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Breaking the Crass Ceiling? Exploring Narratives, Performances, and Audience Reception of Women's Stand-Up Comedy

Sarah Katherine Cooper

University of South Florida, katiecooper111@gmail.com

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Breaking the Crass Ceiling? Exploring Narratives, Performances, and Audience
Reception of Women's Stand-Up Comedy

by

Sarah Katherine Cooper

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Sociology
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Laurel D. Graham, Ph.D.
Shawn C. Bingham, Ph.D.
Robert D. Benford, Ph.D.
Kim Golombisky, Ph.D.

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DEDICATION

To Mom and Dad. Thanks for always letting me stay up late so that I could watch *I Love Lucy* reruns when I was young.

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ABSTRACT

Despite the long history of stand-up comedy as a distinct form of popular entertainment, there has been little sociological attention given to its cultural significance. Comedians have arguably become legitimate and visible voices in many public conversations about social issues and social justice. This dissertation explores the cultural work of women's comedy in popular culture. Specifically, I examine narrative representation and audience reception of women's stand-up comedy through multi-method qualitative inquiry.

First, I analyze stand-up performances by popular U.S. comedians Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. Through narrative analysis, I focus on the ironic performativity of Schumer and the charged styles of Sykes and Cho, and I discuss how these women use humor (in different but overlapping ways) to challenge dominant cultural narratives pertaining to gender, race, and sexuality. Second, I conduct an audience reception analysis using focus groups in order to better understand how people consume and interpret stand-up comedy. Due to the polysemic nature of comedy and satire, audiences decode these texts in a myriad of ways. My analysis shows how different audiences perceive the comedian as unpacking social "truths" in comedy. I elaborate these audience decoding positions, discuss the layers of interpretation (i.e., intersectional positionality and interpretive frameworks), and discuss how participants negotiate symbolic boundaries around what is deemed funny or topically appropriate for comics to say. My findings further highlight the importance of identity in *critical referential viewing* by incorporating standpoint

epistemologies. In particular, audience members of marginalized social groups experience a “bifurcated consciousness” (Smith 1974) in their interpretations compared to those from dominant identity groups, and women and minority audience members are more likely to interpret these performances as counterhegemonic texts.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

We've all heard it before: "Women aren't funny" was considered conventional wisdom until recent years. For about as long as there have been jokes, there has also been an ongoing narrative that women cannot tell them. Plenty of prominent contemporary voices have expressed this sentiment, from John Belushi's belief that the women of *Saturday Night Live* were not funny and should be fired (Kohen 2012), to Christopher Hitchens' (2007) infamously incendiary *Vanity Fair* essay "Why Women Aren't Funny." Comedians Johnny Carson, Jerry Lewis, and Adam Carolla have also joined the public choir explaining how women are not funny because, they argue, humor is seemingly more natural for men than for women. On the contrary, however, women's comedy is currently at the height of its popularity as a genre of entertainment in popular culture (Kein 2015; Mizejewski 2014). The hard-hitting late-night political show *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* is experiencing skyrocketing ratings, Amazon's new hit (Golden-Globe winning) dramedy series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* chronicles the story of a 1950s housewife who discovers her knack for performing stand-up comedy, and many women stand-up comedians are now performing sold-out tours and hosting their own television shows. Women in comedy are breaking new ground in what used to be the "old boys' club," which opens up new and intriguing research questions about the meanings and interpretations of women's comedy.

Although women's comedy remains an underexplored area of scholarly inquiry, there is currently "a moment of popular fascination with female comedians and gender politics in U.S. comedy" (Kein 2015:673), and thus scholarship on women and/in comedy "is not merely filling in gaps, but breaking new ground" (671). My dissertation research engages this line of inquiry and contributes to our sociological understanding of the role of women's comedy in popular culture. Specifically, I examine women's stand-up comedy by analyzing the performances of, and audience reactions to, popular U.S. comedians Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. I focus on two emergent performative styles of women's comedy: incongruous/ironic and "charged" comedy (Krefting 2014). My research addresses two central, overlapping questions: 1) What type of cultural work is being done through women's stand-up comedy in popular culture? 2) How do audiences interpret and negotiate meaning from these stand-up performances?

Coincidentally, women's stand-up has stepped onto center stage at the precise historical moment when the production and dissemination of all comedy is being revolutionized. First, technological advances have afforded more opportunities and outlets for stand-up comedians to perform. Stand-up comedy is a significant component of American television culture through outlets such as late-night comedy programs, cable channels including Comedy Central and HBO that feature stand-up routines, and more recently, the emergence of Netflix that allows consumers to choose from an array of streaming stand-up comedy routines. This increased visibility and consumption has coincided with an increase of diversity in comedy, as well as an emergence of "celebrity" comedians with large fan bases. Second, television and the Internet have significantly influenced how audiences consume and experience stand-up comedy through mediated interactions. Whereas stand-up comedy goes once primarily watched live comedy performances in

a group setting, stand-up audiences can now also watch stand-up in private and at their leisure. From an interactionist perspective, this is especially interesting considering that more people enjoy now comedy through the media rather than through face-to-face interactions (Kuipers 2008). For instance, a clip from Amy Schumer's *Mostly Sex Stuff* performance ("Class It Up") that I analyzed and utilized for my focus group study has been viewed 1.3 million times on YouTube. Digital media now provides opportunities to watch stand-up online, watch clips of routines (such as on YouTube), discuss and comment on stand-up in the blogosphere, and share information via social media.

The simultaneous explosion in viewing modalities and ascendance of women comedians has meant that women's comedy (especially stand-up and TV comedy) has exploded in the public sphere in recent years. Women's stand-up—and stand-up as a genre more generally—has increased in popularity, particularly with the advent of digital streaming services. Following in the footsteps of Comedy Central and HBO, Netflix has increasingly become a prime outlet for producing and disseminating stand-up comedy specials. According to a recent article in *Forbes* (2017), "Netflix has changed the comedy economy" (Berg 2017). In the first quarter of 2017, Netflix increased its investment in stand-up by releasing 17 stand-up comedy specials in early 2017 alone, including several by popular female comics like Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, Christela Alonzo, and Ali Wong. According to Netflix content chief Ted Sarandos, "There's always been an interest in stand-up comedy [at Netflix] ... It's uncensored, it's commercial free, and that allows for a lot of creative freedom. And the fan base for these folks is very big" (quoted in McAlone 2017, *Business Insider*). In other words, the frame of stand-up allows women and minorities to push boundaries in ways that corporate TV networks do not necessarily allow.

As Gilbert (2004) observes, “the ‘master’s tools’ may never dismantle the ‘master’s house,’ but the master’s cover charge and two-drink minimum might help to build another very nice house. In other words, a female comic who has temporary control of the hegemonic wallet may, indeed, be performing a political act” (165). The flourishing economic success and cultural popularity of women’s comedy is also indicative of their growing role and visibility in the cultural marketplace of ideas. Additionally, many women in comedy are also publicly active in politics and social advocacy issues. In addition to their comedy material, comedians including Amy Schumer, Chelsea Handler, Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, Samantha Bee, Wanda Sykes, Kathy Griffin, etc. use their public profiles and social media platforms to share ideas and engage public discourse on a variety of political topics and social issues. In short, through increased public visibility and economic marketability, women comedians are claiming their right to participate in the cultural marketplace of ideas, and social media has further democratized this process.

The second key contribution of new media to comedy scholarship pertains to how audiences experience comedy. Stand-up comedy has a long history as a form of cultural entertainment (Mintz 1985), and stand-up has also had a significant impact on practically all forms of mass media in the U.S., including silent films, radio, the record industry, television, and even contemporary digital broadcasting services. In addition to smaller types of venues, more recently stand-up comedians frequently perform in medium-to-large-sized theaters (that seat a few thousand) and in large indoor arenas with maximum occupancies of 20,000 or more. Arena stand-up comedy, in particular, has become increasingly popular in recent decades in the U.S., though it has received little scholarly attention as a venue of comedic interaction (Lockyer 2015). Of particular interest, a key feature of large venue stand-up comedy is its possibility to be filmed and broadcasted

to mass audiences via cable, DVD, or streaming services. Previous scholars focused mainly on smaller comedy venues, and have argued that it is in these small comedy clubs “where the interaction between the comedian and the audience is more prominent” (Mintz 1985:78).

However, stand-up routines performed in these types of venues are also not usually video-recorded for further distribution and circulation. There is a lack of sociological research on the appeal of, and implications for, arena stand-up comedy, which now constitutes a distinct genre of stand-up given its increased popularity in recent decades (Lockyer 2015).

Overview

My research takes a critical-interactionist approach to examine women's stand-up comedy routines and audience interpretations of them. I take two trajectories here focusing broadly on representation and consumption: First, through narrative analysis I analyze stand-up performances by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. I discuss how these women use humor (in different ways) to challenge dominant cultural narratives pertaining to gender, race, and sexuality. Second, I conduct an audience reception analysis with focus groups of undergraduate students to better understand how people consume and make sense of stand-up comedy. My findings highlight the importance of incorporating standpoint epistemologies in audience research. As I will discuss, I found that members of marginalized social groups experience a “bifurcated consciousness” (Smith 1974) compared to those from dominant identity groups, and they are more likely to interpret these performances as counterhegemonic texts.

In the following chapter (Chapter 2), I provide an overview of my theoretical framework, offer definitions of pertinent concepts, and situate this research within the existing scholarship.

Next, I present my research in Part I and Part II. This dissertation is a multi-method qualitative analysis, and so it is organized into two substantive parts. First, Part I encompasses my narrative analysis of women's stand-up texts. I examine three stand-up performances as narrative performative texts: Amy Schumer's *Mostly Sex Stuff* (2012), Wanda Sykes' *I'ma Be Me* (2009), and Margaret Cho's *Cho Dependent* (2011). Women have increasingly broken into the "old boys' club" of stand-up comedy, and I analyze each of these routines as a potential source of cultural pedagogy as they deconstruct various social "truths" to a vast (live and mass-mediated) audience. I discuss my narrative methods and approach at the start of Part I, in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I present my analysis of Amy Schumer's comedy as a performance of exaggerated, ironic white femininity. Schumer is currently one of the most popular comedians to take the stage in years, and her humor represents a departure from traditional women's comedy in that her attractive feminine appearance plays a role in the performance. Schumer thus represents a contemporary version of the Unruly Woman (Rowe 1995; see also Mizejewski 2014). In this chapter I interrogate how Schumer plays with, challenges, or potentially reinforces dominant ideologies pertaining to gender and race. I argue that comedy such as Schumer's offers subtle satiric semiotics that allow the audience to rethink taken-for-granted assumptions.

Whereas Schumer's subversive potential rests in the juxtaposition of her hyper-femininity and her grotesque, yet playful, content, stand-up comedy may also consist of more charged humor (Kefting 2014). In Chapter 5, I examine the stand-up routines by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho and the ways that they use the stand-up stage to directly confront and openly challenge systems of inequality and cultural oppression. Sykes and Cho are two of the more oft-cited women comics, and in this chapter I pay particular attention to the characteristics of subversive narratives, namely

by examining how they incorporate their own personal narratives concerning their experiences with racism and heterosexism, in addition to explicitly identifying the cultural source and construction of social inequalities. This chapter takes a critical cultural pedagogy approach in order to examine stand-up comedy as “comedic sociology” (Smith 2015) and a site of cultural pedagogy.

Part II of this dissertation encompasses an audience reception analysis of women’s stand-up comedy. In Chapter 6 I describe my focus group methodology for analyzing audience reception. Chapters 7 and 8 include analyses of two major themes that emerged from this line of research. First, in Chapter 7 I analyze and unpack audience interpretations and the identity work involved in making sense of stand-up comedy. Specifically, audiences negotiate the identity of the comedian, the identity of the target of the humor, and the identity of the perceived intended audience. Audience member participants discuss the comedian’s identity as a symbolic boundary of sorts for the type of humor and topic material that is expected or considered acceptable. Additionally, audience members also discuss the extent to which they (and other audiences generally) identify with both the target of humor and with the comedian. Audience members in this study speak about the “relatability” of comedy, and I argue that comedy is the most “successful” when audiences interpret it as relating and elevating their own experiences navigating the social world.

Chapter 8 extends this line of inquiry to examine how audience members’ positionality shapes perceptions of the potential “seriousness” of stand-up comedy and subversive narratives. In this chapter, I discuss how audience members evaluate comedy in different ways for its perceived truthfulness and social commentary. For the most part, marginalized audience members (i.e., women and minorities) were more likely to interpret women’s stand-up routines as

counterhegemonic. Through modes of critical referential viewing, these audience members emphasize how stand-up narratives connect personal stories to broader cultural narratives in illuminating ways. Conversely, members of dominant identity groups more often resist critical interpretations of stand-up narratives. These audience members instead explain how the frame of stand-up serves as a buffer that inhibits any type of serious, ideological negotiation. Additionally, this analysis examines how audiences demarcate “women’s issues” and women’s perspectives from perceived universal comedy topics. Finally, in my conclusion chapter, I outline and discuss key findings from this research and I consider possible future research directions.

I focus on two emergent styles of women’s stand-up humor: incongruous/ironic and charged. These particular styles of stand-up humor have only recently been made available to women in comedy, and, in conjunction with shifts in audience viewership through mass media, this leads us to new exciting questions about the cultural role of women’s comedy, which I will now explore.

CHAPTER TWO:

BACKGROUND, CONCEPTS, AND FRAMEWORK

My dissertation examines the cultural work of women's stand-up comedy via two methodological approaches. First, I explore the "conditions and possibilities of reading" (Gledhill 1988:106) of stand-up through textual narrative analysis of routines by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. Second, I analyze audience interpretations and negotiations of stand-up comedy. My dissertation research is informed by selected concepts within both critical perspectives and symbolic interactionist, social constructionist traditions. In this chapter I review these relevant concepts and explore their connections as they relate to my research.

A few general epistemological assumptions underlie this research. First, I conceptualize stand-up comedy as a unique frame (Goffman 1974) of art and play, and stand-up comedians often engage in a contemporary form of carnival (Bakhtin 1968). This carnivalesque frame that often characterizes stand-up creates an atmosphere where the audience anticipates deviant behavior and controversial topics. Second, the stand-up frame of experience is characteristic of both physical/live stand-up performances and mass-mediated viewership of stand-up. Women have gained increased opportunities in professional stand-up in the Netflix era, and the audience for stand-up is ever-expanding with advances in streaming services and social media to circulate and broadcast performances. A single stand-up performance may be viewed by hundreds of thousands of people, where mass and social media have "multiplied the potential audiences both spatially and

temporally” (Wilson 2011:288). Third, an intersectional framework (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1989, 1991) guides this analysis. From this perspective, race, gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, social class, ability, etc. are conceptualized as reciprocal, intersecting identities that shape social experience.

Theoretical Perspectives: Classical Humor Theories and Contemporary Critical Humor Studies

Theoretical and philosophical intrigue with the role of humor in social life dates to Plato and Aristotle, but the interdisciplinary umbrella of humor studies only began to gain momentum in the mid twentieth century, particularly in the disciplines of psychology and linguistics (Nilsen 1993; Raskin 2008). There are several wide-ranging theories of humor, but classical approaches to studying humor tend to align with the perspectives of superiority, incongruity, and relief or arousal theories (Davis 1993; Kuipers 2008; see also Berger 1993, 1995; Carrell 2008). These theories are useful for understanding the function of each style of humor, or more specifically what it is about humor that makes something *funny*, rather than, say, offensive. Incongruity perspectives are particularly useful for my narrative analytic framework, as I shall describe. An in-depth review of these humor theories is beyond the scope of this work (see Bingham & Green 2016a; Kuipers 2008 for recent discussions of classic humor theory), but I do provide a brief overview of the three theories in the paragraphs below. Each theory is very useful in explaining various aspects of humor, but these classical humor perspectives have often been utilized as an explanation for the occurrence of all humor. However, from an intersectional lens, application of the classical humor theories has tended to overlook issues of identity and power, which is significant because humor functions differently for different people. The explosion of diverse voices in the (mass-mediated)

comedysphere requires explanations of humor that account for differing narrative perspectives. In the conclusion of this dissertation, therefore, I will return to this broader discussion on humor theory—and specifically the recently emergent lens of critical humor studies—and propose new directions for superiority, incongruity, and relief theories from a critical perspective.

Superiority theories of humor trace back to early Greek philosophy, and this perspective dominated humor scholarship until the mid-eighteenth century (Weaver, Mora, & Morgan 2016). Superiority theory was first articulated by Plato and Aristotle, and later by Thomas Hobbes, and it entails the basic premise that humor emerges through ridicule of a joke target and situating the joke target in an inferior position relative to the joke teller. A few contemporary humor scholars (Abedinifard 2016; Billig 2005) have extended superiority theory as a broader theory of ridicule, arguing that the central role of humor and ridicule is to function as a disciplinary social corrective (see also Bergson 1911). As such, ridicule as a social corrective works to maintain and reinforce hegemonic social relations. Similarly, “disparagement humor” (Ford & Ferguson 2004) functions to reinforce existing patterns of social control and inequalities, such as in the circulation of negative stereotypes of marginalized groups (Mauldin 2002). Ferguson and Ford (2008) further link the use of disparagement humor (couched in superiority theories) to social identity theory. According to the authors, disparagement humor is often utilized in response to perceived threats to social and personal identity. From this perspective, then, disparagement humor functions to bolster and maintain salient intergroup identity distinctions through favorable comparisons with social out-groups (Ferguson & Ford 2008).

Some humor scholars have argued that superiority theory has often overlooked or ignored women’s relative social position in explaining humor. Humor can be a powerful social force in

playing with and affirming dominant cultural ideologies. Abedinifard (2016) observes that “ridicule is a universal tool used in sustaining the gender order” (235). Much of gender comedy has historically assumed a gender-essentialist ideology, and this type of humor may therefore serve a self-regulating function as a disciplinary tool for policing gender order (Abedinifard 2016). Superiority theory presumes a superior position taken by laughing at others, but women were not permitted to speak in positions of comedic authority until relatively recently, and women were generally instead made the butts of jokes (Caliskan 1995). The creation and enjoyment of traditional masculine (and/or sexist) humor often encourages women to devalue their own experiences and to identify with a male persona against their own interests (Merrill 1988). In my analysis of how audience participants discuss comedy, I found that superiority theory has limited use in explaining women’s stand-up humor. I return to this discussion later in Chapter 9.

The second major perspective on humor is that of incongruity theory. Aristotle first hinted at the notion of incongruity humor, but this theoretical perspective was later articulated by and attributed to philosophers such as Hutcheson (1750) and Kant (1793). This perspective observes amusement as a reaction to something unexpected, inappropriate, or incongruous with normal order (Morreall 1983; see also Schopenhauer 1964). The underlying logic of incongruity theory assumes that a society has widely accepted expectations of order, including norms, patterns, rules, and values, and “when these expectations are not met, hilarity can ensue” (Bingham & Green 2016a:293). Through incongruity, humor arises from the surprise of perceived violation of norms and social order. Incongruity forces people to juxtapose meaning and sense-making, and therefore incongruity theories are valuable for semiotic theories of humor and are useful for discussions pertaining to the rhetorical construction of humor (Weaver et al. 2016).

My narrative analysis of women's humor draws from elements of incongruity theory. Early women's humor scholars referenced women humorists' ability to use incongruity as a means to subtly expose social inequalities. Historically and cross-culturally, women's humor tends to be less aggressive and demeaning than men's humor, and a superiority perspective is largely absent from women's humor (Apte 1985; Walker & Dresner 1998). This is not to say that women never use comedy intended to humiliate others, but it is traditionally less common whereas incongruity humor is more frequent. According to Walker and Dresner (1998), women humorists often use incongruity to reflect on their positions and roles as women in society. In women's humor:

frustration and anger at gender-based inequities have had to be expressed obliquely, [and thus] incongruity has been a major device for decoding the myths of the patriarchy. By exposing the discrepancies between the realities of women's lives and the images of women promoted by the culture... American women humorists have targeted the patriarchal social system. ... The use of incongruity in humor by women as a means of targeting attributes and behaviors prescribed for them by the dominant culture is an act of rebellion (174).

For example, I discuss in Chapter 4 how Amy Schumer uses the juxtaposition between her traditional feminine appearance and her raunchy punchlines to incongruously reveal the social constructedness of expectations for feminine "gender displays" (Goffman 1979). Comedians may use such counternarratives and cultural incongruities in humor as sociological tools for revealing the hidden institutions and norms that structure the everyday lives of various marginalized groups (Bingham & Green 2016b).

The third classical humor theory is known as relief theory. From this perspective, humor produces "relief" through the physiological release of tension. Relief theory is not mutually exclusive from superiority and incongruity theories—for instance, audience members may experience "relief" or tension release from both enhanced feelings of in-group superiority and

incongruity that unveils the hidden structures of social life. Some elaborations of relief theory (Freud 1928; Schopenhauer 1964) suggest that humor is a socially acceptable form of releasing repressed impulses and social inhibitions. Humor functions as a way to “blow off steam.” Bingham and Green (2016a) extended traditional iterations of relief theory to further illustrate how comedians with disabilities use relief humor as a tool for relieving the potential discomfort of others, and additionally, as an outlet for releasing pent-up frustrations of ableist culture. Similarly, in my audience reception research, I found that women audience members (particularly groups composed only of women) expressed a sense of relief from watching women command the stage and expose various social inequalities.

In sum, superiority, incongruity, and relief theories are valuable for understanding what makes people laugh. However, these three classical humor theories cannot fully explain the current comedy landscape without addressing issues of identity and power. My research is situated in the emerging field of critical humor studies (Lockyer & Pickering 2008; Weaver et al. 2016). According to Weaver et al. (2016), the three major classical humor theories, at least in their original articulations, were quite “uncritical” (228). Therefore, a critical approach to humor studies underscores a fourth development in humor theory, namely concerning *equality theories* of humor.

As Weaver argues:

this emerging strand of humor theory and research is specifically political, critical, concerned with social inequality and the role of humor in perpetuating unequal social relations. This develops humor studies through an interaction with the standpoint epistemologies of much mainstream sociology, cultural studies and media and communications research. In many ways, critical humor studies, and the equality theories of humor that it is producing, signal the movement of humor studies into the social scientific mainstream (228-229).

Therefore, in my research that follows, my analysis focuses on the cultural work of women's stand-up comedy and the extent to which comedy—a polysemic form of discourse with more than one possible meaning—works as hegemonic or counterhegemonic narratives in popular culture. A scholarly emphasis on hegemony in humor scholarship is an underexplored avenue of research (Weaver 2016).

The proliferation of “alternative” American stand-up comedy in the 1990s resembled the alternative comedy scene in 1980s Great Britain. Of particular note, this cultural shift was largely characterized by a turn away from stereotypical jokes and packaged gags, and instead the use of personal narratives and nontraditional forms of storytelling become more prominent. According to Lockyer and Pickering (2008), “send-up forms of self-narrative and social realism with a satirical edge were in... ‘Alternative’ comedy seemed to say what it meant and mean what it said, in a new, values-on-its-sleeve approach” (810-811). At various points throughout this dissertation, I refer to concepts of “attack/punch up” and “punch/attack down” types of humor, as well as notions of “laughing at” versus “laughing with” humor (see Gilbert 2004). I employ these terms to indicate the target of the humor. Specifically, I use the term “attack-up humor” to refer to comedy that targets a member or group of a higher relative social status than the joke teller, or when a comedian targets some element of hegemonic culture broadly (e.g., when Margaret Cho mocks homophobia in the South). By contrast, comedians use “attack-down” humor (i.e., superiority, “laughing at”) when they mock a member or group of a lower relative social status (e.g., men comedians making sexist jokes at women's expense). “Laughing with” humor, often through playful self-deprecation, mocks one's own in-group. I return to this discussion in the Conclusion

chapter, where I discuss how these classical theories may be enhanced and/or reoriented through a critical perspective.

Framework: A Critical-Symbolic Interactionist Project

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, humor is a social phenomenon (Kuipers 2008; Zijderfeld 1983), and humor is a significant rhetorical and interactive resource for negotiating social meanings and for shaping identities (Fine 1984). Humor does not by itself create meaning, but rather has a rare ability to play with deeply held institutionalized meanings, which is essential to the construction of meaning and everyday life (Zijderfeld 1983; see also Douglas 1966). For the purpose of this analysis, Goffman's work on frames, dramaturgical performance, and gender semiotics provides a useful paradigm for articulating the socio-cultural elements of the *carnivalesque* (Bakhtin 1968) quality of many stand-up performances. Russian philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin explored the social significance of folk humor and laughter in the cultural tradition of carnival, exemplified by the medieval Feast of Fools festival. Bakhtin's ideas parallel and complement American interactionist perspectives, where he explains that carnival traditionally consists of socially sanctioned performances, events, or texts intended to bring people together and to contest institutional authority. This temporary suspension of hierarchy characteristic of carnival represents a special type of communication impossible in everyday life, fostering a carnival consciousness that "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin 1968:34).

In this sense, stand-up comedy represents a contemporary form of carnival¹ that is experienced both live in comedy clubs and increasingly through television screens and electronic devices. According to Goffman (1974), frames describe “the organization of experience” (11) derived from shared institutionalized meanings, and hence this tradition of carnival constitutes a particular frame of experience. Drawing from carnivalesque characteristics, the frame of stand-up comedy provides a space for a particular type of interaction between comic and audience, where there is implicit consent from the audience to temporarily suspend its defenses for a moment of trust and communal laughter. Stand-up comedians are granted a license for artistic expression and social commentary that does not exist in other public forums, which is a key feature of the cultural role of stand-up comedy (Bingham & Hernandez 2009; Koziski 1984; Mintz 1985). The frame of stand-up comedy primes the audience to expect that comedians will deviate from traditional norms and etiquette of public speech, and therefore the stand-up frame ultimately shapes the layering of narrative meanings in comedy. Through carnival humor, stand-up comedians may subtly or explicitly subvert dominant cultural values, invoking a carnival consciousness for reimagining how society is and how it could be.

The frame of stand-up is pertinent to contemporary culture and humor scholarship for two primary reasons: 1) the expansion of arena and large-venue stand-up comedy has coincided with the increase in mass-mediated, broadcasted, or streaming stand-up performances that are viewed by hundreds of thousands. This shift in the production of stand-up has led to a shift in audiences

¹ It is worth noting that many, though not all, stand-up performances would constitute a contemporary form of carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. Carnavalesque performances are those that contest authority, and not every stand-up comedian takes this approach. For example, observational comedy from comedians like Jerry Seinfeld (who also decries “political correctness” in response to public calls for greater attention to intersectional politics) is arguably not carnivalesque or charged.

both spatially and temporally in that audience members do not have to be present at the live performance in order to watch it. 2) Given the expansion of audience viewership, stand-up comedy is a potentially intriguing case of the circulation of subversive narratives in popular culture.

I borrow from critical and feminist perspectives and combine them with an interpretive framework in order to illuminate the ways power works in feminist-leaning stand-up performances, often destabilizing interpretations of power, gender, sexuality, etc. in novel ways. In recent decades, critical and feminist scholarship has contributed to a recognition that individuals occupy various positions of privilege or subordination through a “matrix of domination” (Collins 2000) in which gender, race, sexuality, etc. are interrelated categories of identity and power (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1991). Media culture, in particular, serves as a significant site for the production and reception of hegemonic and oppositional discourses through the saturation of texts, narratives, images, myths, and representations (Collins 2004; Gitlin 1979; Hall 1997; Kellner 1995).

As mentioned earlier, I examine the cultural work of women’s stand-up in the context of cultural hegemony (Gramsci 1971), which is an underexplored direction of humor analysis (Weaver 2016). Gramsci contends that societies maintain social control not simply through mere force, but also through cultural hegemony, or ideological dominance. Various social institutions—particularly the institutions of religion, education, *and the media*—establish hegemony by reproducing dominant narratives and ideas that generally serve those with power by supporting the status quo. Hegemonic discourses further suppress groups by legitimating the very institutions that oppress them, making ideology seem both natural and inevitable. Ideologies are not simply imposed but are continuously negotiated—Meanings are negotiated in production practices, through cultural objects and media texts, and at the level of audience reception (Gledhill 1988).

Humor can be a powerful social force in that it can both maintain and disrupt existing social hierarchies in different contexts (Bing 2004). What remains unclear, though, is how audiences interpret these efforts at subverting patriarchal paradigms. A critical-interpretive framework will provide a lens to examine how individuals establish and experience meaning within various social positions, and specifically, how individuals interpret the comedic narratives of feminist comedians. In my audience reception research, I draw from standpoint epistemologies and theoretical traditions that recognize a dual consciousness for marginalized groups—a dualism between macro structures and the lived realities under those structures. In a similar theoretical vein as Du Bois’s articulation of “double consciousness” (1903), Dorothy Smith (1974) extends her feminist standpoint underpinnings and writes about women’s “bifurcated consciousness.” Both Du Bois and Smith point to notions of dualism in consciousness/experience for marginalized groups, whereby oppressed groups are conditioned to understand society from the perspective of the dominant group because these dominant group perspectives become institutionalized and disseminated in everyday practices. Moreover, the dominant group remains oblivious to the marginalized group’s perspective because they are not often called to understand their worldview. In the sections that follow, I provide a brief overview of the relationship between women’s comedy, subversive narratives, and audience reception.

Comedy and the Other F-word: Women’s and Feminist Humor

Despite sentiments like those previously espoused by Hitchens and others, women and feminism have long history of laughter (Hennefeld 2017; Walker 1988). However, little scholarly attention was paid to the social significance of women’s comedy until the 1980s. In recent decades,

a small but influential body of critical scholarship has begun to address the relationship between women and comedic performance by arguing that comedy, to varying degrees, is a potential rhetorical weapon for political and cultural power against patriarchal society (Barreca 1991; Case and Lippard 2009; Gilbert 2004; Lavin 2004; Merrill 1988; Pelle 2010; Reed 2011; Rowe 1995; Walker 1988).

There is not a consensus among scholars regarding terminology for women's comedy (see Gilbert 2004). Some maintain that "feminist humor" and "women's humor" are synonymous concepts while others make concrete distinctions between the two. Throughout this dissertation, I use these two terms interchangeably, but it is worth recognizing that there are noted conceptual differences. Broadly speaking, I maintain that "women's comedy" refers to humor produced by *women* and generally engages some aspect of women's social experiences, much like Kaufman's (1980) depiction of "female humor." "Feminist comedy," more specifically, *aims to be at least somewhat subversive* by elucidating and mocking societal inequalities. Feminist comedy is not necessarily performed only by women, though it often is—or at least by someone outside of the dominant group.

A great deal of women's humor takes a feminist stance, either subtlety or overtly. However, not all comedy produced by women necessarily constitutes a feminist text. Much like other cultural institutions of science, politics, or religion, mainstream American comedy has been institutionalized from a patriarchal perspective. Thus, some women performing comedy, in order to be funny by "conventional" standards, succeed through traditional hegemonic forms of humor that maintain the status quo. For instance, the late Joan Rivers was notorious for her self-deprecating humor and comedy that focuses on women's image and attractiveness (or lack

thereof), which reinforces stereotypical representations of femininity. Moreover, when women laugh at sexist jokes (or politely pretend to), they are participating in an act of gender performance, particularly when the humor narrative works against their own interests. Feminist humor, on the other hand, imagines a female spectator (Bing 2007). Bing (2007) focuses on women telling jokes to groups of other women, but this notion of the imagined spectator is a crucial element in feminist humor. I argue that feminist humor incorporates multi-voiced, intersectional audiences and aims to elevate individuals' experiences and to deconstruct social inequalities. Feminist humor engages feminist politics and disrupts hegemonic narratives by illuminating and mocking various social inequalities and stereotypes, rather than perpetuating them (Kaufman 1980; Merrill 1988).

Despite differences in style and approach (e.g., the overtly satirical comedy of Margaret Cho compared to the subtler observational humor of Ellen DeGeneres), social change is at the heart of feminist humor (Barreca 1991; Gilbert 2004; Kaufman 1980; Lavin 2004; Mizejewski 2014; Walker 1988). Cultural constraints on women's expression, such as taboos against speaking about sexuality or using obscenities, have historically limited content deemed appropriate for women's humor. However, women's humor often covertly conceals its aggression by relying on the comedic devices of understatement, irony, and self-deprecation. Self-deprecating humor, though, does not necessarily work hegemonically by reinforcing dominant norms (Barreca 1991; Walker 1988; see also Lauzen 2012), and instead uses incongruity to expose gender expectations. Feminist humor introduces uncomfortable subject material that has historically excluded and disadvantaged women, and it may be subversive for its audiences because it suggests that existing social norms can be challenged and (re)constructed (Bing 2007). Feminist humor is "rebellious" and "self-affirming," generally targeting *systems* of oppression rather than individual characters as the source

of ridicule (Merrill 1988; Walker 1988; Walker and Dresner 1998). By extension, feminist comedy is empowering because it privileges the complexities and realities of women's experiences (Bing 2004; Merrill 1988).

Given the rapid rise in accessibility of these routines online and on cable TV, the reach of feminist messages through comedy is extending. Women stand-up comedians, specifically, have garnered increased publicity and visibility in recent years, which has coincided with broadening industry practices that promote diversity in programming and attracting diverse audiences (Marx 2016). Through increased opportunities for women to write and craft their own material, new media make it more likely for this material to reach diverse audiences.

Part I: Women's Stand-Up Comedy and Subversive Narratives

Stand-up comedy has been a prominent feature of American popular culture since its earliest days; from the tradition of jesters and circus clowns providing verbal stand-up comedy, to vaudeville and variety theater, as well as night club and resort entertainment. In recent decades, the emergence of comedy clubs has propelled stand-up comedy into a cultural form of entertainment in its own right (Mintz 1985; Wilson 2011). In the 1950s, rooms and clubs emerged specifically for stand-up comedy as a distinct art form. Later, in the period between the late 1970s through the 1990s, comedy's popularity exploded in both physical and mediated venues. Comedy Central, a cable channel devoted to comedy, and stand-up comedy concert films also emerged during this period (Nachman 2003). The alternative comedy scene of 1990s coincided with rise of more women in comedy and increased use of personal stories/narratives in stand-up as opposed to "setup, punchline" formats.

A slowly growing body of literature points to the politically and culturally subversive potential of comedy (Davis 1993; Fine 1985; Rossing 2012), and of women's/feminist comedy in particular (Barreca 1988, 1991; Lavin 2004; Merrill 1988; Mizejewski 2014; Reed 2011; Rowe 1995; Walker 1988). The focal points of research on feminist comedy range in context and genre, from women's comic literature (Bilger 1998), to counterhegemonic portrayals of class and gender in the sitcom *Roseanne* (Senzani 2010), to gendered Internet humor (Shifman and Lemish 2010). However, there has been a surprising lack of critical scholarship on women's and feminist stand-up comedy (the few notable exceptions include Fraiberg 1994; Gilbert 1997, 2004; Greenbaum 1997; Lavin 2004). Feminist comedy narratives emphasize that there is no one objective "truth," recognizing that knowledge is socially and politically produced. Stand-up comedy narratives may therefore be transformative in that they give voice to marginalized subjects and potentially produce an oppositional consciousness.

In many ways, women's stand-up comedy serves as a cultural index reflecting social change, especially considering that women were culturally restricted from performing stand-up until the 1950s and early 60s. The emergence of women in stand-up and changes experienced by women in comedy "read like a social history of the United States" (Lavin 2004:128; see also Caliskan 1995; Fraiberg 1994; Walker 1988). According to Fraiberg (1994), feminist stand-up comedy is much more than simple comic relief; the joy women experience when performing and watching stand-up may be grounded in the "subversive effects produced by humor that gets away with something" (328). For some, the mere presence of women performing comedy is subversive in and of itself because women who enter the "old boys' club" are perceived as subtly undermining the social system (Caliskan 1995). Women are socially conditioned to avoid confrontation, but stand-up

comedians by nature engage and confront audiences, and thus in order to be successful, women comics must eschew traditional norms of social behavior (Greenbaum 1997). In order for women to succeed in exposing double standards and incongruities of dominant culture, they must first break away from traditional expectations of passivity and submission (Walker 1988). In my analysis, I focus on the extent to which women's stand-up narratives reinforce or subvert hegemonic cultural discourses.

From a social constructionist perspective (Berger and Luckmann 1966), narratives are important for identity construction and meaning making (Franzosi 1998; Loseke 2007). By way of storytelling, "narratives create identity at all levels of human social life" (Loseke 2007:661). Loseke (2007) discusses different types of narratives and observes that narratives of identity "are produced at cultural, institutional, organizational, and individual levels of social life" (662). First, at the macro level, cultural narratives are stories that establish social classifications and create a collective representation of a group identity (e.g., the "standard North American family"). Second, institutional narratives construct identity at the level of public policy, such as policies that concern the identity of "Dreamers" in immigration policy debates. Third, organizational identity narratives are crafted by organizers and workers at various types of organizations, programs, and groups (e.g., schools, prisons, counseling centers). Finally, personal narratives consist of social actors' self-stories that they tell in order to make sense of their selves and social experiences.

I am particularly interested in how comedians share personal narratives that reflect various cultural narratives. Personal narratives are analytically useful for what they reveal about social life in that "culture 'speaks itself' through an individual's story" (Riessman 1993:5; see also Polletta et al. 2011). Comedic narratives, in particular, provide links between individual storytelling and

macro structures and cultural discourses. Personal narratives are situated and evaluated within widely-circulating cultural narratives and formula stories (Loseke 2007). However, personal stories that contradict popularly known cultural narratives can serve as resistance narratives (Bingham and Green 2016b; see also Ewick and Silbey 1995).

Narratives have the capacity to reveal socially constructed “truths” as well as to unsettle power. Since they are generally conventionally structured and tend to reflect dominant cultural discourses, narratives (and academic attention to them) are often likely to express hegemonic assumptions (Mumby 1993), and thus, we ought to examine those narratives with transformative potential that strive to subvert dominant power relations (Ewick and Silby 1995). Stand-up narratives are cultural and linguistic acts of resistance (Greenbaum 1999; see also Bakhtin 1968) that can be quite rhetorically powerful (Gilbert 2004). Narratives enable an oppositional consciousness when they expose social structures often taken for granted, if only momentarily (Ewick and Silby 2003). My research focuses on stand-up comedy that attempts to subvert social order or existing hierarchies by mocking their existence.

Part II: Audience Reception Analysis

Griswold (2004) employs the “cultural diamond” to describe the interrelated facets of cultural analysis, focusing on the relationships between cultural producers, messages, consumers, and the social world. As Griswold observes, “the ultimate success of a cultural object depends on its listeners or viewers, its audiences, its consumers—in other words, on the cultural recipients who make their own meanings from it” (91). Pioneering audience reception studies examined how consumers differentially interpret meaning from different types of media texts (Ang 1985; Jhally &

Lewis 1992; Morley 1980; Press 1991; Radway 1984). Research emerging from cultural and media studies insists that media consumers are not passive recipients of some innate textual meaning. Rather, audience members are active consumers in constructing and negotiating meanings and interpretations in media texts (Hall 1980; Radway 1984). As Gledhill (1988) writes, “the cultural ‘work’ of the text concerns the generation of different readings; readings which challenge each other, provoke social negotiation of meanings, definitions and identities” (106).

Examining the ways that audiences interpret and make meaning from media texts is a pertinent topic for sociological inquiry grounded in symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1933; Gamson 1992; see also Hughey 2010). Following the rise of motion pictures as cultural entertainment in the early twentieth century, Blumer (1933) examined how early films “shape conceptions of life and influence subsequent schemes of conduct” (141) through media imagery and representation. By empirically analyzing moviegoers’ interpretations, Blumer asserted that “what is shown may carry authority and the conviction of correctness” (189). Analyzing audience reception to stand-up comedy is similarly intriguing for illuminating how audiences unpack identity in comedy narratives, and additionally, for how audiences interpret stand-up.

My audience reception research draws from cultural studies to bring a critical lens to an interactionist perspective. As Denzin (1992) observes, “implicitly and explicitly, interactionists have always been involved in cultural criticism” (123). Critical cultural scholarship, however, traditionally tended to focus on hegemonic texts and readings (e.g., Thatcherism), but this research examines how feminist comedy routines operate as subversive or counterhegemonic texts. Denzin (1992) discusses aesthetic experience as a form of emotionality, where “interaction with the cultural object is experienced politically... Every aesthetic experience is potentially a political

experience wherein the politics of the act are displaced into the emotionality and the emotional meanings brought to the experience” (135). Denzin writes that one can easily observe singing the national anthem as evoking feelings of patriotism or nationalism. What is less obvious, however, is the politics involved in something like watching Saturday morning cartoons, or in the present case, in a stand-up comedy performance.

Contemporary audience scholarship emphasizes the role of demographics and identity for decoding processes and interpretation patterns. Intersectionality is a key framework underlying my analysis because audiences actively decode and interpret meanings from media texts based on their respective cultural competencies of their social and cultural locations (Hall 1980; Radway 1984). By examining media reception alongside social demographic factors (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, social class), scholars discuss how the self is articulated through contemporary cultural texts (Brunsdon 1981; Press 1991; Radway 1984; Wilson 2011; Wood 2005). “Referential viewing” entails the process of “relating [one’s] own subjective experience to television texts” (Wood 2005:115; see also Liebes & Katz 1986). Modes of referential viewing are often considered a source of pleasure in popular culture consumption (Milestone & Meyer 2012). In stand-up, comedic narratives are encoded with recognizable frames and codes, but through satire and distortion of meanings, they may potentially work to deconstruct—and disrupt—dominant discourses. Watching stand-up comedy, therefore, may potentially provide an interpretive space for *critical referential viewing*. Women’s stand-up narratives offer relatable narrations of marginalized experience, particularly for women and minority audience members.

Previous Scholarship on Comedy Audiences

Comedy as a genre of entertainment is notoriously polysemic because of how meanings are layered or even reversed, and research on audiences of comedy has become a recently emergent area of scholarly interest. First, one trajectory of research borrows Bourdieu's lens to investigate the connections between social class, level of education, and comedy "tastes" ranging from highbrow to lowbrow (Claessens & Dhoest 2010; Friedman & Kuipers 2013; Kuipers 2006). For example, Claessens and Dhoest (2010) examine how education and "taste" influence one's appreciation of comedy and subsequent preferences for highbrow, middlebrow, or lowbrow comedy. Not too surprisingly, Claessens and Dhoest found that comedy tastes were connected to broader media tastes in that less educated individuals expressed preferences for lowbrow simple humor and transparent media with stereotypical characters. Conversely, more highly educated individuals presented themselves as cultural omnivores—consuming both highbrow and lowbrow comedy, but maintaining sharp distinctions between the two. They praise the difficult and subtle humor of highbrow comedy while demonstrating less appreciation for lowbrow comedy by labeling it as merely for mindless entertainment. As the above researchers observe, there is a necessary level of cultural capital (viewed via proxies of education) required to "get" and appreciate highbrow comedy. Accounting for education and cultural capital is thus important for our understanding of audience interpretive resources. Participants in this study consist of university undergraduate students, so they are more likely to align with the higher educated individuals of these previous studies.

Moreover, much of the current research on comedy audiences has focused on the relationship between race and comedy, examining how audiences (of different races) interpret

racial humor and racial stereotypes in comedy (Green & Linders 2016; Jhally & Lewis 1992; Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin 2006; Perks 2012). In their study on audiences of *Rush Hour 2*, Park et al. (2006) found that conventions of the comedy genre tend to naturalize racial differences, and representation in the film did not generate an oppositional consciousness for black and Asian audience members. Perks (2012) identified three decoding positions in her audience reception analysis of *Chappelle's Show*. According to Perks, audiences of satiric texts reflected a continuum of interpretive work, and they tended to take on one of the following decoding positions: 1) "Neutral meanings," or refusing to acknowledge the show's ideological implications; 2) "Surface meanings," or an emphasis on how the text accurately reflects reality; or 3) "Derived meanings," or actively deriving higher meanings from humorous exaggerations of reality.

There is limited audience reception research that examines gender differences in comedy reception. Stillion and White (1987) found that both gender and sympathy toward feminist values impact responses to feminist humor. Additionally, Bore (2010) investigated how men and women negotiate perceptions of the relationship between gender and comedy, and she found that both men and women audiences gendered the comedy in their discussions and constructed a symbolic hierarchy ranking women-centered comedy shows as more trivial and thought to have little relevance to the male viewers. According to Bore (2010), audiences tend to value male-dominated shows over female-dominated shows, and they perceive women's sketch performances as less demanding or of lower quality. This research therefore aims to fill a gap in the research on audiences of stand-up comedy, and additionally, attempts to build on the current literature to offer a more intersectional lens to decoding processes of women's comedy. Two new styles of feminist

comedy—ironic/incongruous and charged—have emerged in women’s humor that leave us wondering how audiences might respond.

Finally, future research in audience reception analysis should address the role of audience interactional contexts. When the viewer is alone, watching comedy on Netflix or on a computer screen, one’s demographic variables are the primary independent variables to consider. But, when the viewer is with peers, friends, family members, or even strangers, the interactional context may lead to interpretation patterns based in part on the shared meanings within that group. My project moves in this direction by contrasting the interpretations of particular types of homogenous and heterogeneous groups. I discuss my audience reception findings in Part II.

PART I:

FUNNY GIRLS: NARRATIVE ANALYSES OF WOMEN'S STAND-UP COMEDY

CHAPTER THREE:

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS: SELECTED STAND-UP TEXTS AND METHODOLOGY²

In Part I of this dissertation, I analyze and discuss three women's stand-up comedy narratives. Through narrative analysis of routines by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho, I examine how these three women use personal narratives in stand-up humor to illuminate broader cultural narratives. In this chapter, I shall briefly introduce the comedy careers of Schumer, Sykes, and Cho, and additionally, I then describe my narrative analysis methodology. First though, despite their differences in age, race, ethnicity, topic material, style of comedy, and public personae, I will briefly outline the commonalities between these three comedians and why they were selected for analysis.

I selected these three comedians for several reasons. First, I am primarily interested in mass-mediated stand-up comedy that is broadcasted to a wide audience. As I discussed earlier, large-venue and arena stand-up comedy (Lockyer 2015), which is often filmed and later mass-distributed, has become an increasingly popular type of entertainment. In addition to the live audience experience, audiences can now watch stand-up comedy performances from the comfort of their living rooms by viewing stand-up on TV or through online services.

² Portions of this chapter can be found in a forthcoming article (to be published) in *Sociological Focus* and have been reproduced with permission from Taylor and Francis. A copy of the Author Use Document is included in Appendix A.

Accordingly, stand-up has also arguably become celebritized in recent years, and I argue these three comics have each achieved celebrity status with widespread visibility in the U.S. public sphere. Schumer, Sykes, and Cho have each headlined several successful stand-up tours, each has starred or appeared in films and television shows, and each of the three has also written at least one book. Furthermore, from a production perspective, these three popular comedians also have experience working behind-the-scenes as writers and producers. All three have helmed various projects as executive producer as well, including each of the three DVD stand-up routines selected for this analysis.

To illustrate their respective popularities, each of these three comedians was recently listed in *Rolling Stone's* 2017 list of "50 Best Stand-up Comics of All Time" (Love 2017). Wanda Sykes (#50), Margaret Cho (#48), and Amy Schumer (#43) collectively comprise three of the eleven total women stand-up comics included in the list. These types of lists are quite telling about gender disparities in the world of stand-up: Joan Rivers (#6) is the only woman on the *Rolling Stone* list to make the top 30 out of 50. Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho are two of only three women of color included on the list (Moms Mabley being the third). In the following sections, I provide a brief overview of Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho.

Amy Schumer: *Mostly Sex Stuff* (2012)

Amy Schumer is a contemporary celebrity who is well-known for her controversial brand of feminist (and feminine?) stand-up humor. At the time of this writing Amy Schumer is currently having her moment in the pop culture spotlight. The writer and host of the Emmy-Award winning satirical variety sketch show *Inside Amy Schumer* (on Comedy Central) also wrote and starred in the

2015 comedy blockbuster *Trainwreck*. Schumer has received widespread mainstream notoriety; for instance, she was named among *Time* magazine's 2015 list of 100 Most Influential People. In June 2015, Jason Zinoman of *The New York Times* explained that "the press obsessively covers Ms. Schumer because she is on the verge of [becoming] the pace-setter in stand-up." Schumer also recently penned her 2016 comedic memoir *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo*.

Amy Schumer often performs her stand-up tours in sold-out arena shows. Schumer's debut *Mostly Sex Stuff* performance was filmed at The Fillmore, a historic venue in San Francisco that seats 1150. At the time of this writing, Schumer has since performed in several larger venues, including New York City's famous Apollo Theater (seating 1500) and Madison Square Garden arena (seating 20,700), as well as other arenas across the country such as Tampa, Florida's Amalie Arena (which seats 20,500). Following *Mostly Sex Stuff*, Schumer wrote, produced, and performed *Amy Schumer: Live at the Apollo* (2015) which aired on HBO and *The Leather Special* (2017) for release on Netflix.

Amy Schumer has also recently become more publicly active in political advocacy outside of her comedy. For example, following the July 2015 movie theater shooting in Lafayette, LA in a screening of her film *Trainwreck*—some have speculated that the shooter purposefully targeted the film for its presumed feminist content (O'Neil 2015)—Schumer joined forces with her cousin and U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer in lobbying for gun reform legislation. More recently, Amy Schumer garnered national news attention when approximately 200 audience members walked out of her 2016 Tampa, FL arena show after she mocked then-presidential candidate Donald Trump. Additionally, Schumer is a frequent subject of discussion in the larger "cultural conversation about feminism" (Dow 1996:xiv), notably within various public discussions that distinguish

intersectionality from white feminism. Regardless of how the media blogosphere characterizes Schumer's feminist status, Amy Schumer is joining the ranks of other comedians blurring the lines between comedy, art, and politics.

Wanda Sykes: *I'ma Be Me* (2009)

Wanda Sykes has had a decades-long comedy career, working in a variety of comedy outlets and mediums. In addition to performing stand-up, she has worked in both television and film comedy, hosted her own TV show, and wrote her book, *Yeah, I Said It*, in 2004. Sykes first performed stand-up in 1987 at a Coors Light Super Talent Showcase, and her comedy career took off in the 1990s when she moved to New York City. Entering the comedy scene during the 1990s' black comedy boom (Littleton & Littleton 2012), Sykes achieved much under-the-radar success for several years. In New York she opened for Chris Rock, and later won her first Emmy as a writer for *The Chris Rock Show*. At the time of this writing, Sykes has been nominated for seven Emmy Awards, including nominations for both of her HBO stand-up specials, *Sick and Tired* (2006) and *I'ma Be Me* (2009).

Wanda Sykes has also had an extensive career in film and television comedy. She is featured in several major films such as *Nutty Professor II: The Klumps*, *Pootie Tang*, *Over the Hedge*, *Ice Age*, and *Monster-In-Law*; and Sykes also provides comedic support through recurring TV roles on shows such as *Crank Yankers*, *The New Adventures of Old Christine*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Black-ish*. In 2003 she wrote, produced, and starred in her own, albeit short-lived, sitcom on FOX called *Wanda At Large*. From 2009-2010 Sykes hosted her own *The Wanda Sykes Show* on FOX—becoming one of the few women in TV history to have her own late-night show.

Sykes is known for tackling various political issues in her comedy, and she is similarly known for her political advocacy off the stage. As Littleton & Littleton (2012) write, “Wanda had comedy specials, her own talk show, and a social conscience” (124). In 2008, shortly after the presidential election that year, Wanda Sykes publicly came out at a pro-LGBTQ rally in Las Vegas. As she explains in her 2009 stand-up, she “had to” because she was “so hurt and so fucking pissed” about Prop 8. She was later selected as Head Roaster at the 2009 White House Correspondents’ Dinner, an event she also discusses in her 2009 stand-up. Sykes currently continues her activism in addition to her comedy.

Sykes’ second HBO special, *I’m a Be Me*, was filmed at the Warner Theatre in Washington, D.C., which has a seating capacity of 1847. Her 2009 stand-up special was well-received; for example, *I’m a Be Me* is ranked #9 on *Rolling Stone*’s list of “25 Best Stand-Up Specials and Movies” (Tobias, Ciabattini, Murray, Love, Grierson, & Fear 2015). Consistent with her “no-bullshit attitude” and “loud, in-your-face persona” (Empson 2010), Sykes uses the comedy stage to unapologetically interrogate topics such as American politics, The Obama First Family, racism, immigration, and marriage equality.

Margaret Cho: *Cho Dependent* (2011)

Margaret Cho has had a similar career trajectory as Wanda Sykes, successfully taking on a variety of comedy outlets since the 1990s, including stand-up, TV/film, music, comedy writing, and as a book author. Cho is likely best known for her long career doing stand-up comedy, but she first gained notoriety for her 1994 sitcom *All American Girl*. The sitcom was loosely based off Cho’s stand-up material focusing on her life as a first-generation Korean-American, and it was the first

major TV network show to follow an Asian American family since *Mr. T and Tina* that aired two decades earlier. As such, Cho is arguably a cultural pioneer in mainstream Asian American representation (Park 2014). However, *All-American Girl* was canceled after only one season following shifting network demands pertaining to whether Cho was “Asian enough,” and conversely, whether she was “American enough.” Cho later starred in the semi-scripted “celebreality” sitcom *The Cho Show*, which she also wrote and produced. According to Park (2014), the commercial failures of *All-American Girl* and *The Cho Show* can be traced to institutionalized racial and gender biases in television industries, and it further illuminates networks’ shifting models of representation of ethnic identity—from assimilationist to more diverse, niche marketing (Park 2014).

Although her television shows were short-lived, Cho has had much more success in her stand-up career, where she uses comedy as a platform for political advocacy (Krefting 2014; Pearson 2009). Cho is notorious for her ‘grotesque’ stand-up humor (Pelle 2010) and her directness in speaking about social issues such as sexuality (Lee 2014; Pelle 2010), bicultural identity, and ironic essentialism of Asian culture (Lowrey & Renegar 2017), but that has not prevented her from periodically garnering mainstream recognition for her work. Margaret Cho is a two-time Grammy nominee for her comedy albums *Cho Dependent* (2013) and *American Myth* (2017). Cho was also nominated for an Emmy in 2012 for Outstanding Guest Appearance for her impersonation of Kim Jong-il on *30 Rock*. Cho has arguably attained feminist stand-up icon status because, no longer constrained by network television or affiliate standards, she has the latitude to overtly combat various social ills through her charged comedy (Krefting 2014). Her *Cho Dependent*

(2009) act, which I analyze in this dissertation, was filmed in Atlanta, GA at The Tabernacle theater, a notorious music venue in Atlanta that seats 2600 people.

Like Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho is also well-known for her outspoken social activism. As an advocate for marriage equality, immigrant rights, reproductive rights, and free speech, “her speaking position surpasses the comic frame” (Pearson 2009:37). Cho takes on the speaking position of “symbolic assassin,” and according to Pearson (2009), this position is powerful because it “functions to expand the space for dissent against disparate power relations” (37). As I will discuss, I am particularly interested in this aspect of feminist stand-up, where comedians blur the boundaries between ideological battles and entertainment. Stand-up comedy is sociologically intriguing in large part because of the potential cultural and rhetorical power of subversive narratives.

Method: Narrative Analysis

This analysis approaches these stand-up performances as narrative texts and pays attention to their performative aesthetics as a whole; including, language, content, dress, and gestures. Each comedian’s style of stand-up humor consists of a series of personal narratives and vignettes organized with characters, plots, and settings. “Personal narratives are, at core, meaning-making units of discourse” (Riessman 2002:705; see also 1993) that are constructed, told, heard, and evaluated in a particular historical context (Loseke 2007). Although the audience does not necessarily expect stand-up storytelling to be “truthful,” I examine how these comedic narratives may resonate and the extent to which they reveal shared social experiences and the constructedness of macro cultural narratives.

Analysis began with “a long preliminary soak” (Hall 1975:15) of initial prolonged engagement with each stand-up text to become familiar with the comedian’s style and moments of emphasis in her performance, hearing it in different contexts to examine the latent meanings of her stated narratives. The three stand-up routines (each one lasting between 60 and 90 minutes) were then transcribed from their DVD formats by the author to allow for multiple “close readings” of both the transcribed text and the visual performance in order to inductively investigate the comedic narrative scaffolding and meaning making. Taking a grounded approach, coding began with a phase of “initial coding” during close readings of the transcript. After assessing which initial codes were the most prominent, I engaged in a second phase of “focused coding” (Charmaz 2008) that attended to the emergent themes. In my analysis of Schumer’s *Mostly Sex Stuff*, prominent themes emerged concerning gender performance and representations of women’s sexuality, white femininity and physical attractiveness, and racial humor and the role of whiteness (Chapter 4). In contrast to Schumer’s performance of ironic hyper-femininity and subtle subversions, Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho’s performances are overtly political and counterhegemonic in their style of comedy. The major analytic themes from Sykes’ *I’m a Be Me* and Cho’s *Cho Dependent* focus on the ways that subversive narratives reflect the lived experiences of marginalized identities and deconstruct cultural discourses (Chapter 5). Moreover, during coding and analysis, ongoing analytic memo writing was a useful practice for continuously reflecting on my findings and analysis (Charmaz 2008).

I took an inductive approach to investigate emerging themes and patterns. However, while my analytic approach was inductive, it is important to reiterate that I conceptualize these narrative texts as culturally and historically situated. Media texts are more broadly understood as “a

distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement [to examine the] narrative character of media content, its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated ‘reality’” (Fürsich 2009:238). In other words, drawing from Stuart Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding model, texts are produced for audiences, and thus are encoded with connotative values that reflect current ideological and naturalized assumptions. Coding for analysis therefore tended to emphasize the bits and moments in each stand-up where the comedian uses, and then disrupts, the meanings of cultural codes and frames.

Researcher Positionality Statement

One of the core tenets of feminist standpoint theory maintains that reality is socially constructed, and knowledge is historically contextualized. As such, it is important to critically reflect on the ways my own positionality and life experience shapes my research process and analysis. Practicing reflexivity in research entails critical introspection by the researcher, an “explicit self-aware meta-analysis” (Finlay 2002:209). As a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who is working on her Ph.D., my positionality inevitably shapes my interpretive toolkit. My social position influences my subjective social experiences, interactions, and worldview. In my analyses of Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho, I take on alternating positions of “insider” and “outsider” according with shifting social life narratives shared by the three women.

My social position may also influence the design, implementation, and analysis of this research. Positionality acknowledges that, as a researcher, I am not separate from the social world I aim to study. I have a longstanding interest in women in comedy, though I was not consciously aware of this fact until recent introspection during the course of this study. When I was young, I

became an avid fan of *I Love Lucy* by watching re-runs that aired every night on *Nick at Nite*. Later, in my early twenties, I began following various celebrity comedians such as Chelsea Handler and Sarah Silverman. I was intrigued by how these women seemed to “break barriers” in various ways (of course, I did not have the language to articulate my early interests in comedy then). So, in many ways it is not surprising that I chose women’s comedy as my topic of study. Interestingly, though, my findings have led me to reflect on my early comedy interests, particularly in the ways audiences are drawn to comedy that reflects their own experiences in some way. I particularly enjoy watching comedy that resonates with my personal experiences that are not typically represented in the mainstream consciousness, from Chelsea Handler’s narratives of single womanhood to Trae Crowder’s “liberal redneck” humor.

Overview: Chapter Four and Chapter Five

In the following two chapters, I present and discuss my narrative analysis of three women’s stand-up performances: First, in Chapter 4, I discuss my analysis of Amy Schumer’s stand-up comedy. Next, in Chapter 5 I examine routines by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho. These three stand-up acts are organized into two conceptual chapters for a number of reasons.

First, in the current stand-up comedy landscape within popular culture, Amy Schumer is representative of a recently emergent cohort of women comics who are heteronormatively attractive, feminine, and white (Ballou 2014; Mizejewski 2014). Like fellow contemporary comics Chelsea Handler, Sarah Silverman, Whitney Cummings, Nikki Glaser, and Iliza Shlesinger, Amy Schumer uses her hyper-feminine (and white) embodied appearance as part of her comedic performance, allowing her to deconstruct the “pretty vs. funny” binary (Mizejewski 2014). In short,

Schumer uses her sex appeal to make her point and to reach wide audiences while subtly engaging feminist politics, and this recently emerging popular culture phenomenon is noteworthy.

In contrast, previous scholarship has examined and analyzed both Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho—who both emerged in an earlier decade—somewhat extensively, for their respective roles in shaping contemporary women’s comedy (Gilbert 2017; Krefting 2014; Lee 2014; Lowrey & Renegar 2017; Mizejewski 2014; Park 2014; Pearson 2009; Pelle 2010; Reed 2011; Rossing 2016; Willett, Willett, & Sherman 2012). For example, Pearson (2009) examines Margaret Cho’s *Assassin* stand-up act and explores the ways Cho reconstructs narrative imagery pertaining to Asian and queer bodies, thereby expanding the discursive space for dissent and symbolically “doing the work of bombs.” Willett et al. (2012) describe how Wanda Sykes effectively performs intersectionality theory for her audiences, where she illuminates the “nodes of power” that maintain systems of domination. According to the authors, “the contagious laughter of Sykes’ black lesbian humor jolts white heteros from their normative scripts” (235). I build on these insights stemming from previous analyses of comedy by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho, and I discuss the socio-cultural significance of feminist/political, activist-oriented stand-up comedy by examining these two comedians in a sociological context. In particular, I explore how subversive narratives in the public sphere, including popular culture (i.e., stand-up), have a potentially critical role as cultural pedagogy.

CHAPTER FOUR:
BREAKING THE CRASS CEILING? PERFORMING IRONY AND WHITE FEMININITY IN AMY SCHUMER'S
MOSTLY SEX STUFF STAND-UP³

Stand-up comedy has a long history as a source of cultural entertainment (Mintz 1985) and contemporary stand-up reflects the contours and fluidity of identity politics (Gillota 2015). Given that the comedy club has historically been a traditionally masculine space (Fraiberg 1994; Gilbert 2004), critically examining women's performances of stand-up is significant for understanding how, against the odds, they have successfully staked a claim and found an audience in this masculine art scene. This chapter explores the distinctive ways in which one woman's comedic performance reflects on and plays with women's cultural realities and experiences, sometimes forcing audiences to question their taken-for-granted political viewpoints. As one of the most popular, and controversial, comedians to hit the stage in years, Amy Schumer has broken into a still mostly-male stand-up stratosphere by assuming the persona of a harmless, feminine, stylish young 30-something-year-old woman who then shocks viewers repeatedly with her fearless and crass insights into the absurd everyday circumstances of a patriarchal society. Schumer's stand-up performance is marked by the juxtaposition of raunchy sexual material with exaggerated white

³ A version of this chapter has been accepted for publication in *Sociological Focus* (forthcoming) and has been reproduced with permission from Taylor and Francis. A copy of the Author Use Document is included in Appendix A.

femininity, allowing her to hone a persona beautiful enough to garner respect in a looks-centered society, but grotesque enough to provoke thoughtful reexamination of the absurdities of said society.

I examine Amy Schumer's debut televised stand-up special *Mostly Sex Stuff* through a feminist lens applied to a Goffmanian interactionist framework, and I discuss Schumer's front and performance as a dramaturgical social critique. Goffman asserts that audiences tend to expect consistency between one's "appearance" and their "manner," but Schumer has established her high-profile brand of comedy through strategic juxtaposition between her performances of white femininity and her crass sexual humor. Upon initial observation, Schumer appears bubbly, nonchalant, and sometimes even confused on the surface, but as the routine continues her words and gestures suggest otherwise by undercutting dominant views of femininity and women's humor. Through narrative analysis of Schumer's routine, I suggest that a "comedic sociology" (Smith 2015) offers a ripe social space for exercising the sociological imagination, giving audiences a vivid perspective on the intersection of personal and public issues, as biographical narratives and macro cultural narratives bump up against each other through juxtaposition, incongruity, alternative meanings, and resistance.

Currently discussed as a potential "pace-setter in stand-up" (Zinoman 2015), Schumer's hour-long stand-up special originally aired on Comedy Central in August 2012 and this performance was formative to her emerging celebrity status. Wearing her usual short dress, high heels, and neatly styled long blonde hair, Amy Schumer embodies traditional white middle-class femininity in her appearance. Schumer opens her routine with a skit about having sex with minors and calling her mother a "cunt," setting the general tone of the performance. In contrast to her

performance of demure femininity, the juxtaposition between her provocative punchlines and her playful, innocent delivery elicits shock value and controversy. Appropriately titled *Mostly Sex Stuff*, she delivers material on sex, masturbation, pubic hair, “ass play,” abortion, and even donating blood, or what she refers to as “getting an AIDS test.”

While some audiences may assume that Schumer’s raunchy comedy is intended to simply garner shock value, I suggest instead that her stand-up performance exemplifies the potential for comedy to blur the lines between entertainment and social critique. For instance, when Schumer discusses the cultural evolution of women’s maintenance of their “privates,” she humorously unpacks and exposes how patriarchal culture and the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) shape how women are to be represented (hairless, “like toddlers”). Schumer suggests that “ten, fifteen years ago all the dudes got together and had, like, a meeting. Like a fantasy football draft about our privates. ... And then they just came to us, and they were just like, ‘Ladies, would you mind looking like babies again?’ And we were like, ‘Uh, like, what do you mean? Just clean up the sides a little bit? Or...?’ [men:] ‘*The whole enchilada.*’” Here, Schumer illuminates and mocks patriarchal culture by comparing culturally imposed beauty norms of hairlessness to fantasy football picks to be consumed and objectified. Her performance of traditional white femininity reveals these subtle ‘truths’ pertaining to gender identity as socially constructed in patriarchal society.

Narratives constructed in comedy can be rhetorically powerful (Gilbert 2004), and examining Schumer’s performance sheds light into the sociological significance of stand-up, where highlighting aspects of feminine performance such as shaving and hairlessness as cultural “gender displays” (Goffman 1979) opens the space for deconstruction and re-construction of everyday gender performance. Therein lies the subversive undertones of Amy Schumer’s stand-up. Aiming

to break the “crass ceiling” of American comedy, Schumer embodies a contemporary version of the “Unruly Woman” archetype (Mizejewski 2014; Rowe 1995) in her performance, bringing feminist issues to the forefront of popular culture and exposing audiences to the constructedness of social life. I first provide an overview of my theoretical framework for analyzing Schumer’s stand-up performance, followed by brief background discussion on women’s comedy to contextualize Schumer’s comedy. In my analysis, I show how Schumer’s performance plays with dominant ideologies pertaining to gender and race in particular, and I conclude by discussing the broader implications of this type of comedy for rethinking the social world.

Analyzing Stand-Up Comedy Performances

Goffman (1959) emphasizes that culture and context determine the definition of the situation, and individuals perform their role to an audience, adhering to culturally learned scripts. For Goffman, social consensus in defining the situation shapes one’s “front” and enables meaningful interaction. A “gender frame” (Ridgeway 2009) also influences an audience’s background expectations and interpretations of performances, including women’s stand-up comedy performances. In this sense, the juxtaposition between Schumer’s delivery (i.e., manner) and appearance of her onstage personal front (Goffman 1959) is noteworthy. Applying a feminist lens to Goffman, Schumer’s performance of conventional white middle-class femininity, albeit literally theatrical, has implications for conceptualizing everyday performances of gender. Although often neglected in feminist scholarship (West 1996), Goffman (1979) provided a non-essentialist account of gender as socially constructed by showing how “gender displays” are portrayed in Western media, revealing ideas about femininity as culturally constructed and reproduced, and

generally associated with passiveness, submissiveness, vulnerability, fragility, and infantilization. For Goffman, femininity is a role to perform—a continuous process of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987). As symbolic interactionists have long pointed out, the rules of society become most apparent when they are broken, and the carnival element of stand-up comedy renders visible and challenges taken-for-granted dominant cultural narratives about gender (Fraiberg 1994), race (Rossing 2016), and disability (Bingham & Green 2016a, 2016b).

In this chapter I examine Amy Schumer’s incongruous, frame-breaking white femininity. Amy Schumer’s “costume” consists of various semiotic codes of traditional white femininity and heteronormative attractiveness, including her dress, hair, and heels (Goffman 1959, 1979). The visual, verbal, and performative aesthetics are “active in both the construction of a message and the relationship between that message and the larger discursive context in which the message operates” (Goltz 2015:267). In addition to her appearance and content, Schumer’s bodily performative gestures, such as hair twirling, facial expressions of feigned confusion, coy deliberate smiles, and changes in voice tone all signal cues to the audience for framing her comedic material. Amy Schumer’s performance is meaningful in this regard because despite her appearance, her performance violates ideas about traditional femininity, thereby deconstructing gender displays and performance through humor and satire. In essence, through incongruity humor Schumer “keys” (Goffman 1974) the gender frame to expose the fragility of expectations surrounding women’s normative roles, inducing audiences to redefine the definition of the situation through her use of ribald comedy juxtaposed with her hyper-feminine appearance.

Contextualizing Amy Schumer and Contemporary Unruly Women

Although previously neglected in the literature (Finney 1994), critical scholarship has more recently begun to address women, minorities, and comedic performance, and a subsequent growing body of research explores comedy's subversive potential as a weapon for political and cultural power challenging patriarchal and racist ideology (Case & Lippard 2009; Fraiberg 1994; Gilbert 2004; Merrill 1988; Mizejewski 2014; Rossing 2012, 2016; Rowe 1995; Walker 1988; Willett et al., 2012). If we consider women's subjugation throughout history, and the power of humor to playfully question and resist elements of that subjugation, the increased public visibility of women's humor is socio-culturally meaningful. Women's comedy serves as a social lens focused on the historically situated cultural moment (Barreca 1991; Walker 1988), and the issue of physical appearance has historically been central to women's comedy (Horowitz 1997; Mizejewski 2014; Rowe 1995). For women to be considered funny it often meant that they were also 'funny looking,' and their perceived lack of physical attractiveness and sex appeal therefore "[gave] them a license for bawdiness" (Horowitz 1997:16).

Rowe (1995) employed a carnivalesque perspective to examine women in comedy and discussed "the unruly woman" in popular culture, who makes a spectacle of herself with her excessiveness, loose behavior, and a rejection of societal standards of feminine decorum and beauty. An emphasis on the meaning of bodies, and especially "grotesque" bodies, is a primary feature in carnival humor and, noting the cultural uneasiness of the female grotesque body in Western culture, Rowe asserts that the "grotesque body" (33) is the most pertinent feature of the unruly woman (e.g., Roseanne Barr, Miss Piggy). Unruly women are transgressive in that they become subjects (rather than objects) "of a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity, and

joy” (Rowe 1995:5). Amy Schumer, however, is emblematic of a cultural shift in the U.S. where there has been a recent emergence of comedic women in the public sphere, particularly of (hetero)normatively pretty and feminine funny women (Ballou 2014; Mizejewski 2014). She takes on an “ironic persona” (Lowrey, Renegar, & Goehring 2014) of a sarcastic, naïve ditz/slut, who looks feminine but delves into a variety of taboo and grotesque topics incongruous with her appearance. Schumer resists Rowe’s (1995) general representations of unruly women. Schumer is conventionally attractive, feminine, and innocent looking (“cabbage-patchy”), and she does not inhabit the grotesque or excessive body often characteristic of many of her comedic foremothers.

However, despite her feminine appearance, she frequently rejects and mocks the traditional narrative plots of romantic comedy (the more socially palatable form of female unruliness, according to Rowe) centering around love, marriage, and motherhood. Instead, Schumer is “excessive” with her grotesque sexual material. For example, Schumer describes her childhood friends as currently “living normal adult lives” and when they call to announce their pregnancies, she maintains that her reaction is more of concern than excitement: “I still react like, ‘What are you going to do?!’ I’m like, ‘I’ll drive you, I guess. Um.’ They’re like, ‘No, you’re gross.’ I’m like, ‘Oh. We keep them now. Um. We keep them...’” Schumer defies notions of passive femininity by suggesting that motherhood is not necessarily the expected or preferred outcome to sex and pregnancy. Schumer, coy and feigning confusion that women in their early thirties (Schumer notes that she is 31) would actually want to have children, thus serves as a parodic performance of femininity itself (Goltz 2015; Shugart 1999) by resisting the dominant narrative of motherhood.

Regarding Amy Schumer's performance of femininity, it is also important to emphasize how traditional femininity is indeed also racialized (Collins 2004; Dyer 1997). Femininity is typically associated with "milky white skin, long blonde hair, and slim figures" (Collins 2004:194) and Schumer's performance of femininity is therefore also marked by her whiteness. In many ways, her palatable persona and rising stardom are arguably due to the commercial marketability of whiteness afforded to her by her white privilege. Historically, traditional white femininity tends to ignore or overlook the role of white privilege. Thus, in the case of Amy Schumer's comedy, I examine the extent of her acknowledgement of and/or obliviousness to her own whiteness, and the role her narrative identity plays in interpreting her stand-up humor as that which 'laughs with' or 'laughs at.' Much of the previous humor scholarship tends to discuss comedy texts as *either* reinforcing *or* resisting dominant narratives of sexism and racism. Therefore, I aim to draw attention to a more intersectional analysis of comedy. As I discuss with the case of Amy Schumer's comedy, as a female comedian her comedy challenges the status quo of gender performances and expectations, but as a white female comedian Schumer also relies on stereotypical representations of other racial and ethnic groups. The findings presented here are discussed separately as 1) performing gender in comedy ("Doing Gender' and Cultural Critique through Comedy"), 2) the politics of white femininity and physical attractiveness ("Pretty Funny: White Femininity and Attractiveness in Comedy), and 3) the role of whiteness in reading racial humor ("Joking About Race"). Although discussed separately for elaboration, Schumer's performance of raunchy white femininity is the underlying analytic crux of this analysis of her stand-up comedy.

“Doing Gender” and Cultural Critique through Comedy

Throughout her stand-up performance, Schumer illuminates a number of cultural “truths” pertaining to gender performance and inequality. For instance, in referencing doing press while on tour, she notes that she is repeatedly asked the same question: “What’s the hardest part about being a female comedian? What is it?”... Well, it’s the rape.” After a pause and long laughter from the audience, she continues the skit:

No, but [reporters] ask, they’re just like—and I guess it’s a normal question, “Is it harder for female comics? Is it harder?” And it’s not. Like, they think we just get up here and just bleed all over the stage. I’m just, “oh, my ovaries! How do I keep them in my body?” Uh, like, it’s totally not harder. It’s harder to be a chick *in general*, for sure. That sucks. That’s not fun. [a few women cheer] Right? Right, girls? No, it is. It sucks. Just in terms of laziness. Like, look at the guys you’re here with tonight, okay? Some of them bangable, not all of them. Let’s be real... But most guys don’t do shit. Like, look at the shirts you guys are wearing. Every one of you that I can see, you could have worn that when you were a toddler on picture day... But look at the beautiful girls you’re with... It’s so much work for us. It takes me 90 minutes to look this mediocre. 90 minutes. Tonight it took eight hours, okay?... It’s so much work. Oh, we’re like clowns. We are circus freaks, women, we are. We put paint on our faces like warriors. We’re—I’m wearing stilts. We wear stilts, we wear heels all night. And we put a string in our buttocks, just- [humming circus music while pretending to walk awkwardly in heels] “Am I pretty? [whiny ‘feminine’ voice]” We wear jewelry, shiny shit. “Look over here, follow me to the altar!”

Utilizing incongruity humor, Schumer begins this skit by carnivalizing women’s marginalized status in comedy clubs. Schumer uses two gendered taboo images that represent women’s experiences with institutional sexism: sexual assault and perceptions of menstruation. Through grotesque imagery of “bleed[ing] all over the stage,” Schumer ridicules the cultural perception of comedy as a masculine space and that women face biological hindrances. In this particular bit, Schumer’s initial incongruous suggestion that “rape” is the hardest part of being a

female comedian is intended to shock, but also forces the audience to recognize the sexism in the question.

She explains that comedy itself is not difficult for women, but rather *being* a woman is perceivably harder because of cultural expectations that dictate how women ought to appear. Schumer then unpacks the body work and maintenance involved in conforming to gender displays, an involved performance that makes women like “circus freaks,” such as wearing makeup (“like clowns”), heels (or, “stilts”), and even thong underwear (“a string in our buttocks”). Schumer’s embodied performance of white femininity is significant in this regard because her appearance is representative of these same modes of body maintenance that she mocks. Hole (2003) discusses the carnival gender performance of comedian Dawn French and observes that “[comedians] theatrically ‘perform’ the routine, ordinary, everyday performance of gender. This ‘meta-performance’ offers a distance that makes the performance clear, emphasizing the strong element of masquerade in gender performance” (318). In this sense, through theatrical dramaturgical performance, Schumer illuminates the constructedness of gender performance and gender displays of femininity. As a heteronormatively attractive white woman on stage, her proclamation that it took her “90 minutes to look this mediocre” is a potentially subversive use of self-deprecation because it may signal a strong sense of group solidarity to illuminate and laugh at patriarchal gender expectations.

Sexual humor is also generally thought to be a masculine terrain and thus raunchy women comics are often deemed offensive (Horowitz 1997). The provocativeness of sexual humor is enticing to audiences, but while there is a long history of “dick jokes” in stand-up comedy, women’s sexual and gynecological humor are not as commonly articulated, nor are they as widely

accepted (Gilbert 2004). Rather than having a grotesque or excessive body, Amy Schumer is “excessive” in her unapologetic promiscuity and carnivalesque body humor, itself a potentially subversive move. At one point, for instance, she compares her vagina to a “petri dish” because she “had a busy month.” Schumer places her own sexuality at the foreground of her comedy, often provoking discomfort from the audience and challenging gendered binaries of what is “appropriate” for women to joke about. She places herself as the subject of sexual narratives, highlighting her own pleasures and dissatisfaction, and ridiculing male sexual partners for their ineptitude and grotesque bodies. For example, one guy was “so lazy” and “wouldn’t go down on [her].” Schumer tells the audience, “I had to become a climber every time, you know? [makes climbing motions and uses hands to peek over the edge] Head up there, just holding onto the headboard like a nosy neighbor peeking over the fence [like] Wilson from *Home Improvement*.” Here, Schumer embodies the unruly woman as a literal “woman on top” (Rowe 1995:43), revealing sexual double standards and evoking the “loose behavior” of an unruly woman by nonchalantly showcasing her sexuality and making fodder out of nameless one-night-stands.

Schumer subverts dominant heteronormative narratives about sex by joking about sex from a woman’s perspective. She explains, “I thought [this guy] was going to break up with me the whole time for the lamest reason. Because I wouldn’t swallow. But I have a nut allergy! Like, what did he expect? That I’m going to risk my life? For his empty calories? No! Stop telling us it’s good for our skin. Fuck *you guys*... Guys are so gross. Right?” Schumer then, explicitly, continues this skit by engaging feminist politics pertaining to sexuality and pornography:

So, yeah, I like porn... I don’t like to watch the end of any porn ‘cause guess what happens at the end of the rainbow every time. Spoiler alert! He comes on her face. Oh, what an amazing choose-your-own adventure, that always ends exactly the same. There’s never a twist, right? He’s never like, the guy is having sex with her,

and he looks off camera in her backpack. He's like, "Oh, are you reading that Nicholas Sparks book too? Oh my God, what are the chances? Let's start a bed and breakfast together." No. He just comes on her head. We don't want to see that. I don't want- Because we think about that girl. Like, that poor girl, and we know, as soon as the director yells "cut," that she's just stumbling around like Helen Keller, looking for a towel... [pretending to be blind] "You promise this is good for my skin?"

Her crass, sarcastic disapproval of porn is rooted primarily in gendered power structures of representation, where sexual pleasure is represented as men's sexual pleasure. Schumer thus carnivalizes the male gaze of heterosexual pornography as well as common tropes and frames of femininity (women reading Nicholas Sparks books and opening a bed & breakfast). Further, male comics tend to discuss women's bodies from the perspective of a consumer, and therefore Schumer's performance is significant on a substantive level where comedy may function to "address and express women's feelings of anger and victimization in a public context" (Gilbert 2004:91). Schumer's displeasure in this context is not derived from cultural associations of femininity as either prudish or hypersexualized. Instead, Schumer illuminates and mocks the cultural norms of representation that emphasize men's sexual pleasure and position women as sexual objects. By depicting men's sexual expectations as excessive and gross, and consequently porn as predictable (it "always ends exactly the same"), Schumer makes male-centered representations of sexuality the subject of derision and disrupts notions of female submissiveness. Moreover, she grants the hypothetical woman porn actor a rare sense of agency by taking her perspective ("we think about that girl"). And finally, crudely referencing Helen Keller looking for a towel—possibly as a metaphor of a woman blind to her own objectification—again explicates Schumer's willingness to break the frame of appropriateness in comedy while breaking the frame of women's appropriate orientations towards men's sexual exploits.

While topics related to sex and birth control are not uncommon topics in stand-up comedy (Gilbert 2004), Schumer's candid sexuality politicizes narratives about birth control, sex, and abortion. Recounting taking the morning-after-pill Plan B, she cheerfully announces that she actually takes it the night before because she's "smart": "I'm with you good people. I believe that birth begins at conception. So, I just, like, beat that shit!" Schumer goes on to note the stigma sometimes associated with women's reproductive health choices as she talks about walking into the pharmacy to pick up Plan B:

They're like, "what do you want?" And I was like, "Plan B." And they were like—they didn't even hide it. They were like, "ewww, you whore." I was like, "[makes surprised questioning face]. You can't, you can't say that." They were like, "you're gonna feel nauseous." I was like, "ugh." I took it. I felt *fine*. I went to yoga. I'm like, can these people tell I'm like mid-aborsh right now? [imitates yoga tree pose & hums "om"] This is easy. They should call it Plan A. That's how I used it. That's a great plan, let's start with this one.

Here, referring to the morning-after pill as Plan A and referencing the stigma around women's access to contraception, Schumer deconstructs aspects of reproductive politics and women's body autonomy. Further, although taking the Plan B pill is not technically the same process as having an abortion, by juxtaposing being "mid-aborsh" with doing yoga, a typically middle- and upper-class activity, Schumer challenges social class-based stereotypes of abortion and traditional middle-class femininity. Like other contemporary unruly women such as Sarah Silverman (Mizejewski 2014), Schumer not only disregards cultural standards and taboos, but she calls into question the gendered construction of such taboos where gross-out humor and politically incorrect comedy have historically been considered male turf. The shock value of Schumer's grotesque white femininity accomplishes more than simply grossing out the audience with vulgarities; Schumer utilizes sexual and grotesque themes to elucidate dominant discourses on

gender, femininity, race, and social class. By creating a paradox between her emphasized feminine appearance and her 'grotesque' humor, she not only illuminates the cultural coding of women's bodies (Mizejewski 2014; Rowe 1995), but she also invites resistance by forcing the audience to question what is pretty, feminine, or funny.

Pretty Funny: White Femininity and Attractiveness in Comedy

While Schumer is conventionally pretty and does not inhabit an excessive body, she further engages in body politics through her attractive (white) appearance that simultaneously resists the dominant cult of thinness. Whereas other current comics like Sarah Silverman and Chelsea Handler are both attractive and noticeably thin, Schumer makes a point to highlight her more "average" sized body throughout her humor by ridiculing body image standards for women. For example, in her acceptance speech for the Trailblazer Award at *Glamour UK's* Women of the Year Awards, Schumer remarked, "I'm probably like 160 pounds right now and I can catch a dick whenever I want." Similarly, throughout *Mostly Sex Stuff*, she frequently comments on bodies like hers, which according to Schumer would characteristically be "the base" of a "cheerleading pyramid." She also offers commentary on the relationship between her body image and sex appeal, suggesting that she "knows her body type" by the way men hit on her at bars, which is usually only at last call when the men start creepily pacing around "like Predator" to take someone home.

But when I do get hit on, like, this guy just came up to me, and he was from, like, Texas or somewhere I'm not going. And, uh—And he comes over, and he's like, "Hey, I like you. You're sturdy." I'm like, "I'm sorry?" He's like, "You look like you could take a punch." I'm like, "Oh. Well don't I feel like the belle of the ball?"

Schumer's engagement with narratives pertaining to bodies in comedy is significant because although she represents a feminine and attractive woman who is by no means overweight,

she plays up the perception that her body is excessive and that her appearance is “mediocre.” However, the emphasis on her body image as comedic fodder subtly reveals the constructed and internalized nature of “gender displays” (Goffman 1979) and the extent that culture regulates and constrains women’s bodies, particularly in public spaces. In another skit, she comments on her failure to achieve the classical beautiful (thin) body when she mentions one lover who tried to pick her up, but then had to set her back down because she was too heavy, commenting that, “it’s hard to feel sexy when a dude’s winded from trying to hoist you.” Her comedy on body image is at times self-deprecating which could, on one hand, be interpreted as a statement of dissatisfaction and merely making herself the butt of the joke, a common rhetorical device in women’s humor. However, self-deprecating humor can function subversively as cultural critique (Gilbert 2004; Walker 1988), and in the case of Amy Schumer, she not only challenges traditional beauty standards for women, but she also frequently turns the comedic gaze on patriarchal culture itself in her narratives. From a carnivalesque perspective, the parody in Schumer’s comedy is not so much about her own self-deprecation as it is a parody of a culture that values and rewards a particular image of women and positions women as sexual objects for a male gaze.

Additionally, Schumer articulates the notion that women are judged for their looks first before they speak when she recounts audience reactions before she was famous: “People had no idea who I was, so they would see a picture of me, and they’d be like, ‘Oh, she looks sweet. She kind of looks, like, Amish, you know? Like, kind of cabbage-patchy up top, right? We should bring the family. I bet she talks about, like, shopping.’ And then they get here and I’m like, ‘My pussy!’” Schumer challenges and subverts gendered expectations by using her appearance to pander to them, only to then incongruously disrupt them. Thus, the shock value of her comedy ultimately

relies on the cultural frame of expectations of traditional femininity and “the emphasis that many societies place on such cultural values as modesty, politeness, and passivity in the context of the female role” (Apte 1985:73). Through “ironic performativity” (Goltz 2015), Schumer exposes and subsequently challenges the dominant coding of her appearance and dominant discourses that shape and constrain meanings attached to “gender displays” (Goffman 1979).

She further parodies the ideals of middle-upper class white femininity in her narrative satirizing the “Stepford-wife” archetype. Here she recounts attending a wedding shower with “fancy Connecticut” women who are characterized as wearing cashmere cardigans, pearls, and “Burberry tampons.” In this skit, Schumer parodies expectations of marriage and gender displays of female submissiveness by depicting how the women spoke softly and unobtrusively, “almost in a whisper.” Explaining that the party was so boring that she was “mainlining chardonnay, trying to remember fun,” Schumer ridicules stereotypes of gender and social class by employing the dominant frame of white femininity and performing her identity in direct contrast to the “Stepford” women. In playing a game with these women that entails sharing a private confession with the group, “Bridgett” confesses her secret of sneaking into the kitchen at night to eat ice cream when her husband is not watching. In contrast to Bridgett’s confession, which highlights the policing of women’s bodies in that eating ice cream is a shameful secret, Schumer “wins the game” by cheerfully announcing, “one time I let a cab driver finger me.” As a contemporary version of the unruly woman, the juxtaposition between Schumer’s appearance and her manner/content operates as a “double text” (Walker 1988) by employing characteristics of dominant (i.e., patriarchal) culture to first garner acceptance from the audience, but then by subtly mocking the very system that makes her comedy seem ‘shocking.’

“Joking About Race”

Many of Schumer's *Mostly Sex Stuff* stand-up jokes are about gender and sex from a straight white woman's perspective, but Schumer also performs skits that explicitly identify characters in her narratives as racially 'Othered.' When Schumer makes jokes pertaining to race, she tends to use overt stereotypes and racially coded narratives. Representations of race in popular culture, including processes of racial stereotyping, have historically served to signify notions of white superiority and naturalized racial differences (Hall 1997; see also Denzin 2002). In the frame of stand-up comedy, however, comedy is a potential space in the public sphere where racial meanings are exposed and illuminated through irony and satire (Rossing 2012). In his analysis of political comedian Stephen Colbert, Rossing (2012) argues that *The Colbert Report* satirized postracial narratives and white privilege. Through his caricature pundit persona, Colbert identified, and then satirically denied, race-consciousness; this juxtaposition disrupts postracial narratives because it forces the audience to confront racism and racialism hidden in plain sight. Similarly, Lowrey et al. (2014) analyzed the “ironic persona” of Sarah Silverman and argue that the juxtaposition between Silverman's attractive looks and innocent delivery of seemingly taboo material makes the irony embodied in her performance visible: “Because she openly expresses an attitude that traditionally remains hidden or unsaid, the satire embedded within this message surfaces... The way in which Silverman seems to so blatantly express her desire to capitalize on white privilege emphasizes the irony and satire within her humor” (66-67). Thus, in some cases Amy Schumer's jokes may have the potential to illuminate racial biases rather than perpetuate them, depending on the extent that her own whiteness (and white privilege) is made visible.

However, while the comedy of Colbert and Silverman readily makes visible the satire of postracialism through ironic interrogation of white privilege, Schumer's racial content is more subtly satirical, and her delivery is less directly threatening to the status quo than her humor targeting gender politics. For example, in discussing one of her sexual exploits she jokes, "Black guys are the future. Some chicks are scared. You know what they say, 'Once you go black, your parents don't talk to you anymore.' Something like that, I don't know." Traditional white femininity has historically neglected the role of white privilege in the pursuit of gender equality, and thus on one hand, Schumer could be perceived here as embodying the trope of white women comedians laughing about sleeping with black men. However, since the audience is likely expecting her to complete the stereotypical phrase, "Once you go black, you never go back," the ultimate punchline and subject of parody here is the incongruous "your parents don't talk to you anymore" and the connotation that interracial dating is ridiculously still considered taboo.

Amy Schumer does parody her whiteness and white privilege when she describes her routine of getting a bikini wax from a woman who is "from the killing fields of Cambodia" who dislikes her. She explains,

But she should, she should hate me because I'm like—we're the worst. White, entitled girls. I walk in chewing gum, I'm on my phone. I'm just like, [imitating valley girl accent, holding the phone and smacking gum] I'm like, 'Don't get any wax on my new Uggs. [talking on phone] What?' [pauses] She's like, 'My parents were murdered in front of me.' I'm like, '[holds up pointer finger to shush] I'm on the phone. What? It's about *True Blood*. Give me one sec.'

She goes on to claim that ultimately the woman waxing her "wins" because white middle-class women are paying to have someone make them "look like a toddler" again. By employing the frame of a salon and suggesting that "white entitled girls" are the worst, Schumer illuminates white women's distance from the realities and experiences of women of color. Schumer parodies the

dominant frame of white feminism, where the satire emphasizes her middle-class material privilege in addition to a cultural tendency for white people to engage in racialized “Othering” (see Collins 2000). However, this skit represents one of the few instances in the stand-up where Schumer explicitly highlights and mocks her own white privilege in the context of joking about race.

In comedy, it is often difficult to discern whether the comic is inviting the audience to ‘laugh with’ or ‘laugh at’ racial stereotypes, and several of Schumer’s narratives focusing on race are more ambiguous in who the punchline actually targets. Whereas previous scholarship has argued that the exaggerated performance of unacknowledged racial privilege by white comedians like Stephen Colbert and Sarah Silverman functions ironically to interrogate and subvert postracial narratives, Schumer’s nonchalant delivery feigning her ignorance seems to highlight her white obliviousness but usually is less clearly emphasizing her own white privilege:

I love joking about race. It’s, like, my favorite. I was talking about this the other day. I was hanging out with literally all my black friend... And, uh, I remember I was like, “Tamambe,” or whatever. Tapestry—it’s something wild, you know? It’s something crazy. I mean, that’s why they need Google in the delivery room, I think, right? I mean it’s everywhere else. Why not there, right? So, when her mom was like, “I’m going to name you “Tamambo.” Google would show up and say, “Did you mean *Jennifer*?” And her mom would be like, “Yes, Google, I did mean Jennifer. Thank you.” No, Tamambe. So, I’m hanging out with Tapioca and, uh, Tempura or something, and what was she saying? She—she was like, “Girl.” Like, I won’t do some racist impression, so don’t worry. But she was like, “Girrrllll!” [begins doing dance impression and moves into swinging jump rope double-Dutch impression] I mean, like, we were, like, mid-double Dutch and, uh, and I’m just like, “Stop yelling. We’re not at the movies.” Thank you. Thank you. I’m glad you guys laughed at that. That does not always work, I’ll be honest with you. I mean, nothing works 100% of the time, right? Except Mexicans.

The overtness of numerous racist stereotypes that Schumer uses in her stand-up routine is consistent with her satirically oblivious, white “drunk party slut persona” (Heisey 2015), but her

use of satire requires audiences to decode her “doing racism” as satirical rather than literal. In other words, the interpretive distinction between the literal and intended meanings of her performative irony is blurred in her quick succession of racist tropes and stereotypes, and ultimately, “whether the victim is the same as the butt in marginal humor depends entirely upon audience identification and interpretation” (Gilbert 2004:160). On one hand, Schumer’s use of blatant racist stereotypes (e.g., yelling at the movies) and her feminine persona who appears clueless that these stereotypes might be controversial is a deliberate mockery of whiteness and colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006) by exposing such overt, commonly circulating cultural stereotypes. From this interpretation, Schumer’s performance is a parody of the ways that white people ignore race; For instance, when she repeatedly mispronounces the name of “all [her] black friend,” she satirizes white perceptions of norms and diversity by playing with another stereotypical saying, “some of my best friends are black,” utilized by white people to denounce allegations of racism. She also occasionally points out the overt racism in her performance by “winking” at the audience, such as when she proclaims that she will not do “some racist impression, so don’t worry” only to then immediately do an impression of black women. Schumer momentarily suspends the audience in a frame of racist stereotypes and narratives, opening a space for audiences to recognize and then potentially resist such racist assumptions.

However, the subversive potential of Schumer’s performance relies on the notion that the audience will recognize and interpret the double language of irony, and therefore much of her racial humor could also easily be interpreted as racist itself. In the example above, Schumer’s performance of white femininity doubles as a performance of white ignorance, but does feigning racial ignorance carnivalize hegemonic racial narratives? When Schumer targets gender politics

more broadly, her position as a woman comedian is easily interpreted as ‘attacking up,’ whereas her race humor as a white comedian may be read as ‘attacking down’ (i.e., superiority) humor. In the frame of carnival, the subversive potential of stand-up comedy relies on the perception of humorously attacking social hierarchy and the status quo. Unlike the previous examples of her racial comedy, the narrative punchlines of this skit do less to imagine a counternarrative to dominant racial logics and the stereotypes she employs. Rather, this bit perhaps relies more on the shock value of a pretty white woman “doing racism,” which reflects the reality of racism without interrogating it.

Amy Schumer embodies traditional white femininity, but she does not consistently acknowledge her white privilege in her race humor, which influences how audiences will ultimately interpret her “joking about race.” Thus, Schumer’s ironic performance in this context of “doing racism” may operate in complex ways ranging from hegemonic to subversive depending on the identity and subjectivity of the audience, and the subjectivity interpreted from Schumer’s comic persona. Although Schumer has been charged with having “a shockingly large blind spot around race” (Heisey 2015), I argue that Schumer’s blatant stereotypical material, immersed in layers of ironic and satiric meaning, may work to make her whiteness visible. Comedy can provide a space for rendering whiteness visible and prominent without addressing it explicitly (Goltz 2015; Lowrey et al. 2014; Rossing 2012), therefore potentially fostering critical consciousness through humor. However, recent research in audience reception of comedy has revealed that audiences, particularly white audiences, interpret racial stereotypes in comedy as accurate, albeit exaggerated, representations of certain racial and ethnic groups (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin 2006), and they place quite a bit of emphasis on the comedian’s race in interpreting racial humor (Green &

Linders 2016). Thus, my intersectional analysis of stand-up comedy incorporating the relationship between the comedian and the audience in Part II of this dissertation is warranted.

Conclusion

Amy Schumer has branded herself as a comedian that pushes the boundaries of taboo in her comedic social commentary. The writer and host of the Emmy-Award winning satirical variety sketch show *Inside Amy Schumer* has been dubbed a “public intellectual” (Garber 2015), and Schumer’s brand of comedy has become a popular topic of conversation and debate within feminist media circles. In the public sphere, Schumer’s comedy has stimulated the mainstream media to engage in the current “cultural conversation about feminism” (Dow 1996:xiv). For instance, Schumer was selected for the cover of the summer 2015 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, and *The Guardian*’s Heisey (2015) wrote that “Schumer seems to satirize and encapsulate the feminist debates of the moment, from equal pay to rape culture.” Considering that “women are expected to keep not only their bodies but their utterances unobtrusive” (Rowe 1995:63), on one hand, Amy Schumer might be considered transgressive simply as a woman stand-up comedian shunning conventional notions of gendered behaviors of passivity by taking assertive power on the stage (Caliskan 1995; Greenbaum 1997; Walker 1998). More significantly though, through the lens of Goffman-inspired symbolic interactionism in conjunction with feminist media sociology, Schumer’s strategic performance of ironic raunchy femininity is subtly, but nonetheless politically, subversive in deconstructing patriarchal ideologies through humor.

The goal of this research, however, is not to suggest that Amy Schumer’s comedy is wholly and undoubtedly subversive and feminist. Rather, my analysis suggests that “humor is a

particularly potent weapon in ideological battles” (Case & Lippard 2009:251) and that Schumer’s brand of comedy further implicates and interweaves current feminist debates and sensibilities. Women’s comedy is a pertinent space in U.S. popular culture that engages in feminist politics and may function as a means of consciousness-raising and deconstructing cultural scripts. It is also important to note, though, that not all stand-up is intended to be subversive—indeed, some of the most visible stand-up comedians tend to reinforce dominant values (Gillota 2015). However, despite assumptions that “humor, no matter how subversive, will never be taken ‘seriously’” (Gilbert 2004:177), I argue that the cultural work of comedy is complex and sociologically underexplored, and this case study analysis of Amy Schumer’s stand-up performance suggests that unpacking the layers of irony and satire within a performance narrative has broader implications for investigating the dissemination of, and resistance to, dominant ideologies. Stand-up comedians reveal connections between individual storytelling and macro structures and cultural discourses, and through a case study analysis of Amy Schumer’s *Mostly Sex Stuff* I find that stand-up comedy pushes the audience toward a sociological imagination, which moves beyond personal pains to unearth the underlying structures and public issues.

Schumer plays with dominant logics in her stand-up where there is an implicit understanding that her comedic narratives are layered with meaning. However, the extent to which one interprets her performance as political or as reiterating dominant stereotypes is inevitably impacted by the audience’s positionality. For example, the likelihood of interpreting her performance as ironic unacknowledged white privilege, or as a reiteration of a white privilege that makes racial minorities the butts of jokes will likely vary according to audience identification and decoding of irony. In many ways, the political implications of Schumer’s comedy parallel

contemporary feminist debates concerning frames of white feminism compared to intersectional feminism, where her stand-up more readily challenges hegemonic narratives of gender than those of race. Media texts are polysemic in meaning and interpretation (Hall 1980), and recent work in audience reception analysis has demonstrated that individuals' preexisting political ideologies influence the extent to which they interpret *The Colbert Report* as political satire (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam 2009). Additionally, white and black stand-up audiences expressed varying interpretations of the subversive or hegemonic potential of racial stereotypes, content, and the significance of a comedian's own race in race humor (Green and Linders 2016). Thus, further research on audience reception of women's stand-up comedy is called for, which I examine in Part II.

CHAPTER FIVE:
FEMINIST AND ANTI-RACIST NARRATIVE STORYTELLING THROUGH COMEDY: STAND-UP COMEDY
AS CRITICAL CULTURAL PEDAGOGY

In the previous chapter, I examined the comedy of Amy Schumer as a case of subversive femininity that troubles the “pretty vs. funny” binary in popular culture and offers subtle subversion through satire of femininity. However, while I argue that Schumer successfully challenges norms of gender performance and expectations for white femininity, one may be left wondering whether her performance is primarily, or perhaps only, subversive for white women. This chapter picks up on this thought and explores how some stand-up comedy might also more explicitly challenge dominant culture and systems of inequality through an intersectional lens.

A critical cultural pedagogy perspective guides this chapter’s exploration of the ways some comedians construct their comedy performances with subversive narratives that counter dominant stories pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality. As such, this research considers art and cultural work—in this case a stand-up comedy performance—as engaging cultural politics and creating a space for imagining oppositional social change (Giroux 2004). Implicit in this approach is an understanding of the significance of “culture and public pedagogy as a struggle over meaning, identity, and relations of power” (Giroux 2001). Women’s comedy has become a primary space in the public sphere where feminist politics are hashed out (Mizejewski 2014), and thus stand-up comedy is a type of cultural work that is public, performative, and pedagogical (Giroux 2001,

2004; Hall 1997; Rossing 2016; see also Bingham & Hernandez 2009; Koziski 1984). In this chapter I discuss how comedians Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho perform “charged humor” that unmasks systems of inequality and the structures upholding them, invoking a sense of “cultural citizenship” (Krefting 2014).

Incongruous, performative irony (like that of Amy Schumer) has emerged as one popular type of women’s comedy, and here I draw from Krefting’s (2014) “charged humor” to depict a second newly prominent type of women’s humor, as exemplified by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho. While humor has historically taken aim at its surrounding culture, manifested in various ways, not all humor purposefully tries to promote equality as its primary goal. Charged humor is “intentional, meaning the humorist has designs on an outcome, specific or general—a change in attitudes or beliefs or action taken on behalf of social inequality” (Krefting 2014:25). In other words, unlike slapstick or other types of humor, charged humor aims to be more politically potent than something done “just for laughs;” charged humor seeks social change by comically representing collective struggles for social justice and equality.

According to Krefting, charged humor is one of several variations of stand-up performance styles, which can be (and often is) utilized in conjunction with other comedic styles. The popularity of and market for charged humor shifts with the cultural moment. Krefting argues that charged humor is typically not as marketable to the mainstream, but she also notes the gendered dynamics of comedy industries. Male comics—of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds—have traditionally been afforded more opportunities for mainstream success, and men’s use of charged humor is less common, especially among white, heterosexual, able-bodied men. This is not to say that these men do not perform charged humor (for example, notable exceptions include George Carlin, Bill

Maher, Patton Oswalt, etc.), but their use of this style of oppositional humor is generally less common, presumably because people who do not directly experience oppression or exclusion may not be as motivated to produce charged humor (Krefting 2014). However, American popular culture is currently experiencing an increase in diversity and of politically charged comedians tackling a range of issues, including but not limited to sexism, racism, and homophobia. As such, more women are now using charged humor in their craft.

This chapter analyzes two stand-up routines as case studies of politically charged comedy. Wanda Sykes' *I'ma Be Me* (2009) and Margaret Cho's *Cho Dependent* (2011) are examples of stand-up routines that exemplify the production and circulation of "charged humor" (Krefting 2014) in popular culture. Notably, I argue, both Sykes and Cho illustrate the intersectional politics of marginalized identities. For both Sykes and Cho, navigating the intersections of gender, racial and ethnic identity, and sexuality is a focal point of their stand-up. Moreover, both comedians also spare the subtleties sometimes used by fellow female comics and directly target cultural oppressors through ridicule. Thus, this chapter focuses on two key elements of subversive public narratives: 1) voicing the lived experiences of marginalized persons often neglected in dominant discourses, and 2) critically unmasking the source of cultural hegemony that maintains the status quo.

Background and Approach

Women's comedy serves as a cultural index of women's realities in American culture (Barreca 2013; Lavin 2004; Walker 1988) and reflects "a compressed record of social change" (Lavin 2004:1-2). The comedy of Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho represents a particular cultural moment for women in comedy, revealing the intersections of identity of race, gender, and

sexuality. Originally performed in 2009 and 2011, respectively, each stand-up routine is reflective of the political climate at the time as well. For example, Sykes discusses in depth the implications of Obama-era race relations, and much of Cho's comedy focuses on LGBTQ rights and pertinent "anti-gay" political figures such as Sarah Palin and her daughter Bristol Palin.

The textual narrative analysis employed in this chapter is grounded broadly in a Gramscian cultural studies framework, conceptualizing culture and cultural practices as terrain for ideological struggles over hegemonic dominance. From such a perspective, comedians have become a legitimate voice in the multi-voiced public sphere exchange of ideas. Stand-up performances are a permitted cultural space for comedians to delve into controversial or taboo topics otherwise unacceptable for discussion in everyday life. By extension then, comedy as public pedagogy "recognizes culture as a contested educational space with significant political force. Public pedagogy scholarship attends to popular culture as a site of struggle over knowledge, power relationships, and identity and as the material used to (re)produce these cultural features" (Rossing 2016:616; see also Giroux 2001; Hall 1997). According to Lockyer (2015), the frame of arena stand-up comedy influences the content of stand-up narratives in that comedians performing in arenas often tend to "water down" their routines in favor of more observational comedy that has more universal appeal to large diverse audiences. My research, however, focuses specifically on women's stand-up comedy that aims to push the boundaries. Here I analyze stand-up performances by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho that were produced for mass public consumption (via live audience, DVD, or online streaming), filmed in large venues, and contain a combination of politically charged humor, taboo topics, and obscenities.

The use of charged humor (Krefting 2014) in comedy has been previously discussed and debated in the literature, but a closer examination of the intersectional politics in comedy remains underexplored. Minority women have historically had little or no control over their mediated representations, including within most genres of comedy. However, carnivalesque public spaces like stand-up comedy may be “emancipatory” when they successfully foster a critical consciousness, establish collective identities for culturally marginalized groups (Rossing 2016), and create spaces for voicing their own stories. Finley (2016) writes that contemporary black women comics engage in “a brand of satire that privileges emotion and experience,” and thus black women’s use of satire is “a performative strategy that enables them to spotlight and put pressure on deeply embedded historical narratives” (237). Here, Finley’s research parallels Collins’ (2000) emphasis on foregrounding personal experience and refusal to erase emotionality. Therefore, for minority women generally and for black women specifically, comedy is a representational strategy to expose and challenge the cultural fictions that sustain hegemonic racist narratives. For example, Finley (2016) interrogates narrative tropes (e.g., the Welfare Queen and the Angry Black Woman) that paint black women as incompetent and irresponsible and often prevent black women from being taken seriously politically. The present analysis builds on this line of inquiry. My analysis suggests that feminist stand-up comedy culturally “works” to dismantle hegemonic racialized narratives and foster an oppositional consciousness. Feminist stand-up, particularly in the style of charged humor, provides an alternate way of seeing social relations.

The comedy of Wanda Sykes certainly differs from Margaret Cho’s in both style and content, but there is also much thematic overlap between the work of these two performers. Of interest to this analysis, both Sykes and Cho use humor to share targeted social commentary on

contemporary politics and marginalized minority experiences often excluded from mainstream public discourse. Wanda Sykes, a black lesbian, and Margaret Cho, a Korean-American self-identified queer, both use comedy as their political weapon to challenge the cultural dominance of the white Christian, heterosexual male perspective that dictates social relations.

The sort of potentially “emancipatory” (Rossing 2016) stand-up comedy performed by Sykes and Cho is sociologically rich for several reasons. While narratives offer insight into the social arrangements that sustain dominant order, narratives also have the power to challenge and disrupt cultural power. Ewick and Silbey (1995) assert that two virtues of narratives are the ability “to reveal truth and to unsettle power” (195). In other words, many stories circulating in the public sphere work to reproduce existing power relations and inequalities, but subversive narratives “challenge the taken-for-granted hegemony by making visible and explicit the connections between particular lives and social organization” (Ewick & Silbey 1995:197). Both Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho perform stand-up that is characterized by personal narratives rooted in broader social critique. In addition to broader social and political commentary, these comedians make themselves primary characters in the narrative accounts of racial and homophobic oppression, rather than merely critiquing systems of oppression as observers. For example, Margaret Cho references her family’s immigration to U.S. and their experiences navigating race relations. Cho notes that she is the only member of her family to have been born in the U.S., and consequently her mother frequently tried to “pass” her as white while she was growing up. Along these lines, Cho also discusses the cultural backlash against Asian-Americans following the 2007 mass shooting at Virginia Tech: “when I found out that the kid was Asian, I was like, ‘Oh, please God, let him not be Korean. Please God, let him not be Korean.’ Not only is he Korean, his last name is

Cho also. So, on the day the massacre happened, one of my comedy specials aired on television. And people complained. They were like, ‘How could you show us a Cho right now?!’ As Cho hints in this bit, how we interpret culture and social relations is largely influenced by media representation, and in this sense, I argue that feminist stand-up comedy uses subversive narratives that aim to do important cultural work in the public sphere by disrupting dominant narratives and providing an alternative type of representation for public consumption.

Analysis and Discussion

The following analysis focuses on the presentation of counternarratives in stand-up comedy, and I examine stand-up as a potential source of critical public pedagogy. My research emphasizes two central overlapping features of counterhegemonic narratives illustrated by Wanda Sykes’ and Margaret Cho’s comedy: 1) recounting autobiographical narrative accounts of experiences with discrimination that expose broader dominant discourses, and 2) identifying the source of hegemonic oppression to directly challenge the construction of dominant narratives. In their stand-up routines, Sykes and Cho illuminate dominant cultural narratives pertaining to race, racism (and whiteness as a distinct hegemonic category rather than the default), and LGBTQ communities and rights (e.g., coming out narratives). As I discuss in this chapter, feminist stand-up comedy aims to accomplish significant cultural work of identifying and interrogating systems of oppression, including everyday racism and homophobia, in particular. Later, in Part II, I explore the extent to which stand-up is successful in accomplishing this sort of cultural work.

“White People Are Looking at You!”

A major underlying theme of Sykes’ *I’m a Be Me* stand-up performance is the then-recent 2008 election of President Obama and subsequent political issues of concern. Sykes jokes about the election’s impact on perceptions of race and she unpacks political and racial issues through humor. For instance, she illuminates notions about white surveillance of minorities’ lives. Sykes demystifies the impact of Obama’s presidency on U.S. race relations and subverts postracial notions that the country’s first black president signifies the cultural irrelevance of race. Sykes describes living under an Obama presidency, and she states that she is happy that the U.S. finally has its first black president. According to Sykes,

Now I can relax a little bit. You know, I can loosen up. I don’t have to be so *black* all the time. Don’t have to be so *dignified*, you know, because we did it. Black folks, we always gotta be dignified. Yeah, ‘cause we know if we fuck up, we just set everybody else back a couple of years, right? Well, we should have killed Flavor Flav like 10 years ago... But we did it. Now I can relax a little bit. I can do some shit... I can dance on camera. I couldn’t dance on camera before. When I was growing up, my mother, she wouldn’t even let us dance in the car. You know, we sitting in the car, a good song would come on the radio, we—[humming, bobbing head]. My mother was like—she would stop the car. ‘Uh, do you want to dance, or do you want a ride? Because you ain’t dancin’ in my car. *White people are looking at you!*’ I’m going, ‘Huh?’ [mom voice:] ‘White people are looking at you!’ I’m like, [looks outside car] Oh, damn!’ She was right.

Through narrative construction, Sykes illustrates the power of the white gaze and the double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903) experienced by African Americans. Sykes explains how African Americans learn to police their actions in public and to appear “dignified” because they are always subject to judgement and objectification in a white dominated society. In this skit, she first reminds the audience that it is a historic accomplishment that the first black president was elected in the United States. As Sykes notes, “we did it.”

However, as an enduring remnant of white supremacy, Sykes also articulates how the actions of one black person are often perceived by white audiences to stereotypically represent the character of black people overall. Thus, Sykes portrays how black people learn and internalize a double-consciousness from a young age. In this bit, Sykes learns that she is under constant surveillance of a white gaze (see hooks 1992). The bit continues as she asserts that black people can now do several things that were socially prohibited prior to the election of a black president. Not only can she dance, but now she can also tap dance and enjoy purchasing whole watermelons:

But now, shit, I could dance. We got a black president. Not only can I dance, I can tap dance! [imitates tap dancing] You know what dignified black people hate? Tap dancers. [tap dances again] Hate that shit. It's like, "Look at that damn Bojangles just setting us back. How we gonna get ahead? She up there looking like Bojangles." [dances again] Now I could dance. I could do some other shit. I can buy whole watermelons now. I no longer have to grow them in my closet under my weed lamp. Before, I would go in the grocery store and I would look at the whole watermelons. I was like, "Damn, they look good! Boy, I would like to get a whole watermelon." I would get all these white people lookin' at me. "Fuck you, Whitey! I ain't buying a whole watermelon for your enjoyment!" I'm going to go over here to the salad bar. Take my dignified ass to the salad bar, get the sliced watermelon. [imitates scooping pieces of watermelon onto plate] Let me camouflage this shit with some cantaloupe. [walks away confidently] "Good day, sir." Now, I got a black president. You should see me. I'm walking out of the grocery store with the watermelon on my shoulder. [imitating holding it like a boom box] "Yeah! Obama, bitch!" Shit. I hope he gets a second term, then I'm going to Popeye's. You'll see me in the Popeye's drive-through dancing and eating watermelon!

In this bit, Sykes deploys several racist stereotypes (e.g., fried chicken, watermelon) in order to flip the original intended meanings on their heads. For example, Sykes' shift from acting dignified and scooping sliced watermelon from the salad bar to her celebratory walk holding a whole watermelon is revealing of the historical dominance of the white gaze as a disciplinary discourse. Sykes' skit also underscores that the freedom enabled by Obama's 2008 election is still only a partial freedom.

Sykes “can do some shit,” but not yet all of it. With a re-election in 2012, she anticipates gaining more cultural freedoms, as she jokingly declares she will be able to go to Popeye’s, a fried chicken restaurant. Additionally, however, Sykes’ humor is a “gesture of defiance” (hooks 1992) that talks back and reimagines possibilities for identity. For audiences, this bit illuminates everyday personal experiences with racism embedded in dominant cultural narratives. This sort of politicized feminist/anti-racist stand-up comedy may thereby affirm a shared sense of community and identity for black audiences (Rossing 2016). The ultimate punchline of this bit is a recognition of, and challenge to, white surveillance of black bodies.

Sykes also uses representation of Barack and Michelle Obama to exemplify a publicly visible example of white surveillance. For instance, Sykes jokes that President Obama probably walks around thinking to himself, “Whatever you do, don’t touch your dick,” because he knows that he must consistently appear dignified and unthreatening to a white public. Moreover, Sykes further interrogates the intersections of racism and sexism when she contrasts Michelle Obama with the Angry Black Woman narrative trope. As Mizejewski (2014) observes, “[this] stereotype works in concert with the historical positioning of the black female body as the antithesis of white femininity” (155-156). Therefore, Sykes strategically contrasts the image of overly graceful First Lady Obama with the stereotypical narrative of an angry, irrational black woman. Sykes remarks that American culture will have to “get used to having a black First Lady.” Sykes points out “that’s why we had all those articles, you know, when [the Obamas] first got in office, like, ‘Who is the *real* Michelle Obama? When will we see the *real* Michelle Obama?’ You know what they’re saying? When are we going to see *this*?” Sykes then performs the angry black woman stereotype as Michelle Obama by violently flailing her arms around, furiously wagging her finger, and yelling at her

husband. She pretends to scold Barack by yelling, “No, you need to take care of your baby! You need to take care of your baby!” This layering of incongruous narrative imagery forces the audience to recognize, and to then potentially question or reject, stereotypical representations of black women. Sykes then shifts back to a more serious tone (back to Wanda) to address the audience more directly. She asserts, “Well, you’re not going to see *that* from Michelle Obama. *And we all don’t do that.*” Sykes jokes that during the 2008 campaign, Michelle Obama “had rods implanted in her neck” that kept her stiff and poised, making her “incapable of [acting like] *that*. You see, sometimes she wants to, but she can’t... It’s like everybody’s just waiting for one of those rods to snap and for her to get pissed one night and throw all his shit out on the White House lawn. ‘Fuck you, Barack! You ain’t shit! You ain’t shit!’” This skit ends, of course, by Michelle’s mother reminding her that “white people are looking at you!” Sykes’ juxtaposition of Michelle Obama with the Angry Black Woman trope effectively works to counter dominant “controlling images” of black women (Collins 2000).

Similarly, Margaret Cho’s comedy often focuses on her queer Korean American identity in Anglo-dominant culture. Like Wanda Sykes, Cho has had a long career working in different genres of comedy since the 1990s (including her own TV sitcom *All-American Girl* in the 1990s). Given the overall lack of representation of Asian American identity in mass media, she is considered to be a pioneer in mainstream representation of Asian Americans (Lowrey & Renegar 2017). Her use of cultural identity in comedy is significant because it communicates and interrogates the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Specifically, in her *Cho Dependent* performance she describes her experiences of feeling “Othered” as a racial and sexual minority. Cho describes her time living in the South, where she claims she was the “blackest person” in

Peachtree City, Georgia (a suburb south of Atlanta). Speaking to the perceived lack of diversity, Cho observes that it is a “weird” feeling when “your apartment is the ghetto, the gay neighborhood, and Chinatown.” She recounts:

When I first moved to the South, people were trying to get me to be social, go out and stuff. So, I got forced into going to Atlanta Steeplechase, which is like the white Freaknik. Atlanta Steeplechase, it's like a horse race and a dog race for really rich people. All the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* were there. And let me tell you, I love white people. It's just that when there are a lot of white people together, then they start playing bagpipes. And I get scared like I'm going to get sold. Because when white people are really rich, that's when they have Asian servants. So, people were checking me out at Steeplechase. They were like, “[in southern accent] Oh, I bet you could stir-fry real good. And offer technical support.”

Performed and filmed in Atlanta, Georgia, Cho incorporates certain regional examples to her live audience, connecting local culture to broader ideologies. Freaknik was an annual spring break celebration for black college students in Atlanta that reached its peak popularity in the 1990s. To Southern residents, Freaknik is likely remembered for its images of thousands of young black students gathered every year, and additionally for the white backlash that eventually ensued. So, Cho referring to the highbrow Atlanta Steeplechase event as “white Freaknik” works to recontextualize racially homogenous spaces. Dominant narratives suggest that minorities gathered together in groups is more threatening than white people gathered together (e.g., perceptions of a Black Lives Matter protest vs. a predominantly white crowd celebrating a sports team victory through a riot), but here Cho historicizes hegemonic whiteness. And accordingly, she satirically points out that it is actually racial minorities who justifiably feel threatened in white spaces. Therefore, these examples by Cho and Sykes presented in this section reveal how some comedians use comedy to portray marginalized experiences in hegemonic white spaces for mainstream public consumption and consciousness. In feminist comedy, the comical is political. Stand-up humor that

attacks up and targets systems of oppression may work to dismantle “colorblind” ideologies about racism and whiteness, especially for white audiences (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

“If I Helped One Gay Kid Feel Good About Himself, Then I Fucking Won.”

As the previous section shows, the stand-up frame incorporates personal narratives to invoke broader cultural themes. By extension, as I discuss in this section, these kinds of performances serve as explicit critiques of hierarchical systems of dominance. Stand-up narratives do more than simply implicate the source of cultural oppression, be it white surveillance or religious intolerance. Blurring the boundaries between entertainment and politics, subversive stand-up narratives may potentially also serve as calls to action in the pursuit of social change.

The political visibility of intersecting identities is a primary theme in the stand-up performances analyzed in this chapter. Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho are known for their public activism, and in their comedy, they also intentionally present intersectional narrative accounts that make visible the lives of LGBTQ people of color. Racial minorities who are LGBTQ have been all but invisible in mainstream mass media representation (Collins 2004), and thus stand-up comedy provides a rhetorical space for marginalized voices and it critiques dominant power relations through mockery. For example, Margaret Cho jokes about her stint as a contestant on the reality TV show *Dancing with the Stars* alongside fellow contender Bristol Palin. Cho discusses feuding with the Palins because “they hate gay people,” and explains that she was voted off the show because she “wanted to make a statement about gay pride.” According to Cho:

I’m very concerned about gay teen suicide. So, I wanted to make a statement, take a moment—it’s one thing to dance, but it’s another thing to make a statement to 23 million people about how you feel. So, it was incredible, you know? I danced in my rainbow pride flag dress to Barry Manilow with my awesome gay-ass partner. It was

the gayest shit that had ever happened. I should have just slipped on a pool of jiz. It was so fucking gay. It was very exciting. And if I helped one gay kid feel good about himself then I fucking won.

Margaret Cho embodies “the grotesque” characteristic of unruly women (Pelle 2010; see also Rowe 1995), inviting the audience to question taken-for-granted ideas and taboos. However, Cho’s comedy is also significant for its counternarratives and explicit calls for social change. Cho is an outspoken activist on many social issues, and in this bit, she also references the impact of representation in advancing political causes.

For her part, Sykes illuminates “matrices of domination” (Collins 2000) by directly comparing the lived realities of racism and heterosexism. In her routine, Sykes informs the audience that she recently married her wife in California. Sykes discusses being “happily married” and explains, “I got married in California, you know. Then I had to publicly come out. I had to do that. I had to. I had to do it, especially after Prop 8—after that Prop 8 fiasco in California, I had to come out. I had to say something because I was so hurt and so fucking pissed.” Here Sykes is referencing California’s Proposition 8 referendum that passed in the 2008 state election, effectively prohibiting same-sex marriage in the state before it was later found to be unconstitutional. Sykes continues,

I had to say something, had to say something because you know what? It was like that night was crazy. Black President, yay! Oh, Prop 8 passed. Oh shit. Now I’m a second-class citizen. What the fuck?! I was up here, now I’m back down here [using hand gestures]. Actually, I’m lower. I dropped lower. You know, because as a black woman—at least a black woman, I could do whatever, marry whoever—but as a gay black woman? Uh-uh, even lower. And I think about it, I was like, ‘You know what?’ It is harder. It’s harder. It’s harder being gay than it is being black... There’s some things that I had to do as gay that I didn’t have to do as black. I didn’t have to come out black. I didn’t have to sit my parents down and tell them about my blackness.

By bringing recent current events into her stand-up, Sykes reveals that the personal is political, and additionally that the political is personal. In this skit, Sykes briefly refers to her own LGBTQ activism when she decided to publicly come out and speak out against sexual discrimination. Sykes describes the intersections of racism and heterosexism where the country elects its first black president, yet she remains a “second class citizen” due to anti-LGBTQ legislation. Moreover, Sykes jokingly explains that she did not have to sit down with her parents to “come out black” and hope they would still love her. This skit continues with Sykes imitating a hypothetical conversation with her mother as she pretends to come out as black (rather than as a lesbian). After delivering the news (“Mom, Dad, I’m black.”), her mother exclaims,

Oh no, Lord Jesus! Not black, Father God! Oh, not black, Lord! Anything but black, Jesus! Give her cancer, Lord! Give her cancer! Anything but black, Lord! [...] No. No, you know what? You’ve been hanging around black people. You’ve been hanging around black people and they got you thinking you black. They twisted your mind! [...] Oh, you weren’t born black. I don’t want to hear that. Uh-uh, you weren’t born black. The Bible says Adam and Eve, not Adam and Mary J. Blige.

In this part of the skit, Sykes reveals the heteronormative implications of the “coming out” narrative. By incongruously making her race, rather than her sexuality, the subject of coming out to her family, Sykes uses humor to demonstrate the absurdities of having to formally and anxiously reveal one’s sexual orientation and identity to others. This counternarrative thus reveals that one’s sexual orientation, for non-heterosexual individuals, is a less visible facet of identity that must be revealed in hopes of being accepted and validated. Her mother’s refusal to believe Sykes, and her denial that one is born that way, further illuminates marginalized realities of the LGBTQ community. By supplanting her race for her sexuality in the coming out narrative, her incongruity

humor in this context demonstrates the absurdity that one's identity must be announced and rationalized. Sykes then shifts to a slightly more serious tone and continues:

I think the problem most people have with homosexuality is, you know, their religion, and also, they think it's a choice. Being gay is not a choice. It's not a choice. It is not a choice. And so if you believe that it's a choice, then you're saying that straight people are straight because they *chose* not to be gay, right?

Sykes incorporates autobiographical personal narratives to expose cultural systems of oppression and to directly speak against homophobia and racism. Minorities' personal experiences with oppression are typically absent from dominant narratives, and so these sorts of feminist stand-up narratives have subversive potential because they challenge the prevailing wisdom about gender, race, and sexuality. Counternarratives presented through comedy also convey and reinforce shared experiences of oppression, which "bring new perspectives to public consciousness" (Rossing 2016:623).

In addition to her incongruous humor and use of personal narratives, Wanda Sykes' comedy also targets hegemonic racism and sexism by explicitly calling out those in power.

Referring to the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Sykes continues,

They gave her so much shit. You know, isn't it funny that the only time your race or gender is questioned is when you're not a white man? 'Cause I think white men, they get upset. They get nervous, like, a minority or another race gets a little power, it makes them nervous. 'Cause they scared that that race is going to do to them what they did to that race. They get nervous. So, they start screaming, "Reverse racism! This is reverse racism!" I'm like, "wait a minute. Isn't reverse racism~isn't that when a race is nice to somebody else? Isn't that, to other people? That's reverse racism. What you're afraid of is called karma."

In this bit, Sykes humorously attacks proclamations of "reverse racism" by emphasizing that the actual *reverse* of racism would be kindness and compassion, rather than oppression of another group. Here, Sykes literally challenges their use of the English language and its logic in order to

show how arbitrary it is to call demands for equality “reverse racism.” Equality for one group need not mean suppression of another group. She also sharply adds that white people are actually afraid of karma, suggesting that white people are aware of their historically sustained white privilege and discrimination toward others. Here, Sykes taps into white perceptions of racial equality as a racial zero-sum game, where, if minorities attain some rights, it can only be because white people are giving up rights. Alternatively, she suggests a deeper understanding of the world where one group can improve its status and rights without necessarily impacting the status and rights of another group. In this sense, stand-up humor has the capacity to be “emancipatory” (Rossing 2016) when it challenges dominant realities and (potentially) fosters critical awareness of and reflection on social issues, such as racial oppression. I return to this thought in Part II when I discuss audience interpretations of feminist stand-up comedy.

Both Sykes and Cho take aim at religiously inspired homophobia in their humor. Sykes uses comedy to be subversive and educational. For instance, in the previous example Sykes illustrates the intersections of racism and homophobia, and then firmly explains that being gay is not a choice. Margaret Cho, however, is generally more overtly confrontational toward systems of hegemonic racism and heterosexism (and the individuals who uphold them). For example, she recounts her experiences living in Georgia and facing religious intolerance. Mocking a Southerner’s sentiments and speaking in a thick Southern accent, she slowly states,

[in Southern drawl] “Well, I don’t agree with gay marriage because it goes against my religious beliefs.” [drops accent] And my answer to that is, “Well, fuck you then.” Like, why do you think I give a shit about your religious fucking beliefs? I don’t care. *Well, fuck you, then.* That’s just—I think that’s the right answer. It’s concise. It says everything I need to say, and it’s easy to remember. So, it’s my new slogan. I’m trying to pass that around, making sure everybody knows it so we can all say it. But it just pisses me off, you know?

Here, Cho personifies bigotry and religious intolerance and rhetorically gives it the middle finger.

Where Sykes uses incongruity humor to tease out and make the point that being gay is not a choice, Cho says, “fuck you” to the idea of having to rationalize one’s identity and equality.

Throughout her performance, Margaret Cho uses the comedy stage as a platform to advocate for progressive ideas and causes, enhancing the notion that comedy can be a form of (carnavalesque) activism itself. For instance, she discusses frequenting and supporting gay businesses: “I try to go to gay resorts when I can. I try to go to gay restaurants, gay bars. I try to spend my money in gay businesses as much as possible. I go to gay shows like this one.” Additionally, Cho describes how she regularly went to the gym while living in Georgia, “not to work out, just to cruise.” At the gym, Cho recounts getting into a symbolic battle of controlling the narrative by repeatedly placing gay-friendly magazines on top of the stack of anti-gay *Focus on the Family* magazines in the gym sitting areas. Subversive stand-up narratives not only convey and personify the source of minorities’ oppression (e.g., homophobic white Christians) but they also give a voice and subjectivity to marginalized voices, which can ultimately work to foster empathy, reflexivity, and social change.

Conclusion

In an April 2017 MSNBC interview, TV host and journalist Lawrence O’Donnell stated that “there is a unique power” to stand-up comedy. Speaking with host Joy Reid, O’Donnell was referring to the case of comedian Hannibal Burress, whose stand-up jokes about Bill Cosby arguably spurred increased public attention to allegations of sexual assault against Cosby. During this conversation, O’Donnell articulates that the perceivably non-partisan space of stand-up in public culture gives stand-up comedy a unique edge in articulating social and political issues. My

analysis suggests the cultural power of stand-up is more than just an edge—Comedians have free reign to go where “serious commentary” cannot go and to point out truths through stories and juxtapositions.

To summarize Part I of this dissertation, my analysis of stand-up by Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, and Amy Schumer (Chapter Four) demonstrates how women’s stand-up comedy reveals connections between individual personal narratives and broader cultural ideologies. This chapter examined two stand-up performances by Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho as cases of charged stand-up humor. This chapter also reveals contrasts between incongruous/ironic humor (e.g., like that of Amy Schumer) and charged humor styles. While not mutually exclusive from incongruity, I argue that Sykes’ and Cho’s comedy is further indicative of a type of social activism.

I applied a critical cultural pedagogy lens to analyze Sykes’ *I’m a Be Me* and Cho’s *Cho Dependent*. From this framework, I contend that sites of critical pedagogy have always extended well beyond the classroom and into everyday life settings (Giroux 2001; 2004). A critical consciousness can be gained in any number of sites, including popular culture and entertainment—not just serious plays, movies, novels, or poetry, but also seemingly innocuous stand-up comedy. Stand-up seduces the audience with the promise of the easy laugh and the permission not to have to “think” for a while, but then it coaxes you into thinking anyways, and in powerful, life-changing ways. From a critical cultural pedagogy perspective, I discussed how Sykes and Cho use comedy to encourage the audience to question the conditions under which cultural knowledge is produced, and they further offer alternative ways of seeing the world and understanding inequality. This chapter emphasizes two pertinent characteristics of narratives that become subversive through

humor: sharing personal stories of marginalization and explicitly identifying the cultural root of hegemony.

Stand-up comedy thus blurs the boundaries between popular culture and political seriousness. Beyond the arena stage (or one's TV screen), humor is also potentially a powerful emotional and rhetorical strategy for social movement protest (Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014). However, media texts, including the multi-layered meanings of comedy, are polysemic in that not all audience members will decode humor the exact same way (Griswold 2004; Hall 1980). It is thus crucial to understand how audiences interpret comedy since, after all, not every audience member takes a direct path from standing ovation to the picket line. Moreover, it remains unclear how audiences might differentially interpret the ironic performativity of Schumer compared for politically charged comedy by Sykes and Cho. Therefore, next I discuss my analysis of how audiences interpret women's stand-up humor in Part II.

PART II:

WHAT'S SO FUNNY? ANALYZING AUDIENCE INTERPRETATIONS OF WOMEN'S STAND-UP

CHAPTER SIX:

AUDIENCE RECEPTION ANALYSIS: INTRODUCTION AND METHOD

Throughout Part I of this dissertation, I analyzed and discussed the sociological significance of women's stand-up comedy in the public sphere. Through narrative analysis of three women comedians, I described how stand-up comedy is rhetorically and performatively powerful, pushing the audience to reimagine possibilities for social life and social relations. Contemporary comedians have arguably become legitimate voices in the public sphere; However, there is little research exploring how audiences make sense of the layered meanings of narratives constructed through humor (Bore 2010; Mintz 2008). In particular, two increasingly popular types of women's comedy call for audience analysis due to their potential political implications. This research aims to bridge these gaps in the literature by examining comedy viewers' interpretations of women's stand-up comedy through audience reception analysis. Examining the ways that audiences interpret and make meaning from media texts is an important symbolic interactionist project (Blumer 1933; Gamson 1992). Through a symbolic interactionist, critical cultural studies lens, I examine the ways audiences decode and negotiate the meanings of stand-up comedy.

As one of oldest forms of entertainment, stand-up comedy constitutes a unique frame of experience grounded in carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968) tradition. In recent years, the mediated experience of watching stand-up has also become a significant component of American television culture. Media outlets like cable (e.g., Comedy Central, HBO) and online streaming venues such

as YouTube or Netflix provide extended visibility and consumption opportunities for audiences. Audiences now have increased opportunities to consume stand-up online, discuss and comment on stand-up in the blogosphere, and share information via social media. Despite increased opportunities to consume comedy privately in one's own home rather than always in the live audience, interpreting meaning from comedy is still largely a social process where audience members share their reactions and opinions with one another, and meaning is constructed in these interactions. People may view stand-up bits separately, but still talk about it together and collectively interpret it. Thus, analyzing audience interpretations of feminist stand-up comedy provides insight into audiences as active cultural consumers engaged in the process of media consumption and meaning making. "What we know" about society is often filtered through media, and meaning making is often a collective process where people make sense of something together by consuming and discussing media texts (e.g., films, TV shows, books, and stand-up comedy) with others.

This research utilizes focus groups of university students to analyze audience reactions to stand-up skits by comedians Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. In the following pages, I provide an overview of my methodological and analytic approach. In Chapter 7, I present my findings pertaining to the identity work involved in watching comedy and interpreting meanings. Then, in Chapter 8 I discuss my analysis of the ways that audiences perceive comedy as a venue for social commentary and truth-telling.

Method

Qualitative approaches to audience research can illuminate symbolic resources viewers draw from in decoding the meanings of media texts. From a social constructionist framework (Berger & Luckmann 1966), I use focus groups to analyze how audience members interpret meanings from texts and how meaning is created and negotiated through social interactions. In order to examine audience interpretations of performances by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho, I conducted six focus groups with undergraduate students from a large southeastern university.

I chose focus groups as my method for a number of reasons. First and foremost, focus groups can closely resemble comedy viewers' typical consumption patterns, and focus group interactions exemplify a process of social meaning-making. Focus groups, compared to other methods such as individual interviews or surveys, "more closely simulate the social setting in which stand-up comedy is typically consumed" (Green & Linders 2016:247; see also Lunt & Livingstone 1996; Perks 2012). Stand-up comedy is often experienced socially, and while audience members decode texts individually, meanings are further created and negotiated through talk and interaction with others (Fingerson 1999; Gamson 1992; Swink 2017). Second, following the qualitative shift, there has been a recent resurgence of focus group research, particularly in audience reception scholarship. Previous studies, for instance, have shown the utility of this method for understanding audience interpretations of and reactions to issues such as media representations of race (Jhally & Lewis 1992; Park et al. 2006; Perks 2012) and gender (Bore 2010; Press 1991; Radway 1984; Swink 2017). Focus groups are therefore methodologically promising for sociological inquiry because they consist of both personal and cultural explanations that

highlight consensus and diversion in attitudes, and they offer insight into the participants' social environments (Warr 2005).

Data Collection and Conducting Focus Groups

I conducted six focus groups in the spring and fall of 2015 with a total of 42 participants. I recruited participants who knew one another from pre-existing social networks to create a more familiar setting in the groups. Participants were recruited via flyers that were placed in residence halls and distributed to various classes in the College of Arts and Sciences (e.g., Introduction to Sociology and Social Science Statistics), as well as through word-of-mouth. Beginning with an initial contact person, participants were asked to invite others to join him or her in participating in the focus group.

As a means of observing the collaborative construction of meaning, focus group research must consider the social contexts of group composition (Hollander 2004). I chose to recruit focus groups with participants who already knew one another from pre-existing networks. Analyzing groups consisting of individuals who are friends, roommates, colleagues, etc. has been suggested to be methodologically advantageous because participants who know each other and are familiar with one another are the very groups with whom one might “naturally” discuss these topics (Gamson 1992; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2013; Kitzinger 1994; Warr 2005). These types of “peer group conversations” (Gamson 1992) represent important social contexts where ideas are formed and meanings are negotiated. These groups therefore allow the researcher to observe interactions among participants who feel comfortable enough in the group to openly express opinions, disagree, relate one another person's comments to their shared stories or memories, and,

presumably, interact with one another similarly to how they would in a “natural” setting. This is not to say that focus groups represent natural settings or interactions but, rather, that focus groups based upon existing social networks can resemble “real-life” interactions and discussions (Kitzinger 1994; Warr 2005). Participants’ habits and style of interpretation and interaction that exists in their daily interactions can spill over into the focus group dynamics, allowing the researcher to observe their media consumption patterns. Thus, these groups effectively became “interpretive communities” for reading these comedy texts because of their similar social positions and experiences (Radway 1984; see also Fingerson 1999).

In general, focus groups lasted approximately an hour and a half. Each focus group session consisted of viewing three comedians’ skits, pausing between them to elicit group discussions pertaining to their interpretations. Each session was conducted by the author, and each group was shown the same series of short clips from the stand-up routines of Amy Schumer’s *Mostly Sex Stuff*, Wanda Sykes’ *I’m a Be Me*, and Margaret Cho’s *Cho Dependent*. Groups were shown approximately ten minutes of each stand-up routine before discussing each one. Clips from the respective stand-up routines were selected by the researcher in order to represent some of the overarching themes of the performance as a whole, and additionally, to address dominant cultural discourses on gender, race, and sexual orientation. (See Appendix B for more details about the skits shown to viewers).

A primary methodological concern of focus group research traditionally includes group interaction effects, such as silences, “groupthink,” or polarization of ideas. However, recruiting groups whose members know one another arguably mitigates some of these effects on group interactions because, presumably, participants in a familiar setting are more likely to speak up

and/or disagree with one another. Additionally, these types of interactions may actually constitute data of interest. In this research, I specifically aimed to address these methodological concerns by also asking participants to write some confidential responses for my eyes only; these individual responses are separated from the social pressures of vocally articulating their ideas in front of the group. Participants in each group were asked to respond in writing to a few open-ended questions during the focus group session as a means of ascertaining individual reactions to these performances. Additionally, I encouraged participants to jot down stream-of-consciousness notes and reactions during the session. I employed this approach as a precaution to lend insight into the possibility of people feeling silenced by the group, but ultimately, it turned out that participants' written responses did not significantly differ from their verbal comments in the group settings. But, this triangulation of data nonetheless provided insight into audience reception on both an individual and collective level.

Each group watched the clips together and were then encouraged by the moderator/researcher to discuss their reactions together. I followed a low-moderator-involvement approach (Morgan 1997) where I used a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire guide (see Appendix E). From this moderator approach, the group discussions generally tended to be informal conversations steered by the participants, where I prompted follow-up questions and occasionally probed for elaboration. Using open-ended prompts (rather than specific questions) and allowing participants to take over the discussions generally results in richer and more complex conversations (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2013). Focus groups were video-recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis in combination with participants' individual written responses. Participants were given pseudonyms during the transcription process.

Of the six focus groups, the first five groups consisted of small friendship groups, each containing three to five participants. The sixth group was larger, conducted within a small Feminist Issues undergraduate class. Of the 42 total participants, 33 were women and 9 were men. Of the six groups, three groups (including the classroom group) were mixed-gender groups, one group was an all-men group, and two groups each consisted of only women. Participant ages ranged from 18-58, with a median age of 21.

Participants were also asked to self-identify their racial/ethnic background: 23 participants identified as White/Caucasian; 10 as Hispanic, Latina, or Puerto Rican; 2 White/Hispanic; 4 Asian or Korean; 2 Black; and 1 West Indian. Three of the six groups were mixed-race groups, while two groups consisted of only white students (including the all-male group), and one group consisted of three Korean participants. Participants' academic majors were also recorded. Participants were academically diverse, claiming a total of 21 different majors, although about one-third were sociology majors (14). Throughout the two following analytic chapters, the reader may refer to Appendix C for audience participants' full reported demographic information.

The findings of this research illuminate processes of meaning-making and the importance of audience positionality in interpreting cultural texts. However, these findings are not necessarily intended to be generalizable, and such implications must be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. Two major limitations to my study include: 1) an overrepresentation of sociology majors who, presumably, have had more exposure to learning about social problems and matters of identity. Also, 2) as I discuss in the following chapters, a great deal of discussion in each group concerns comparing the racial humor in the stand-up bits, particularly in comparing jokes by Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes that both contain narratives pertaining to black/white relations in society.

However, this research does not explain how black audience members, specifically, interpret these jokes. There were only two black participants in the study, as part of the small classroom group (Group 6), who were mostly quiet during the group session.

Analysis

My analysis is grounded in a social constructionist framework (Berger & Luckmann 1966). I took an inductive approach, where emergent themes were uncovered through multiple close readings of focus group transcriptions and individual written responses. Following data collection and transcription, analysis took a grounded approach where I analyzed themes as they emerged in participants' discussions (Charmaz 2008). During early readings of my data, I began with a period of "initial coding" based upon several close readings of the focus group transcriptions. Cognitive analytic processes of "lumping and splitting" (Zerubavel 1996) steered my initial coding phase. Certain analytic themes (e.g., the role of stereotypes in comedy) became readily apparent by combing through the data. I followed this stage with a phase of more "focused coding" after streamlining the most prominently emerging themes from the data. Early analytical themes were adjusted, parsed, and refined during this coding phase, and the major findings from my analysis are discussed in the following two chapters. Throughout the entirety of data coding processes, I also wrote and kept ongoing analytic memo notes to reflect on my findings as they emerged (Charmaz 2008).

This analysis is also largely informed by insights from feminist standpoint perspectives in addition to Stuart Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model, especially in emphasizing the role of audience members' positionality and subjectivity in identifying decoding patterns and

interpretative repertoires. Conceptualized in conjunction with my narrative analyses of stand-up texts (as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), this audience reception analysis therefore focuses on two broad overarching themes pertaining to 1) the “identity work” involved in discerning meaning from watching stand-up performances, and 2) competing discourses on the “seriousness” of humor. In general, audience groups in this research were quick to bring up the comedian’s identity and perspective in their discussions. Audience members of varying social backgrounds discussed issues pertaining to identity, but in general, women and racial minority participants were the most likely to emphasize the role of the comedians’ marginalized identities in interpreting meanings reflected through shared identity experiences. Based on the audience’s perception of the performer’s gender, race, sexual orientation, and physical appearance, audience members in this study were often explicit in their discussions on policing symbolic boundaries of cultural appropriateness in comedy. Conversely, audiences also tended to interpret the comedian’s identity as a barrier to telling jokes about out-group identities, particularly when a member of the dominant group mocks a marginalized group through punch-down humor. In Chapter 7, I discuss the role of identity in “referential viewing” (Wood 2005) and interpreting narrative meanings. Finally, in Chapter 8 I elaborate on the ways that audiences perceive comedy as a venue for social commentary and truth-telling.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

AUDIENCES OF STAND-UP COMEDY AND INTERPRETIVE “IDENTITY WORK”

Stand-up comedy offers a distinct frame for examining the narrative construction of identity, power, and culture (Gilbert 2004), and this chapter explores the role of identity and positionality in how people interpret comedy. This component of my analysis focuses on the “identity work” for stand-up audiences, which involves the overlapping interpretive processes of identifying with the comedian, with the target of the joke, or as audience members of a particular social location. An intersectional lens (Collins 2015; Crenshaw 1989, 1991) guides this analysis, where race, gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, social class, ability, etc. are conceptualized as reciprocal, intersecting identities that shape social experience. Intersectionality is pertinent to analyzing audience reception because audiences actively decode and interpret meaning from media texts from their social and cultural locations (Hall 1980; Radway 1984). Extending beyond the audible laughter from the audience groups, this analysis further elucidates interpretive processes audiences use to negotiate what is funny, truthful, and/or offensive because of the power dynamics involved in interpreting jokes.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, an essential feature of the carnivalesque frame (Bakhtin 1968; Goffman 1974) that characterizes stand-up comedy is the cultural license to discuss taboo or controversial topics. This analysis more specifically reveals and unpacks processes of audience identification and boundary-making within these performances. First, the identity of the

performer (based on their race, gender, sexuality, and physical appearance) seems to establish boundaries around what types of jokes and humorous narratives were deemed appropriate for each comedian to say. Second, in accordance with the comedian's identity, audience participants also discuss cultural hierarchies of dominant and marginalized groups, and they focus much of their discussions on identifying who they believe the comedian is targeting as the butt of her jokes. Third, participants in this study also address the role of audience positionality in creating interpretive communities and meaning-making. In this sense, I pay attention to how some audience members discuss among themselves the potential relationship between positionality and interpretation (e.g., a group of Korean friends, Group 2, ponders how white students might think about race comedy). I find that when audience members do not perceive themselves to be a part of the intended audience of the comedian (especially when they belong to a dominant group), then they see the performance as narrowly focused and less universally appealing.

A broader focus on patterns of interpretation underlies this analysis as I consider the relationship between audience member positionality and how one decodes women's stand-up. This chapter therefore discusses three interrelated themes concerning the identity work in stand-up comedy: identifying the performer, identifying the butt of the joke, and identifying who is perceived to be the intended audience. Interpretive processes of identity work are integral components in decoding media texts, where audience members assess how well the performer can authentically represent social realities, and additionally, the extent to which they relate to the comedian's narratives.

“So It Just Depends on Who It Is and Who Is Making Fun”⁴: Identifying (with) the Performer

Marginal humor is traditionally, and inevitably, linked to power dynamics (Gilbert 2004), and this analysis finds that audiences begin interpreting these power dynamics from the moment the comedian walks onto the stage. All six groups, to some extent, discussed the comedian’s authority to perform certain jokes and to speak to particular social realities. In other words, “everyone has a toolkit, you know? [Comedians] work with what you have available to you via your body and whatever timeframe you’re living in” (James, Group 4). Discussions within all six groups emphasize the role of identity in interpreting meaning from comedy, and many specifically underscore that the perceived identity of the performer (gender, race, etc.) is significant for how people will interpret stand-up humor.

Participants articulated this aspect of audience identity work by describing the comedians’ intersectional “lived experience” that “comes out immediately” when the comedian takes the stage (Carmen, Group 1). This theme of identifying the comedian is significant because it speaks to the tension between a joke being funny or offensive (see also Green and Linders 2016) based on the extent that the comedian is perceived to be representing authentic experiences. Additionally, since stand-up is a communicative interaction between audience and comedian (Mintz 1985), my analysis suggests that audience members’ identification (or lack thereof) with the narrative storyteller (i.e., the comedian) and the story (i.e., the stand-up bit) shapes how individuals decode meaning from women’s comedy.

⁴ (Gabriella, Group 3)

First, this component of analysis yielded gendered patterns of comedy reception, revealing some of the ways audiences interpret the relationship between gender and comedy. Participants in each group remarked that it is “rare” and noteworthy to see women performing stand-up comedy. To some extent, though, I possibly set them up for comments about the seeming rarity of women’s stand-up by showing them clips of only women comedians, in addition to my position as a female researcher. My own embodied gender and research interests produces potential expectations from participants. Nevertheless, some audience members discussed women comedians as “breaking boundaries” in a cultural sphere where the white heterosexual male perspective is framed as the norm. Thus, Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho were immediately marked as “female comedians” in peer group discussions. While I anticipated participants focusing on “female comedy” (after all, they only watched comedy performed by women and consented to participate in the study given this knowledge), reactions expressing how women are breaking boundaries and frequent comparisons to other contemporary male comedians as reference points are nevertheless noteworthy and significant.

Discussions about the three comedians *as women* demonstrate audience articulations of how identity frames the perspective from which comedy is told and performed. Several participants explained how audiences are generally accustomed to hearing comedic narratives from a (white, heterosexual) male perspective because comedy is a historically male-dominated industry. Subsequently, several of the women in this study, and especially within the two all-women focus groups (Group 1 & Group 3), expressed that it is “refreshing” to see women perform comedy from a woman’s perspective. For instance, in the first all-women group (Group 1), Carmen, a 26-year-old Hispanic woman, described herself as a fan of stand-up who frequently watches comedy at a local

comedy club. According to Carmen, stand-up usually features male performers, and when men make jokes that involve women and women's experiences, it's "*their* perspective" on the matter, but men "don't know shit." Carmen continued, "I just feel like comedy, like a lot of entertainment, is such a boys' club, you know? So, I just feel like any woman in it is fucking on my side in some way. You know what I mean? ... At the end of the day, women are funny!" Most of the women in this research similarly viewed women's comedy as an outlet that normalizes women's voices in the public sphere and women's authority to speak on various issues.

In terms of the order of the clips shown to each group, groups first watched clips by Amy Schumer, followed by Wanda Sykes, and finally by Margaret Cho. Most of the women in this study started off group discussions praising Amy Schumer and the sense that comedy on women's issues is "relatable" and "refreshing" because she delivers jokes from a woman's perspective (e.g., taking birth control, stigma for being sexual, maintenance of "gender displays," etc.). Many participants (primarily women) also articulated notions about women comics "pushing boundaries" in such a way that can potentially normalize traditionally taboo topics for women, such as sex, birth control, and abortion. Referring to Schumer's sexual material, Elizabeth, a 22-year-old white woman (Group 6) observed that these topics (e.g., one-night stands) are only considered taboo because Schumer is a woman. Elizabeth asserted that if a male comedian had said the same jokes, then "that conversation wouldn't have been brought up [as] a taboo topic. It was just a normal topic." Gloria (Group 5) similarly noted that men performing stand-up like George Carlin have historically been very "graphic," and therefore she enjoys hearing women joke about "everything that you're normally not supposed to."

The all-men group (Group 4) also referenced the historical male dominance of stand-up comedy, and they too discussed how women's comedy is "unique" because it is presented "from a woman's perspective" (Will). Analyzing the discussions from Group 4 was particularly illuminating because their conversations often consisted of contesting and negotiating meanings with one another. For example, at one point Michael, a 32-year-old white man, contradicted the group and considers whether Amy Schumer is perhaps being given too much credit for her "lowbrow" humor. Michael then posed a hypothetical scenario to the group: "Imagine if a guy was up there talking about, 'Oh this bitch better be taking the morning-after pill because I don't want to have a baby with her!'" The other four men in the group, however, quickly pointed out that many men comedians do, in fact, make those sorts of jokes. Thus, women and men in this research suggested that women in comedy still face a symbolic boundary determining what is considered appropriate subject matter for women to discuss. Comedy that focuses on women's experiences typically excluded from the public sphere creates opportunities for what women can openly talk about in public. This aspect of identity work in audience reception is significant because audiences compare mediated narrative texts to their own lives, which I will unpack further in the following sections.

Audience members in this study also discussed specific differences between the women in terms of their physical appearance, race, and sexuality. In this sense, audiences discussed their expectations for and reactions to these comedians' content based on their perceived embodied identity. For one, participants indicated that the comedians' physical appearance and attire shapes their expectations for what type of comedy they will produce. A focus on women's physical appearance has historically been relevant to women's comedy (Horowitz 1997; Mizejewski 2014; Rowe 1995), and my research supports this general point. For example, according to Madison

(Group 3), the comics' appearance and dress "reflects their personalities as well." Madison discussed how "they all dressed differently," and observed that Schumer was dressed "very young and very playful," Cho's appearance was "very dark," and Sykes was "dressed more professionally." Directly comparing the relevance of dress and appearance between male and female comedians is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, this theme is interesting considering that many men in stand-up comedy with a comparable degree of celebrity and notoriety, such as Louis C.K., George Carlin, etc., often perform in a t-shirt and jeans (as pointed out by Group 1 and Group 4). This emphasis on appearance reflects gender dynamics in comedy and may serve as a microcosm of gender expectations in society writ large.

Five of the six groups commented on and discussed rather thoroughly Amy Schumer's appearance, in particular. In Chapter 4, I discussed Amy Schumer's performance of hyper-femininity, and this analysis both affirms and expands my previous examination of the subversive potential of her performance. Several participants discussed Schumer's appearance and dress as either necessary for her delivery style, or as transgressive femininity. For example, Daniel (Group 6) argued that Schumer is "somewhat feminist" because "she's able to... use her femininity... as topic material to be able to break into a mostly male-dominated industry... She's using it how she is choosing to use it." Audience members that interpreted Schumer's hyper-femininity as a subversive performance described her appearance as initially attention-grabbing, which allows her to then delve into taboo material and unpack dominant cultural narratives through mockery. From this interpretive position, Amy Schumer strategically uses her appearance to reveal the connections between micro performances of identity and macro cultural discourses on gender expectations.

While most participants discussed Schumer's hyper-feminine appearance as playing a pertinent role in her punchlines and general delivery style, her appearance was however later critiqued by some groups once they compared her to Wanda Sykes. For instance, Gabriella, a 19-year-old Hispanic woman (Group 3), emphasized the incongruous contrast between Amy Schumer's hyper-femininity and her grotesque raunchy humor. Gabriella observed that all three comedians use obscenities and foul language in the clips shown, but in contrast to Schumer, "the way that [Sykes] presents herself is *still classy*, even though the words she's saying are... not considered professional words. She still presents herself and her comedy in a classy manner." In other words, Schumer is too feminine to use obscenities and still be considered "classy."

This interpretive position was echoed in the all-men group (Group 4) as well. Michael, for example, asserted that Schumer's comedy is "low-class humor" because "it relied on sexual innuendos and jokes a little too often." Michael later added during various points of the conversation that Schumer sounds "bitter" and "whiny," unlike other female comedians such as Ellen DeGeneres who are "more classy." From this perspective, audience members in this group compared Schumer to the late Joan Rivers in evaluating the shock value of her grotesque femininity, where Schumer's "specialty" is "looking like this innocent little girl" (Zach), only to then proceed to shock the audience. Here, Schumer's (white) hyper-femininity was contrasted with Sykes' perceived masculine traits. In comparison to Schumer's "little girl" performance, Zach pointed out that Sykes is wearing a leather jacket and a pantsuit. Will further compared Schumer's and Sykes' use of obscenities in their comedy. According to Will, "[Wanda Sykes] can throw F-bombs and C-words and everything else out there and you're okay... When Schumer did it, she threw the C-word out there and you're like, [wincing] 'Oooo. That's, oooo.'" Generally speaking,

this emergent theme interrogates gendered patterns of reception, as well as gendered notions of taste and offensiveness.

In contrast to Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes was often identified by her more “masculine” traits, which generally include her known identity as a lesbian and her more universally appealing humor. A few of the groups discussed this theme, but it was stated in more explicit terms of perceived masculinity by the all-men group (Group 4). According to Zach, a 31-year-old white man, “[Wanda Sykes] comes off as more gender neutral too. Her comedy, that one time she talked about being female... it was to mention her wife, which I thought was kind of interesting. That she was the, you know, *masculine* part of it... I think that makes her more appealing which helps her reach a broader audience I guess.” Therefore, the extent of women’s perceived masculinity can potentially buy them greater credibility in the comedy audience. Participants in this study highlighted intriguing intersections of gender, sexuality, and race as signifiers of meaning.

In addition to reading the comedians in terms of gender, audiences also articulated more intersectional understandings and nuances in narrative identity construction concerning the comedians’ race and sexual orientation. A primary underlying finding in this research pertains to the interpretive work in decoding the comedian’s performed identity as grounded in broader cultural hierarchies. Perhaps in accordance with growing cultural awareness about so-called “identity politics” in public discourse, peer group conversations indicate that comedians do not have the authority to speak for other groups, particularly through attack-down style humor. Audience members often expressed that the comedian’s own race, ethnicity, and sexuality are important for determining the types of jokes that are socially appropriate for that comedian to tell.

Stand-up performances are rooted in the broader context of race relations, and participants discussed how the comedian's race shapes the perspective of the skit. Accounting for the comedian's race in the context of interpreting humor shows how audiences understand marginalized and privileged identities, as well as the constructed boundaries between comedy that "laughs at" versus that which "laughs with." For instance, Madison, an 18-year-old white woman (Group 3) contrasted the "Joking About Race" and "Dignified Black People" bits by Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes, respectively. Madison concluded, "It's definitely *not* the same coming from Amy Schumer." Emily, an 18-year-old white Puerto Rican woman in Group 3 agreed, and she asserted that Wanda Sykes "is a minority" and therefore she "was able to talk about" topics like immigration, President Obama, and black stereotypes (e.g., watermelon) "because she's black." Emily further added that Schumer and Sykes have "different life experiences" which is ultimately why "Amy Schumer would not have gotten the same response" from the audience discussing these topics. This interpretive focus on the comedian's race is also significant for how audience members interpret the target of the joke, which was discussed by all six groups. I return to this point in the following section.

Several participants were quick to point out identity hierarchies and how, true to the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968) aesthetic of feminist comedy, stand-up is more "successful" when comedians make fun of privileged groups and challenge the status quo, rather than when they are perceived as mocking marginalized groups in their humor. Minority women and most white women, as well as men of color, further interrogated whiteness and white privilege in stand-up comedy. For instance, as depicted above, several participants indicated that Amy Schumer will likely get a different reaction from audiences if she makes jokes about race because of her white

positionality and privilege. Additionally, Schumer's middle-class "privileged" feminine appearance (Carmen, Group 1; Emily, Group 3) is a noteworthy part of her performance. Emily (Group 3) asserted that Amy Schumer seems "over-privileged, hair-flipping, like 'Haha, I've never struggled, and I'm just going to make fun.'" Thus, Emily illustrates here that Schumer's "Joking About Race" bit might be received as controversial because her appearance is indicative of her relative social privilege. Helen, a 52-year-old white woman (Group 6) similarly suggested that Schumer and Sykes "couldn't reverse the roles and have the same dialogue and get away with it" based on their race. Reversing their roles "would be highly offensive" and would "cross over a lot of boundaries." Helen's sentiment here reflects an emergent pattern in this analysis, where audiences expressed symbolic boundaries for what types of jokes are acceptable based on the comedian's identity, and moreover, that these boundaries are firm and inflexible. "Crossing over boundaries" for comedians, as Helen puts it, would be received as offensive humor because audiences are rather invested in hearing jokes that speak to the comedian's authentic experiences (as well as those of audience members), particularly for marginalized groups, rather than jokes that disparage other groups.

Conversations about race and racial privilege were not solely focused on Sykes and Schumer, but Margaret Cho's Korean American identity was only discussed in depth by Group 2, which consisted of three Korean friends. This group (two women and one man) unpacked how interpreting the comedian's identity is also important for audience meaning-making processes because audience members can identify with the performer. When asked about Margaret Cho's use of Asian stereotypes (e.g., mimicking her mother's accent and facial expressions), Yunjin, Jin-soo, and Min-ji discussed how they relate to her humor because they shared the experiences

embedded in Cho's narratives about being Korean growing up in American culture. Min-ji, a 21-year-old woman, explained that Cho's use of parodic facial expressions and exaggerated Korean accent of her mother is funny and poignant "because it literally belonged to her life" and "I know she [has] undergone the problems" of living in the U.S. while being held to traditional Korean cultural expectations. Min-ji then added that if another comedian used these same performative gestures in their comedy, then it would be "inappropriate for her."

Jin-soo, a 24-year-old Korean male (Group 2) articulated his reaction to power dynamics operating through comedy as he stated, "I think [when] someone who belongs to [the majority] group makes fun of minority [it] makes me uncomfortable. [Schumer, Sykes, and Cho] are all in minority group, and they make fun of themselves." Here, Jin-soo referred to the three women comedians, but especially to Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho for their minority status as women of color who are also not heterosexual. Jin-soo further reiterated that not only is the visible identity of the performer important to joke-telling and the interaction between the comedian and the audience, but identity categories that are not necessarily visible, such as sexuality, are also significant in this context. Jin-soo asserted,

I think appearance is very important because [when] I first saw [Cho]... she was talking about gay people... [and] before [Cho] said, "I am bisexual," I thought that it was very uncomfortable because she is making gay slur[s]. Minority people get made fun of... so I was... a little uncomfortable. But she said she was bisexual and she's also a minority group. And after that I can accept her more.

Initially uncomfortable with Cho's jokes about LGBTQ groups, Jin-soo discussed how learning about the comedian's identity (i.e., sexual orientation) shifts one's interpretation of authority and acceptability in humor. In the beginning of the routine, Cho seemed to be taking advantage of her perceived-by-default heterosexual privilege making fun of stereotypical gay

mannerisms and tropes. However, when she explicitly shares her bisexual (according to Cho, “greedy”) sexuality, it grants her additional license and authority over shared experiences.

Similarly, in referencing Wanda Sykes’ comedy, Madison (Group 3) articulated how knowing about the comedian’s identity contextualizes her interpretation. According to Madison, “I didn’t know Wanda Sykes was gay, actually, before this. It doesn’t make a difference, but I think that it’s funny that she’s able to talk about it because a lot of straight comedians aren’t going to talk about people that are gay. Well, I guess they do, but it’s funnier almost to hear it come from someone who is gay.” Here, Madison echoes the dominant interpretive sentiment that it is both more socially appropriate, and funnier, when a comedian ridicules themselves through self-deprecating humor. As I discuss in the following section, the second component shaping audience interpretation entails identifying the butt, or target, of the joke.

Power Dynamics in Jokes: Identifying Narrative Content and the “Butt of the Joke”

One of the more intriguing findings in this research is the duality of identifying the comic and the butt of the joke, and subsequently how audience members interpret women’s stand-up in terms of either “laughing-at” or “laughing-with” the target of their humor. The previous section focused on audiences interpreting comedians’ embodied identities (e.g., gender, race, and sexuality) and the perceived appropriateness for telling various jokes, and this section explores the perceived power dynamics of stand-up humor grounded in identity. In discussing the routines with each other, members of audience groups were very tuned in to the rhetorical construction of the butt of the joke, but discrepancies still existed in identifying the target of a particular joke. Participants sometimes disagreed about the construction of narrative power dynamics in joke

content, revealing polysemic processes of identification. For example, does Wanda Sykes' "Dignified Black People" bit playfully mock black people in a self-deprecatory manner, or rather, does it reveal the double-consciousness of living black in a white society? Do Amy Schumer's jokes involving gender topics make fun of other women or do they mock the cultural gender norms that dictate women's experiences?

Because stand-up bits by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho were selected for their focus on themes pertaining to gender, race, and sexuality, I focus on these forms of difference as I examine how participants constructed meanings. As indicated by the previous section, audience members were quick to identify and label each comedian, which is important because it shapes the eventual interpretations of power dynamics presented in the joke narrative. Based on how one initially perceives the comedian's identity status, audiences differentially interpret stand-up comedy humor as either mocking groups of others or as ridiculing dominant culture more broadly. Groups consisting primarily of sociology majors (Group 1, Group 4, and Group 5) and participants enrolled in the Feminist Issues course (Group 6) are primed to look for critiques of the larger society, and thus it is reasonable to expect that these groups might potentially articulate these relationships and nuances more so than some others. Discussions in the other two groups, however, also prominently aligned with this theme through their negotiated discussions discerning the butt of the joke.

First, there was disagreement between groups pertaining to the target of Amy Schumer's stand-up jokes. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Schumer's performance of shocking grotesque femininity mocks patriarchal expectations for women and a gendered culture that makes her humor seem so shocking in the first place. Across all six groups, most participants aligned with my

interpretation that Schumer's humor is primarily mocking gendered *culture*, thereby making patriarchal social norms the target of her jokes. This interpretation was voiced the loudest and discussed at great length in each all-women friend group (Group 1 and Group 3), collectively consisting of one white woman, one West Indian woman, and four Hispanic/Latina women.

In contrast, another less frequent interpretive position perceives Schumer as making fun of other women in order to be funny. This decoding position was predominantly expressed in Group 4 (five white men) and by a few individuals (primarily white women) in Group 6, the Feminist Issues group. For example, according to Lauren (19-year-old white woman, Group 6), "the butt of [Schumer's] jokes were always women, or she made like a statutory rape joke. There, she's making fun at the expense of people who are already oppressed in society." Jessica, a 20-year-old white woman (Group 6), followed this comment and added, "Yeah, it was like [Amy Schumer] was making fun of women, but like because she's a woman [she thinks] it was okay, or [that] she was progressive or something like that." Jessica, a political science major, later asserted that a lot of Schumer's comedy is arguably "internalized misogyny," such as when she cracks a one-liner about teen moms in the South. (Schumer: "That's my favorite reality show—You know the show *Teen Mom*? Or if you're from the South, *Mom*? They don't wait, right?").

Analyzing audience interpretations illuminates the differing ways audience members construct victims and butts of jokes. The interpretations expressed above by Lauren and Jessica in Group 6 do not represent a universal (or dominant, *per se*) decoding position for this group, as I learned when I analyzed some of the individual written/typed responses. The Feminist Issues group (Group 6) was the largest group of the six, and therefore I paid much attention to their individual written documents because some participants were not very vocal in the group session.

Interpretations of Amy Schumer's comedy were quite nuanced and contradictory in this group, comprising what Stuart Hall (1980) would characterize as a negotiated decoding position. Most audience members in Group 6 generally perceived Schumer's performance as challenging stereotypical gender expectations. At the same time, however, members in this group were also more concerned than the other groups that Schumer may also be reinforcing sexist representations of other women, such as when she talks about teen moms or plays with the trope of drunk women stumbling in their heels. For instance, Ashley (19-year-old white woman) wrote that "stereotypes of women are used in negative ways, reinforcing criticism of women." The majority of audience members in Group 6 wrote down interpretations that constitute a negotiated reading of Schumer's humor, where they expressed that Schumer is progressive in some ways, but that she simultaneously relies on stereotypical depictions of women.

Similar conversations in the all-men group (Group 4) were revealing in this respect as well. Josh commented, "making fun of men is part of [Schumer's] stand-up, but it's not the primary focus of her stand-up. Nobody is off limits, but... [men are] not her primary focus it seems like. It's more a woman making fun of other women as the majority of her routine." These comments reveal significant aspects of audience decoding processes, where the audience's interpretation of the target of stand-up humor impacts how one will interpret the overall character of the joke, as well as the extent to which the joke is thought to challenge dominant values (which I explore in greater depth in Chapter 8).

I discovered similar interpretive distinctions in audience reception of racial humor. Amy Schumer's racial comedy is more ambiguous, which spurred differing interpretations, especially compared to the oppositional racial humor of Wanda Sykes. Groups were shown Schumer's

“Joking About Race” and Sykes’ “Dignified Black People” bits, which both consist of racial humor that plays on stereotypes of black people. There is an inconsistency between participants who interpreted these routines as making fun of hegemonic racial discourses and privileged whiteness, versus those who interpreted both Schumer and Sykes as making fun of black people, specifically.

First, Wanda Sykes jokes about how, prior to the election of President Obama, black people could not openly dance in their cars or purchase watermelon at the market because “white people are looking at you.” Most audience participants interpreted the joke narrative of this bit to be pointing out the existence of the white gaze, reminiscent of Du Bois’ “double consciousness.” However, audience members offered different interpretations of black stereotypes about watermelon, fried chicken, and tap dancing; Some regarded these jokes as mocking white surveillance while others considered them to be mocking black people. For example, after noting that a “running theme” of Sykes’ performance was “finding little parts of the American society and pulling it apart,” Josh (Group 4) asserted that Sykes “makes fun of herself and her own race. She targets the purchase of a whole watermelon. Like, I don’t know, that’s weird to me.”

However, the most common interpretation of this bit by Sykes focused on deeper layered meanings of her exaggerated racial stereotypes, or a “derived” meaning (Perks 2012) of the text. These groups primarily perceived that Sykes uses comedy to expose broader social issues and inequalities. In other words, audience members decoded layers of meanings, and they indicated that Sykes’ bit contests hegemonic racism and colorblind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2006). For instance, Elizabeth, a 22-year-old white woman (Group 6), observed that Sykes “would point out the issues in society and then would frame the joke around the group or person that is... the cause of the issue, and not the people who are the victim of the issue.” For most participants, Sykes

seems to take on the establishment in a way that is difficult to miss, whereas Schumer leaves interpretations more ambiguous. There was somewhat more disagreement about Schumer's racial narratives in particular. As I indicated in the previous section, the comedian's race shapes how the comic narrative is framed.

Schumer's positionality as a white comedian spurs divergence in interpretations of her racial comedy as either top-down superiority humor, or as ironic self-deprecation of white privilege. There was a general recognition from most of the participants in this study that, just as comedy is historically male-dominated and impacts women's representation, it is also traditionally dominated by white comedians. Schumer's white femininity evokes a certain amount of shock humor when she flippantly plays with racial stereotypes (e.g., black women yelling at the movies). For instance, in the second all-women group, Madison (Group 3) noted that Schumer could, instead, choose to explicitly mock white people in her comedy:

Wanda Sykes is talking about her own race, and like, Amy Schumer is talking about different races. [Schumer] *could* be making jokes about being white... Louis C.K. I think has a stand-up... about white people and he's a white male, so it's funny because it's his own race. And you can say whatever you want about yourself... Self-humiliation is funny, but like, when you're talking about other races it can definitely cross the line. And that's what [Schumer] does as a comedian. She crosses the line and usually it's pretty funny, but like sometimes it's too far... I think it depends on who's watching too, like who the audience is.

Gabriella (Group 3) responded to Madison by initially affirming Madison's suggestion, but she then countered that Schumer may actually be mocking white obliviousness rather than overtly mocking minorities. According to Gabriella, "I feel like it was funny to me because... a lot of white people [will] say like, 'I'm not racist. I have one black friend.'" This brief discussion between Madison (a white woman) and Gabriella (a Hispanic woman) parallels Green and Linders' (2016)

finding that white audience members are more sensitive to the race (see also Bonilla-Silva 2006) of the comedian, whereas minority audience members focus more on the delivery style of the comedian regardless of their race. Thus, white audience members like Madison may be more sensitive to how other white people appear to be talking about race, whereas Gabriella is willing to cut Schumer more slack because she recognizes the larger social critique of white privilege. Additionally, Gabriella is a sociology major, and therefore may be more likely to derive extended meanings about white privilege from layers of irony and satire. However, while there was some disagreement among this group in identifying the butt of Schumer's racial humor, Madison's comment above highlights a broader, prevailing theme in this analysis where she suggests that making fun of another race is considered "crossing the line." Despite certain differences in determining the butt of the joke, focus group discussions reveal that most women and racial minority audience participants are more actively critical of "laughing-at" top-down (i.e., superiority theory) humor narratives.

Following a similar line of thought, audiences also made thematic distinctions in interpreting LGBTQ humor, particularly within Margaret Cho's comedy. For the most part, Cho's identity as an Asian American was deemphasized for all groups except for the group of three Korean friends (Group 2). Most audience members in this study tended to focus on Cho's narratives that highlight her pansexual identity and her experiences living in suburban Georgia. Audiences noted that the LGBTQ community is a marginalized community in society, and Cho's comedy is successful in this regard for her charged, upward comedic attack on dominant heteronormative culture. As Emily (18-year-old Puerto Rican woman, Group 3) pointed out,

I thought it was funny when she made fun of the Southern... Christian, white people... with the country accent. I thought that was funny. I think it was only

funny though because she was saying that... the way that they treated her was *actually* the way that they were treating her. Like, she wasn't making that up. I mean, I guess it could be a stereotype for... all Southern people to be like that, but I thought it was funny because... the things that were happening to her were bad, so... I was like, "make fun of them, yes!"

Emily's comment indicates that Cho's jokes are primarily interpreted as reflecting her own (real) experiences, and additionally, the source of humor is her politicized critique of the status quo that tolerates discrimination (see also Chapter 5). More specifically, for some audience members, if the joke's target causes oppression (e.g., homophobic Christians), then there is a sense of carnivalesque pleasure (see Bakhtin 1968) in ridiculing those who maintain hegemonic ideas and in laughing at the unbalancing of their power.

Preaching to the Choir? Audience Positionality and Collective Identities

In this final section I focus more specifically on the role of audience's identities and social backgrounds in decoding stand-up comedy, and additionally, the extent that audience members see themselves as being part of the intended audience of the performance. Although not as thoroughly and exhaustively discussed by the audience groups, some participants unpacked who they perceive to be the intended audience of each stand-up performance. For one to laugh at a joke, she or he must first either identify or "dis-identify" with the joke teller or the target of the joke (Gilbert 2004:11). Thus, the social location and positionality of audience members, along with identifying with the performer and/or the butt of the joke, is central to how participants negotiate the meanings of stand-up performances. In this context, I examine how audience participants characterized the presumed intended audience of each performance.

First, audience groups in this study occasionally focused their discussions on who they suspected the comedian was performing for. Audience reactions to Margaret Cho's skits from her *Cho Dependent* performance were particularly pertinent in this sense. Many participants from diverse backgrounds described Cho as "funny" and "hilarious," but most of the audience group discussions quickly turned toward conversations about the presumed target audience of her comedy: the LGBTQ community. The primary exception here is Group 2, consisting of three Korean friends, who collectively stated that Margaret Cho was their favorite comedian of the three shown to the group. This group strongly identified with the stand-up narratives pertaining to Cho's Korean heritage and her family's immigration. In contrast, the other groups in this study tended to focus on her sexuality, and Cho's Asian American identity was overall less visible and nearly absent from their discussions.

For example, Margaret Cho jokes about certain stereotypical depictions of the LGBTQ community, such as gay men using Grindr and the "lesbian equivalent" of "animal rescue." Group 6 at one point focused their discussion on how Cho makes jokes both about, and for, the LGBTQ community. Daniel, a 21-year-old white man who identified himself as gay⁵ asserted, "for the most part I did like her, but I don't particularly like when some members of the LGBT community think that... they can make fun of and promote stereotypes for other groups in that community... Just because you're in the LBGT community, [it] doesn't mean that you can say that... gay men are more promiscuous." Here, Daniel points out that our conception of what constitutes an "in-group" varies according to one's own identity and relationship to that group. For Daniel, some of

⁵ Information about participants' sexual orientation was not formally collected. Some participants openly discussed their own sexual identity in group conversations, while others did not.

Cho's jokes do not operate as subversive self-deprecation because, as a woman, Cho ultimately has a few jokes that are perceived to perpetuate negative stereotypes about gay men. Daniel's comment is particularly noteworthy for unpacking notions of diversity within collective identities and further intricacies of identification with texts. It is possible that the same could be said of Afro-Caribbean viewers of Wanda Sykes or Japanese viewers of Margaret Cho. Further intersectional audience reception research is thus needed to expand on these ideas.

However, Lauren, a 19-year-old white woman (who did not disclose her sexuality) sitting next to Daniel, responded to his observation by suggesting that self-deprecating humor perhaps serves a different purpose when it is intended specifically for the audience being mocked:

Like what Daniel said, [Margaret Cho] made a lot of jokes at the expense of people... already marginalized... but I feel like she was also making the jokes *for* members of the LGBT community, *not* for a larger audience. She was making in-community jokes, which, I guess there are different sides of the opinion on it. It's okay to... make fun of marginalized people within your community... It was... self-deprecating, but she was doing it for, you know, a very specific community.

Indeed, self-deprecating comedy may arguably be subversive (Barreca 1991; Gilbert 1997, 2004), and this conversation highlights the significance of the relationship between the identity of the performer, the identity of the target of the joke, and the identity of the audience watching the performance.

Three of the groups⁶ (Group 1, Group 3, and Group 6) specifically claimed that Cho's stand-up is intended to cater primarily to LGBTQ audiences. Carmen (Group 1), for instance, asserted that Cho's comedy is "definitely geared" toward a "very specific audience." Carmen mentioned that she did not understand some of the specific references in the punchlines, and she

⁶ Researcher note: Group 4 (the all-male group) was unfortunately unable watch Margaret Cho's skits due to a technical glitch and expiration of the scheduled time for the group.

observed, “the way that Cho... addressed the audience, it was like she knows that her audience is gay-friendly, or just gay, lesbian, etc. and identifies with that.” The second all-female group (Group 3) reiterated this audience perception, and they additionally highlighted how audience member positionality is related to the perceived shared experiences of the comedian. For example, Madison (Group 3) commented that, compared to watching Sykes or Schumer, she had a more difficult time relating to Cho’s style of comedy. According to Madison, Cho’s comedy is primarily about “being Asian or being gay... Parts of it were funny, but again, I can’t relate to it so it’s kind of hard for me to discern what I should be able to laugh about and what I should not be able to laugh about.” A few moments later, Gabriella also added, “from what I can gather, [Cho] does gay shows. Like, that’s her main audience, [and] obviously, I’m not gay so I wouldn’t go.”

This group discussion (Group 3) exemplifies a few important points. First, this conversation illuminates interrelated processes of identity work in audience reception, where an audience member’s identification with the performer and/or the narrative content is significant for how an audience interprets the performance. An underlying theme emerging from this analysis demonstrates that if you are not part of the (perceived) target audience, the humor looks narrowly focused. If you are part of it, it can seem that the comic is overgeneralizing about your minority group (see Daniel’s comments above). As Carmen, Madison, and Gabriella demonstrate, they do not personally identify with Margaret Cho and her comedy because they identify as straight. On the surface, the relationship between identification and meaning-making seems straightforward; however, this analysis of audience reception reveals that participants who identify as straight tend to view LGBTQ humor as more narrowly focused, niche, and/or less “mainstream” (Carmen, Group 1). Unpacking this perception a bit further, these participants contextualized their

interpretations by commenting that 1) Cho's comedy is not necessarily intended for heterosexual audiences, and that 2) there is likely some hesitation for laughter by those belonging to dominant status groups because they do not want to be perceived as offensive by others in the immediate social setting for laughing at an inappropriate moment. Overall, this analysis reveals that audience members belonging to dominant groups often do not perceive marginalized identity humor as "for them," whereas marginalized groups experience a "bifurcated consciousness" (Smith 1974) in how they interpret and relate to media texts. I shall discuss this point further momentarily.

This research also reveals gendered patterns of stand-up comedy reception, where audiences (of both men and women) are culturally primed to employ a "patriarchal interpretive repertoire" (Bore 2010:144). First, like the scenario depicted above where heterosexual participants interpreted LGBTQ humor as not intended for them, focus groups also suggested that they believe women are more likely to enjoy "women's comedy." General area topics and political humor are perceived as men's terrain, while gender topics are considered more niche and excluding of men. In other words, male humor is considered "humor genera" with universal appeal, and humor emerging from an alternative perspective is Other humor, topical, or special interest (Krefting 2014:113; see also Stott 2005). Second, in the absence of men's stand-up performances, participants re-constructed traditional binaries between perceptions of masculinity and femininity, where femininity becomes marginalized and devalued. Along this line, comedy targeting gender themes is associated with femininity, and is also perceived as "easier to do," "safe" material (Carmen, Group 1), and generally more trivial. These peer group conversations shed light into the gendered politics of public discourse and humor consumption.

Bore (2010) found that both male and female audience members tended to suggest that women are more likely to enjoy women's comedy because they can relate to the issues presented by women performers. Similarly, all six groups in this study to some extent suggested that Amy Schumer does "gender comedy" (implying "women's comedy"), which often invoked comparisons among the comedians. For example, this theme was prominently reflected in the all-men group in this study (Group 4). With the exception of one self-proclaimed avid stand-up fan (Zach), this group expressed that they do not usually watch women's comedy because they do not expect that they will be able to relate to the topics or think it is as funny. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Amy Schumer does, certainly, perform skits that consist largely of narratives concerning (white, heterosexual) women's experiences with gender performance and sex. These kinds of topics (e.g., taking birth control) are relatively common in women's comedy (Gilbert 2004); however, there is some sense among the groups that Schumer's comedy is more trivial in comparison to Wanda Sykes, and that it is generally more appealing to women.

For example, Zach and Will illustrate this dynamic in their conversation by concluding that Amy Schumer is a "female comic" while Wanda Sykes is "just a comedian":

Zach: [Sykes is] a female comic so she appeals to women, but she doesn't talk about female stuff so she can appeal to men at the same time.

Will: Yeah... Amy spoke to a lot of women's issues... whereas, Wanda talked more [about] social issues that, you know, a lot of people can relate to.

Zach: But you can say that Amy Schumer is a female comedian, but for Wanda Sykes it could be accurate just saying that she's just a comedian.

This interpretation illustrates how the men in the group tended to view women's issues in comedy as primarily intended for women, hence the qualifier "female comedian." This conversation parallels a point articulated by Gabriella earlier: when one belongs to a dominant group identity, they often do not see themselves as part of the intended audience, and thus they perceive the

humor to be narrowly focused, niche, and not for them. The distinction made here is that Sykes talks about more “masculine” topics (i.e., not directly women’s issues) and therefore is considered “just a comedian.” This theme exemplifies the “ghettoization of women’s comedy” (Stott 2005:94) because comedy that addresses “women’s issues” is not perceived as universally appealing, particularly by male audiences.

Therefore, as audience members, women must maintain a bifurcated consciousness (Smith 1974) because men are not called to task for understanding women’s experiences in the same ways that women are conditioned to understand men’s worldview. When examining the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in audience reception, insights by scholars such as Dorothy Smith and W.E.B. Du Bois are particularly valuable for dissecting how the perspective of the dominant group is institutionalized and framed as the default perspective. As Michael, a 32-year-old white man (Group 4) describes, “when there’s a man comedian, they’re not always telling jokes about ‘*man* stuff.’ They’re talking about... a whole array of things. Whereas, [Amy Schumer’s] first three [bits] were just focused on female issues... Kind of like when you have a black movie, it’s like almost always all black people in the movie, but when you have a regular movie it’s... got a bunch of different people in the movie.” Given that “regular movies” actually quantitatively lack diversity, Michael’s comment reflects how dominant group perspectives become deeply ingrained in culture. Moreover, consistent with Smith’s (1974) articulation of the bifurcation of consciousness, dominant group audience members have the privilege to remain oblivious to the perspectives of marginalized groups.

Four of the six groups (Group 1, Group 2, Group 3, Group 4) also referenced the role of audience members’ race in decoding comic narratives, particularly emphasizing the role of

whiteness as an interpretive resource. These groups discussed how white audiences might interpret marginalized racial comedy, and occasionally, white participants reflected on their own subjective positionalities as white audience members. First, there was some speculation that white audiences may decode racial comedy differently because they do not experience systematic racial discrimination and stigmatization. For example, Jin-soo, Min-ji, and Yunjin (Group 2) discussed how they perceive possible differences in racial awareness between white and non-white audiences. Yunjin explained, “I don’t know if... white people... also think about these issues. I mean, of course they do, but... the way they think about this issue would be... from a different perspective than... what we think of about this issue. I feel like... [minorities are] always thinking about this... [but white people] don’t really think deep into these kinds of issues.” Additionally, a few white participants discussed how their own positionality as white audience members plays a role in interpreting comedy. As Madison (Group 3) pointed out, in “talking about race, specifically, is that... none of us [in Group 3] are black and so, it’s different hearing a black comedian talk about being black.” These sentiments by white students suggest that stand-up comedy potentially works to destabilize hegemonic “white racial framing” (Feagin 2013). I explore this idea further in Chapter 8.

There is also a perception discussed in a couple of the groups that white people are generally aware of *appearing* racially insensitive (or, racist), and this cautious awareness may influence how white audiences react to comedians and racial humor. For example, the all-men group (Group 4) also discussed the relationship between the race of the performer, the target of race stereotypes, and race in the audience. According to Josh, a 24-year-old white man,

[Sykes] was talking about the watermelon and fried chicken thing... We’ve been so trained as white people to not laugh about the stereotypes because it might be

considered... [trails off]. What I'm getting at is, if I got up there on stage and had a twenty-minute skit about how black people like watermelon and fried chicken... I had better be funny and get paid good, or I better be prepared to be, like, verbally harassed and everything like that.

The group then immediately discussed comedian Ralphie May, a white comic who “does a lot of black jokes”—and who has also been accused of racist humor in the public sphere (see Brooks 2016). James, a 21-year-old white man, added, “on the topic of relatability, Ralphie May is understanding it from our perspective. He’s a white man.” Here, James is not implying he enjoys racist jokes, but rather, he points to the perceived (and often controversial) complexity of white comedians who joke about race.

Similarly, Emily (Group 3) considered the differences in the audible laughter heard from the live audiences attending Amy Schumer’s and Wanda Sykes’ performances. In this sense, Emily speculated whether, compared to the more uproarious laughter following Wanda Sykes’ “Dignified Black People” bit, the live audience at Schumer’s show did not laugh as hard at her “Joking About Race” because white audience members possibly want to avoid the appearance of being racist for laughing. According to Emily, “that’s why it comes across like that... like, ‘Ohh, maybe [Schumer] shouldn’t have said that’... like the people were scared to laugh because they didn’t want other people around them to be like, ‘Ooo, racist!’” Emily’s comment further highlights the audience’s awareness of the social interactions involved in stand-up between comedian and audience, in that laughter at a controversial joke may be thought of as validating the stereotype it satirizes.

Finally, audiences in this study also articulated how certain interpretive repertoires, such as education and ideology, play a role in interpreting comedy texts. Of note, two groups of sociology majors were rather self-reflective on the role of education in meaning-making. The first all-women group (Group 1) and the group of men (Group 4) both consisted entirely of sociology majors (n =

8), and members in both groups occasionally referred to their own “sociological imaginations” that allow them to make connections between micro and macro social relations. For example, Jamie, a 27-year-old Latina woman (Group 1) noted, “[As] sociology majors, I think because we can make those connections, so [for instance] ... none of us are black, but we can laugh with Wanda Sykes because we can understand what she means and where she’s coming from because we have that sociological imagination to... empathize. So, even if we can’t directly relate, we still understand, so it’s still funny.” Both Group 1 and Group 4 were arguably able to “make those connections” between micro and macro discourses in comedy, although some gendered interpretive differences emerged as discussed previously in this chapter (specifically pertaining to interpreting “women’s comedy”). Moreover, the group of men audience members were much less likely than the group of women to interpret women’s comedy as serious social commentary with culturally subversive potential, which I outline and discuss further in Chapter 8.

Conclusion

This research contributes to our understanding of the layers of identification in audience decoding practices. This research offers insight into how audiences observe someone’s embodied identity and construct meaning and authenticity from—and boundaries for—their narrative storytelling. The comedian’s embodied identity gives them “permission” to make fun of one’s own in-groups and the authority to speak for experiences based on shared identity status. Some of these findings replicate those discussed in previous audience reception studies of comedy, while others offer new insights. First, analyzing focus group discussions suggests that audience members are primed to utilize a “patriarchal interpretive repertoire” (Bore 2010). Men and women audience

members suggested that “women’s comedy” is targeted to women audiences, whereas political humor and general topics are perceived as masculine areas. Additionally, this research also supports previous findings regarding race and comedy (Green and Linders 2016; Perks 2012). In particular, I found that audience member participants were quite attentive to the comedian’s embodied identity, including their race and sexual orientation. This interpretive focus on the comedian’s identity is sociologically important to our understanding of how audience members construct meaning from comedy and how they determine what is funny versus offensive (Green and Linders 2016).

I argue that these decoding practices pertaining to varying levels of identification in comedy narratives are embedded in broader patterns of interpreting marginalized identities and social life. According to Smith (1974), women understand two simultaneous modes of experience: the world as she experiences it, as well as the patriarchal (dominant) perspective women are accustomed to navigating and adapting to. As such, the dominant group also maintains its privilege to remain oblivious and unaware of the marginalized group’s perspective because they are not generally called to understand their worldview. Not only did audience participants articulate how women’s comedy is more for women audiences, but this bifurcated consciousness arguably also applies to straight audience members not conditioned to adapting to the perspectives of LGBTQ individuals.

In the context of audience reception of comedy, this research reveals that there is a great deal of identification work at play in the process of interpreting stand-up comedy. My analysis suggests that positioning the comedian’s identity on multiple axes of social status is part of an early interpretive process of establishing the narrative context and power dynamics. The comedian’s

identity (especially based on gender, race, sexuality, and occasionally physical appearance) establishes a perceived sense of authority for their role of narrative storyteller. This is key to audience decoding processes because it frames the context of how the audience will interpret the narrative plot and butt of the joke. In other words, identifying the comedian constructs symbolic boundaries for what audience members consider “crossing the line” into offensiveness.

Identifying the butt of the joke may seem like an obvious interpretive practice on the surface, but really this is the crux of the stand-up narrative. This analysis reveals a dichotomy between audience members who interpret the target of stand-up humor as macro cultural discourses and those who emphasize individual stereotypes. This emergent theme is further significant because it also speaks to how audiences distinguish funny vs. offensive. Generally speaking, when a comedian from a dominant group mocks a marginalized group (attacking down), comedy is considered more offensive, such as when participants interpreted Schumer’s “Joking About Race” bit as mocking racial minorities. Audiences were critical whenever dominant group comedians seemed to mock marginalized groups. The majority of participants seemed to understand women’s stand-up humor as an outlet in popular culture to expose social problems and mock dominant culture. I discuss these ideas further in Chapter 8, “Hysterical Women: Audience Reception and Cultural Pedagogy,” but it is worth reiterating here that the audience members in this study are more educated than the general population, as well as overrepresented by social science majors.

Building on the current body of audience reception scholarship, audience positionality is also key to decoding stand-up comedy performances. Audience members’ social backgrounds impact how one identifies with comedy, both from the perspective of the joke teller and within the

narrative content of the joke. In terms of identity, the issue of “relatability” was important; audiences needed to feel like they could relate to the comedian. Audiences in this study demonstrated that one’s standpoint (from perceived identity) influences the boundaries of possible narratives the comedian can successfully share with the audience. Overall, participants of varying backgrounds expressed greater acceptance of counterhegemonic comedy involving a comedian mocking cultural oppression or self-deprecating humor of one’s own in-group. Audiences critiqued comedy that they perceived to “attack down” and disparage already oppressed groups. This pattern was especially true for most of the women (white and non-white) participants and minority men.

In the following chapter, I discuss how audience groups characterized stand-up comedy as a satirical reflection of society, and I explore implications for consciousness-raising through popular culture. Chapter 8 expands the analysis presented in this chapter in that the outcomes of audience identity work (i.e., identification, relatability, symbolic boundaries) influence the extent that comedy is interpreted as subversive, as well as how comedy is perceived as presenting “truths.”

CHAPTER EIGHT:

HYSTERICAL WOMEN: AUDIENCE RECEPTION AND STAND-UP COMEDY AS CULTURAL PEDAGOGY

In this chapter I examine the extent to which participants perceive stand-up comedy as a lens for unpacking social “truths” and as a means of consciousness-raising for social issues. Chapter 7 explored how audience participants engage in interpretive processes of identifying the comedian, identifying the target of the humor, and the role of audience identity characteristics. Audience participants’ social positionality shapes their interpretive frameworks, as well as their interpretations of the relationship between the comedian and the butt of the joke. Identifying the comedian and the joke’s target structures the context of perceived appropriateness, tastefulness, or offensiveness. Here, I extend the analysis presented in the previous chapter on audience identity work, and I discuss how audience members’ positionality and social locations also shape the degree to which they will interpret comedy to contribute “serious” commentary with subversive implications.

This emergent theme goes beyond whether participants believed the comedians were simply offering commentary on various social issues—which might reasonably be expected within the frame of stand-up comedy—and instead delves into how audience members discussed the cultural pedagogical value of comedy (or, lack thereof). In this chapter, I return to some of the key ideas discussed throughout Part I—namely, subversive narratives and comedy as critical cultural pedagogy. In Chapter 5, I described how comedy serves as a source of critical cultural pedagogy,

where ideas and ideologies are circulated, affirmed, negotiated, and challenged in popular culture (Giroux 2000, 2001; Hall 1997; see also Collins 2004; Mizejewski 2014). As Gabriella (19-year-old Hispanic woman, Group 3) pointed out, comedy may “make [audiences] think about [social issues] because... they’re laughing about it but then they’re like, ‘Oh wait, like, she’s right!’ That type of thing.” In group discussions, several audience members characterized the cultural work of stand-up comedy as a potential source of cultural pedagogy disseminated in the public sphere. Specifically, there was a great deal of discussion in all six groups pertaining to whether comedy is truly *subversive*, or merely a space to bring up issues in a non-serious, jocular manner. I analyzed these competing narratives between and within groups regarding the extent to which comedy is influential, serious, or even educational in its social commentary. Audience participants offered few different definitions of “truth” within group discussions, but most tended to center either on 1) how comedic narratives are reflective of, or in contrast with, their own personal experiences, or 2) their interpretations of stereotypes as a rhetorical storytelling device with tiered meanings.

First, from a macro perspective, several audience members discussed with one another the extent to which women’s comedy narratives reflect on or offer commentary for various social problems. For most participants in this study, stand-up comedy illuminates cultural narratives and hegemonic discourses, and many participants alluded to notions of stand-up comedians working as public sociologists. By extension, some audience members further discussed how comedy is funny (and possibly even subversive) because there is some degree of perceived truth that resonates with personal experiences in the skit, which anchors the construction of meanings. Drawing from insights of the previous chapter, I focus on how audience identity and positionality further shapes the extent that “funny” operates subversively for certain audiences. Audience members from

marginalized identity positions (on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, etc.) are generally more likely to experience feminist stand-up as a counterhegemonic text. They found resonances with their own lived experiences that contradict or undermine various hegemonic cultural narratives. People may find something funny for a number of reasons, but for these participants the elicitation of humor stems from the pleasure in subversive decoding and interpretation of narratives. As I shall discuss, audience members taking on this interpretative position articulated the importance of representation through stand-up performances, where stand-up offers perspective and voice to experiences often excluded from mainstream culture. In contrast however, audience members belonging to dominant identity groups tended to interpret marginalized comedy narratives as more niche and/or not relatable enough for universal appeal.

Second, and interrelatedly, audience groups in this analysis frequently cited the comedians' use of stereotypes within stand-up narratives. Stereotypes are a common "currency of stand-up comedy" (Gilbert 2004:151), and as I discussed in the previous chapter, differing interpretations of stereotypes in joke content frame how audience members will interpret the comic narrative. Sociologically, stereotyping is a "signifying practice" that connotes naturalized differences between groups (Hall 1997). Stereotypical representations of women in the mass media are generally very confining (Collins 2004; Tuchman 1978), and women (especially minority women) have historically been subject to "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman 1978) where they are not only underrepresented in media overall, but their representation is often reduced to stereotypical roles. Paralleling much of the critical scholarship on humor, focus group participants often discussed how stereotypes in comedy expose the construction and absurdity of such depictions through satire and exaggeration. These subversive narratives facetiously reorient the traditional thinking behind

many widely-circulating stereotypes and “controlling images” (Collins 2000). In this sense, stereotypes—and other comedic exaggerations—illuminate those macro cultural narratives mentioned above. Conversely, however, a few participants viewed these narrative stereotypes as aspects of perceived literal (i.e., factual) representations. All six groups pointed out the use of stereotypes in comedy, and they were subsequently asked to elaborate.

This analysis does not intend to suggest, however, that audience interpretations were fixed or monolithic decoding positions. Comedy is notoriously polysemic, and differences emerged both within and between groups regarding the cultural work of women’s stand-up comedy. In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the dominant decoding position (as expressed by most of the women and racial minority participants) that perceives feminist stand-up comedy as subversive texts—linking micro and macro narratives. Second, I examine how some audience members discuss comedy’s potential pedagogical and educational role. Next, in contrast, I speculate about how membership in dominant identity groups impacts interpretation by examining the interpretations of some white men and others who seemed to resist critical interpretations. Specifically, I examine the ways the group of white men (Group 4) differentially interpreted women’s stand-up comedy as “just joking.” Lastly, the final theme that emerged under this analytic umbrella pertains to the demarcation of “women’s issues” and women’s perspectives from comedy topics that were perceived as “universal,” or funny to all audiences.

Seriously Funny? Marginalized Audiences and Subversive Narratives as Linking Micro and Macro Discourses

This audience reception analysis shows that stand-up performances by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho have the capacity to illuminate social inequalities and potentially

to encourage interpretive resistance. The most common interpretive position views women's comedy as a venue for listening to discourses that "really make you think." This perspective was shared vocally by women participants across all six groups, and was discussed in the most depth in the two all-women groups (Group 1 and Group 3). Both white and non-white female students tended to express interpretations of the women's stand-up performances as cultural critique, especially regarding dominant narratives about gender and race relations.

Several participants like Gabriella (quoted above), for instance, observed that stand-up comedians "make you think" by using humor to connect the personal and the political, and to expose the various ways social life is differentially organized. Similarly, in the first all-women group (Group 1), Jamie (27-year-old Latina) articulated this notion of how comedy brings to the forefront "serious issues" by describing how Wanda Sykes uses humor as a consciousness-raising tool:

[Wanda Sykes] talks about growing up as a black woman and learning the roles of how to act because of her race... I mean, she's... using humor but she's, again, illuminating a very serious issue that a lot of... people have to go through in their daily lives. They have to... surveillance [sic] themselves because of their race, you know?

Jamie explained how Sykes' "Dignified Black People" skit works to highlight "a very serious issue."

Jamie and her group alluded to Sykes' ability to expose the white gaze and the realities of internalized double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903) through her narrative performance. Stand-up comedians in general, but especially those performing "charged" humor (Krefting 2014) like Wanda Sykes (see Chapter 5), are willing and licensed to delve into various social issues. In other words, as Yunjin (Group 2) put it, comedians say what people are "scared to say" about their own culture by pointing out the absurdities and inconsistencies of American culture. Audience participants in this research frequently expressed that comedians use humor to illuminate serious

issues, and that these performances may serve a consciousness-raising function because they “really make you think.”

One way the media “make you think” is related to how we construct gender identities (Milestone & Meyer 2012). From a Goffmanesque interactionist perspective, individuals make conscious, but constrained, decisions about their performances (see Chapter 4). Social performances and identities are shaped by dominant gender frames constituting social expectations for femininity and masculinity. “Referential viewing” entails the process of “relating their own subjective experience to television texts” (Wood 2005:115), and this sort of referential viewing is often considered a source of pleasure in popular culture consumption (Milestone & Meyer 2012). In stand-up, comedic stereotypes and representations are encoded with recognizable frames and codes, but through satire and distortion of meanings, they may work to deconstruct and challenge dominant discourses. Therefore, watching women’s stand-up comedy seems to provide an interpretive space for *critical referential viewing* because the stand-up narratives offer relatable narrations of marginalized experiences, particularly for women and non-white audience members.

For example, in the previous chapter I discussed how women participants in this audience study frequently expressed that women’s comedy is “refreshing” because it centers on women’s experiences in patriarchal society, relating to both mundane and taboo experiences. The two all-women groups (Group 1 and Group 3) most thoroughly unpacked these ideas in their discussions. Lana, a 27-year-old West Indian woman (Group 1) alluded to the relationship between gendered identity work and subversive texts when she discussed Amy Schumer’s comedy on performing gender (e.g., “walking in stilts,” taking Plan B before yoga, and laboring for “90 minutes to look

this mediocre”). According to Lana, “what makes it really funny is the fact that it is true what [women] go through and everything, like how we have to put makeup on ourselves, how we have to go through this if you do get pregnant, or don’t want to get pregnant. It’s the little things like that... [which] makes it more hilarious.” Lana’s observation reveals some of the ways that stand-up can be relatable, particularly to marginalized audiences, by speaking to experiences and social norms not often unpacked in the public sphere (i.e., critical referential viewing). Representation through narrative storytelling normalizes these experiences through performance and humor. Moreover, this finding also arguably highlights the importance of group composition in focus group research, where women participants may feel more comfortable sharing ideas and perspectives in a “safe” setting more so than in a mixed-gender group.

Conversely, audience participants in the all-men group (Group 4) indicated that they, too, thought the jokes by Amy Schumer (mentioned above by Lana) were especially funny. Whereas Lana highlighted how the relatable experiences of (Western) womanhood drive the context of the bit, for Group 4 the source of humor is not rooted in stereotypes that they experience personally, as Lana indicated. Rather, the men audience members relied on their familiarity with gendered narratives and stereotypes in the social world. As James pointed out, “I’m a 21-year-old guy. Like, yeah, I see the slut prototypes on the sidewalk. I see things like that and so, like, that’s funny.” Will, a 45-year-old, later added that while some jokes in Schumer’s performance were funny in how they were delivered, he did not relate to the perspective of a 30-year-old woman: “No, I don’t understand what a thirty-year-old woman... Plan B? I don’t know what you’re talking about, you know? That’s never been a problem!” In this scenario, both groups (Group 1 and Group 4) laughed at the same jokes by Amy Schumer because of the shared comic frame, but the bit

connected more closely for the women because it gave a voice to their own experiences. This theme also further speaks to audience's interpretive bifurcated consciousness (Smith 1974) discussed in the previous chapter, where men are typically not called to task to empathize with women's experiences in the same ways that women are conditioned to interpret both the world as they experience it and the dominant view that they must adapt to.

This emergent theme was also prominently discussed in Group 2 (two Korean women, one Korean man), where this group articulated how the comedian's narrative perspective is significant because comedy (like other forms of representation) normalizes marginalized identities by bringing these perspectives into mainstream consciousness. Representations of race circulating in popular culture, including racial stereotypes, have historically signaled notions of white superiority and naturalized racial differences (Collins 2004; Denzin 2002; Hall 1997). Stand-up comedy, however, is a potential space in the public sphere where racial meanings are exposed and illuminated through irony and satire (see again Chapters 4 & 5). Specifically, minorities are permitted the "freedom" (Min-ji, Group 2) to portray personal racialized experiences through humor. For instance, Yunjin noted, "the fact that [Margaret Cho] is herself among a part of a minority group makes it seem like there's nothing wrong with that. Like, there's nothing wrong with being a minority." In this context, Min-ji, Yunjin, and Jin-soo collectively discussed the comedy of Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho in particular, and how non-white (and LGBTQ) perspectives allow minority status to become more "normal" in culture.

This group also discussed how they appreciated the high degree of relatability from Margaret Cho, especially in characterizing shared experiences such as feeling "humiliation" and feeling as though you are "not the ideal type to live in this society" (Min-ji, Group 2). In other

words, personal narratives—told through the frame of stand-up—have the potential to become subversive by challenging hegemonic taken-for-granted ideas and voicing the perspectives of marginalized Others. Ewick and Silbey (1995) assert that when “stories make visible and explicit the connections between particular lives and social organization, they may be liberatory” (222-223). These audience reception findings therefore contribute to sociological understandings of subversive narratives. Audience members expressed how stand-up narratives connect personal and cultural narratives, and marginalized audience members in particular employed their critical referential viewing toolkit to decode comedy. For these participants, women’s stand-up comedy lifts the veil on social inequalities and how individuals’ social realities are shaped by inequalities. Women’s stand-up comedy, therefore, may culturally “work” to counter the “controlling images” (Collins 2000; see also Hall 1997) of subordinated minority groups, especially those of minority women. For audience members taking this decoding position, it seems that part of the enjoyment and pleasure of watching (women’s) stand-up is in the act of decoding oppositional readings of the status quo, which hints at how “funny” can actually work subversively.

Unpacking the Perceived Truth in Stereotypes: Implications for Cultural Pedagogy

Comedic stereotypes are often deployed in stand-up narratives because of their culturally ubiquitous codes and symbolic meanings that structure them. I previously discussed stereotypes in Chapter 7 because audience members think about stereotypes when trying to identify the target of the joke. As a frequent narrative component of stand-up comedy, I return to the significance of stereotypes in this section because of their potential to work as subversive and pedagogical representations. If stand-up comedy “really makes you think,” it stands to reason, then, that stand-

up comedy also carries some critical pedagogical value in the public sphere, and this theme speaks to the polysemy between hegemonic and counterhegemonic interpretations.

Each focus group in this study discussed the role and meanings of stereotypes in comedy, and my findings illuminate the tension between interpreting stereotypes in comedy as reinforcing existing stereotypical representations (because we are laughing at them), or interpreting stereotypes as a challenge to dominant culture because we are laughing at the fact that these stereotypes exist. For instance, discussions in Group 3 effectively exemplify this point. First, discussing the Amy Schumer bit about men and women getting dressed, Gabriella (19, Hispanic) pointed out that Schumer utilizes several “women’s stereotypes.” Gabriella asserted:

Some of [the stereotypes] are true. For the most part, I feel like they are probably true, I don’t know. But like, she reinforces them as being valid, like they are valid stereotypes, so men in the audience would sit and would possibly think, “Oh, because she’s telling us this is a true stereotype, like, then it’s ok for us to also acknowledge it as a valid stereotype.” So, I think anytime a comedian plays on a stereotype it just... highlights it more.

For Gabriella, using certain stereotypical generalizations in narratives, despite their use through satire and parody, suggests that they are *valid* (i.e., legitimate) representations of women and womanhood. Emily (18, Puerto Rican) and Madison (18, white) of Group 3 subsequently responded to Gabriella and the group then teased this theme out further.

Madison nuanced her group’s interpretations by suggesting that comedy perhaps works both ways (reinforcing *and* subverting stereotypes, depending on the context). According to Madison, when a comedian uses stereotypes in their humor,

Either [the comedian] is reinforcing it, or they are breaking the stereotype... I think that with the first skit [Schumer] kind of reinforced [gender stereotypes] because she was talking about how men, like *all men*, don’t take very long to get ready, but *all women* do take a long time to get ready. And that’s not necessarily true. But then

moving into her second skit about the Plan B... that's *not* something you usually talk about, so it's one thing for her to be putting it out there, and she's also kind of breaking down the gender stereotypes.

So, as Madison described, a stand-up comedy performance is not necessarily interpreted as a whole text, but rather, each routine and joke seems to require contextual decoding of its narrative components. For Madison, joking about women taking longer than men to get dressed is a familiar stereotype that initially seems to validate negative representations of women, compared to the bit about Plan B that works more subversively because women's sexuality is not an openly-discussed public topic. Moreover, Emily then asserted that, "it could be taken two different ways. I take it, like, [Schumer is] putting it out there so it can be laughed at because it's funny that this is a stereotype. Like, it doesn't mean it's true, but like... it's something stupid. Like [Madison] said earlier, not all girls take ninety minutes to get ready, you know what I mean? So, it's funny that... it is a thing." Therefore, Group 3 pointed out that there is some degree of encoded truth in a stereotype (some women take a long time to get dressed, for instance), so that the audience recognizes and understands the symbolic codes and frames embedded in the narrative. But, as Emily and Lana both illustrated, stereotypes are not funny because they are true, *but because you realize how ridiculous they are* through comedic exaggeration. Similarly illustrating this point, Zach (31-year-old white man, Group 4) wrote, "So, in a way [Schumer] uses her comedy to point out the faults in gender stereotypes."

Furthermore, for some audience members, discourses in comedy offer serious reflections of society that serve an educational purpose. Discussing comedy as a serious space, some students even worried that other audiences may take away misinformation or various 'untruths' from the routines. For instance, Carmen (26-year-old Hispanic woman, Group 1) discussed Schumer's

humor in the broader context of public discussion on reproductive health politics. Here, Carmen pondered whether audiences might confuse Plan B and having an abortion from Amy Schumer's "Plan B" bit, where Schumer jokes about taking the pill before going to yoga. Referring to Schumer's proclamation that she is "mid-aborsh" in tree pose, Carmen stated,

I really like the Plan B segment... Like, that's hilarious. But at the same time, I wish she wouldn't have said that because, you know, it's not the abortion pill. Like, it's not the same thing even though people get those two confused... So, the fact [that] she went and put it together, I was like, "Damn it." It's funny, but no! Someone's going to take that as fact, you know?... But it's still hilarious nonetheless.

Similarly, two of the groups (Group 2 and Group 6) discussed and praised Wanda Sykes' "immigration" bit for its potential educational function. In her stand-up Sykes states that there is nothing "illegal" about undocumented workers. Jessica, a 20-year-old white woman (Group 6), noted that she is pleased that Sykes "pointed out the correct term for undocumented workers. She did not use 'illegal immigrants' and she pointed out the correct term." A few of the audience members in Group 6 also wrote down similar sentiments in their individual responses. For example, Andrea (20-year-old Dominican/white woman) wrote, "I think [Sykes is] hilarious because she calls [society] out on problematic issues such as the term 'illegal immigrants,' America's superiority complex, and societal stereotypes of coming out." Likewise, Yunjin (Group 2) referred to the Sykes' immigration joke and commented, "they're not illegal. They're not doing anything, you know? They don't want free anything. They just want to be happy and they want a better life. They're not anything wrong." Therefore, for those audience members inclined to interpret stand-up comedy as counter-hegemonic, stand-up then is perhaps not so different from cultural products such as *The Daily Show* in that it bears a certain responsibility for cultural pedagogical insights.

You Can't Get Mad Because "We're Just Joking!"

A few participants, though, implied that stand-up comedy is carnivalesque (see Bakhtin 1968) primarily in the sense that it exists as a distinct, politically charged form of popular culture performance. From such a perspective, comedy is not subversive because mockery and bawdiness are expected in the frame (Goffman 1974) of stand-up. In other words, these audience members asserted that comedy is purely "just a joke." From this perspective, there are shared expectations and understandings when audiences watch comedy, and therefore the very frame of stand-up strips comedy of any broader "serious" implications or meanings. Audience members taking this perspective thus argued specifically that people should not get offended by comedy.

This interpretive position of "just a joke" was only explicitly voiced by white students, and primarily by white men. According to Adam, a 25-year-old white man (Group 5), "I personally think comedy is comedy and... if you can't laugh at yourself then you shouldn't even watch comedy... Whenever you go into a place where they do comedy, you should just put your beliefs aside and just enjoy the show." While this is likely a popular opinion known by audiences outside of this study, the fact that mostly white audience members of this study (and particularly white men) expressed this decoding position is nevertheless noteworthy. Historically speaking, audience members who belong to dominant identity groups have been less likely to be made the butt of jokes in mainstream comedy. Moreover, in a racialized society, racial slurs and stereotypes applied to whites by minorities do not carry the same cultural meanings or symbolic weight as they do when these positions are switched (Embrick & Henricks 2013). According to Embrick and Hendrick (2013), "these symbolic meanings [in comedy] matter because they maintain white supremacy in both material and symbolic ways." Additionally, Gilbert (2004) explains that men's

laughter at jokes about them by female comics may be explained by their hegemonic cultural status: “Perhaps the laughter is precisely because he is *not* threatened. Members of the dominant group in any culture know that names can never hurt them. Marginalized groups like women and minorities, however, may feel threatened by humor that seems to perpetuate existing structures of oppression” (163, emphasis in original). My findings suggest that how one interprets the butt of the joke is influenced by audience positionality, and audience members who benefit from certain social privileges, especially at the intersections of race and gender, are more likely to read joke narratives for their hegemonic meanings. Additionally, much of comedy (and the consumption of comedy) tends to reaffirm dominant group identity (Krefting 2014), and my findings also suggest that members of the dominant group are less likely to perceive the rhetorical power of humor as potentially disruptive to the status quo. This finding is particularly striking when comparing reactions from the group of white men (Group 4) and the two racially heterogeneous female groups (Group 1 and Group 3).

Group 4, the all-men group in this study, discussed the interpretive dynamic of “just joking” at several different moments in their conversation. Early in the discussion, Will and Zach observed that comedians are able to use humor as a protective defense for presenting taboo or political material (“real issues”) that people do not typically discuss in everyday life. Zach argued that stand-up comedians are “bringing in real issues with comedy so that we don’t think anything about it” (e.g., race relations and immigration). Will agreed, “Yeah... through comedy, it’s kind of like when you talk about *The Daily Show* or anything like that, and do the ‘well, it’s all a joke. We’re just joking.’” Here, Will and Zach acknowledged that comedy delves into various social or political issues, but they claimed that the frame of comedy, as a distinct genre, prevents it from

ideologically saying anything too serious. Dominant group identity status provides an interpretive buffer of sorts from internalizing the symbolic meanings of gendered and racial representation.

I discussed in Chapter 5 how Wanda Sykes and Margaret Cho perform a more aggressively political style of stand-up humor than Amy Schumer, and the men in this group also unpacked this theme further when comparing the political implications of Schumer's and Sykes' stand-up. As discussed in the previous chapter, this group tended to express more identification with Schumer, and Sykes was perceived as more highbrow but also more overtly political. Will identified as politically conservative, and he indicated that he is on the opposite side of the political spectrum from Wanda Sykes, and therefore interprets much of her comedy through the lens of "just joking" so as to not be offended by her humor:

Will: Yeah... And you have to stop and take it, like we were saying before, because she's a comedian and where she's coming from is, you know, she's making a joke about it. It's not like you can sit there and go, "I'm walking."

Zach: Don't get offended. It's your fault if you get offended.

Will: Right, it's your fault if you get offended. And, well I wasn't offended by what she was saying, it's just more... the topics have become a little more heated.

This research therefore contributes to the existing audience reception and humor studies scholarship by illuminating how the positionality and lived experience of audience members leads them to negotiate meanings from stand-up performances differently than others. Additionally, this particular conversation highlights the importance of the frame of stand-up itself, where despite his disagreement and/or discomfort with the political topic material, Will granted Wanda Sykes a license for political expression, where he may have "walked away" from another speaker espousing the same views in a different frame, such as a political rally or newspaper editorial. Additionally, although not voiced publicly to the group, Josh later hinted in his written individual response that this frame of stand-up may, actually, be an effective type of pedagogical communication because

the frame permits this type of charged dialogue. Josh wrote, “I personally focus on the information that the comedians use for their material rather than their delivery as much. While it is true that a good delivery is important, I find hearing others’ opinions on things in a funny non-threatening way [is] more likely to change my views on things like politics.”

Taking Women Seriously: Femininity and “Girls Telling Man Jokes”

Another finding of this study involves audience members’ tendency to demarcate “women’s issues” from general topics in comedy. Audience members—both men and women—often (re)created traditional binaries in identifying the comedians on the extent of their perceived femininity or masculinity. In general, as the following analysis will show, comedy reflecting femininity (namely, by Amy Schumer) was associated with being easier to perform, and it was depicted as more culturally “lowbrow.” Conversely, comedy identified as more masculine (through its lack of traditional femininity) was characterized as more universal in its appeal and more “highbrow.”

Audience members most closely connected with the dominant groups in our society were less likely to perceive comedy as rhetorically subversive, compared to women and minority participants who frequently discussed comedy as more counter-hegemonic. Additionally, the all-men group’s discussions further highlighted the devaluing of “women’s humor.” In their conversations directly comparing Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes, the all-men group tended to compare and rank the perceived seriousness of each comedian’s routine. The group negotiated the traditional masculine/feminine binary to categorize Schumer and Sykes, where Schumer was marked by her hyper-femininity, and her humor targeting women’s topics was interpreted as less

universally relevant or politically serious. Conversely, the group saw Wanda Sykes as more masculine overall, and more universally appealing to broad audiences.

For Group 4, women's stand-up comedy was broadly interpreted as "breaking boundaries" and offering political commentary, but the group often disagreed and negotiated with one another what constitutes "serious issues." The clips shown to the group by Amy Schumer included material on topics such as dating, sex, birth control, and race stereotypes. However, members of this group negotiated at various points throughout their discussion whether Amy Schumer's comedy (and, "women's issues" in comedy broadly) contains serious issues/topics. For instance:

James: I didn't really see [Schumer] bringing up any issues though.

Michael: Yeahhh.

Zach: Well she talked about, like, the fact that women have to take the morning-after pill.

Will: Plan B.

James: Oh ok, yeah.

Zach: And even, like, how pubic hair is an issue that women...

Will: Yes, yes. And... how female representation—how males dictate what that female representation should be.

So, on one hand, the men watching Schumer's comedy came to agree that topics like taking the morning-after pill and women's representation in media are perhaps consequential issues for women. On the other hand, however, regardless of whether Schumer's comedy delves into serious issues, the male audience members lacked the cultural competencies to experientially relate to women's experiences and, therefore, several of them "took her humor less seriously." It is therefore possible that their positionality does not afford them the critical tools and mindsets for understanding the feminist-minded critique in gendered humor.

As Will commented, "taking Amy serious[ly], compared to taking Wanda serious[ly], was different. [The] social issues that [Schumer] was trying to accomplish were fluff." The appearance

of hegemonic femininity (e.g., Schumer's dress, stilettos, appearance) was closely associated with perceived "women's issues." This type of gendered comedy was further dissociated from serious (i.e., not "fluff") topics and commentary, which is masculinized. Will and James (Group 4) continued this line of discussion:

Will: If [Sykes] had worn a dress and heels and tried to deliver what [Schumer] delivered, and vice versa...

James: It wouldn't have been the same.

Will: Exactly. And I think those two, a lot of what we're talking about with the gender thing [is] the ability to cross over. I think that's what Wanda's biggest asset was, because she does not represent the male version of, you know, the beautiful...

Michael: Mmhm

Will: It's... because Amy presents that—when I watch her I'm like, "Oh, she's a pretty girl. She's telling girl jokes. That's funny." You know? Wanda, her gender never, it was never an issue. It was never something that you look at and say, "I can't believe a woman just said that."

Will continued and noted that Sykes' jokes cover topics that "are actual hotly debated topics in the political arena... [but] if Wanda had tried to present the serious nature of her topics... dressed as Amy was dressed, you would have been like, 'Whatever. It's a girl trying to tell man jokes. It's not coming over.'" When probed by Michael during this conversation about what he meant by "man jokes," Will clarified that he was referring to general "stereotypical" narratives where "women talk about this, men talk about this." So, in this context, Will recognized the stereotypical depictions of women and men in comedy, but these stereotypes nevertheless shaped his interpretation of whether jokes are allowed or successful for the comedian telling them. Interestingly, Will claimed that he did not find Sykes as funny as the rest of the group because he is politically conservative, so this perspective is especially telling because he did not emphasize the charged punchlines in Sykes' political commentary on race, "coming out" narratives, and

American politics (e.g., Obama, immigration, education). Rather, Will stressed that Sykes is granted authority to speak to “serious” topics because she is not perceived as feminine in her performance. As Will concluded, “when I watched Amy, the fact that she was a woman played into it. When I watched Wanda Sykes, it was never an issue... The way she presented herself and the way she presented her comedy, it was a very neutral, gender neutral.”

Krefting (2014) writes,

You can be a woman telling jokes, just do not call attention to your woman-ness or any other category of difference that might force listeners out of their comfort zone, because that forces them to learn from another perspective or identify with someone unlike them. Male humor is humor genera, and humor arising from any other position becomes ‘Other’ humor, topical, or special interest (113).

Following this line of inquiry, my analysis provides an empirical investigation of how men and women interpret women’s comedy differently. For instance, both male and female audience members from the six groups frequently referenced Amy Schumer’s “Plan B” bit in their discussions. As discussed earlier in Chapter 4, in this bit Schumer refers to the pill as “plan A,” describes the stigma associated with asking for the pill from the pharmacist, and concludes the joke by laughing at how the whole process is actually seemingly mundane (e.g., “I felt *fine*... I went to yoga.”). Whereas several women participants referenced these aspects of the joke as relatable and liberatory, the all-male audience group (Group 4) characterized Schumer’s humor as “lowbrow” in contrast to Wanda Sykes’ “highbrow,” “smart,” “educated” humor. According to Bing (2007), enjoying “liberated women’s sexual jokes” requires familiarity with “the scripts that jokes like these presuppose” (348). Accordingly, Chelsea (22-year-old white woman, Group 6) wrote, for instance, Amy Schumer is “making it normal for women to talk about sex and details. She put out real world things women deal with (like Plan B). [And she talks] about things usually

not openly talked about too (bikini waxing).” In Chapter 7, I discussed the importance of audience identity work in interpretive processes, including notions of identification, such as relatability. This interpretive identity work is therefore significant for meaning-making and stand-up comedy’s utility as critical cultural pedagogy.

Conclusion

Through a symbolic interactionist, critical cultural studies framework, this chapter extends the audience interpretation findings discussed in the previous chapter and focuses broadly on audience reception of the potential *seriousness* of stand-up comedy. Audience members of stand-up comedy have a repertoire of interpretive resources they bring to the table as they compare the stand-up narratives to their own experiences through modes of critical referential viewing. This research also represents how shared identity and relatability establish the basis of “interpretive community” (Radway 1984). Interpretive communities are not necessarily physical communities, but rather identify similar patterns of interpretation based on their shared social positions based on gender, race, age, education, etc. Comedy, through layered meanings of irony and satire, is notoriously polysemic, but my analysis illuminates some notable patterns in audience interpretation regarding the potential seriousness of comedy: 1) many women and racial minority participants (who are also college-educated) understood stand-up humor in a more personal way that made it more than just a joke. Most participants, and especially women and minority participants, discussed at great lengths comedians’ ability to expose social problems by inviting the audience to laugh at the absurdity of their existence. 2) Along this line of thought, several participants also discussed comedy’s potential role as cultural pedagogy. Group discussions

highlighted the tensions in how we interpret the use of stereotypes in comedy. Additionally, these participants praised comedians' uses of factual information in narratives (e.g., Sykes' "immigration"), and they also worried about comedy potentially teaching falsehoods (e.g., Schumer's use of abortion references in conversation with birth control). 3) In contrast, however, my findings also suggest that dominant group membership may cause these audience members to interpret comedy more hegemonically and/or as less politically consequential. Conversations in the group of white men revealed that, while they did articulate the presence of social issues in women's comedy, they employed a "just joking" frame of interpretation that presumably allows comedians to say whatever they like without actually meaning anything. 4) Finally, audiences also tended to demarcate women's issues as less serious and less universally appealing. Also, the perceived masculinity of the performer grants women more license to be "taken seriously."

One of the key findings of this analysis pertains to audience interpretations of feminist stand-up comedy as an outlet for societal truth-telling and reflexive identity negotiation. For example, women audience participants were quick to discuss notions of relatability in narrative experience they viewed in the stand-up clips. Women participants' conversations expressed that comedy reveals the ways patriarchal constraints continue to restrain women's daily lives. In this context, women audience members in my research often referred specifically to Amy Schumer's comedy and described her gender humor as "fun," "refreshing," and "fucking on my side." I argue that these descriptions reveal something more than mere entertainment from stand-up comedy. My analysis further suggests that there is pleasure in viewing counter-hegemonic, ironic, or alternative representations of womanhood. This finding parallels some recent feminist media scholarship concerning contemporary women's comedy, particularly ideas on authenticity and

authorship from women comedians such as Lena Dunham (Woods 2015). Additionally, Swink (2017) recently examined audience reactions to four popular sitcoms (*30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Girls*, and *The Mindy Project*), and she found that women participants expressed a sense of relief from the “realness” of the shows discussed, a deviation from standard stereotypical representations. My analysis builds on this line of inquiry examining the nuances of negotiated interpretations (see also Gledhill 2009) of identification with women’s comedy, the comedians, and feminist discourses. Women’s stand-up comedy presents a space in popular culture where viewers can dissect representation of “real” issues and express pleasure in decoding the narratives. However, much like reception of *Girls* or even *Twilight* (see Petersen 2012), women’s stand-up comedy simultaneously reveals the struggles of intersectional feminism.

This emphasis on how audience positionality influences patterns of interpretation is significant for sociologically-oriented audience scholarship. Moreover, one of the more intriguing findings of this study, I argue, is that women’s stand-up comedy seems to have implications for consciousness-raising and political rhetoric, albeit primarily for women and minority audiences. Interpretations that trivialize comedy as non-serious may risk underestimating humor’s potential as a powerful rhetorical weapon. Though many may dismiss comedy as harmless fun, this research suggests that comedy is quite culturally powerful for some marginalized audiences, and it can also even work on the dominant group. Stand-up comedy narratives expose social issues and problems in a relatable, though humorous, way. As Gabriella (Group 3) pointed out, “obviously [comedy] is funny, but it makes you think about these important problems... These are things that we don’t, we might not think about everyday but they’re important. They’re affecting us every day.” Conversely, however, members of dominant identity groups are less likely, but still occasionally

able, to interpret stand-up comedy as having subversive potential. My analysis highlights how white men audience members, for example, do not have a bifurcated consciousness (see also Du Bois' "double-consciousness") that shapes their interpretations and reactions. Marginalized audience members experience a bifurcated consciousness (Smith 1974), which enable a mode of critical referential viewing in women's stand-up comedy.

CHAPTER NINE:

CONCLUSION: DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this chapter I describe the major sociological contributions of my research, the limitations of this work, and future research directions. At the same moment that new Internet and broadcasting technologies have made comedy instantly accessible, women's comedy has expanded to include more ironic and/or charged styles of humor. My narrative analysis reveals serious themes that are present in women's stand-up, but the question of how diverse audiences perceive and make sense of such routines has not been explored until now. In my audience reception analysis, I found that:

- 1) Through processes of interpretive identity work, audiences negotiate the identity of the comedian, the identity of the perceived target of the humor, and the identity of the perceived intended audience. In this sense, the identity of the comedian acts as a symbolic boundary of sorts—Audience members discussed the comedian's positionality as shaping the type of comedic material thought to be appropriate, and additionally, the relatability to one's own experiences.
- 2) Audience members' positionality shapes interpretations of the perceived "seriousness" of women's stand-up comedy. In general, women and/or minority audience members were more likely to interpret stand-up narratives as counterhegemonic texts. Through critical referential viewing, audience members articulated how stand-up narratives use humor to

link personal stories to broader cultural narratives. In contrast, audience members in dominant identity groups resisted critical readings of stand-up. According to these participants, the frame of stand-up acts as a barrier, inhibiting serious ideological interpretations.

3) Audiences distinguished women's perspectives and topics deemed "women's issues" from topic areas considered universal or mainstream.

This research has broad implications 1) for the incorporation of standpoint epistemologies in audience research, 2) for situating women's stand-up comedy in the cultural marketplace of ideas in the public sphere, and 3) for extending theoretical perspectives to studying comedy in the social sciences. I have addressed and discussed the first two points in detail, which I will summarize below in the "Recap and Discussion" section. However, the third point deserves further elaboration, and in the section after the recap and discussion, "Broadening the Scope of Humor Theory: Critical Approaches and Standpoint Epistemologies," I will articulate how my research informs a discussion regarding comedy scholarship. Finally, I conclude by discussing limitations of my research and my suggestions for future research directions.

Recap and Discussion

My research took two trajectories broadly focusing on cultural representation and consumption, as outlined separately in Part I and Part II, respectively. First, I analyzed performances by popular U.S. comedians Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho, and I discussed how these women use humor in different (but overlapping) ways to challenge dominant cultural narratives and to provide an alternative to women's traditionally hegemonic

representation. Through narrative analysis, I explored how negotiations of feminine identity and feminist performances intersect with other spheres of identity such as race and sexuality.

Consistent with characteristics of post-1990s “alternative” stand-up, the comedy narratives analyzed in this study generally consisted of a series of personal narratives that offer insight into broader culture. Within the frame of stand-up, comedians present narratives that encourage the audience to interrogate socially constructed, taken-for-granted cultural narratives about marginalized identities. As discussed throughout Chapters 4 and 5, stand-up narratives by Schumer, Sykes, and Cho reflect certain social tensions and contemporary circulating ideas about social issues. The sociological implications and subversive potential of this narrative analysis were further delineated by my audience reception findings.

For the second line of inquiry of this dissertation, I conducted an audience reception analysis with focus groups of undergraduate students to better understand how people consume and interpret meaning from stand-up comedy. My findings highlight the importance of identity (and identification) in modes of critical referential viewing, as well as the value of standpoint theory in analyzing how audience members decode media texts. My research emphasizes the incorporation of standpoint epistemologies and identity negotiation in the interpretive processes evaluating the identity of the comic, the identity of the butt of the joke, and identity in audience positionality. In their stand-up routines, comedians speak to different realms of experience, and if the audience has not had to relate to them before, they may find the performance either distasteful, or just “not for me,” or simply not funny.

Findings from my audience reception analysis suggest that stand-up accomplishes significant cultural work, though not in the same ways for all groups. In particular, I found that

members of marginalized social groups experience a “bifurcated consciousness” compared to those from dominant identity groups, and they are more likely to interpret these performances as counterhegemonic texts. Furthermore, I contend that stand-up comedy, particularly feminist stand-up comedy, may have cultural pedagogical value for audiences. According to my findings, such a pedagogical role is most likely to be interpreted as such by audience members who see themselves as part of the audience being spoken to and whose unspoken experiences are being represented in a way that acknowledges them.

Comedians play an important social role as cultural mediators and public sociologists (Bingham & Hernandez 2009; Douglas 1975; Koziski 1984; Mintz 1985; Smith 2015). I extend this general notion by exploring audience reactions to women’s stand-up comedy broadcasted to a mass viewership. Many celebrity stand-up comics have arguably become legitimate voices in the public sphere, and while my findings and analysis have hinted at the subversive potential of stand-up, the underlying question remains: Does comedy spur social action? My research does suggest that comedy can invigorate a sociological imagination in audience group discussions by linking the personal to the universal. Stand-up may therefore function as potential means of consciousness-raising in popular culture, especially for women and minorities, which is significant given its increasing popularity and circulation. Throughout this dissertation, I have alluded to notions about comedy partaking in ideological battles within popular culture. Far from trivial, I argue, stand-up as a particular type of comedic genre is significant because performances link personal narratives to the cultural level. I suspect that comedy’s cultural and pedagogical role will become more pertinent in an increasingly polarized political climate, where comedy (and its subversive narratives) deconstructs and reframes social “truths.” In this sense, then, comedy seems to perform

a relief function similar of that of relief theories to humor, but the relief perhaps comes more from bringing sanity to chaos.

Broadening the Scope of Humor Theory: Critical Approaches and Standpoint Epistemologies

This research also points to possible new directions for humor theories and sociological perspectives on comedy. In this section I briefly return to a discussion of the classical theories of humor (see Chapter 2 for earlier recap), and I articulate how a critical perspective enriched by standpoint theory can expound upon these early theories. Applying a critical lens may also better reflect the contemporary comedy landscape by considering intersectionality—and newer forms of comedy that are built on intersectionality.

Based on my research findings, I propose the advancement of a recently emergent theoretical perspective that situates comedy scholarship in a critical humor studies context (Lockyer & Pickering 2008; Weaver et al. 2016; see also Bingham & Green 2016b; Krefting 2014). This emerging strand of “equality theories of humor” (Mora, Weaver, & Lindo 2015; Weaver et al. 2016) “is specifically political, critical, concerned with social inequality... [and] develops humor studies through an interaction with the standpoint epistemologies of much mainstream sociology, cultural studies and media and communications research” (Weaver et al. 2016:228). A bulk of recent comedy research has specifically focused on the cultural capacity of comedy to give a platform to marginalized groups and to reimagine hegemonic narratives. My research contributes to this discussion. By suggesting that an interpretive continuum exists between jokes for the sake of joking and interpretations of subversive narrative meanings, I found that one’s standpoint shapes how an audience member will interpret comedy along this continuum.

A critical approach to studying comedy is not entirely separate from, nor does it preclude the incorporation of, the three classical theories on humor. Superiority, relief, and incongruity theories were “decidedly uncritical” in their original articulations (Weaver et al. 2016:228), but a critical lens on these theories takes into account the power dynamics of identity processes and positionality. In fact, comedians often utilize a combination of superiority (and inferiority), relief, and incongruity types of humor to present counter-hegemonic narratives by and for marginalized identities (Bingham & Green 2016a, 2016b). My findings highlight the valuable insight gained from synthesizing a critical approach to humor with standpoint epistemologies, which can be observed through the representational narrative strategies performed by the comedians as well as within focus group audience discussions.

Contemporary stand-up comedy and the technologies now bringing it into our lives have increasingly afforded women and minorities more opportunities to take the stage, and accounting for interactional power dynamics in narrative—but also between the comic and audience—is therefore crucial. The positionality of each audience member shapes their interpretive framework and subsequently how they will interpret a polysemic joke and the type of humor performed (e.g., superiority, incongruity, relief). For example, in Chapter 4 I discussed Amy Schumer’s “Joking About Race” bit, which is arguably an ambiguous skit and more open to interpretation than some of her other humor. The extent to which the audience interprets her as utilizing superiority humor (i.e., laughing at others, in this case racial minorities) or as performing inferiority humor (i.e., self-deprecating white ignorance) largely depends on audience standpoint and how one interprets Schumer’s awareness of her own positionality as a white comic. I will now briefly outline how a critical humor studies can enhance our conceptualization and use of classical humor theories.

Superiority theory, which holds that humor arises from derision and feelings of superiority over others, does not adequately capture the historical power dynamics embedded in humor without addressing standpoint and inequality (see Caliskan 1995). For example, regarding the target of humor, Embrick and Hendricks (2013) assert that stereotypes cast about white people by nonwhites do not carry the same weight or symbolic damage as racist stereotypes deployed about racial minorities by whites. In similar ways, women comedians' use of superiority humor is complicated by their historically marginalized status in society. Amy Schumer's gender humor, for instance, was generally interpreted by audience participants as either mocking dominant culture or as mocking other women; none of the groups discussed Schumer as taking a superior position to men, specifically. Similarly, when Margaret Cho directly mocks homophobic Southerners, audience members tend to interpret this bit as mocking homophobia broadly, even as Cho confronts and laughs at them. In other words, when the comedian comes from a marginalized status, they are less likely to be interpreted as using superiority humor, arguably because they do not maintain superior positions in society. Consistent with equality theories of humor, however, it also seems that feminist stand-up comedy is more likely to engage inferiority humor (self-deprecating humor, employed to critique social order or combat negative stereotypes) as its goal, rather than superiority humor, to garner laughter.

Incongruity theory posits that we laugh at things that surprise us or conflict with expectations, but to understand incongruity in humor, there must be a grounded consensus over norms in a given social context. Past scholarship has examined incongruous humor as functioning to reinforce dominant norms (Bergson 1911), but a critical lens on incongruity suggests

implications for subversive narratives and resistance. According to Bingham and Green (2016b), incongruity humor can

function as a mirror to reflect and invert traditional norms and values, and as a form of resistance. In this sense, incongruous humor is still used as a social corrective, but in ways that challenge the values of the dominant groups while giving voice and power to the subordinated through incongruity (161).

In other words, comedic personal narratives reveal something about society by holding up a mirror that reveals social structures, norms, and values. Through incongruity narratives, stand-up comedians can reframe cultural narratives in ways that expose their hegemonic construction. Incongruity in women's stand-up is at the heart of its subversive and pedagogical potential. Audience interpretations of incongruous stand-up humor suggest a more critical role for comedy in the public sphere, as well as in everyday interactions.

Relief perspectives generally attend to the emotional element of humor. My findings suggest that some audience members find a cathartic resonance in stand-up humor, where comedy is funny because it speaks to unspoken experiences and makes them "real" in the public (audience's) imagination. Humorous relief and tension release may therefore serve a critical, subversive role for some audience members in that it may lay the groundwork for, or contribute to, developing an oppositional consciousness. Bingham and Green (2016b) write that relief humor can provide "representational relief" of marginalized identities such as disability. Additionally, relief humor "operates as a significant tool of navigation and sensemaking in everyday interaction... [It] can function as an active tool to push back, invert power, mock, satirize, and parody systems and people who act as the oppressor while also providing relief" (150). Any taboo can set the stage for relief humor. In this sense, the relief function of feminist stand-up humor intersects with feminist sensibilities, collective identities, and audience pleasures in critical

referential viewing and the act of laughing. Cathartic “representational relief” also emphasizes standpoint theories in conjunction with humor theories because, as my findings suggest, those with greater social capital and power experience comedy differently than more marginalized audience groups. Relief humor, specifically, functions differently for various groups. For example, dominant social groups such as white men in this audience study expressed “relief” from watching stand-up comedy in a more escapist sense of the frame (Goffman 1974) of stand-up comedy. Comedy is funny and enjoyable because you are simply there to laugh. For most women and racial minority participants though, feminist stand-up comedy provided “relief” in the sense that Bingham and Green discuss, where there is relief in parodying systems of oppression and speaking to marginalized experiences.

In sum, I suggest that traditional humor theories can potentially be broadened and extended through a critical approach to humor studies that specifically accounts for standpoint and social inequalities. I will now turn to a brief discussion on the limitations of this research and possible future directions.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to this study worth serious consideration. First, my audience reception research does not use a representative sample, and the findings presented are not necessarily generalizable to the broader population. My aim in this study was not to attain representative samples per se, but rather to qualitatively analyze small group conversations in depth in order to ascertain how groups of friends collectively construct and negotiate the meanings of something they watched together.

In particular, audience groups consisted of university students who are more educated than the general population. Groups were also overrepresented by social science majors. In terms of audience demographics, it is important to point out the overrepresentation of women (including feminist) participants in this study. In future audience reception research endeavors, I would like to conduct more segmented groups in focus group analysis, comparing audience reactions between men and women, and additionally between racial groups. Another limitation of this research concerns the lack of black audience participants in this study, considering the inclusion of black personal narratives (i.e., Wanda Sykes) and a focus on how stand-up narratives use black stereotypes (Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes). In future research, it is imperative to feature the reactions of black audience members when analyzing comedy that speaks to black experiences and identity.

A final limitation is my own positionality as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, female researcher. As such, my narrative analysis of women's stand-up comedy presented in Part I is influenced by my positionality as a researcher. However, like my focus group methodology, narrative as a method of inquiry does not aim to be generalizable. I analyzed the personal narratives by three women stand-up comedians in order to better understand and to "learn about the general from the particular" (Riessman 1993:70).

Future Directions

Findings from this research also suggest several intriguing questions for future research. Broadly, this research examines some of the pertinent spheres of representation, identity, and consumption that constitute the "circuit of culture" (du Gay et al. 1997) by analyzing stand-up

texts and audience reactions to the texts. It would therefore be beneficial to explore the production and regulation of stand-up comedy. A focus on cultural production processes would complement my current focus by analyzing stand-up comedy as a case study in the “circuit of culture.” For instance, future research might include interviews with comedians to inquire about their authorial intent and their perceived role as cultural arbiters. Here I have asserted that the comedians have some subversive intentions, but it could be better to hear them articulate their intentions and strategies for themselves.

Another potential future research question concerns how regulation practices impact the ways stand-up is integrated into other cultural forms, such as TV programming, in rather innovative ways. For example, Chelsea Handler’s Netflix show, *Chelsea*, merges stand-up-style monologues, traditional talk-show formats, field interviews, in-depth interviews with various political figures, and filmed dinner party conversations. So, how are streaming outlets like Netflix, which are not subject to the same FCC regulations as network programming, shaping the culture of comedy? Further, how are women comics, in particular, fighting the regulatory system to have their voices heard and to assert production control? In 2014 Amy Schumer fought for and won the right to say “pussy” on her Comedy Central show. Women’s increased presence in comedic representation and production roles brings forth a number of intriguing questions for future comedy scholarship: How are women changing the economy and marketplace of comedy? Given the more popularized examples from comedians like Chelsea Handler, Amy Schumer, and Sarah Silverman, are these industry “power moves” only deemed acceptable by attractive white women?

Finally, another line of inquiry ought to explore comedy’s potential role in grassroots collective action. A great deal of my discussion in this research has focused on comedy as critical

cultural pedagogy, and I would like to extend this research. Comedy has a long history of coinciding with and being used in social movement activity (e.g., feminist and civil rights movements). More recently, comedy utilized in myriad forms can be observed across the political spectrum, such as protest signs that read “Girls Just Wanna Have FUNdamental Rights!” at the 2017 Women’s March, social media activist groups sharing the latest clips from political comedy shows with one another, or even white nationalist movements’ adoption of Pepe the Frog online memes. However, future research in this area is needed to assess the extent to which comedy is successful in shaping or sharpening audience members’ political viewpoints.

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APPENDIX A:
SOCIOLOGICAL FOCUS RIGHTS AND PERMISSIONS

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APPENDIX B:

LIST OF STAND-UP COMEDY CLIPS SHOWN TO FOCUS GROUPS

1. Amy Schumer: *Mostly Sex Stuff* (2012)

- “Class It Up.” Schumer celebrates sleeping with her “high school crush,” feigns embarrassment from her crassness, and briefly depicts her relationship with her mother: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIKPA-4u4BU>
- “Plan B.” Schumer describes her experience (and stigma) of taking the morning-after-pill: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/8w7xke/stand-up-amy-schumer-plan-b>
- “Joking About Race.” Schumer uses black stereotypes to depict her relationship with “all her black friend”: <http://www.cc.com/video-collections/2lnjq8/stand-up-mostly-sex-stuff-clips/px41yn>
- “Harder to Be a Chick in General.” Schumer describes differences between men in women in getting dressed and everyday impression management performance: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/77mmjf/stand-up-amy-schumer-same-questions>
- “The Whole Enchilada.” Schumer describes girls in Las Vegas and the gender-work of body hair maintenance and shaving one’s privates: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/71ctrh/stand-up-amy-schumer-the-whole-enchilada>

2. Wanda Sykes: *I’m a Be Me* (2009)

- “Our Shit’s the Best.” Sykes discusses how countries think they are the best and the metric system in the U.S.: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6mMFMmuEE>
- “Education System and Illegal Immigration.” Sykes discusses the U.S. education system and undocumented workers: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xRPnmvF2b8>
- “Dignified Black People.” Sykes describes how the election of Barack Obama impacts race relations, and she explains that, now that we have had a Black president, Black people can “relax a little bit”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EK2iPGy1vYs>

3. Margaret Cho: *Cho Dependent* (2011)

- “Bitch, We’re Going Down.” Cho jokes about a trip to a gay resort, gay and lesbian dating practices (Grindr vs. Animal Rescue), and she describes living in the South as a minority. Cho also describes her own sexual identity. *Shown from DVD.*
- “An Immigrant Thing to Say.” Cho discusses the experience of being Asian in spaces of white privilege (specifically where white people have Asian servants like Steeplechase) and perceptions of Asian stereotypes (e.g., media associating her with the Virginia Tech shooter whose last name is also Cho). This clip segues into a short skit where Cho jokes about Asian parenting practices. *Shown from DVD.*

APPENDIX C:

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Focus Group 1:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Carmen	Female	Hispanic	26	n/a	Sociology
Jamie	Female	Latina	27	Senior/4 th year	Sociology
Lana	Female	West Indian	27	Junior	Sociology

Focus Group 2:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Jin-Soo	Male	Asian (Korean)	24	Senior	Math/Chemistry
Min-ji	Female	Asian	21	Junior	Sociology
Yunjin	Female	Korean	20	1 st year	Biology

Focus Group 3:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Madison	Female	White	18	Freshman	Mass Communications & Political Science
Emily	Female	Puerto Rican	18	Freshman	Mass Communications
Gabriella	Female	Hispanic	19	Sophomore	Journalism & Sociology

Focus Group 4:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Josh	Male	White	24	Senior	Sociology
Zach	Male	White	31	Senior	Sociology
James	Male	White	21	Senior	Sociology
Michael	Male	White	32	Senior	Psychology/Sociology
Will	Male	White	45	Senior	Sociology

Focus Group 5:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Carrie	Female	White	21	4 th year	Psychology/Sociology
Gloria	Female	White	39	Senior	Sociology
Erin	Female	Caucasian (white)	22	Senior	Sociology
Adam	Male	Caucasian	25	Senior	Sociology

Focus Group 6:

Pseudonym:	Gender:	Race/Ethnicity:	Age:	Year in School:	Academic Major:
Gina	Female	Hispanic	19	Sophomore	Women's & Gender Studies
Andrea	Female	Hispanic (Dominican/White)	20	3 rd year	Communication (and WGS minor)
Julia	Female	Hispanic	23	5 th year	Public Health (and WGS minor)
Taylor	Female	White	20	Junior	Communication
Mariana	Female	White Hispanic	19	Sophomore	Chemical Engineering
Lakshmi	Female	Asian	19	Freshman	Biology
Daniel	Male	White	21	Junior	Psychology/WGS
Helen	Female	White	52	4 th year	Religious Studies
Ashley	Female	Caucasian	19	2 nd year	Psychology
Lauren	Female	White	19	Sophomore	Mass Comm & WGS
Veronica	Female	Hispanic	20	Junior	Integrative Animal Biology & WGS

Monica	Female	White	20	3 rd year	Mass Comm
Alex	Female	White	22	Junior	English
Hilary	Female	White	58	3 rd year	BCGS
Chelsea	Female	White	22	Senior	Psychology (minor-behavioral healthcare)
Jay	Male	Black	20	3 rd year	Economics
Isabella	Female	Hispanic	20	3 rd year	Early Childhood Education
Erica	Female	Black	20	Junior	Political Science
Sarah	Female	White	21	Senior	Biomedicine
Adriana	Female	Hispanic	19	2 nd year	Art History
Hannah	Female	White	20	3 rd year	Political Science
Elizabeth	Female	White	22	Senior	Psychology
Jessica	Female	White	20	Senior	Political Science
Elena	Female	Hispanic	20	3 rd year senior	International Studies (&WGS minor)

APPENDIX D:
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 • FAX (813) 974-7091

January 6, 2015

Katie Cooper
Sociology
Tampa, FL 33629

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**

IRB#: Pro00019566

Title: That's What She Said: A Critical Examination of Feminist Standup Comedy

Study Approval Period: 2/5/2015 to 2/5/2016

Dear Ms. Cooper:

On 2/5/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):

Protocol

Document(s):

[Cooper Dissertation Proposal Final v1.docx](#)

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:

[focus group consent form.docx.pdf](#)

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John A. Schinka, Ph.D.".

John Schinka, Ph.D., Chairperson USF Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX E:

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. Consent Process

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I am very interested to hear your thoughts and opinions about stand-up comedy. In a moment we'll watch a few clips, but remember that I'm here to learn from you all.

- *The purpose of this study is to learn how people watch comedy and how we make sense of certain jokes and routines.*
- *I understand how important it is that this information is kept private and confidential. The information you provide me will be kept completely confidential, and I will not associate your name with anything you say in the focus group or write on your iPad or computer (or paper).*
- *I will also ask participants to respect each other's confidentiality. Because of the group setting, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. However, I ask that you keep what is discussed during the group confidential and not disclosed to others outside of the group. If you would like to make a comment that you do not wish to share with others in the focus group, please use your iPad or computer to make that comment. Your written comments will also be kept confidential.*
- *The focus group session will be videotaped so that I can make sure to capture the thoughts, opinions, and ideas heard from the group, but the video will never be played for anyone other than me and the faculty helping me with this project. No names will be attached to the focus groups and the tapes will be destroyed as soon as my project is completed. Your written comments will also be kept confidential and destroyed after the completion of my project.*
- *You may refuse to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.*
- *If you have any questions now or after you have completed the questionnaire, I'm happy to address your questions. You may also contact me after the focus group has concluded by using my contact information provided below.*
- *Please review and sign the informed consent form if you agree to participate in this focus group.*

Questions that the participants will be asked may include:

II. From Amy Schumer's *Mostly Sex Stuff*:

General Guiding Questions:

1. Open the floor to group: What are your initial reactions to these segments from Amy Schumer's routine?

2. Do you think there are any common themes circulating throughout Schumer's comedy?
3. Sometimes we find humor in stand-up comedy through the comedian's social commentary on social life experiences. Do you think Amy Schumer is making any particular societal commentaries?

Probes:

- 3a. Shared experiences: Is Amy Schumer tapping into shared experiences on the basis of gender?
- 3b. Gendered Narratives: Is Amy Schumer challenging our notions of gender? Why or why not? Is she staying in line with traditional notions of gender? Why or why not?
4. Does Amy Schumer seem like someone who you would hang out with "in real life"? Or, does her comedic persona remind you of anyone you know?
5. How would you describe Amy Schumer's comedy to a friend?

III. From Wanda Sykes' *I'ma Be Me*:

6. Open floor to group again: What did you all think about these segments from Wanda Sykes' routine?
7. How does Wanda Sykes' comedy compare or contrast to that of Amy Schumer's?
8. Which particular themes or comedic story elements stand out to you the most? Why?
Probes to Consider:
 - 8a. Race in US: Is Sykes making a commentary on racial stereotypes?
 - 8b. How is Sykes parodying certain racial stereotypes?
 - 8c. Ideas about cultural relativism vs. ethnocentrism?
9. Does Wanda Sykes' comedy in any way reflect your own social experiences? (either your personal experiences or macro societal perceptions)
10. How would you describe Wanda Sykes to someone else?

IV. From Margaret Cho's *Cho Dependent*:

11. Open floor to group again: What did you all think about these segments from Margaret Cho's routine?
12. Do you think Margaret Cho's comedy is at all similar to that of Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes? Different? Both similar and different perhaps?
13. Does Cho's 'performance' of ethnicity/race have an effect on her comedy?
14. How would you describe Margaret Cho's comedy to a friend?