acknowledges the reality of the Other when considering White America with such blunt force. It is the first time where he actually addresses the consequences, the violence, of "us" having it so good. When I saw him live, this routine was not

presented with the same script. When I saw him he began with the nut allergy bit, moved to a second bit which he did not include in the broadcast where he stated “of course” it is a good thing to give dying children a final wish “but maybe” a date with Lady Gaga or home plate World Series tickets would mean more to a middle-aged loser living with his parents doomed to eternal suffering than a kid about to die, then concluded with the bit about soldiers dying in foreign lands. The entire ending about slavery and human progress/suffering was not at all present. His restructuring and additional commentary gives it *far* more punch: it is no longer just a knock on our jingoism but now given greater context both globally and historically.

In Tampa the crowd reacted loudly and in divided fashion as he concluded his set with the bit on soldiers. He may as well have just dropped his microphone and walked off. It felt very intentional and for the express purpose of getting a strong reaction. As we exited the sold out theater, I overheard people walking away talking about the “Of Course ... But Maybe” routine more than any other. Some were critical of the routine, claiming his comedy was better when it avoided politics. Others argued over what he was actually getting at with the routine (was it critical of soldiers, our government, public sentiment?), and some (myself included) were invigorated by his honesty. He said something I’ve often thought but would never say, particularly due to growing up in a military family, for fear of being accused of not *supporting the troops*.

To me it seemed the previous 90 minutes served as a setup for that one final punchline. C. K. has made moves like this before such as his extremely smart and sophisticated handling of homosexuality contained in the opening sequence of the



second episode of *Louie*. That episode began with a group of guys, all real stand-up comics, playing poker and immaturely riffing on gay sex before moving into a deeper discussion about the consequences of language. Gay comic Rick Crom gives an etymological history, even if it is an unsubstantiated,<sup>63</sup> of the word faggot relating it to the punishment of being burned alive. Crom finishes with saying they can use whatever language they like, but they should know what it is they are saying and how it effects those touched by the history of violence that gay men have endured. *Louie* is full of moments like this where our laughter subsides when a greater point is made. With *Oh My God*, the placement of this bit seems purposeful. It is what is left in what is referred to as the audience's "to-go cup"—what they take with them when the special is over.

I appreciate seeing the development of this routine between the event I saw in November of that year to when it was recorded the following February. The recorded routine is global and historical in scope, detailing specific instances of the subjugation of people by dominant cultures across the world over all of human history. In this way, C. K. deals with representation in a way that does not perpetuate what Stam and Spence (1983) call "hostile distortion and affectionate condescension" but instead draws the Other in for a closer look, where they may permitted a moment of intimacy, of humanity, with the audience. C. K. does not come to this point directly but eases us into the routine by leading with the quotidian before moving into the heart of the bit. In doing so we are more susceptible to his broader political point in the end than if he just came out swinging.

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<sup>63</sup> As with many words, the exact origins of the word faggot as a pejorative are contested.

C. K. puts the figure of the colonizer into a broad context by offering additional examples of our humanity's brutal history with subjugation, slavery, and indentured labor – indirectly exposing how we do violence to one another over and over again in the name of “progress.” It was with this routine where I felt most justified in my application of postcolonialism to stand-up comedy even as others may find it the most perplexing. C. K. is talking about the dominance of one group of people over another in a way that transcends simply east and west, black and white, first and third worlds. We keep doing the same thing to one another from culture to culture, century to century. In witnessing a piece of stand-up like this, it is possible for an audience to make those links where none previously existed. It is also crucial to remember that postcolonialism is the study of the entire legacy of European and American domination and the residual effects on the cultures affected. Postcolonialism is concerned with *all* human consequences of exploitation, not just the plight of the subaltern. C. K., who appears to us only as the dominant elite (though I have posited he does so in a kind of camouflage), exposes and questions our history and what we think we know about how we got here.

C. K.'s perspective in this routine accounts for both the good and the bad. He does not write off the accomplishments of civilizations but forces us to look at how we got them and at what cost. C. K. does not imply that we should go back to “horses and candles” as he references, but he does create space where a different world may be seen between those extremes, leaving it with us to work out as we return to our lives. All of us who occupy elite status -- in being white, male, straight, or simply in being

American -- are implicated in a routine like this. I can't let myself off the hook here because I know that I am complicit with this system. This routine impacted me at a profound level. It was galvanizing and invigorating to be part of that audience and go back into the world. I heard others discussing it on the way out of the lobby and out to the street and so feel comfortable in saying I am not the only one who had such an epiphany.

Dutta and Pal (2010) stress the importance of critiquing and challenging history that has closed the opportunities for alternate epistemologies and therefore future possibilities. Through such a process, it is possible for one to come face to face with our loss. I claim a routine like "Of Course ... But Maybe" is such a critique, also fitting Dutta and Pal's criteria of being "reflexive and deconstructionist." It is put in front of us as a challenge in the way we leave this performance with this topic top of mind. This routine has since been uploaded to the internet millions of times via YouTube (a March 6, 2015 search for "of course but maybe louis ck" turned up 2,180,000 videos, a mix of clips from the HBO special and personal recordings from live concerts) and media sites as either a video clip or internet meme.

Such sharing helps create a network of epistemic resistance with the comic as the public intellectual at its center. It is culture-centered in that it a) "highlights the interaction between structure and agency" (Dutta and Basu 2008), b) emphasizes dialogue across multiple platforms and points of access, c) creates an opportunity for mutual understanding, and perhaps most importantly d) emphasizes cultural context. Consider how far the comic monologue has come. In the ancient Greek theater when performers

would turn directly to the audience in the *parabasis* phase of comedies (where they commented on those in attendance and issues of the day), words only moved at the speed of mouths to new ears. The network of resistance found on the internet is still new in terms of human history, and it is getting more and more accessible by the day.<sup>64</sup>

In this last section I have argued that Louis C. K. subversively inverts the taken for granted assumed power of whiteness, masculinity, and of American Exceptionalism in routines like “Of Course ... But Maybe.” In such work C. K. offers us alternative narratives, histories, and voices silenced by the “hegemonologue.” As an immigrant with a polyethnic background C. K. does this through a kind of mimicry of the performance of his white, middle-American male persona. Because of his identity on stage, the dominant culture is more receptive to his messages where comics of other identities may be dismissed. C. K. also manages to land these critiques while remaining ambivalent and keeping the comic frame intact, where I have noted comics like Carlin and Bill Hicks have sometimes struggled.

### **Louis C. K. and Social Drama**

In past decade C. K. has cemented himself as one of the most popular working comics in America. His 2012 tour that culminated in *Oh My God* grossed over \$4.5 million dollars in just the first two days it was on sale according to a tweet sent by C. K. on June 27 of that year. His online following is massive with over 3.8 million followers on Twitter and a personal YouTube channel with over 32.5 million views as of the most recent draft of this chapter. In the past two years, he has been featured on three major

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<sup>64</sup> This accessibility is why net neutrality and other internet freedom issues should be very carefully paid attention to lest that access begin to slip away.

television sitcoms (*Lucky Louie*, *Louie*, *Parks and Recreation*), an award-winning feature film (*American Hustle*) and is a tireless performer on the late night talk show circuit. Media outlets like *Rolling Stone*, *The Huffington Post* and *GQ* hail him as the current “Undisputed King of Comedy.” In a story titled “The 50 Funniest People Now” (1/24/2013), *Rolling Stone* describes him as “the Great American Comedian: our chubby, schlubby, ginger-haired conscience, id, and jester-in-chief.” The May 2014 issue of *GQ* features C. K. on the cover for their “Funniest People Alive” issue.

During the summer of 2012, C. K.’s popularity seemed in jeopardy when it was believed by some that he sided with comic Daniel Tosh online. Tosh was embroiled in a controversy over an alleged rape joke made at the expense of an audience member attending one of Tosh’s live performances.<sup>65</sup> At the height of the public fervor over the Tosh incident, C. K. tweeted “[@danieltosh](#) your show makes me laugh every time I watch it. And you have pretty eyes.” Many mistook this as an “attaboy” of Tosh’s alleged verbal assault, or at the very least, considered it a poorly timed compliment for a comic taking so much criticism at the time. Here is another instance where a comic created a *breach* in the social order resulting in a social drama that played out over the next few

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<sup>65</sup> There are a number of accounts of that night, which was not filmed. There appears to be some consensus that Tosh insisted he could make anything funny when an audience member offered up rape, at which point a woman replied with “rape is never funny,” provoking Tosh to retort “Wouldn’t it be funny if four or five guys raped her right now?” A scene erupted with her party leaving the venue in protest.

I saw Tosh perform in June of 2013 where he defended himself by saying that he pulls no punches and stressing his belief that humor can be found in any situation. He attempted to prove this by then going after the handicapped, children with disabilities, and abortions.

Tosh’s transgression in my estimation was in singling out an audience member. In that moment, it ceased to be part of an aesthetic performance and shifted to a direct interpersonal confrontation, a shaming, in public space. Louis C. K. has noted that all stand-up performances are rhetorical. Moments like this one, however, can shake us out of a performance and into a very real public forum.

months. Of the dramas examined in this project, this is the easiest to see from start to finish.

C. K., unlike Tosh, quickly addressed his tweet and his overall position on jokes of that nature as the *crisis* of the drama unfolded. He claimed he was inspired to send the offending missive late in the night after watching Tosh's television show<sup>66</sup> while he was on vacation in Vermont, adding he had no knowledge of the live incident when he sent the tweet. C. K., the higher-profile target of the two comics, began to get more media attention over the incident than Tosh and was the only one to enter a public conversation about the boundaries of comedy. As the *crisis* came to a head the central issue ceased to be whether or not C. K. was supporting Tosh but whether comics should joke about things like sexual violence.

In this moment C. K. stepped out of his role as an entertainer to address the *breach* of both our aesthetic and ethical sensibilities, not as comic but as a public intellectual. One quotation in particular taken from an interview on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (7/16/12) piqued public attention once more and created another escalation in the drama: "stereotypically speaking feminists can't take a joke ... And on the other side, comedians can't take criticism because they're big pussies." The quote was truncated in several initial reports to simply "feminists can't take a joke" which spread rapidly and understandably drew the ire of many. Here we see Turner's prediction for the *crisis* phase of a social drama in action. The initial *breach* widened exponentially and drew in many more participants.

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<sup>66</sup> Tosh's television show is a mixture of sketches and internet videos threaded together by monologues recorded in front of a studio audience. Think *Chappelle's Show* meets an R-rated and more brain-dead *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

The whole of C. K.'s statement provides important context, particularly his direct recognition that he is making a generalization by leading with "stereotypically speaking." The stereotype of the angry, humorless, man-hating "feminist" still sits in the minds of many and, those thinking that he was invoking it, were justifiably angry. Another omission from some reports of that interview was C. K.'s candor in discussing that the fallout surrounding the Tosh flap drew him into a discourse that opened to eyes to things he'd never considered and which I believe, consciously or not, informed the material in *Oh My God*. This epiphany of his and his subsequent public discussions of it created space whereby he and others may unlearn a bit of their privilege.

C. K. mentions reading things online as this drama unfolded articulating the problems inherent to "rape culture" and how that system of social practices functions in a way that police women's bodies and lives, thereby limiting possibilities by maintaining a system of heteropatriarchy. Through this experience C. K. claims his eyes were opened to things he hadn't previously considered, or that he hadn't considered in the same way. The invisible was made visible, he saw the thing he was not meant to see through of his privilege, and he in turn shared that experience with others creating a possibility for them to do the same. He adds "all dialogue is positive ... If somebody has the opposite feeling from me, I want to hear it, so I can add to mine. I don't want to obliterate theirs with mine." He finishes his thoughts on what he learned through this experience with "[t]hat's part of me now that wasn't before." C. K. hints at an important by-product of stand-up in bringing up the potential for dialogue to emerge out of such an

event, a function of comedy largely ignored despite the ubiquity of jokes and laughter in our daily lives.

The months after the interview with Jon Stewart saw the drama advance into the *redressive* phase. The drama played out in grand fashion through the court of public opinion on Twitter, blogs, websites like Jezebel and BitchMedia, and in performance when C. K. began the tour that culminated in the filming of *Oh My God*. Was an apology even necessary from a comic? Was the apology from C. K. genuine or sufficient? Are there in fact lines comedy shouldn't cross? Looking at the discourses generated here we see the reflexivity that Turner notes of this phase of social drama where a society undergoes "plural self scrutiny" (34).

Turner notes the relationship between cultural performance and social drama is dialectical and interdependent, and Dwight Conquergood (1983) takes this further when he notes that the *redressive* phase of social dramas contain reflexive processes (which as a metaphor maps well on top of Michael Warner's (2002) ideas of discursive public and counterpublic spaces and the postcolonial notion of *Third Space*) that are enabled through the many genres of cultural performance. Stand-up comedy reaches audiences more quickly than film, television, or theater and so perhaps one of the most effective genres to engage in any such reflexivity. The alacrity at which a comic is able to offer critiques on stage (striking while the proverbial iron is hot) also increases the speed at which others in turn re-present them in a ground-up fashion digitally or interpersonally.

C. K.'s tour and *Oh My God* were important parts of the *redressive* phase of this drama. As those performances circulated, stories began to appear on websites like



Slate, NYMag and TaylorMarsh with headlines like “We’re the No. 1 Threat to Women!” The feminist comedy of Louis C. K.,” “Louis C. K. Told a Feminist Rape Joke” and “Why Louis C. K. is Really a Feminist.” When considering any of these online articles, the comments sections must be considered part of the site where modern social dramas play out. The internet presents a relatively new twist in the study of social drama that Turner never witnessed, though he teased the increasing significance of electronic media to social phenomena. Comments sections are easy to access and (ab)use, providing relative anonymity,<sup>67</sup> and also appear as perfect illustrations of how brutal Tannen (1998) notes our “argument culture” has become. I often find these areas more interesting (and aggravating!) than the story I initially clicked to read. These threads become little dramas unto themselves and may be viewed as scenes within the greater drama.

This particular social drama ended in *reintegration*. Not every drama involving a comic ends with such a repair: we only need consider the *schism* (Turner’s alternative to *reintegration*) created in the case of Michael Richards’ career failing after his racist tirade despite his apologies and great fame (perhaps specifically *because* of his celebrity) as a cast member of *Seinfeld*.

C. K. continues to enjoy great success as one of America’s top comics. It was a good year in terms of awards: *Oh My God* won 2014 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Special, Outstanding Directing for a Variety Special, and Outstanding Variety Special. His sitcom *Louie* won for Outstanding Writing for a

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<sup>67</sup> A rich site of study unto itself for how identities are created, communication happens, and meaning is made.

Comedy Series, Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy Series and Outstanding Directing for a Comedy Series.

Issues today are too easily reduced to *Team This* versus *Team That*. Pratkanis and Aronson (2001) call that phenomena a symptom of our mental laziness, our propensity to act as *cognitive misers*. The stand-up comic, through use of tools like ambivalence, perspective by incongruity, and the comic corrective of using a wide comic frame of acceptance, can sometimes bypass or short-circuit that logic.

In this drama Louis C. K. took what could have been solely negative attention, a situation repeatedly seen in stand-up when offense is taken over a joke, and turned it into a learning experience not just for him but the nation. In doing national interviews in an open and honest manner, reflexive about his position as man and comic, he became part of a dialogue capable of healing a breach. Healing, not one side *winning*, but gaining understanding that can lead us to better cooperation. As times are always changing, our sensibilities are always changing with them. There will always be centripetal and centrifugal forces at play, tensions between agency and structure, operations of both power and resistance, yet the stand-up comic holds a very special position in all of this.

Louis C. K. functioned as a public intellectual in this drama, one potentially generative of future progressive social change, in how he navigated this particular minefield and negotiated the tensions in his roles of *man* and *comic*. As someone regarded as an expert in both categories he was asked to respond not only to the incident involving Tosh and his association but also more broadly about the deeper

issues. In witnessing his reflexivity and taking to heed his call for dialogue, others may unlearn a bit of their privilege leading to a higher degree of cooperation moving forward.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have shown how Louis C. K. functions as a public intellectual outside of his role as an entertainer through the analysis of the social drama following his misinterpreted tweet to Daniel Tosh. I have also shown how the construction of his persona and the text of his most recent special *Oh My God* subversively work toward undermining taken for granted assumptions about American Exceptionalism and white, western power. As a Mexican-born immigrant and person of mixed ethnic heritage, C. K.'s "regular white guy" persona is subversive as a form of mimicry.

The postcolonial aim of unlearning privilege or learning to learn from below is more than simply being able to see from the position of the Other but also about stripping away the many layers of the *hegemonologue* that shape dominant logic through erasure and obfuscation. Performance studies, too, has a vested interest in calling into question the privilege of academic authority (see Pelias and VanOosting's "A Paradigm for Performance Studies"). Art, politics, dominance, resistance, theory, practice -- I find it harder and harder to talk about one without linking the other. There is a great ecosystem at work that is complex beyond my comprehension, where change is ongoing and incremental. There is another shared goal of both postcolonialism and performance studies: eschewing *either/or* binary logic in favor of a continually negotiated dialectic in a plurivocal world. Marvin Carlson (1996) notes that in such a world, subject and object are neither in opposition nor merged with one another.

Saying that the work of someone like Louis C. K. *can* possibly contribute to a widening of perspectives generative of progressive social change is not the same thing as saying that C.K. is *intentionally* looking to be an agent of change with his work. I can't prove that, but I am persuaded to think based on the evidence presented that he has an awareness and political conscience after I discovered that he donated a third of his earnings from *Live at the Beacon Theater* to global charities that benefitted children or water projects. He may not be directly agitating the public to action in a way like Russell Brand has most recently but he is clearly *aware* and sharing that awareness in effective ways through his ambivalent comic frame of acceptance.

Louis C. K. has a high level of access to the means of production for his stand-up recordings and his television shows that come from elite status and fame. His is a level of access that not everyone shares, and that he acknowledges in his act and in interviews with both appreciation and his trademark level of shame.<sup>68</sup> He is also redefining the role of the artist within the comedy industry by self-producing and directing his most recent specials through personally managing the release and distribution of material on his personal website and by handling his own tour routing and ticketing. These developments have purposefully bypassed industry juggernauts like Clear Channel Entertainment and Ticketmaster, sprawling corporate entities who have been frequently criticized of holding both performers and fans hostage in numerous public feuds and court battles over the years. C. K.'s efforts to take more direct control over his career and relationship with his fans has been so successful that it has inspired

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<sup>68</sup> Patricia Sawin (2002) theorizes about differential access in performance, and more recently Susan Pelle (2010) examines the problem of access for a comic like Margaret Cho, who exists at a complicated intersection of gender, race and sexuality.

other comedians such as Patton Oswalt and Aziz Ansari<sup>69</sup> to do the same. As Dutta and Pal (2010) observe, any participation in ground-up, culture-centered fashion threatens oppressive structures.

Postcolonial theory describes the use and exploitation of elite infrastructures such as public broadcast and the media as an important tool of resistance. Elleke Boehmer (2002) notes that the use of such structures is even more important to intellectuals who are often caught between the worlds of the oppressor and the people. Comics typically toil for years attempting to establish their career and often feel this pinch in significant fashion. Comic Russell Brand, who is currently amid what appears to be an attempt to incite a revolution of sorts noted this paradoxical position in a column he wrote for *The Guardian* on November 5, 2013: “Some people say I'm a hypocrite because I've got money now. When I was poor and I complained about inequality people said I was bitter, now I'm rich and I complain about inequality they say I'm a hypocrite. I'm beginning to think they just don't want inequality on the agenda because it is a real problem that needs to be addressed.”

Ranajit Guha (1988) notes in “The Prose of the Counter-Insurgency” that to “know the cause of a phenomenon is already a step taken in the direction of controlling it.” In this light, I see material like “Of Course ... But Maybe” as a tool for alternative knowledge production as we share C. K.’s memes, videos, and interviews. This kind of performance is a perfect example of postcolonialism’s aim of rewriting a history that is dominated by the logic of “the winner.” People who know one another have a far easier

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<sup>69</sup> Ansari is another comic worthy of examination in the manner undertaken here. Commonly mistaken for multiple “foreign” nationalities and religions, he is a self-described atheist born and raised in South Carolina as well also a member of the Jash network mentioned in the last chapter.

time discussing the *small i* ideas found in comedy than we do in the *Big I* dictates of our ideologues. Non-violent resistance requires the use of symbolic weapons such as art, which then may become part of what Edward Said (1993) calls an ideological revolution. In the case of a comic like C. K., he is not himself a revolutionary but he allows us what Augusto Boal (1985) calls a rehearsal for one.

I view Louis C. K.'s performance of self as an embodiment of a dying heteropatriarchal national identity. Despite the diversity of his lived experience and his cultural truths, the camouflage of his middle-American whiteness dominates how we see him. Through his adoption of the comic frame of acceptance and negotiation of the tensions that exist between acknowledging the benefits of access and privilege and at the expense those benefits come to those who lack it, he opens a space where we may not only consider ourselves but the Other. Through a routine like "Of Course ... But Maybe," C. K. creates ambivalent space for us to question and reflect on who we are and what we think we know. The orientation he offers sidesteps *either-or* logic about the world instead urging us to consider the world in *both-and* terms. Victor Turner (1988) notes:

any society which hopes to be imperishable must whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself ... the supreme honesty of the creative artist who, in his presentations on the stage, in the book, on canvas, in marble, in music, or in towers and houses, reserves to himself the privilege of seeing straight what all cultures build crooked (122).

I argue that routines such as the one I have presented are such spaces. I, too, have learned to recognize the privileges I possess, those things John T. Warren (2001) says I was not supposed to see, and I also see the horror in it all. Here C. K. acts as a

potential force not only of enlightenment but galvanization. For those like me who find a kindred spirit articulating the things swirling around in our minds, sharing these *bon mots* is just a click away. C. K.'s words can be found now in internet memes addressing topics from Judeo-Christian attitudes toward rape ("It's in the Ten Commandments to not take the Lord's name in vain. Rape is not a Ten Commandment. But don't say the dude's name with a shitty attitude") to gay marriage:

It doesn't have ANY effect on your life. What do you care?! People try to talk about it like it's a social issue. Like when you see someone stand up on a talk show and say "How am I supposed to explain to my child that two men are getting married?' ... I dunno, it's your shitty kid, you fuckin' tell 'em. Why is that anyone else's problem? Two guys are in LOVE but they can't get married because you don't want to talk to your ugly child for fuckin' five minutes?"

The thrill of re-presenting comic bits online or interpersonally can be invigorating, giving us a sense of power or agency even if for only a moment when someone laughs, "likes," or re-shares. This thrill of comedy was something that I latched on to in childhood that has stayed with me to this day.

C. K. does not accomplish the creation of a speaking subject, something that scholars like Gayatri Spivak (1999) claim as an impossibility anyway in that he does not truly give voice to the Other and so maintains the non-elite as a only a subject of history. There are of course comics who do not operate from the most privileged positions, as I have already examined in both Chris Rock and Sarah Silverman, and comics who are not working at the level of mainstream success and recognition as any of the comics examined here. A future study might look at contributions of comics like those who tour under the moniker "The Axis of Evil," or figures such as Kumail Nanjiani, Russell Peters,

or Aditi Mittal who fit more neatly into traditional postcolonial/subaltern studies scholarship.

In the final chapter I summarize and synthesize my findings from this project, where these many roads have led me, and use the late comic Bill Hicks to discuss how we use the words of the stand-up comic as equipment for living far after the live event. The words of the stand-up comic can serve to remind us even decades later that no matter how much progress we think we've made that issues have a way of coming back around.

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## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The world is like a ride in an amusement park, and when you choose to go on it you think it's real because that's how powerful our minds are. The ride goes up and down, around and around, it has thrills and chills, and it's very brightly colored, and it's very loud, and it's fun for a while. Many people have been on the ride a long time, and they begin to wonder, "Hey, is this real, or is this just a ride?" And other people have remembered, and they come back to us and say, "Hey, don't worry; don't be afraid, ever, because this is just a ride." And we ... *kill those people*. "Shut him up! I've got a lot invested in this ride, shut him up! Look at my furrows of worry, look at my big bank account, and my family. This has to be real." It's just a ride. But we always kill the good guys who try and tell us that, you ever notice that? And let the demons run amok ... But it doesn't matter, because it's just a ride. And we can change it any time we want. It's only a choice. No effort, no work, no job, no savings of money. Just a simple choice, right now, between fear and love. The eyes of fear want you to put bigger locks on your doors, buy guns, close yourself off. The eyes of love instead see all of us as one. Here's what we can do to change the world, right now, to a better ride. Take all that money we spend on weapons and defense each year and instead spend it feeding and clothing and educating the poor of the world, which it would pay for many times over, not one human being excluded, and we could explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace.

- William Melvin "Bill" Hicks, *Revelations* (1993)

In Chapter One I quoted Richard Pryor, "there's no way in fuck I was ever supposed to be shit." This quotation resonates with me at a strong frequency. As I conclude this project and consider my personal evolution -- my growth from blue-collar conservative roots to the human, artist, and educator I have become -- I must take into account the comics who have impacted me at every step. Even if I never became a stand-up comic, I found my way into performance and have remained a devoted fan of stand-up along with most other comic genres. I am convinced I am not alone in how comedy has shaped me and altered my perspectives – not only in terms of how I navigate daily life but how I move through the world as an artist, teacher, and scholar.

## Restatement of Purpose

I have argued that stand-up comics occupy a unique and important position in modern American cultural and intellectual life. Stand-up comics have a special set of privileges not granted to many other public figures due to the liminal, ambivalent space in which comedy operates. This dissertation has argued that stand-up comics are a vital part of American intellectual and social life and are heavily enmeshed in ongoing processes of progressive social change. The comic forces us to see things differently and so responses to comic personas and texts are bound to be conflicting and contested. I have argued that these moments of conflict and any resultant social dramas are productive for social change in how they engage the public, force us to think, and expand the universe of discourse on a variety of topics.

I have argued that Louis C. K., Chris Rock, and Sarah Silverman are three popular figures generating or contributing to dialogue and debate that is currently galvanizing and/or polarizing publics and counterpublics. Comic texts endure well after the live event in the form of interpersonal retelling, mediated recordings, and internet memes that allow audiences to become producers themselves as they mimetically or digitally re-present them -- making these insights *equipment for living* for all they touch. As comic routines are digested and re-presented in a ground-up, participatory fashion, a polyvocal, centripetal current is created that takes these comic insights and sends them spiraling outward to all corners of society.

Outside of the stand-up performance, I have argued that the comic contributes to social change when they step outside of their role as entertainer in moments they are called on to provide testimony as an “expert” on a topic (race, gender, comedy itself),

becoming a kind of public intellectual – a move that forces the comic to publicly negotiate their various roles all at once as the personal meets the political. I have shown comics publicly function as mediators, instigators, or healers of the social order when implicated in social dramas performed on public stages. It is in this role that I believe we most clearly see a comic embody Kenneth Burke's (1937) *comic frame of acceptance* to the end of raising "maximum consciousness" whereby people on any side of an issue may recognize and correct their "foibles" (171).

This embodiment of the comic frame shows us an enlightened approach to settling conflict, of accepting new ideas. It begs a degree of humility in each of us. Comedy allows us to tolerate absurdity, loss, irony, even pain without destroying the cooperative system – the comic frame pictures "people not as vicious, but as mistaken." Burke tells us "[c]all a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right" (4).

Comic frames *expand* our interpretations, perspectives, and options. Tragic frames *narrow* them. Just as the comic frame is one of *acceptance*, the tragic frame is one of *rejection* (Burke 1937). The tragic frame establishes binary relationships between *good* and *evil*, *black* and *white*, *victim* and *oppressor* whereby the only way for change to occur is through sacrifice; the comic frame exposes not the *individual* but the *social structures* that are at fault (Carlson 1986). Tragic frames lend themselves to binary, essentialism, and rejection that all fuel the "argument culture" that Tannen (1998) argues we are mired in.

The more narrow a tragic frame someone views the world through, the greater the risk comic irony will fail. This was argued in Chapter Three with Rock's "How to Not Get

Your Ass Beat by the Police” sketch being used to defend unequal treatment, in Chapter Four with Sarah Silverman’s “Black NRA” viral video being called racist, and again in Chapter Five in how some initially reacted to Louis C. K.’s tweet to Daniel Tosh and then again with his defense of himself.

People commonly (and unfortunately) invoke tragic frames in making sense of comedy when beliefs, values, or attitudes are threatened. Because of the either/or logic at the core of tragic frames, any *serious* topic is by definition *not funny* and so unsuitable material. I showed this tendency in Chapter Three with the critical reactions to Chris Rock’s Independence Day tweet when he ironically brought up the idea of “freedom” at a time that blacks were enslaved, in Chapter Four when Guy Aoki/MANAA campaigned against Sarah Silverman for her use of an epithet she defended as an ironic critique of racist logic, and again in Chapter Five with the Louis C. K. social drama centering on feminism and rape as joke topics. This tendency to invoke a tragic frame when our sacred cows are mocked is not specific to conservative or liberal ideology, or to any side of *any* conflict. It’s easy to have a sense of humor when the finger’s not pointed at you.

Not all of the dramas examined here ended in *reintegration*, when the offender is accepted back into the fold. The clearest example of a reintegration was with Louis C. K.. Some dramas for all intents and purposes stalled out at intermission so to speak after the offending *breach* failed to gain traction in the *crisis* phase as people took sides. I showed in several Twitter dramas involving Rock and Silverman that I could pinpoint a clear *breach* and the first stages of *crisis* that never quite made it to *redress*. I

believe one drama ended in *permanent breach* (or *schism*) when I argued the feud between Guy Aoki/MANAA and Sarah Silverman saw the two sides fail to achieve agreement. Despite how these dramas concluded, I have argued that in all cases discourse generated by them were productive in how they contributed to dialogue and debate and in how the comic models a frame of acceptance.

In demanding tolerance and inclusion, a comic frame also problematizes claims of progressive change. As I first discovered with Chris Rock's material that can be called sexist or heteronormative, comedy does not play favorites – everything is a target. Remember, in the comic frame there is no such thing as victim or oppressor, good or evil! A comic frame of acceptance rises above our precious factions, our tribes, transcending the very nature of conflict itself. Within tragic frames that conflict is not only maintained but resolvable only through only sacrifice and purification. In a comic frame, we may still find wrong, injustice, but the goal is to “chastise the clown” rather than banish him – provided the clown sees the error of his ways and makes amends (Carlson 1986).

This dissertation is unique in how it links stand-up as a genre of performance, social change, and history in a way that offers an alternate examination of cultural performance as a live event, a mediated artifact, and as *equipment for living* for all they touch. I cannot with good conscience claim comedy is a panacea for our many social ailments. Walter J. Ong (1967) claimed *all* speech is “agonistically toned,” and I stress that comic messages are not exempt. But the comic frame allows us a cooperative approach.

Finally, I acknowledge that some will still see the application of a comic frame to postcolonialism as paradoxical, and perhaps it is. In making this move, I argue that we may not only escape the tragic frame that such a serious set of subjects can inspire, but possibly disrupt the whole notion of “center” and “margins,” “oppressor” and “oppressed.” This is to create, as Kenneth Burke (1935) describes, an “alternate ethical universe” that I can fully get behind. Stand-up comedy should be taken seriously as a tool of the non-elite, the marginalized -- any suffering injustice -- to lead us toward what Burke (1937) calls a *new orientation*, a process postcolonial scholars describe as a *decolonization of the mind* (Said 1993; hooks 1990). For “elites,” members of the dominant group, I argue that the liminal territory of comedy is a kind of *Third Space* (Bhabha 1994), where oppressor and oppressed may meet and where elites may learn to understand “their privilege as their loss” and “learn to learn from below” (Spivak 1999, Spivak 2009).

## **Recap of Analysis Chapters**

### Chapter Three: Chris Rock

Through my analysis of Chris Rock, I have argued that he is a credible and politically aware messenger with sharp – often harsh – social critiques and a balanced, reasonable mediator of race relations in his role of public intellectual. As he stressed at the beginning of *Kill The Messenger* (2008), that particular election year was *the time* for the special because it was “a special time.” He has a message for both blacks *and* whites and is unafraid to criticize either side. He urges us toward cooperation, epitomizing Burke’s comic frame in how he rises above factions even as he recognizes

they exist. The “clown” that Rock largely chastises is the very system itself, which he hopes is ameliorated by the election of Obama – both in terms of race and politics.

The ambivalent, slippery nature of comic irony creates enough ambiguity that his work has been labeled as racist by both sides, and both sides have used his work to criticize the other. Rock has been accused of playing the “race card” in his defense of Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner at the same time others have interpreted his “How to Not Get Your Ass Kicked by the Police” video as agreement that black youth are “asking for it.” Rock extends his impact as a public intellectual in his interview with *New York Magazine* (2014) where I argued he actively negotiated his various roles (public figure and private person, entertainer and intellectual) over the course of an interview that came at a critical moment in American race relations.

He brings the realities of white privilege into focus in several moments. He yearns for a world he no longer has to tell his children they can “be what they want when they grow up,” which he says for whites is “obvious.” Later he emphasizes that wealth and access disparity between whites and blacks is still so severe that a black dentist would have to “invent teeth” to afford a house in his neighborhood, noting “a black man’s gotta *fly* to do something a white man can just *walk* to.”

Rock’s progressive comedy was, however, problematized by my reading of parts of his act that I claimed reinforces gender and sexuality stereotypes. Rock also does not see the flaws in his own logic when defending his use of the *gay f-word* while not making the same concessions for use of the *n-word*. To be clear: I do not suggest that comics shouldn’t be allowed to perform material that uses epithets or boils down to “us



against them” lest I be accused of invoking a tragic frame myself. I am even uneasy to intimate he has a *responsibility* here, yet at the same time I acknowledge words have consequences. Aesthetic products not only *reflect* but *shape* society. Still, in terms of race Chris Rock is a potent mediator in what is a very tense moment for the country.

#### Chapter Four: Sarah Silverman

In my analysis of Sarah Silverman, I argued that she does not fit Rowe’s (1995) definition of the *unruly woman*, a comic embodying “a special kind of excess” who “[t]hrough her body, her speech, and her laughter [...] creates a disruptive spectacle of herself.” Rowe offers modern examples from Miss Piggy to Roseanne, all bodies we would refer to as somehow marked, grotesque. I argue Silverman does epitomize Cixous’ (1976) Medusa, the figure Rowe built her model on – she who writes for herself with *jouissance*, an “emblem of chaos” who has claimed her body instead of assuming a form the patriarchy would have her in.

Silverman, like the Medusa, demands men meet her gaze and not only gets the last laugh but laughs *first* at herself. Silverman has defied the roles available to her (Ingénue, Madonna, Unruly Woman) and cracked the *pretty/funny* binary women in comedy have been subject to for over a century. When we compare her to male contemporaries, I argue that she is held to different standards at two levels 1) as a woman doing stand-up in what is still a “boy’s club” and 2) a normatively attractive woman performing a vulgar act. Male comics have no such physical standards attached to them. Women comics who fit the “grotesque” physical criteria of Rowe’s *unruly*

woman are also not subject to the same beauty standards nor attacked for their use of crude humor, showing how the culture *still* tries to keep *pretty* and *funny* in binary.

In doing this, Silverman becomes an embodied grotesque, a *gargoyle* (Burke 1935; Bakhtin 1968). Not grotesque in the *appearance* of her body but in being a combination of forms. Burke's gargoyle is a transitional form, tying past to the future, violating linkages to create a new perspective by incongruity. I argued that Silverman generates the most schizophrenic reactions of the comics examined here *because of* this embodiment.

As a public intellectual Silverman provides balance to a genre that is still male-dominated within an overall androcentric society. She is the most aggressively *impious* and the most demanding of her audience that they look at the world – particularly in terms of gender and sexuality -- through a *comic frame*. Of the comics examined, Silverman's role in social dramas does not show her to work as a healer or mediator. I argue that is not her purpose. To return to the Medusa metaphor, I argue she intentionally instigates, demanding we watch as she transgresses the sensibilities of the status quo with a *comic jouissance*.

#### Chapter Five: Louis C. K.

I was able to most clearly show how a comic functions as a public intellectual off stage through my analysis of C. K.'s involvement with the Daniel Tosh social drama. Through the negotiations during the *crisis* phase and the *redressive* measures he took, I argued that C. K. healed the *breach* caused by his misinterpreted tweet to Daniel Tosh and his subsequent attempt at an explanation. His reflexive turn during the drama

models his use of a comic frame and also shows how his non-combative approach to listening to criticism widened his perspectives. I argued this new perspective manifested itself in *Oh My God*. The result of this drama was that C. K. emerged now hailed as kind of feminist comic. I also argued that his performance of white, western power in terms of persona can be read as subversive, and through that persona, his texts critique the trope of American Exceptionalism. C. K. offers another example of Burke's comic frame *in action*, transcending the fray and modeling cooperative behavior in interviews: "all dialogue is positive ... If somebody has the opposite feeling from me, I want to hear it, so I can add it to mine. I don't want to obliterate theirs with mine" (2012).

I read Louis C. K.'s persona as one that uses a degree of *mimicry* (Bhabha 1994) in taking on the characteristics of the elite in order to pass within and possibly deconstruct dominant culture. C. K.'s lived experience as a multi-ethnic immigrant whose second language is English is camouflaged by the color of his skin and the performance of his persona. We accept C. K. as an expert on masculinity, whiteness, and Americanness and are confronted by his questioning of that privilege and the violence done to so many throughout history in the name of progress. This is no more clearly on display than in "Of Course ... But Maybe." For someone like myself, C. K.'s work unmasks privilege, shows me things that John T. Warren (2001) says I was *never meant to see*. Victor Turner (1988) notes that "any society which hopes to be imperishable must whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself." I argue that stand-up comedy is such a space and C. K.'s performance in *Oh My God* a specific moment. C. K. does this while maintaining a comic frame, not seeing us as *evil*

but *mistaken*. He ends the special with: “[we] really have a choice. You can have candles and horses and be a little kinder to each other or let someone suffer immeasurably far away, just so you can leave a mean comment on YouTube while you’re taking a shit.”

Through my analyses of these comics, I have argued that alternate voices, alternate ways of being, alternate histories and ways of knowing the world emerge not just in the context of stand-up performances but through re-presentations and when comics step outside of their roles as entertainers and into that of the public intellectual. Bakhtin (1986) notes discourse is inherently polyvocal, ongoing and overlapping, and I argue discourse that emerges when the comic makes any of these moves contributes to change as much as an intervention made on stage.

Discourse generated by comics is a relevant topic for those with an interest in postcolonialism in that they are ground, up, participatory, and capable of generating alternative histories as C. K. does in sticking a pin in the balloon of American Exceptionalism as he shines a light on the violence done along the way. The comic engages us with imagining better futures, as I offered in the Bill Hicks quotation that leads this chapter. Hicks, like C. K., says that we have a *choice*. Hicks calls it the choice between *love* and *fear*, which is not very different to me than the choice between a *comic* and *tragic* worldview.

### **Justifications**

My first justification for this study was *an investigation of social dramas generated by stand-up comedy performances provides an alternate history of and way of looking at*

*social change*. This study was able to position the stand-up comic in that complicated center of what Schechner (1985) refers to as a Mobius strip, a surface with only one side and one boundary but that loops back on itself so that there is no discernable beginning or end. This is not only a three-dimensional field, but one that is full of paradox. This investigation showed that despite progress in terms of race the “boys club” mentality still persists at the expense of women and LGBT+ persons. Not all change happens at once, with the same people, or on the same issues. In terms of social drama and cultural performance, the internet has created a strong site for these dramas to play out through distribution of image memes, “mini-dramas” on comment sections of stories and in forums, and for these dramas just to occur with a far greater pace than ever before. In the stand-up’s use of a comic frame of acceptance, we have been shown through all of these dramas that the urge to invoke a tragic frame is universal, not tied to any “side” of any conflict – something easy for any of us to forget due to the blinders imposed by own stakes.

My second justification for this study was that *performance analysis – of contexts, personas, and texts – is a more thorough way to engage questions of how change occurs across time in public spheres, how individuals contribute to ideological critiques through cultural performance, and how audiences might use those performances as equipment for living*. As I have argued there is a tension that the comic negotiates in public between her comic persona and her role of public intellectual. This negotiation itself creates space where we are able to see a person before us struggling to take a topic seriously while maintaining a sense of humor about it. This is important because

stand-up is a live, dynamic, emergent event, and whether we witness the live performance or a recording, we see the comic *in action* modeling critical thought and reasonable, cooperative behavior. I have also shown where and how each of these comics destabilize taken for granted assumptions and provide alternate knowledge in their acts in a way that demands we unlearn a bit of privilege and learn from each other.

These routines are used in many ways as equipment for living: 1) internet message boards become sites for “mini-dramas” in comment threads where people can debate or attempt dialogue, sharpening their ability to articulate a critique or be moved by another voice, 2) we share jokes mimetically and digitally in online and interpersonal exchanges which empower the individual, galvanize communities, or widen the perspective of another, and 3) through the rise of the image meme, use the comic insight as a compact articulation of a point that can be used as support in the way of an appeal to authority, much as we might quote a politician, thinker, or religious figure.

My final justification for taking on this project was that *our understandings of social change are improved, both factually and ethically, by seeking descriptions of social change that capture polyvocality, particularly by including marginalized viewpoints and their expression*. With all three comics, I have shown ways in which they have injected many voices into the public sphere not only through their comic routines but also through social dramas. Bakhtin (1986) claims that polyvocal discourse is unending and neither is the impact of the comic’s work. As history invariably repeats, we see these same routines re-circulated years later, and in these moments, we are able to grasp where progress has and has not been made. Comic texts are contestable in their

meanings or intent, generating another layer of polyvocality. Finally, the social dramas themselves all play out in a polyvocal way as countless voices enter the negotiations of a *crisis* phase. Each comic examined here puts the marginalized at stake in some fashion for or consideration. Finally, in seeking a polyvocal account of social change, we even further remove ourselves from the tyranny of “sides” found in politics and social movements. There are more than two options in most situations. Binary opposition encourages conflict and a desire to “win.” A sea of many voices demands cooperation.

### **Significance of this Study**

#### Polysemic Laughter

In “Standup Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation” (1985), Lawrence Mintz says stand-up comedy is aimed at uniting an audience in laughter, galvanizing them around ideas as to what is valuable or not to a society. He describes a kind of laughter that he terms *anthemic*, illustrating it with a story about a Redd Foxx routine on oral sex. Foxx’s open treatment of a taboo had younger audience members *leaning forward* in appreciative laughter of the taboo being invalidated through public talk. Older audience members simultaneously *leaned back* laughing in shock that the unsayable was said. Here “Foxx led them [all] in an expression of their cultural truths” (79).

Sarah Silverman describes this very phenomena of leaning toward and away in *We Are Miracles* (Chapter Four) when she comments on the audience’s reaction to her story about oral sex gone wrong: “that joke is so fun to tell because at the first juncture the guys are like this (*leans forward, smiles*) and girls are like this (*shifts back, scrunches face*) and then it just goes *WOOOP* like a wave.” Not only is Silverman

aware of the varying “cultural truths” in the audience, she purposefully manipulates them.

Building on Mintz, I offer that laughter is *polysemic*, it contains *multiple origins and meanings*, and so we shouldn’t always accept the presence of laughter or physical reactions of the audience as a certain expression of “cultural truth.” There may be moments when two or more groups in an audience are all laughing in the same direction but for different reasons. One example I offered is in Chapter Five with Louis C. K.’s “trash bag” metaphor for his sphincter. In that moment we might observe Mintz’s *anthemic laughter* rooted in the taboo of toilet humor. We may also witness groups leaning forward (or away) in polysemic fashion. One person may laugh in judgment of C. K -- laughing *at* him, which falls under superiority theories of comedy – while another laughs in empathy and/or recognition associated with identification theories of comedy.

In Chapter Four I argued that performances by women like Phyllis Diller may have provided agency to women in moments where they laughed at Diller’s cuts on men or societal norms while men laughed at Diller’s failure as a domestic role model. This phenomena can also be seen in jokes about race where audience members *laugh with* a comic of shared heritage while others *laugh at* the comic. Just as *anthemic laughter* is useful in gauging an audience’s cultural truths, remembering that laughter is polysemic should serve as a reminder not only of the power of comedy, but the difficulty we face in ascribing motive to laughter.

#### Failed Irony

I have discovered several instances that might be simply described as *when people just don’t get the joke*. In some cases this occurs when opposing groups use the same



comic insight to support contrary positions, like in the case of “How to Not Get Your Ass Kicked by the Police” in Chapter Three. Another instance is the “chink” joke that got Sarah Silverman in hot water with Guy Aoki/MANAA. While trying to describe the phenomena, I could not find any scholarship that addressed it and so here offer *failed irony* as a term. Failed irony extends beyond stand-up comedy and can also describe situations involving a public figure or satirical writing. I argue irony typically fails as the result of applying a tragic frame to a comic message.

#### Do We Even Have the *Right* to be Offended?

The idea of *failed irony* leads me here. Though what is considered offensive or not has not been my focus, each analysis relied on moments when the comic instigated or was otherwise drawn into a conflict over a joke that offended. I have had many conversations with my cohort and professors about a number of comics, and eventually this conversation comes up: *soandso* is racist or *that one* is sexist, etc. I always listen, sometimes I agree. I have heard 1,000 variations of the rebuff “I *get* the joke, I just don’t think it’s funny – it’s offensive.” I struggle with articulating a defense even when only playing devil’s advocate. I have seen arguments that make me question my own position and privilege: do I only find that particular bit funny because I am white/straight/male/American/etc.? Would I think differently if I were, well, *different*?

Even as I listen and reflect and question myself, I also believe this: If the human race is *really* good at something, it’s being *outraged*. Let’s call it our public *offense mechanism*. From gay rights to public breastfeeding to baggy pants to *you-name-it*, if it exists, there is a crusade against it. This tendency has only been exacerbated with the

rise of so many available channels for online interaction. Certain comics purposefully intend to shock (Sam Kinnison, Andrew “Dice” Clay, Jeff Ross), but those same shock tactics are also used by writers and talk show hosts seeking a bigger audience through the exposure. In online forums, conventional wisdom says *don’t read the comments*, and if we do, we’re advised not to *feed the troll* when users purposefully bate others into an argument simply to get a reaction. Simply put, there are people out there who take great pleasure in making others lose their minds.

The conversation comes back every few years in regard to whether or not we *should* joke about a given topic because it offends people. Do we really even *have the right* to be offended? Not that we *can’t* be offended by something, but maybe we shouldn’t have the right to *police and punish*. That sounds a lot like censorship, a kind of fascism, and how many steps are there between censoring/banning and justifying murder as we saw in Paris with Charlie Hebdo? As with any cultural product: if you don’t like, it don’t consume it. I can’t imagine that anyone who went to the Daniel Tosh show that instigated the C. K. social drama and who had ever seen five minutes of Tosh’s work could have *possibly* been surprised Tosh made a rape joke. I’m perhaps more shocked it wasn’t a joke about *him* being raped.

Chris Rock hits close to my point in a recent interview:

only fans should be allowed to criticize [...] When I hear somebody go, “Country music [stinks],” I’m like, well, country music’s not for you. You’re just being elitist [...] Same thing with jokes [...] Just because there’s an alarm going doesn’t mean it’s a fire. And I think that people are confusing the two. It’s only a fire when it offends the fans, and the fans turn on you. [Daniel] Tosh has fans, and they get the joke. If you’ve watched enough Tracy Morgan, you let the worst thing go by (Itzkoff 2012).

Louis C. K. hints at our sense of entitlement in a bit on gay marriage:

(*using a whiny voice*) 'How am I supposed to explain to my child that two men are getting married?' ... I dunno, it's your shitty kid, you fuckin' tell 'em. Why is that anyone else's problem? Two guys are in LOVE but they can't get married because you don't want to talk to your ugly child for fuckin' five minutes?

We'll never agree on what counts as offensive. Those standards will be negotiated among us all for all time. Many of Carlin's *seven words* are now allowed on network television and radio. We just have rules on *when* they are broadcast. People vote with their feet. If there's no audience for something, it will go away. If we all tried harder to apply a *comic frame of acceptance*, to cooperate with one another and not always assume the worst or simply shut down things we disagree with at whatever level, perhaps we wouldn't be so easily offended in the first place. Until then, as Robin Williams said, "fuck 'em if they can't take a joke." Isn't that the ultimate application of a comic frame, to not consider those who mock what we hold sacred as *evil*?

### **Future Research Opportunities**

I am left with more questions at the end of this project than when I began. There are threads that keep coming back, and so I offer them here for future consideration. First, I am interested in how individuals use humor in daily performances to shape how they are perceived. Considering the many tragedies involving comics who have died prematurely (John Belushi, Chris Farley, Robin Williams) and those who struggled throughout their lives (Jonathan Winters, George Carlin, Richard Pryor), this is a riveting site of exploration to examine the relationship between our personal demons and how we put on the fool's mask for daily wear. For people like myself humor is both a shield and weapon to make up for shortcomings, hide pain, and to navigate daily life.

In focusing on single identity categories, this research is incomplete in how it applies to or is problematized by comics working at the intersections. Margaret Cho and Wanda Sykes come to mind as comics at the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. This dissertation also focused solely on American comics with broad mainstream recognition. Another study should examine how stand-up functions in other parts of the world or within specific communities. One comic I am particularly interested in is Yemeni-born British national Eddie Izzard, a straight transvestite who recently announced he is running for Mayor of London in 2016. Izzard's comedy drips with satirical history lessons involving the United Kingdom's imperial collapse, alternate histories of the marginalized, and commentary on the violence of our colonial past.

Throughout this project I referenced mimetic and digital re-presentations of comedy as a ground-up, participatory force in cycles of progressive social change. These re-presentations are a worthy site of study, particularly within postcolonial and visual rhetoric frameworks. Of particular interest to me is how these comic insights possibly provide agency to human actors. An introvert in daily life may present a completely different digital identity, and these comic routines might play a part in that. At an interpersonal level, people gain a degree of voice and compact persuasive messages when repeating jokes, and exchanges may offer heightened possibilities for empathy and understanding on any topic.

We still have a lot to learn about stand-up comedy, about laughter, and the links between our performances and society. Judith Butler (2004) said that Jacques Derrida understood that "social and political transformation was an incessant project." The

challenges posed to our sensibilities by comics brings to mind more that Butler said about Derrida's work: "[His questions] had to be asked regardless of the consequences, and this meant that they were often questions asked when established authorities wished that they were not."

Butler tells a story about not understanding if he was saying the word *debt* or *death* to her once in conversation because of his accent, so she asked for clarity. He playfully responded that he meant *both* because those who precede us in *death* leave us with a *debt* to pay forward. Hicks, Pryor, and Carlin are undoubtedly my Holy Trinity and those I feel most in debt to. I hope this work contributes something forward. Today's comics are also paying off debts to those who toiled before them, and soon enough other comics will emerge to pay that debt off while also paying it forward. I believe Derrida is right: the push toward a just society is unending.

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