

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE ON DOWNTOWN COMEDY
IN NEW YORK CITY**

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation is based on an ethnographic investigation of the “downtown” or “alternative” comedy scene in New York City. Downtown comedy emerged as a production model for live performances in the mid-1990s, and its objective was to provide comics with opportunities to try out new or experimental material. Audiences were drawn to this quasi-workshopping environment by a low cost of admission, and an interest in seeing new work in its formative stages. As of this writing, the scene in New York is robust, and has cultivated a loyal fan base in addition to launching the careers of many well-known comics. Participants have successfully cultivated a social sphere that nurtures certain innovative forms of performance and social interaction.

A central theoretical concern of the project was to better understand the mechanics and operation of linguistic performativity. Comedy entails a performative risk - audience members may be mobilized to empathy, appreciation, and even adulation, or they may reject the comic, resulting in ego-injury. Comics are thus enacting an existential drama of self-articulation, and how audience members relate to this drama serves to determine what constitutes efficacious or felicitous speech. Experimental

comedy, moreover, can be highly provocative or transgressive, challenging deeply-rooted conceptual frameworks or social conventions. Such provocations often result in micro-scale crisis moments in the liminoid, leisure-oriented space of the performance venue. A “good” punchline, and the audience laughter that follows it, resonates as the explosive emergence of an entertaining public secret.

Via a combination of ethnography and formal analysis, I trace the reception of specific jokes, the process of commodification of comics via live performances and mass media outlets, and the affective resonances that circulate within this self-described “community”. I document the contributions of community members in developing and enforcing the criteria for what constitutes “comedic authority” in this context. I conclude that the transgressive dimension of this authority is often paired with the exercise of unmarked forms of social power. The fault lines of social power along which comics implicitly position themselves, and which are investigated here, include those of race, gender, sexuality, and mental health.

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unflagging support on the rink extended to all spheres of daily existence, and they taught me a lot about responding with courage and creativity to challenging situations. As the comics also demonstrated, if you work hard and keep your chin up there's a good chance you will eventually succeed at something you weren't sure you were capable of, and then your friends will explode with joy and it will all be worth it.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This study investigates truth in comedy, and how that truth comes to be recognized as such.

In the days following September 11th, 2001, it was proposed that the destruction of the twin towers might also have marked the demise of the “Age of Irony” (Rosenblatt 2001). In the intervening years, as fans and critics will eagerly tell you, comedy has, quite on the contrary, been undergoing a renaissance. Critical works have argued for its significance as an art form, pointing out that it is aesthetically sophisticated, and capable of provoking reflection on the state of the world and the nuances of human relationships in the same ways “serious” art is able to accomplish (Katz, forthcoming). Louis CK has taken on an unlikely hybrid status as sitcom star and prophet (Cavna 2013). Marc Maron’s quasi-psychoanalytic podcast, for which he interviews a range of popular and lesser-known comics, has gained a cult following among comedy fans and non-comedy fans alike for its insightful cultural commentary. There is a long history of political commentary in comedy, but the current moment seems particularly rich. Figures such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert have intervened in “serious” political discussions in novel and highly impactful ways (Baym 2005). Indeed, in the years since 9/11, “The political discourse

taking place in the satiric register currently appears far more vibrant than any of the traditional outlets for serious political dialogue” (Day 2011, 1).

This book is an ethnography of the scene that incubated quite a bit of this important work.

Live comedy performance experienced a “boom” in the US in the 1980s, after the proliferation of distribution opportunities through cable TV networks demonstrated there was an audience for it. New York, an important epicenter for comedy production, saw the development of several upscale clubs, at which established performers frequently landed well-paying gigs. The recession in the early 90s threatened the financial viability of this model, clubs across the country closed, and the “boom” came to be regarded as a “bubble” that rapidly deflated. The remaining clubs in New York depended on established acts to draw paying crowds, and up-and-coming performers found their opportunities to perform in front of an audience very limited.

In this gap emerged a scene that has been described as “downtown” or “alternative” comedy¹. “Downtown” refers to the location of many of the informal performance venues that cropped up during this time, most of which were located in downtown Manhattan. These venues were rarely devoted solely to comedy - most were small theaters, or small rooms in bars that on most nights featured local or up-and-coming musicians². Comedy performances began in these spaces as weekly or monthly events, and provided performers a space in which to hone material that was more professionalized than the open-mic nights frequented by beginning performers,

¹ “Alternative” is a reference a style of music popularized by small record labels in the 1990s, which used a small-scale production model to release music to niche markets that did not provide adequate returns to attract the interest of major labels. Janine Garafalo is credited with coining the term. I have chosen in the rest of the dissertation to describe the New York scene on which I focus as “downtown comedy”, to distinguish it from a similar “alternative comedy” scene in L.A., in which many New York figures also participate as they move back and forth between coasts for various work opportunities. Yael Kohen devotes a chapter to further description of this L.A. scene (Kohen 2012). Several comics have also mentioned that they prefer the term “downtown” comedy, in part because the term “alternative” may suggest their work has limited popular appeal.

² The exact capacity of these rooms varies. Some of the larger rooms can hold up to 80, but for many shows in smaller venues an audience of 20 is considered quite robust.

but much more accessible than upscale clubs. Over time, these shows built a devoted audience, creating the demand for more such shows. This growth provided frequent opportunities for a core group of comics to not only perform, but to discuss work, offer mutual support, and collaborate on various projects.

Comics resist characterization of the downtown comedy scene, for legitimate reasons. The work produced by members of this loosely organized social network is diverse, in both style and content, and such characterizations risk the sort of “pigeonholing” that, in the current mass media landscape, limits access to equally diverse audiences and means of distribution³. There are, however, important features that unify this work, many of which can be described as conditions and philosophies of production.

The shows that downtown comics and audiences frequent are often produced by comics themselves, in informal and even ad-hoc spaces. The price of admission to these shows tends to be very low - \$5 is common, and there are many shows that have no cover charge. Bars often provide comics with space to perform in exchange for the increased revenue they draw from patrons who come to see the show. Comics who produce shows, and in some cases individual performers, may make a small amount of money⁴, but the value of these shows resides less in their immediate remunerative possibilities than in the opportunity they provide for comics to develop their work.

Stand-up has to be honed and refined in front of a live audience, which provides feedback, via its laughter, on which parts of a joke are “working”. Parts that don’t work will be taken back

³ Chapter two provides more detailed analysis of downtown comedy’s positioning as a “subculture” within a rapidly evolving mass media landscape.

⁴ The producer of one highly successful downtown show estimated that he would make \$150-\$200/week producing and performing at his show, plus a percentage of drink revenues that amounted to another \$30-\$70, depending on the night. I believe this represents the upper end. Comics who perform at paying shows (not all of them pay) make \$20-\$40.

to the drawing board for restructuring, and to future audiences for minor shifts in tone and emphasis. Comics will tell you that the essence of comedy is delivery, and delivery is an art that has to be practiced to be perfected.

This emphasis, in downtown rooms, on the process of developing work, is accompanied by a latitude to present work that is unfinished or experimental - as-yet-untested⁵. Downtown comedy also emerged at a time when digital formats rendered multimedia production much more accessible; thus comics may incorporate video and audio elements into standup acts. Downtown comedy also has latitude to depart from the conventions of comedy proper, at times moving fluidly between different genres to elicit a range of emotions.

Comics in the “downtown” scene agree that the best work is the most interesting or unusual work, is work that is somehow new or different. They are open to experimentation. As one comic put it, “I’d rather see something new that totally fails than something that’s kind of funny”. Being “kind of funny”, suggests, in contrast to more experimental or risky comedy, a reliance on existing tropes or comedic conventions. “Kind of funny” lacks the explosive quality of a “new” idea or style; it is not challenging, innovative, or precise. Comics suggest that it reflects a sort of existential cowardice, an unwillingness to advance an individuated, possibly entirely idiosyncratic perspective. Downtown comics and audiences want, rather, to see work that has an individuation that marks it as authentic, that speaks to and from a genuine, personally grounded, experience and perspective.

The small or nonexistent cover charge signals a sort of social contract between comics and audiences - downtown audiences have agreed to be part of the development of works-in-

⁵ This experimental aesthetic is reflected in the titles of some of the shows, from “Eating It”, a highly popular show that began at the Luna Lounge in the mid-90s and was instrumental in establishing the downtown scene, to “Permission to Fail”, a show that as of this writing runs weekly at The Creek and the Cave in Queens, NY. “Eating It” is a colloquial expression also indicating failure.

progress. The scene is in fact densely populated with fans who self-describe as “comedy nerds” - people who are interested in seeing new works, and works-in-progress, for the insight it lends them into the process of creating comedy and the new directions in which the genre is heading. A wealth of astute comedy criticism has sprung up around this scene in blogs published by fans, which have added value for comics as a marketing tool⁶.

The production structure that unifies this work thus supports its breadth and diversity. Some of what audiences see will be funny, some of it might not be funny yet, some of it may never be funny. Tentative laughter, appreciative-but-not-uproarious laughter, may signal that audiences find the work in some ways difficult to approach, but believe in its future possibilities.

The bulk of my research was conducted between 2004 and 2006, but this study actually represents a personal relationship to the scene dating back to 1999, when I began to frequent comedy shows hosted by friends I had met while in college. This relationship endures to the present day. I have had the privilege of seeing work and careers develop over the course of more than a decade, and small, informal, weekly shows become established over the course of several years, until an audience measurable in single digits became a line wrapping out the door and down the block.

When I began to think about the comedy scene from an anthropological perspective, certain things stood out to me as particularly fascinating. Comics are highly reflective and analytical about their work, eager to discuss technique and its social effects, and also fascinated by other angles of social analysis. They showed a lot of interest in the project. We had a lot to talk about. However, while we had many overlapping and/or intersecting ways to talk about

⁶ Many fans participate in other ways in the production and promotion of shows, lending talents in writing, photography, prop construction, web design, and video production, and also performing various tasks such as ticket sales and crowd control. These efforts are detailed in Chapter 2.

communication and performance, there were certain, sudden dissonances that would stop a conversation short - moments of incommensurability in our analytic frameworks that interrupted a heady conversation with a moment of sudden incomprehension.

I was also interested in the way academics would ask me about figures like Jon Stewart. They would light up when they talked about the revelatory nature of his work, the way in which it spoke truth to power. They were delighted. It seemed to me that, while they talked about the content of what Jon Stewart was saying, and the importance of his debunking the rhetoric of Fox News and the Bush administration, what was not talked about, though equally important, was that someone was sticking up for them. Someone on television was making them feel less alienated from the public sphere, in a very particular way.

I began to think that there was something about comedy that thwarted a certain kind of critical analysis - precisely the kind of analysis that is the academic's stock in trade. I began to think about the difference between the way academic scholarship grounds its discursive authority - what counts as evidence, what linguistic and embodied performance holds sway, etc - and the roots of discursive authority in comedy. This was around the time Stephen Colbert's show premiered, and "Truthiness", the word of the day on his first episode, was voted word of the year by both Merriam-Webster and the American Dialect Society (2006)⁷. Comedy is an art of persuasion, and it seemed to me that it appealed to cognitive processes and social context in such a way as to create its own aura of "truthiness".

Several comics have related similar stories to me about their early experiences performing stand-up, in which they were taken aback by how difficult it was to convey the

⁷ Per Merriam Webster Online, "**truthiness (noun)**" is:

1 : "truth that comes from the gut, not books" (Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report," October 2005)

2 : "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" (American Dialect Society, January 2006)

meaning of what they considered to be a well-written joke. They came to realize that writing was only a small fraction - 10%, in the estimation of one comic - of the work involved in communicating their personal truth or perspective. The larger component - the other 90% - was delivery, or performance.

Current theory on linguistic performativity tends to emphasize the ways in which it reiterates existing discursive structures, and in doing so, draws upon and reproduces concomitant relations of power in more material spheres (e.g. MacKinnon 1996, Matsuda et al 1993). This emphasis on reiteration begets a certain amount of literalism, a presumed transparency or congruence between the meanings of words and their social effects. The law provides the model for this understanding of performative efficacy, one that Judith Butler describes as “sovereign” in its power (Butler 1997).

But comedy thwarts literalism, in that the meaning of a joke is implied rather than explicitly stated. This is why a joke is no longer funny if you have to explain it⁸; laughter occurs in a moment when the listener has decoded the meaning of a joke, making a cognitive leap over a gap in articulation, usually with the aid of some background knowledge shared with the speaker (Raskin 1985).

In spite of their attention to the central role of performance, comics and fans also evaluate comedy in terms of the “true” - suggesting, again, that a good joke refers to something accurate, real, or authentic.

Comedy thus brings to light some points of dissonance between what is happening, in the social context of linguistic performance, and the theoretical frameworks we have in place to

⁸ This structure also accounts for E. B. White’s famous assertion that “Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind” (White and White 1948, xvii). I am afraid this will happen repeatedly in the pages to follow.

describe and understand it. Comedy raises very interesting questions about the relationship between performance and performativity, and the way in which notions of reference uphold performative efficacy. What mechanics are involved in the act of making people laugh, and what is happening in comedy at the interstices of the performative and referential? If comedy, and downtown comedy in particular, values authentic communication, what is the relationship here between authentic and efficacious communication? Moreover, echoing Shoshana Felman's provocative analysis of the performative, how does performance come to be understood as reference, and what is being written out of the history of comedy performance in this process?

There is a small but robust body of literature on comedy, in a range of disciplines, that provides a fascinating foundation from which to address these questions.

As stated above, the structure of humor is such that the actual or core meaning, the essential meaning, is implied rather than explicitly said (Freud 1989, Raskin 1985). To the extent that the joke is constative, or referential, it articulates itself in a manner more akin to poetry than law. The sign in comedy is not a discrete linguistic object that points to a referent, concealing ambiguity in a manner that has been a focal point of interrogation for generations of semioticians. It is rather a constellation of linguistic objects that cluster around a referent, triangulating that referent with more or less precision. At times it seems these objects do no more than glance surreptitiously over their shoulders at a referent, nudging each other and winking, coughing, giggling.

Humor is thus geared into the social in a particular way, as social knowledge is required to interpret a joke's implicit meanings (Raskin 1985). Humor signals and affirms shared community, and can confer inclusion in this community on individuals, eliciting feelings of affection, camaraderie, complicity, and collusion (Basso 1979, Freud 1989). Laughter is a flow

experience, and its viscerality and apparent spontaneity or naturalness can make shared laughter seem intimate. Humor can also signal or reinforce an individual's exclusion from a social group (Basso 1979, Chiaro 2002).

Many comics and fans self-identify as social outsiders. Membership in the downtown comedy scene thus involves an interesting dialectics of inside and outside that successful material negotiates.

Humor is also particularly suited to the expression of emergent or unauthorized meanings. Bergson opposes the "vitality" of humor to the "mechanicity" of established mores, portraying it as a corrective to manners, habits, and worldviews that are inadequately responsive to the constantly shifting demands of social life (Bergson 1999). Douglas describes a joke as a "little disturbance" or temporary suspension" of the social order (Douglas 1975, 106-7). Jokers are "minor mystics" able to "release the pent-up power of the imagination...a joke implies that anything is possible" (ibid, 108).

There is thus a certain mystical quality surrounding what is being said with humor, and indeed at times a mystification that bypasses the evaluative and punitive mechanisms to which the literal is subject. Humor can be used in situations of potential conflict, to broach contentious topics without creating indissoluble rifts in personal relationships (Radcliffe-Brown 1965). It allows for a point or positionality to be advanced in a covert way, a way that allows for denials if audience laughter doesn't step in to render it undeniable - one can always make the excuse that one was just joking (Mulkay 1988). Humor can breach taboos with relative impunity (Douglas 1975). This capacity for humor to advance dissent, and provoke authority without directly confronting it, gives it particular efficacy as a "weapon of the weak" (Scott 1987; 1992). At times humor can shift balances of discursive power in a sudden and radical way,

unceremoniously toppling unfounded authority figures, standing up, as Limon says of Lenny Bruce, “the abject as the phallus” (Limon 2000). It can even intervene in the relationship of self to self, broaching topics that might otherwise be too painful or frightening to confront (Goldstein 2003).

One of the enduring questions in humor studies, that people still seem to seek to resolve conclusively, regards whether humor is at its core a progressive or conservative discourse. John Limon considers this question something of a red herring, and I agree, to the extent that the form itself offers no final determination apart from the social context within which it operates. What seems to me to be the case is that humor lends itself to critiquing and affirming certain kinds of social power and social relationships because of the way its structure allows it to reference and mobilize different elements of the social context in which it is uttered. This ethnography seeks to illuminate this process by looking at how downtown comics negotiate personal identities and subject matter that is implicated in different sorts of power relations.

I have chosen to describe the discursive and performance strategies employed by comics as taking place, broadly, in the ironic mode. The literary structure of irony bears importance resemblances to the structure of comedy as outlined in Victor Raskin’s *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, the seminal text on the humor’s semiotics. Irony occurs when the literal meaning of an utterance or event is not its salient or “core” meaning, in the minds of speakers, listeners, or observers. Irony signals a shift in framing or interpretation such that the intended or received meaning is in fact (to some degree) oppositional to the literal meaning, creating some friction between the two (Hutcheon 1994). Authors skilled in the ironic mode, such as Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, have mobilized these dissonances to provoke critical reflection on established ways of thinking about (or framing) social experience. Previous studies of irony raise interesting

questions about speaker intentionality, and how audiences decode the ironic text in order to infer these intentions (ibid).

The punchline of a joke can also be described as a sort of ironization, to the extent that the punchline institutes a new perspective on the joke's "setup". This is the surprise element in a joke, the moment that incites laughter - a sudden shift in framing that problematizes or undermines the most readily available meaning of the setup (Raskin 1985). As in the case of irony, the meaning of the speaker has to be inferred - this is what it means to "get" the joke - that the listener has the required context and knowledge to arrive at a second meaning without having to be told.

This shift in framing can be fairly frivolous, as in the case of the joke, "What's black and white and red all over? A newspaper" - which signals a shift in meaning from "red" to "read". But jokes that are geared into the social context in which they are told often involve much more subtle and complex shifts in interpretation. These jokes operate within complex, overlapping fields of social power and hegemony, fields which they both mobilize and critique (Willett 2008). Jokes of this second type, along with their effects, are what I will be exploring.

Irony is also significant because it has been identified as a central cultural trope, particularly among younger people in the United States (Baym 2005, Day 2011, Miller 1988). The popularity of this mode of interpretation - or, I would say, mode of relating to cultural material - among this demographic has raised questions as to how it impacts their possibilities for political engagement (Miller 1988, Postman 1985). There is some debate around this point, which I think a study of the nuances of ironic engagement, particularly in its social and affective dimensions, should help to clarify.

I am particularly interested in ironic modes in which the position of the speaker raises some problem within the social context. This problem can take various forms. The position of the speaker might be unclear, forcing the listener to question his or her assent or complicity with the statement (or action). The speaker may allude to an idea that is likely to generate conflict, or that is difficult to conceptualize in the context of available, hegemonic frameworks. Both of these (related) types of irony require the listener to engage in difficult cognitive and emotional work.

These ironies are challenging. They are akin to the sort of provocative questioning Kierkegaard investigates under the heading of Socratic irony. They generate the sort of problematic positionality Booth describes in his analysis of what he terms unstable ironies. In an effort to link these forms of irony to the performance of everyday life, I have described, in chapter 3, the way comics may generate what Goffman terms negative experience, in order to ironize everyday moments in social life (Goffman 1986). In its most interesting moments, this generation of negative experience is a sort of open-ended, in many ways playful provocation, that can call forth the production of new ways of framing the social context.

The interpretive work required to infer a speaker's perspective in the case of these more challenging forms of irony clearly demonstrates that audiences participate in the production of meaning of comedic performances. They participate in parallel ways in the production of comic personas in offstage interactions, as they offer or withhold their assent to new constellations of words or patterns of interaction. These emerging forms of performance come to represent this socially grounded consensus or consent. Talented comics emerge as spokespeople for a shared social context, saying things the people around them can't say, or, as one fan put it, "the things you would say if you had thought of them".

In this sense, the reputation, status, or aura of the comic is a form of charismatic authority (Weber 1946). The ironic provocations in which comics engage create micro-political crisis moments, and laughter can be viewed as a form of reintegration (Turner 1974). The sense that comics say “things you would say if you had thought of them” suggests comics articulate public secrets, but, as Michael Taussig points out, the mode of revelation is a key factor in public reception (Taussig 1999). It is perhaps more accurate to say that comics produce truth-effects; that comedy is a sort of experimental structure for testing social facts, and that these facts may have no scrutable prior existence.

This study, then, looks at the way comics make appeals to locally salient structures of feeling and social facts, shared cultural material that signals shared community, plausible construals of their own positionality and the positionality of audience members, and locally relevant public secrets, in order to lay claim to what I will call comedic authority. It doesn't deal specifically with political humor - or, rather, the politics aren't of the electoral variety. Most of the humor on its face is much more personal and micro-focused - national and global politics are rather embedded in the readings and rewritings of individual and small-group positionalities.

For comics to do experimental comedy means it is unclear whether the public secrets they articulate are in fact public, or private. They are articulating dissatisfaction or alienation from existing frames, cultural logics, and ways of practicing everyday life. This alienation may prove to be shared by the audience, it may in fact be a public secret. Or it may be a completely idiosyncratic point of view. Or it may be difficult to tell, at first, which it is, because the technique for articulating the point of view, or, more accurately, for drawing audience attention to an incipient or emergent meaning, positionality, or what Williams terms a “structure of

feeling”, may be hard to arrive at (Williams 1977). Comics frequently acknowledge this possibility by leading into a “risky” joke with a caveat such as, “this might only be funny to me”.

Many people avoid live comedy because of the possibility that a joke might fail. The thought that someone would stand up in a spotlight and try to make them laugh, and fail, strikes many people as excruciatingly awkward. But among downtown comedy fans, per the social contract described above, the possibility of failure is par for the course.

Comics in fact assert that there is an excitement associated with the possibility that a joke might fail, shared by both themselves and the audience. I suggest that the experimental nature of downtown comedy converges with a cultural logic of risk. The period of downtown comedy’s ascendance has traversed the end of the Clinton years through the .com boom and subsequent collapse, through the economic and political upheaval following 9/11, through a massive real estate boom during which rising rents drove many comedy venues to close or relocate to outer boroughs, and through the near-collapse of the financial services industry, its subsequent bailout, and the rise of the Occupy movement. New York is a precarious place, even for the white, college-educated twenty-somethings, often transplants from other cities and suburbs, who make up the majority of devoted comedy fans. They arrive here a little unmoored, many of them aspiring to membership in what Florida terms the “creative class” (Florida 2002). They are engaged in increasingly flexible labor, pairing temporary and part-time jobs with various forms of entrepreneurship.

Comics engage in a fairly extreme form of this entrepreneurship. Authenticity has to have some component of originality, and originality, creativity, is marked by transgression, a creative destruction. They position themselves as outsiders, outsiders who seek to gain acceptance by swinging cultural norms around to their own point of view. Many of my

respondents devoted countless unremunerated hours to developing their craft, over the course of a decade or more, before they became successful enough to quit their day jobs. Some were not, or have not yet been, so lucky.

The development over time of comedic authority in this context overlaps with and is complicated by the production of the comic as a saleable commodity. As this process is successful, utterances that hold sway in the social context of the downtown comedy scene, and, over time, the expanding social context of performance tours, web and television distribution, and other mass mediated venues, accrue as a history of individual authorship. This authorship also holds the promise of future creative work, marking the individual performer as creative, innovative, charismatic, talented - any number of descriptors that in this social context mark the performer as, most ideally, a genius. Over the course of this production of the comic as a commodity, the social aspect of this production is obscured, fetishized - and, I will argue, haunts the comic as an absence, in mystified forms. This process is not dissimilar to the identity formation experienced by any individual, in a culture that regards them as isolated, atomized. Social qualities accrue and sediment as personal, even embodied attributes, as Bourdieu's concept of habitus articulates (Bourdieu 1977). People who identify with comics want to see them as agentive, fans have an investment in seeing their efficacy as larger-than-life. Identity is always dynamic and contestable, but most people avoid, on a day-to-day basis, the kinds of breaches of etiquette that might result in conflict (Goffman 1986, Milgram 1977). Comedy by contrast has an aggressive quality. It works in zones of potential conflict, putting both the speaker and listener at some social risk.

Kierkegaard is thus relevant to this study not only for his provocative analysis of irony, but also in that the quest for authentic and efficacious communication is an existential project.

The framework of existentialism allows the question of irony to be connected to questions of what is at stake for comics and audiences, in more concrete and material terms. It also provides a fruitful link between the criteria by which audiences evaluate performances as authentic and meaningful, and the ways performers are geared into relationships of power, particularly via embodied characteristics such as race and gender⁹. The ambiguous boundary between freedom and facticity, I will argue, is one that comics are constantly testing, interrogating, and colliding with. Much of the inner drama of comedy is watching this process acted out, and audiences, true to form, are always delighted to see a tragedy with a happy ending.

The second chapter of this dissertation documents the history of the development of the downtown comedy scene, beginning in the mid-1990s. In addition to giving a more detailed picture of the predominant production model, it details important aesthetic concerns, performance strategies, and points of social inquiry. I locate the downtown comedy scene as a subculture in the context of late capitalism, identifying ways in which its “outsider” status converges with contemporary mechanisms of commodification, even as the perspectives advanced by comics and the specific mode of production they engage in may challenge normative workings of the entertainment industry. This chapter will also introduce the reader to the community constituted around this mode of production and this aesthetic, and some ways in which the commodification process operates in tension with the values of the community that nurtures it at its incipient/emergent stages.

⁹ Cynthia Willett raises similar questions in her very interesting discussion of Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*, which she frames as a comedic send-up of what Sartre terms “bad faith”. Willett argues that the film demonstrates comedy’s capacity to reground the individual’s quest for authenticity in the realm of the social. While her argument is persuasive and insightful, it unfortunately focuses more uniformly on comedy’s possibilities for a progressive politics/aesthetics than I am able to do in a faithful rendering of the downtown comedy scene. In order to highlight the continued salience of a heroic, ontologically separate model of subjectivity in this context, rather than drawing on Sartre I will return to Kierkegaard as the progenitor of existentialist philosophy, linking his rendering of the ironist to his rendering of the knight of faith, and attempting to account for the emotional valence that attaches to both of these figures via a range of ethnographic examples.

The third chapter will explore downtown comedy in greater detail as an aesthetic and hermeneutic strategy, in relation to existing research on the formal mechanisms at work in comedy, social psychology, and irony. The intention is for the reader to understand the dominant mode of authorship and audience reception in greater detail, and to elaborate on the proposal that, by bringing frames into conflict, comics can generate crisis moments in social life, paving the way for new perspectives and modes of engagement, and accruing charismatic power to themselves through acts of transgression.

Chapters four and five will reintroduce the idea of embodied power to the concept of irony, taking as point of departure the idea that we occupy and reiterate, via practice, complex overlapping fields of power relations (Bourdieu 1977, Foucault 1984). The main axes of power explored in these chapters are those of race and gender, two axes which have also informed much of the current theory on performativity in language (MacKinnon 1996, Matsuda et al 1993). I work from the premise that people move through different social and ideological spheres, within each of which they exercise different degrees of authority. This notion is succinctly encapsulated in Patricia Hill Collins' idea of the "outsider within" - suggesting that individuals are never entirely empowered or entirely oppositional (Collins 1998, 7). Comics play very deftly with this ambiguity, often bringing these overlapping fields or frames of authorized language and practice into friction with one another. Their performances synthesize the authorized and submerged meanings that prevail in these frames, and they thus make appeals to power from different sources, asserting their authority to do so in a context where laughter determines whether the authority is legitimate. I will illustrate that these different forms of social power can be mobilized using different techniques. Particular attention will be paid to the boundaries between the known and the unknown, and permitted and taboo knowledges. It will be argued

that comics combine authorized and unruly forms of power in order to successfully break taboos and channel the power of public secrets. I rely on Foucault's notion of power as productive and not just repressive - transgression happens in relation to power structures that produce it, and the nature of transgression is conditioned by power relations. I thus join such theorists as Shoshana Felman and Judith Butler in moving away from the law as model for performative efficacy, looking rather at the way the "law" of the symbolic realm interacts with other forms and modes of power.

Chapter six departs from chapters four and five in that it addresses a different type of marginal identity, one that constitutes an interiority of the subject rather than being written on the surface of the body. Ambiguity is differently negotiated in the case of depression, because the condition allows for "passing" and may be experienced episodically. In the case of all of these marginal identities we see people policing affect in relation to an expected norm, but the choice to adopt a depressed identity offers the ability to opt in or out of a different set of norms or a different category of personhood, offering a mobility that is less readily available in the case of gender and race. We thus see that the diagnosis of depression allows a person to bracket off the part of him or herself that lacks efficacy, but at the cost of casting this part of the self out of the realm of speech.

Chapter four, which deals with "ironic racism", is a case study in the application of irony as criticism or cultural critique. It deals largely with transgression of taboos and drawing attention to public secrets. It raises the issue of who accrues the power of the transgression, and the extent to which this transgression provokes (or fails to provoke) critical reflection. Chapter five extends the discussion of public secrets to look at their enduring mystifications, and the way emotional labor performed in this social context recuperates certain transgressive or radical

proposals while relegating others to the margins. Chapter six looks at the airing of private but relatable truths, and offers a close look at the structure of comedy from the angle of psychoanalysis and film studies, in an effort to develop a sort of “apparatus theory” of comedy. I demonstrate in this chapter that, in spite of the barriers to critical reflection identified in chapters four and five, comedy can indeed work to shift the criteria of what is permitted and not permitted, work to shift an atmosphere or “structure of feeling” so as to conventionalize a different mode of relating to authorized language and performance of identity. It is my intention that each of these chapters will move toward increased understanding of the mechanics of revelation and the production of comedic authority.

A final note will help to orient the reader to certain authorial choices I’ve made, in terms of both style and content. As I mentioned, I have spent well over a decade on the periphery, and several years very close to the center, of the downtown comedy scene. In addition to attending countless shows at myriad venues, conducting interviews, and spending time with comics at various social events, from 2006-2008 I spent every Wednesday night at a bar called Rififi, at a weekly show called *Invite Them Up*. At that time Rififi was the scene’s epicenter - a point of regular and reliable convergence for people who were engaged in a shared project, about which the majority of them were very passionate. In many places my language will be colloquial, and certain anecdotes and snippets of performance material are included just because they are funny.

The atmosphere at places like Rififi may be characterized by loose ties, but such a densely connected web of loose ties can make for a strong public. The impact or effect of the performance (or breach in social norms) indicates both efficacy and relatedness. The impact of speech begets obligation in some sense. Conflict builds relationships. In conflict or crisis people decide whether or not to commit to an “us” that’s constituted around the resolution of the conflict,

which may constitute a new way of framing shared experience, an alliance in terms of a shared perspective that is spoken or unspoken - very often conspiratorial and unspoken. The “truth” may not constitute actual literal agreement, but it is upheld by the implied terms of a social contract, a sense of a “we” that is the speech community and community of practice in which the shared truth or perspective circulates.

These relationships, which occupied some point in the intersection of the professional, the romantic, friendship, fandom, and casual acquaintanceship, are important to people. I have tried to document the forgotten intimacies, the hidden emotional and more material labors, the embarrassments and the joys of awkward and/or failing jokes...the history of what one comic tenderly described as “a good time”...in order to demystify some of the social processes that allow certain people and certain perspectives to become emblematic. In the years since Riffi has closed I occasionally run into old friends I used to see there every week, and they talk about Riffi with nostalgia, and wistfulness, a sense that they experienced something magical, unique, and irreplaceable. Certainly it was a romantic sort of time, a very fortunate convergence of material forces, aesthetic and intellectual concerns, and emotional energy. But the sense of loss that sometimes accompanies such nostalgia comes from forgetting the details of how it was built. There was magic, indeed, but between everyone involved we know how to work the trick. I hope that some of you will read this book and go forth and build your own scenes.

Chapter 2 – You Had To Be There

This chapter will trace the process by which downtown or alternative comedy as such emerged in New York in the mid 1990s, and coalesced in the succeeding decade around a particular production model, social network, and set of aesthetic concerns.

This process was informed heavily by the immediate economic and cultural landscape of downtown comedy's emergence, and in particular by certain key features of this landscape that nurtured the development of downtown shows and venues. First, novice comics in the early- to mid-1990s encountered formidable barriers to entry in established “uptown” comedy clubs, and perceived a need for alternative venues. Second, Downtown Manhattan offered an abundance of small-capacity, informal performance spaces, primarily in Manhattan's East Village and Lower East Side. Many of these performance spaces were attached to bars, and thus their operation was subsidized through alcohol sales, allowing shows to be produced for no cover charge in the interest of drawing additional patrons. Third, New York is home to a dense population with a high concentration of cultural producers, standup comics among them. Many of these members of what Richard Florida terms the “creative class” are willing to invest large amounts of unpaid labor into the production of shows, and in their own professional development. Fourth, New York hosts a plethora of established and emerging mass media outlets, including television and

web-based production. This contributes significantly to the presence of a high concentration of cultural producers, and also provides comics with remuneration and exposure to varying degrees, allowing for the sustenance of a career in comedy or at least the promise that it might be realistically attainable. The development of both shows and audiences has been reliant on these factors.

This chapter will also trace the lineage of the aesthetic bent of these shows, and discuss the unusual character that attracted and retained a regular audience. The satisfactions fans and comics derived from performances will be explored in greater detail in later chapters; this chapter seeks to lay a foundation for the reader to appreciate the milieu in which specific moments of performance, and performer-audience interaction, took place.

While downtown comedy drew upon existing comedic traditions, interviews with fans who regularly attended these shows, as well as discussion on comedy-related blogs and message boards, suggest that audience members were sensitive to being part of a new and interesting thing in its genesis. This sense of newness or vitality had several facets: First, audience members felt that they were witnessing, and were to some degree part of, the coming-together of a social network, a sort of community or in-crowd. Second, fans appreciated seeing unusual, surprising, and innovative comedy. Third, fans had a real sense of participation in the production of this new work, which was still in an unfinished state. This cultivated a different kind of relationship with performers, some of whom were already fairly well-known or seemed to be on their way to stardom, than the mediated, hierarchical relationships fans experienced watching TV or going to large venues.

I will give a brief history of the creation and production of several shows that at various periods were staples of the downtown scene. This will by no means be an exhaustive survey of

the many shows that have graced Downtown Manhattan, and, more recently, Brooklyn and Queens, over the course of the past 15 years. These have become so numerous that their individual histories are unfortunately out of the scope of this chapter. I have chosen to instead focus on particular shows and locations that can be taken as typical examples of the production model, marketing strategies, curation, and loose set of aesthetic concerns around which downtown comedy is currently organized. I also hope that the longitudinal scope of these brief show-biographies will give the reader a sense of the way fans interact with shows and comics over periods of several years, or, differently put, the way members of this community invest in different ways in the same social space. Comics, fans and producers follow the ups and downs and struggles to sustain particular shows and venues as an ongoing part of their daily lives.

I will also discuss the ways that producers, performers, and audience members of shows at these venues, as well as venue owners and managers, fit into and negotiate the larger economic landscape of NYC. This landscape both sustained and challenged the continued existence of these shows.

The availability of live venues for stand-up comedy performance expanded enormously during the 1980s and into the early 1990s. During this time New York was able to support several large comedy clubs, and it was relatively easy to make a living as a standup comic. Comics refer to this era of unprecedented growth as the “comedy boom”. Entertainment industry professionals generally agree that the advent of cable television catalyzed the boom. Differing obscenity standards for paid cable and traditional broadcast networks enabled cable networks to present uncensored versions of comics' material, an essential feature in a genre that relies so deeply on pushing the conventional limits of good taste (Holden 1987). Standup was also inexpensive to produce, as it was performed on a minimal set, required no location shooting, and

consolidated writing and talent in a single performer. Programming in this format thus also presented a low-risk investment for fledgling networks that were aiming for a smaller market share than their Big Three predecessors (Holden 1987). The popularity of standup showcases on premium networks such as HBO, Showtime and Cinemax suggested that there was a growing market for this style of performance, and comedy clubs began to open across the country to soak up the perceived demand. In 1979 there were an estimated 20 comedy clubs in the US; a decade later there were over 300 (Waters 1992). Between 1981 and 1983 alone the number of comedy clubs around the country grew by 200% (Holden 1987). Much of this growth was fueled by the franchising of clubs that were already established and drawing sizable crowds in major cities, such as the Comedy Store and New York's Catch a Rising Star (Holden 1987).

While the expansion of consumer interest in standup was compared to that of rock and roll in the 60s and 70s, comedy appealed to an older and more affluent audience than rock music, to the extent that Showtime producer Ken Weinstock coined the term “yuppie vaudeville” to describe the emerging phenomenon (Holden 1987). Caroline's Comedy Club, which opened during the boom and was one of few New York clubs to survive the recession that followed, operated according to a business model designed to attract this affluent audience. Originally opened as a cabaret venue in Chelsea in 1981, Caroline's was distinguished from the conventional comedy club model by its posh décor and upscale menu. Co-owner Caroline Hirsch switched to comedy about a year after it opened to attract a younger audience (Moss 1992, D'Alessandro 2002), but retained the venue's upscale feel.

"My club was the first yuppie comedy club," says Hirsch. "I wanted it to rival those of the old Latin Quarter. There's no Copacabana anymore. My club took its place." (D'Alessandro 2002).

A glowing review from comedy manager Barry Katz suggests that Hirsch succeeded:

Caroline's is the Ritz Carlton of Comedy Clubs. The service, the clientele, the food, the energy is unbelievably spectacular. It is the most prestigious gig for a comedian to work in New York City (D'Alessandro 2002).

Caroline's also offered shows that had a novel structure; rather than booking several relatively unknown comics for short sets of 10 or 15 minutes, Hirsch booked headliners who had TV or extensive live performance credentials, and had them perform much longer sets (Moss 1992). This allowed Hirsch to charge a celebrity premium for tickets to the club, and also elevated the status and the fees of comics who performed there. According to Jay Leno,

She permitted comedians to get paid. As a working comedian that was a big deal. It wasn't like you were doing 10 or 15 minutes. A headliner's show had a beginning, middle and an end. Not many people did that in the early '80s. (D'Alessandro 2002).

Hirsch also partnered with Cable TV networks to produce weekly series based on live shows at the club; a strategy that was supported by the “headliner” model she had pioneered. In 1987 Caroline's moved to a larger location at the South Street Seaport to accommodate audio/visual and spatial needs of TV production, a move that also enabled Hirsch to cater to wealthy patrons from the financial industry (D'Alessandro 2002). In 1992 the club moved to a location near Times Square with 275 seats, at which it resides currently (Boss-Bicak 2004). This move took place after the financial industry was hit hard by the prolonged recession in the early 1990s; according to Hirsch the new location was also easier for her clientele to get to¹.

According to many cultural critics and industry professionals, comedy also underwent an aesthetic shift during this time of rapid expansion. The increasing overlap between television

¹ Hirsch's statement that the Times Square location was easier for her clients to travel to supports the assertion that more formal, upscale, “uptown” comedy clubs cater primarily to tourists and suburbanites, rather than city residents.

and club audiences, exemplified in the business strategies that made Caroline's so successful, went hand in hand with what was described as the “suburbanization” of comedy. This entailed a shift from more provocative, conceptual, or performance-based material to a more observational style.

Mr. McLaren attributes the rise of stars like Mr. Seinfeld, Richard Lewis, Paul Reiser and Carol Liefer to what he called the suburbanization of comedy. For around the country, as in Manhattan, the predominant audience for urban comedy clubs comes from outside the city. (Holden 1992).

In the early 1980's, the hottest young performers in clubs were so-called weird or conceptual performers like Pee-wee Herman, Steven Wright and Emo Philips. Then in a rush of rock-star energy came performers like Andrew Dice Clay and Sam Kinison who brought a macho, heavy-metal energy to the field...Within the comedy industry, it is generally agreed that Jerry Seinfeld, with his friendly observational humor, has superseded Mr. Clay as the king of comedy. (Holden 1992).

Fans of downtown comedy are not always particularly interested in this more observational style of comedy. One fan who became so involved in the comedy scene that it eventually came to comprise the majority of her professional life told me that she thought she hated standup until she saw it in NYC, because all she knew from standup was what she “saw on BET when she was a kid in the 80's”. As stated in the quote above, upscale clubs are also perceived by many downtown comics to cater primarily to a “bridge and tunnel” audience, rather than local residents.²

² “Bridge-and-Tunnel” is a local epithet used to describe people who drive in from New Jersey, Westchester, and other proximate regions of lower population density in order to experience Manhattan's culture and night life. Consonant with the notoriously Manhattan-centric perspective of its inhabitants and their preference for the urban lifestyle, these more suburban areas are assumed to be bereft of local culture, and its inhabitants unwilling to encounter entertainment that is complex, intellectually demanding, or challenges their existing aesthetic expectations or worldview.

During the prolonged recession in the early 90s, the boom turned around. Clubs saw drastic reductions in profits, and several established NYC clubs closed. Those that remained open reduced the amount that they were willing to pay performers.

While many attributed the comedy “bust” to the recession, the proliferation of comedy on cable television, while credited with initiating the boom, was also now seen as having oversaturated the market. To wit:

Like baseball expansion, the proliferation of comics has led to a diffusion of talent. "The quality is getting thinner," admits Silver Friedman, co-founder (with her ex-husband Budd) of the Improvisation club in New York. So far, however, the ranks are not dwindling. "The competition is unbelievable," says Comic Wright. "Every year I think it will level off, but it doesn't." (Zoglin et al 1987).

"There are too many comedians," Rita Rudner declared recently. "Pretty soon the Government is going to pay you not to be a comedian the same way they pay you not to grow wheat." (Holden 1992)

[Rudner's] comedians-are-a-glut-on-the-market observations join a long list of jokes about the profession's overcrowdedness that some trace back nearly a decade to Randy Credico's quip: "Every time a steel mill closes in Pittsburgh, another comic joins the work force." But there is a painful side to the jokes about the superabundance of stand-up comedy. Although the comedy boom hasn't exactly gone bust, the bubble has burst. Several months ago, an article in *Spy* magazine re-christened stand-up comedy "the disco of the 90's." Around the country as well as in New York City, comedy clubs that until 1989 were almost guaranteed moneymakers are struggling for survival (Holden 1992).

Louis CK and Marc Maron are two comics who are highly respected by downtown comics and fans. In an episode of Marc Maron's podcast series *What the Fuck*, they reminisce about the heady excitement of the late 80s, and the way opportunities to make money as a standup seemed to disappear overnight. Louis CK describes the feeling allegorically: he was racing his motorcycle down the West Side Highway from one well-paying gig to another when he got in an accident. The force and speed of the impact was congruent, in his memory, with the sudden collapse of the industry (Maron 2010).

For aspiring comics who arrived in New York in the mid 1990s seeking to make the beginnings of a career, opportunities to perform in front of a live audience were very limited. It was difficult even to get stage time; to be compensated for performing was all but unheard of. Clubs offered limited stage time in the form of “bringer” shows, to which comics were expected to guarantee attendance of four or five patrons who had come specifically to see them perform. Aspiring comics would often ask friends to come to the club to support them and legitimate their presence on stage, but, as one comic observed, between the ticket price and the two-drink minimum, you were asking these friends to spend \$50 on an evening out, which was an exorbitant sum for a peer struggling at the early stages of his or her own career. The number of times one could ask a friend for this particular favor was very limited. Other clubs offered “amateur” nights where comics could pay to perform, but these evenings didn't offer much of an opportunity to hone one's craft in front of an audience, and, moreover, comics found them depressing. As one comic recalls,

You'd get there and pay three or five dollars or whatever, and do your set for other comics. And there would be these older comics there who had been doing it for five or six years, and they'd say, five years ago we were making money at this.

At the other end of the spectrum were open mic nights, which were far more informal and welcoming to the novice than clubs, but also frequently a dismal affair³. Several comics are prone to wax nostalgic about the evenings they spent in such venues as the basement of a pizza parlor, performing for other young, aspiring comics, but most of these amateurs, in their estimation, were terrible. As one comic said, “There are very few people who are serious about it. Every year there's like 20 people who don't drop out, and those are the ones who are serious”.

³ “Booked” shows are curated events, for which the lineup of comics is programmed in advance. Open mics, by contrast, will generally give a spot to anyone who shows up, so quality of performance is policed only by the limits of the comic's tolerance for audience criticism or apathy.

The constant influx of new amateurs made it difficult for these “serious” comics to claw their way out of the fray.

Thus an intermediate space was lacking between venues that were open to complete novices, and venues that were geared towards performers whose television appearances could command a \$50 price tag. It was into this space that “downtown” shows began to emerge. These were booked shows, rather than open mics, and often featured established and well-respected performers, but they had a business model and aesthetic that differentiated them from clubs, allowing for lineups that included a larger roster of emerging comics and more experimental work.

Eating It was a weekly show that began in 1997, produced by Jeff Singer and Naomi Steinberg. It took place every Monday night in the back room at The Luna Lounge, and ran there until February of 2005, four months before the bar was forced to relocate from 171 Ludlow St. upon expiration of its lease, due to rapidly escalating rents in the neighborhood. The show is frequently credited with initiating the downtown “comedy renaissance”.

Rob Sacher, who co-owned The Luna Lounge with Dianne Galliano, is an enthusiast and promoter of local rock music. In addition to managing the bar and live venue, Sacher released several albums on an independent label called Lunasea during the Luna Lounge's tenure on the Lower East Side. The back room in which *Eating It* took place offered live music the other six nights of the week. The room was small, accommodating a maximum of 90 people, and there was never a cover charge. It was thus an excellent venue for little-known local artists to cut their teeth.

The object of *Eating It* was quite consonant with the philosophy and business model with which Sacher approached emerging musicians. Singer and Steinberg sought to provide a venue

in which comics could experiment with new material, and it was theorized that because audience members were only paying for the cost of the drink that was included with the show's ticket, they would be tolerant of material that wasn't entirely polished or worked out. “Eating it”, like “bombing”, is a colloquial term for failing miserably as a comic. It was understood that getting up on stage and failing to make the audience laugh was entirely acceptable at this particular show, and an inevitable pitfall of trying out risky or unusual material⁴.

Singer and Steinberg were both entertainment industry professionals. From 1992-2005 Sternberg was director of talent at Comedy Central, and they thus drew on a robust professional network in order to book the show (New York Post 2006). The show had a different guest host every week, and featured a combination of emerging and established comics. The atmosphere was informal. Audience members congregated in metal folding chairs and in the well-worn, threadbare easy chairs that lined the room's periphery. After or even during the show they might wander into the front room, which contained a few couches, a foosball table, a long bar along one wall, and a closed-circuit television over the door to the back room. Though the space was casual the producers were well-respected, and performers with formidable star power would often stop by unannounced to do a set. There was a sense of excitement associated with seeing these performers try out new material in a small, intimate setting.

The Lower East Side in the late 1990s was also home to several small experimental theaters, such as Collective: Unconscious, Todo Con Nada, and Surf Reality, all of which have also relocated or disbanded due either to escalating rents, or lack of maintenance in the buildings in which they were housed (Trav S.D. 2003). While *Eating It* was the only forum devoted specifically to standup, several of these theaters hosted variety-show style open-mic nights, and

⁴ As mentioned in the introduction, titles of shows often reflect this emphasis on experimentation. Other show titles tie promotional efforts to a sense of local community, intimacy, or pleasure, as in the case of , *Tell Your Friends*, *Invite Them Up*, and *Sweet*.

there was some cross-pollination between the theater and standup communities, as performers would bring experimental styles of standup verging on performance art to different venues.

Fans recall a number of performances from the Luna Lounge that struck them as out of the ordinary. Todd Barry is a veteran and highly respected performer who has success in both club and downtown venues, moving one comedy fan to describe him as “The Neil Young of downtown comedy”. One evening at the Luna Lounge he speed-dated several women from the audience, which by all reports was hilarious. A comic named Michael Portnoy who has since crossed over into the world of performance art interrupted his own set to start throwing Prozac at the audience, screaming, “Maybe this will make you happy!!!” Slovin and Allen, a writing team known for absurdist and highly structural work, performed a “dueling boom boxes” routine in which neither one spoke, but instead played recorded clips back and forth to one another, chief among them the banjo riff made famous by *Deliverance*⁵. Other memorable stunts included a show featuring 60 comics, each of which performed for only a minute.

Angela has lived in New York for 20 years, and has spent most of that time working in television, a career choice she links to her adolescent fandom of *Late Night With David Letterman*. She shows up for our interview wearing tight black jeans. She does her hair like Debbie Harry⁶. She describes herself as a lifelong comedy fan, and attended *Eating It* on a regular basis. She describes the atmosphere as distinct from that found in more established clubs.

The Luna Lounge was very energetic. I haven't found anything with quite that energy...you were in a very small room, and it definitely felt like it was...hot. The comics were very interactive too, I thought, more so than other places, because the place was so small. It was interesting. It was an interesting time.

⁵ This routine was subsequently featured in their 2001 episode of Comedy Central Presents.

⁶ Debbie Harry is a musician most famous for her role as the lead singer of Blondie, a pioneering New Wave band that was major presence in the East Village rock scene in the late 1970s.

Other comments throughout this interview suggest that, for Angela, these nights at the Luna Lounge were “an interesting time” for New York comedy in general. Not only were individual acts often provocative and unusual, but Angela had a sense that she was watching a social network coalesce. She recalls fondly that, “You were up close enough [at Luna] to see whatever rivalry, or commentary, or input, from comic to comic”. Indeed part of the fun of going to shows at the Luna Lounge was watching offstage interactions between these emerging, highly energetic performers. Angela attributes the unique atmosphere at the Luna Lounge in part to the affordability of the shows.

What you said about community, it was one of the few times that you really felt that, up close, because comedy clubs are so expensive, generally. [In uptown clubs] It's a different – it's a lot of out-of-towners, or couples on dates, or whatever...it's not the same audience.

The surrounding neighborhood also provided spaces for this fledgling social network to commune in the hours following the show. Often a group of 10 or 15 performers would head to a nearby café or restaurant for a late dinner, or to another venue to see a mutual friend's rock band play a later show. One popular destination was “El Sombrero”, invariably referred to, in English, as “The Hat”, a nearby Mexican restaurant that was locally recommended for selling frozen margaritas in styrofoam to-go cups.

It was around this time that the monikers “alternative comedy” and “downtown comedy” were coined to describe the work that was being performed in the Luna Lounge, Pianos, The Slipper Room, and other Lower East Side venues. Like the term “alternative music”, the term “alternative comedy” in particular has since been the object of controversy, and even ridicule. Many view it as an unduly succinct effort to neatly package an aesthetic and economic

phenomenon that, if at all coherent, is at the very least amorphous and loosely bounded. Comics often prefer the term downtown comedy, if they choose to apply a terminology at all.

The contentiousness of the term indexes the status of downtown comedy as a subcultural phenomenon. The status of the category “subculture” is currently under a great deal of flux, particularly as it operates as an organizing trope for aesthetic production and consumption in a metropolitan epicenter of media production such as New York. Future iterations of this project will offer a more detailed analysis of this category and its current utility. Unfortunately the myriad and rapidly evolving ways in which downtown comedy integrates with the entertainment industry and real estate economies of New York City, a subject which easily merits another hundred pages, is out of the scope of this dissertation. I hope at least to pique the reader’s interest in future work on the subject with a brief discussion at the end of this chapter.⁷

Certainly shows like *Eating It* paved the way for a do-it-yourself approach to the production of comedy shows that became much more common in New York over the course of the following decade, and which diverged from the model that New York clubs had exported to venues across the country during the comedy boom of the decade prior. Further development of this DIY model in New York was also fueled by migrations from cities such as Boston and Chicago. Both of these cities had robust comedy scenes of their own, due in part by to the strong

⁷ I workshopped a section of this dissertation with some colleagues, and their incipient efforts to approach the question of subculture are best encapsulated in the quizzical, non-comprehending look of one colleague, who, attempting to locate comics and their audiences in a broader cultural landscape, finally asked, “Are they hipsters?” My answer, in brief, is, yes and no. I am inclined at this stage of my research on the topic to suggest that hipsters, for most of the later 20th century, were positioned as cultural brokers between the originators of marginal cultural formations, and mass media outlets whose ownership of the means of production and distribution positioned them to profit from circulating these subcultural materials. The idea of “appropriation” as a way to conceive of this structure for mass-media dissemination of creative work is greatly complicated by the reduced costs of digital production and the proliferation of internet-based means of distribution. More work is needed on this topic, but some interesting starting points are Bill Wasik’s *And Then There’s This*, N+1 Magazine’s *What Was the Hipster*, and of course The Baffler’s classic *Commodify Your Dissent*.

presence of comedic traditions at local universities, and to the efforts of independent producers who had achieved various levels of professional success.

Patrick Borelli moved to New York from Boston in 1999. In Boston he had been the sole paid employee of *The Weekly Week*, an absurdist bi-weekly periodical collectively edited by himself, Eugene Mirman, Bill Wasik, Ben Dryer, Karen Coughlin, Rebecca Lieblich, Diana Bonfilio, and Brian Spinks. Members of this close-knit Boston social circle also produced a comedy show at the Green Street Grill, and later joined forces with the producer of an existing show at The Comedy Studio. Linas Phillips and Larry Murphy also performed at these shows, and at times collaborated with the abovementioned writers and performers.

For many of these contributors, *The Weekly Week* was part of a larger project they termed “post-ironic comedy” a reflexive, tongue-in-cheek art movement that drew its inspiration in equal parts from Marcel Duchamp and David Ogilvy. Mirman, Spinks, Bonfilio and Dryer had all recently graduated from Hampshire College. Mirman's self-designed major was in stand-up comedy, and his thesis project consisted of writing and producing an hour-long performance. Spinks and Bonfilio had been thoroughly steeped in avant-garde aesthetics via Hampshire's film and photography departments, and Bonfilio was a regular contributor to Hampshire's school paper, of which Ben was the editor for most of his tenure at Hampshire. Spinks and Mirman were also involved in student club called KAGFLORT, which staged prank-style public events on campus, including counter-rallies to the annual hemp legalization sit-ins that revolved around the themes of dental hygiene (1994's Floss-In) and reactionary politics (1996's Republican Barbecue). Wasik's penchant for social experiments would be revealed on a grand scale in 2002, when he invented the flash mob.

Patrick moved to New York after *The Weekly Week* folded due to financial insolvency. Jen Kirkman and Linas Phillips moved to New York around the same time, seeking the opportunities that might be afforded by proximity to New York's mass media outlets. Most of *The Weekly Week's* editorial staff relocated either New York or LA within the following two years, in order to pursue opportunities for work in entertainment or publishing. Ben and Karen remained in Boston and now operate Sherman Cafe, a coffee shop and small venue in Somerville's Union Square. Those who are still performing comedy on the East Coast return to perform at Sherman's monthly variety shows on a regular basis⁸.

Shortly after moving to New York Patrick began hosting a weekly show at The Gershwin Hotel. "I had gone to an open mic there", he told me, "So I knew people would come there for comedy, but mine was the first booked show". Patrick's show was free of charge and ran every Thursday night. Before long there were shows in the same space on Friday and Saturday nights as well.

The Gershwin Hotel is a youth hostel. As of this writing it continues to operate on E. 27th St., adjacent to what is now the Museum of Sex. My first impressions of The Gershwin, formed in 1999, were that it evoked a fantasy of New York City that might inhabit the heart of a young devotee of 1960s counterculture. The eclectic collection of art and sculpture that adorned – or, rather, cluttered – the lobby seemed to have no organizing principle other than “trippy”. The facade of the building was a deep red, and curving up around the front door were four huge vaguely conical protrusions, sculpted in translucent plexiglass and glowing from within. When

⁸ When *The Weekly Week* went bankrupt Ben, who was in his early 20s at the time, paid a substantial amount of money to retain the intellectual rights to the paper's content. This decision reflected either an enduring optimism about the monetary value of this intellectual property or an intense sentimental attachment – emotions which, as the succeeding chapters seek to demonstrate, are not always easy to distinguish. Clipped articles from *The Weekly Week* now wallpaper the Sherman Cafe bathrooms, wherein one can read such headlines as “Snakes Everywhere!”, along with the following issue's rather contrite retraction, “Snakes Not Everywhere”.

people would give directions to the venue, they would say, “It's the only building on the block with horns”.

It took several months for the show at The Gershwin to get off the ground. At first Patrick would host it in a cafeteria-style dining room, furnished with round formica tables, florescent lighting, and multicolored metal-and-plastic chairs. The dining room was at the front of the building and several curtainless windows faced the street. You could hear the passing cars, and people on the sidewalk would peer in as they walked by. A lone microphone was set up in front, with Patrick standing off to the side during each routine, as though in the nonexistent wings of the nonexistent stage. I came in a little late one night and quickly realized that I was the only person there who wasn't slated to perform. The other four or five people, each sitting awkwardly at his or her own table, were all comics. They would periodically gesture in my direction and refer to me as the audience, in a way that struck me as both amused and forlorn. And also resigned, as though they were somehow good-naturedly indifferent to the fact that no one had come to their party.

At some point Patrick convinced the management – which was, inexplicably, enduringly hostile to him throughout his tenure there – to let him relocate the show to a room at the back of the hotel lobby. This was a much cozier if equally weird space, done in faux Victorian, with elaborate wallpaper, portraits of obscure and unknown figures, and velvet couches and plush chairs lining the walls. The comics performed in front of an ornate and imposing fireplace. The space was cobbled together from incongruities, and though some of them were unsettling to the focus and fluidity of live performance, there was always a pleasantly haphazard feel that converged delightfully, at least in retrospect, with the show's aesthetic. People would wander down from the rooms upstairs, and on any given night the crowd/audience might contain young

international travelers with a tenuous – scant, even - knowledge of English. Tough customers such as these were favorites for crowd work.

At some point the room started to seem full, and then eventually people were standing in the back, spilling out of it. Patrick also convinced the management to keep the hotel bar – a tiny alcove off the lobby containing an intermittently functional refrigerator that was more or less reliably stocked with bottles of Heineken – open past 9pm, so that it could receive the crowd that spilled out into the lobby after the show. As they did at the Luna Lounge and would later at Rififi, the comics mingled with the audience during and after these shows. They would lean against the audience-left wall, adjacent to the door, waiting to go on, or sometimes wander into the lobby and have to be tracked down to be told they were up next.

Before and after every show at the Gershwin, Patrick would set up and take down fifty metal folding chairs. He brought the single microphone stuffed in a messenger bag, and wheeled the mic stand and amplifier from home on a metal luggage cart. It was a lot of work to produce the show at the Gershwin, and he did it all himself – making and copying and handing out flyers, dealing with the management, booking the show, getting people who were guests at the hotel to come in from the lobby to watch. He said he thought sometimes his performance suffered from it, because he'd be very stressed out from making these preparations, in the days leading up to and especially in the half hour before the show. Later on, he thought, it became the norm to divide the labor among several people, and cited as an example *Invite Them Up*, which on a given week had five or six people participating in production, booking, hosting, setup and promotion. But his perception when he was producing the show at the Gershwin was that such divisions of labor weren't yet the norm.

Patrick said, “It's easy to get not a lot out of it [out of all that work]. Sometimes you'd book the show and get a couple of bad comics, and it would be a lame show”. In spite of his dedication to the show he was, moreover, at a loss to explain its success, given the inhospitable nature of the space.

I never really understood why people went there. The bar sucked. And it wasn't really a destination. Now there's Ace Hotel with Stumptown coffee, and a bunch of restaurants, all right in the same area, so it's kind of a hotspot for foodies, at least, but then there was nothing. I think Time Out New York helped. We were always in Time Out, and we got a star, so I think that really helped. People aren't going to go see a show every week, just another comedy show, unless it's really good.

I remember a lot of reflexive work happening in this space, that made fun of established forms of comedy. One comic I spoke to described this sort of work as “un-comedy”, and attributed its prevalence in the late 90s to a widespread exhaustion with the narrow genre of “club” comedy that had become so popular on cable television in the 1980s. Bryan Olsen used to do a bad 1980s comic. He would wear jeans and a sports jacket, and his act was structured around hacky jokes⁹ and outdated cultural references. Ron Lynch had a more conceptually challenging bit where he posed as the animatronic Abe Lincoln from Disney World's Hall of Presidents. The year was 2035¹⁰ and the venue the World's Fair, and he had been retrofitted to show the citizens of an Orwellian dystopia what comedy, now an obsolete form, had been like. The entire act played back from a tape recorder in the pocket of his jacket as he lip-synched and gestured stiffly in a spot-on impression of an animatronic robot. He strung together fragments of what the audience could recognize as hacky jokes in an unintelligible order, laughing robotically to cue the audience that their search for a punchline had ended in vain. He reprised this act by

⁹ “Hacky” jokes are jokes that appear to be lazily crafted, generally because they closely mimic some established comedic trope. Their meaning and purpose, therefore, is obvious and uninteresting.

¹⁰ As I recall. My apologies to the author if the exact date is incorrect.

special request for the 2010 Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival. There was another guy – I think a soft-spoken guy, I can't remember his name, who once led an act with, I'm so sorry I'm late, I just had a fight with my wife, and boy are my arms tired.” It was a great joke; as I recall it killed. He drew you into what seemed like it was about to be an (albeit contrived) moment of empathy, and then delivered a dark and incongruous image in the form of a punchline so often repeated that no one seems to know where it originated.

I also remember seeing early work by people who are now hot shots, such as Mike Birbiglia and Demitri Martin. Demitri used to sketch out very structural(ist) jokes involving palindromes on sheets of cellophane and display them on an overhead projector. He had just dropped out of law school. I brought a friend to a show at which Jessi Klein performed in 2001 or 2002, and he immediately, predictably, fell madly in love with her, with the raw half-frantic energy that she's since toned down a bit. Mike Birbiglia told a story about locking himself outside as he was moving his bed into a new apartment building, and being allowed in by a female neighbor, who said, “I know you're not a rapist because a rapist wouldn't have a bed like that”. Birbiglia's punchline was, “What I should have said was nothing. What I did say was, you'd be surprised.”

Diverse work, and yet certain threads emerge as collective preoccupations. There is an aggressive, destructive sort of play with the routine forms that predominated during the comedy boom, symptommatizing perhaps an uneasy proximity, but also a desire to carve out some distance from these forms. Lynch's bit also seems to allude to the role of comedy as social critique, suggesting both its importance and its frailty, as well as its illegibility via authoritarian modes of interpretation. There is a deconstructive impetus in Martin's palindromes, and many of the bits

move out of the realm of pure entertainment in order to play with or comment on some form of social or emotional discomfort.

Patrick himself did a bit where he pretended to be translating jokes for a monkey. He rented an actual monkey, a fairly seasoned performer, whose resume also included regular visits to children's hospitals, and a contract with Disney. All the jokes were gruesome, unfunny scenarios involving the untimely demise of research scientists. I never actually saw this bit. He was going to perform it, maybe for the third time, on a Monday night at the Luna Lounge. Friends were visiting from Boston, it got later and later, and he never showed. Finally word came in that when he'd gone to pick up the monkey it had bitten his ear, and he'd rushed to the hospital. He finally appeared at a late, post-show dinner with a giant white bandage around his head. I remember distinctly what a pristine white the gauze was; it was almost glowing. It was the Lower East Side in the late 90s; it must have been the cleanest thing in a ten block radius. The monkey act was thereafter abandoned.

The crowd at the Gershwin often contained a high concentration of comics, which perhaps accounts for some of why reflexive material was popular with the audience. In particular it was mostly comics who would hang out afterwards. I recall the conversations following shows in the bar, lobby, and on the sidewalk in front of the Gershwin revolving overwhelmingly around comedy, with occasional digressions into the subjects of music or literature. This helped to give the shows the feel of a workshop, an atmosphere that had been cultivated at *Eating It* and was later to be cultivated at the highly popular *Invite Them Up*. That the people who occupied this social space shared a passionate and relatively obscure interest also made The Gershwin an excellent forum for building what sociologists refer to as “loose ties”. It is perhaps worth mentioning that for young people in an urban environment, most of

whom are unmarried transplants living away from family members and communities of origin, and who are in the first, possibly abortive stages of embarking on a career, most of the ties to their everyday social environment may be loose. An alcohol-soaked *communitas* frequently developed in the lobby, on the sidewalk out front, and reportedly one night on the roof of The Gershwin. I recall several intimate conversations rising out of chance encounters with acquaintances I knew only through that venue. On one such occasion, I remarked to a comic that I'd recently ended a romantic relationship with someone across the room, and that it had been awkward and frustrating. "Comics shouldn't date other comics", he responded. "It never works out". When I pointed out that I was not in fact a comic, he said, "No, but you're close enough. You're part of the scene".

Though the venue initially seemed ill-suited to the purpose of live comedy performance, over time the space itself was transformed. The Gershwin indeed became a "destination", a space that hosted three live shows on successive nights at the end of each week and conferred a particular status, membership in a specific community, on its patrons. Perhaps this accounts for some of the hostility of the management – they were unable to entirely control the nature or the terms of this transformation.

The ability of comedy shows to transform a space was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of Rififi, a bar that was home at the time of its closing in 2008 to nightly comedy shows. Rififi had been called Cinema Classics. Up until the time it closed a small marquee hung above the front door, a holdover from the late 90s, when they used to show cult and foreign movies in the back room. The bar appeared on the downtown comedy map in 2003, when Bobby Tisdale and Eugene Mirman began producing a weekly show called *Invite Them Up*. The show was to continue in the tradition of *Eating It*, to provide a casual atmosphere in which

comics could experiment with new work. Unlike *Eating It*, which had a different guest host every week, Bobby and Eugene alternated hosting duties, and eventually Bobby took over entirely, with Eugene doing a set in the second half.

In spite of a consistent history of efforts to provide entertainment beyond mere inebriation, the Rififi of the early aughts had a sparse crowd on weeknights. By 2005 it was regularly packed, hosting live shows including standup and sketch comedy, variety, and burlesque almost nightly, and sometimes multiple shows (and thus an entirely new crowd to buy drinks) in one night. Many of the regular patrons were comedy fans, and by their reports they enjoyed having a social space reliably populated by friendly acquaintances as much as they enjoyed going to shows. As one fan wistfully reminisced after Rififi closed, “It was a good bar, because no matter – eventually - no matter what night you went, there were cool people to hang out with.”

The back room at Rififi was about 20x30 feet. It was separated from the bar by a small foyer, which was delineated on the bar side by a set of glass-paned french doors, and on the back room side by heavy black curtains. The audience would line up in front of the glass doors up to half an hour before the shows started, and they would have to shuffle aside for comics who were arriving early to come in and out. The stage in the far end of the room was built of plywood, about 20 inches off the ground, with a single step leading up to it. It was painted a glossy black and then the gloss was scuffed away in short order. The walls of the room were a dark blue, predominantly, though in the early days of my own attendance there was a wave painted behind the stage, a sort of Yellow Submarine-style veering stripe in a contrasting color or two. There were wooden benches, reportedly recycled pews salvaged from a church somewhere upstate, lining the wall to the right. They had red velvet cushions on them, as did some of the seating in

the bar in front. On the left there were additional benches, built into the wall in such a way that the frontmost and rearmost created L-shaped booths, with one bench in between that was cordoned off into its own booth by the high back of the row in front of it. The front booth was a coveted spot for groups especially, because it featured a table on which you could set your drinks. For the last two or three years *Invite Them Up* was always crowded, there were always almost as many people standing in the back as there were sitting.

Rififi was closed for almost a month in early 2007, and renovated to conform to the fire code. How the new floor plan was an improvement was impenetrable to the layperson. A long narrow hallway now cut the space of the already-cramped front room in half. When people began to line up for shows there was barely room to squeeze past them, and after the shows were over the crowd was reduced to a set of tiny tables for two on one side, and the barstools on the other, with two lanes of people in the center, circulating inwards and outwards. I suppose the cramped quarters made for an excuse to get close, for people in their 20s who had time and energy and inclination to be out drinking on a weeknight to cluster three around one barstool. And the fact that it took over a minute to get from one end of the room to the other made good cover for any awkward loitering, of which there was plenty.

The renovation also included tearing down the sound booth, which for several years had perched like a homemade birdhouse in the back corner of the back room. One had to climb several steps of a rickety wooden ladder to access it, and it was just barely tall enough for a man of average size (i.e. Antonio, the long-suffering sound man) to sit in. You could peer at the stage through a 10"x10" window of plexiglass, and the rest of the enclosure was plywood. The sound board, half buried in a nest of cables, looked like it had been salvaged from a dumpster. Lives

were probably saved by the booth's destruction but the regulars lamented the loss of a choice makeout spot.

Bobby was constantly perplexed by the management's disinterest in making the space more hospitable to comedy shows, which were clearly a huge draw of patronage to the bar, and in particular to making the physical space a little more high-class. He said, "When we started the show there was no stage in there. I built the stage myself. I put up the lights, everything". They hosted a benefit show at one point, and were frustrated that it was difficult to convince the bar's owner to install a TV with a live feed, which would expand the viewing capacity in the bar to include the front room. When the TV was finally installed, we used it every week to monitor a live feed from my video camera, and it indeed increased the number of patrons who remained in the bar to watch sold-out shows.

Bobby Tisdale had a skilled hand in making *Invite Them Up* a welcoming place for non-performing fans, creating a spirit of inclusion. He was reliably ridiculous, and well-loved for it. He rarely prepared his opening monologues in much detail, and the meat and potatoes of his act was a series of running jokes, each more juvenile than the last. He drew heavily upon a repertoire of catch phrases that were inside jokes with the audience, and often commented reflexively on performances, or comedy performance in general. Fans repeat these phrases with a nostalgic grin, and at reunion shows (which take place more or less annually) they are greeted with shrieks of delight. He would do prolonged mic checks, enunciating into one mic and then the other with excruciating precision, making guttural sounds and drawing out long strings of alternating vowel sounds, sometimes for over a minute. There were regular audience members who liked to show up early and sit in the front row, and he would rub the microphone on their

crotches. The bathroom was just to the left of the stage, and if someone went into it during the show Bobby would point at the door and make fart noises.

Why all this was done to the unparalleled delight of audience members is perhaps difficult to understand without appreciating Bobby's energy and persona. He has bright red hair and the loose, explosive body language of a nine year old. On the stage at Rififi he was constantly moving, always toward something, some audience member, some comic approaching the stage, some curious prop he had stowed behind the amplifier. As one audience member said, "It was just so amazing that he was willing to take up our time doing that shit. We loved it. I loved him from the first time I saw him."

The central drama of Bobby's hosting was his emotional engagement with the act, the process of performing. This perhaps served as either a litmus test or indoctrination for audience members, who came to appreciate being included in this process. The sense of inclusion in a small, intimate space enhanced the excitement fans felt when a comic of some reputation appeared on the bill, often unannounced. As one fan relates:

Invite Them Up was so much fun because I saw Zak Galifianakis at *Invite Them Up*, I saw Demetri Martin for the first time at *Invite them Up*, I saw *all* these comedians that later my friends were like, have you heard of this guy? And I'm like, I saw him *raw* on stage, I saw him like, *fail jokes*. I saw him tell jokes that he never told again because he thought they didn't work, but in this crowd of 20 we loved it. But I never heard the joke again...I was able to hear it because I happened to be there that night. That was an incredible thing.

As previously mentioned, the audience at Rififi and other downtown rooms came to have a reputation for patience with material that wasn't yet completely developed, or with sets that weren't constructed around a conventional joke structure with frequent punchline payoffs. Performing for these enthusiastic and contemplative "comedy nerds", comics felt at liberty to

digress into bits or stories that might have some emotional or intellectual effect other than or in addition to humor. As one comic relates,

Downtown audiences will cut you more slack if you're sloppy. They're patient, they'll listen, they're not as drunk, they have a longer attention span, in the clubs it's more, 'I paid money to see comedy now make me laugh'. Maybe downtown there was a sort of agreement that we're working stuff out here, we're experimenting, we're developing stuff. You perform in front of a hundred nerds who went to Hampshire¹¹ they're more likely to want to listen to you and hear the smart things you say.

As the word "sloppy" indicates, it wasn't always considered a good thing that downtown audiences tended to provide more latitude for rougher work. Some comics were wary of the aesthetic that was developing in downtown rooms, arguing that performing in front of exceptionally patient audiences wasn't a rigorous enough practice to allow one's craft to fully develop (see below).

Invite Them Up also relied on the contributions of many people in order to keep the show operating and publicized. Bobby, Eugene, and Holly Schlesinger, who took on a producer/booker role in later years, were there almost every single week, and spent the days between booking comics and planning special events. Holly took time out during the day from her full-time job in development at a national cable network to make a lot of this happen. I contributed by bringing a video camera and sound equipment, and I estimate that, billing at the rate I would have charged an established media company, the total number of hours I spent shooting and making tapes for comics of their sets, at *Invite them Up* and other shows, amounted to \$60,000 worth of labor. Anya Garrett took photographs of the show on a regular basis, and updated the website every week to reflect the lineup for the next show. Sean Connelly and

¹¹ The interviewee mentions my alma mater in particular, I think, due to his professional training as a comic, which prefers the specific example over the general, and selects such examples with an eye to building common ground with the audience.

Marianne Ways would stand in the foyer and sell tickets when they opened the doors to the show, making change and stamping hands. At least one of them was there every week, and they did it for free admission and drink tickets. Free admission and drink tickets were really fun. Karin Stanley used to work the bar every Wednesday night, and she never charged me for drinks. She used to duck outside for a cigarette sometimes and let Greg Johnson, a comic who lived a few doors down from Rififi, man the bar in her absence. The regular performers and patrons and supporting participants in the show had a very strong sense of ownership of the space. In that small venue we had all the perks of being rock stars.

There were many moments, on and off stage, that spoke to the sense of community at Rififi. One evening a comic named Craig Baldo showed up unexpectedly asking if he could have a few minutes of stage time, to solicit help with a sudden and urgent problem. He was headed to Vancouver the next morning to perform at a comedy festival, and had just realized that the festival organizers had made his flight reservation under his stage name, rather than the given name that appeared on his passport. He explained the problem to the audience, and several people raised their hands and offered suggestions on how to get through customs. He said after the show that it was something really special they had, there, the kind of community that would earnestly and unquestioningly put thought into solving this minor crisis.

On another evening I spoke to a comic who had recently participated in a stunt on MTV, hosted by the members of a sketch group called Human Giant, which had a show by the same name running in a weekly half hour slot. The network had decided to replace 24 hours of regular programming with “24 Hours of Human Giant”, and they invited many of the comics with whom they had worked for several years in local venues to join them for the improvised event. He told me:

It was really an amazing experience. All of us just sitting around in the studio, and coming up with these weird ideas, and then being like, all right, let's do it...I just looked around me at all these people I've been friends with for so many years, and I just felt...(he grinned a little at the force of his own emotion)...*so lucky*.

Rififi was subject to repeated noise complaints from neighbors. It was on 11th St, several doors down from First Avenue. The shows themselves weren't particularly loud, but the crowd that would hang out just outside the building before, during, and after shows made a measurable impact on an otherwise fairly quiet, largely residential block. There was also a popular dance party called *Trash* on Friday nights that frequently got rowdy. The noise complaints eventually led to a series of public hearings. One of the issues at stake was whether the bar made a significant cultural contribution to the neighborhood, such that forcing it to close because of noise violations would be of net detriment rather than benefit to the community. Several comics testified at these hearings, but their ability to provide evidence was curtailed by the fact that Rififi never had a cabaret license, and so in fact was not legally permitted to host live entertainment.

When the noise complaints started to escalate, resulting in exponentially greater fines for the bar, there was a strong sense of foreboding that the venue's days were numbered. Fears were acute for at least a year before Rififi closed. Bobby stood out in front one night after a show, surveying the other changes in the neighborhood, saying:

They're going to close this place down. They're going to close the place down and open a Quiznos. And we're going to have to change the name of the show to Quomedy. Come see Quomedy at Quiznos.

When Rififi did finally close it was very sudden. One last show was pulled together on a day's notice. Leo Allen came out to host, and brought everyone in the audience up on stage.

Video clips of this part of the evening were posted on Brooklyn Vegan, a local comedy blog, the following morning. Eugene called me around 5 pm to let me know what was happening and ask me to bring my camera, but I was slated to start an edit session at 7pm for a producer who had been very supportive of my burgeoning editing career, and I thought it would be in very poor form to cancel when he didn't have time to find a replacement. I was agonized by the decision, but by that point it was also simply the extension of an already-existing agony, as I, along with many others, had long felt a visceral sense that Rififi was a sinking ship. *Invite them Up* had ended in February of 2008, several months before, and with it my routine of hauling the camera into the city every Wednesday night at 7, shooting the show and hanging out with comics until midnight or one or four in the morning. It was fun but it was also taxing.

This chapter has focused thus far on shows and venues that primarily showcase(d) standup comedy, but improvisational sketch comedy has also had a measurable influence on New York's downtown comedy scene. Improv, as it is known by practitioners, has its roots in Chicago, but since the early days of its development in the 1950s it has disseminated to a number of other cities, and has quite a strong tradition in Toronto. Many colleges and universities also feature improv groups, either as independent student ventures or more formally connected to theater programs.

Improv is a more distinctly theatrical tradition than standup, founded on a more coherent, codified philosophy of performance, which has been documented in several books by and about seminal practitioners¹². There is a body of accepted techniques and practices for both performance and training of the improv performer, which new performers learn through classes and membership in theater communities. Improv as it is practiced in New York and Chicago

¹² See for example *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, by Del Close and Charna Halpern.

thus initiates new practitioners through a more institutionalized setting than standup. This invites comparisons to a cult, which are reinforced by the shorthand language and looks of blank indifference with which many young initiates greet unaware outsiders such as myself when they arrive at the theater and ask uninformed questions.

As is the case in stand-up, a central tenet of the philosophy of improv revolves around the idea of truthful or authentic expression. Improv seeks to arrive at these truths over the course of performance by cultivating a practice of uninhibited spontaneity. Improv techniques begin from the idea of the game, with the understanding that “play” is a way of eliciting spontaneous reactions from participants¹³. Improv performers are engaged in live games in front of the audience - games that have unpredictable outcomes. There is thus something akin to a sporting event in what improv offers to audience members¹⁴. Matt Walsh hypothesizes that audience members feel some excitement associated with the possibility that a performer might fail, and are consequently thrilled when performers succeed in creating something particularly resonant or funny. As was the case with shows like *Eating It* and *Invite Them Up*, improv thus encourages and values performances that enter into a realm of unpredictability and risk. To wit, students taking improv classes at the Upright Citizens’ Brigade are counseled, as a central tenet of the work, to “follow the fear”.

The currently strong presence of improv in NYC can be credited to several independent theaters that offer nightly shows and classes. The longest-running and largest of these is the Upright Citizens' Brigade Theatre (UCB). It was founded in 1999 by Matt Besser, Amy Pohler,

¹³ Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater* is considered the originary text of improv, and the theater games described therein were elaborated by her son, Paul Sills, the founding director of Chicago’s Compass Players.

¹⁴ One fan told me he has to be at home to watch Saturday Night Live when it airs, in the same way most of his friends feel they have to be in front of a television or at the arena for their home team’s baseball or hockey games, watching them unfold in real time. Recording it on the DVR and watching it later would defeat the purpose of being (at least temporally) present, to witness the uncertain outcome.

Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh, who studied improv together under the tutelage of Del Close. Their sketch group, also called The Upright Citizens' Brigade, had an eponymous TV show on Comedy Central that ran for two seasons. Proceeds from this TV show provided the startup money that allowed them to establish the NYC theater.

The first eight or ten years of the theater's existence were fraught with some financial instability, and a change in location in 2003 from its initial residence in a former nude dance club to its current location on W. 26th St.. But now business is booming, with audiences no longer overwhelmingly composed of devoted practitioners and enthusiasts, but people with a range of other tastes in entertainment who have become aware of the theater's growing reputation. Entering classes at UCB has become extraordinarily competitive, with sections filling up months in advance, very soon after their availability is posted online, and in 2011 they opened a second theater, with a greater emphasis on stand-up, in Manhattan's East Village.

There are two other improv theaters in lower Manhattan, the Magnet and The People's Improv Theater (PIT), both of which offer classes and inexpensive shows. Classes at The PIT and Magnet are easier to get into than those at UCB, so avenues remain for novices to begin practicing and perform publicly (as most classes culminate in public performances). Many of the UCB's founders have relocated to L.A., where they have opened a second theater by the same name. Because, as one of its founders said, "we needed a place to hang out".

The atmosphere at these theaters is casual and interactive. Improv performances are often structured around audience suggestions, which in addition to kicking off the performance for performers and allowing the audience creative input, also provides the audience with evidence of the show's spontaneity. The Magnet accommodates a very small audience – probably no more than 50 seats – and the lobby is a living room full of couches, used by

performers as a warm-up and backstage space as well as a place for audience members to wait for shows to begin. The UCB is set up as theater-in-the-round, with seats rising up from the stage on three sides. Audience members sometimes form a row on the floor in front of the first row of seats for very crowded shows, on a porous border between stage and audience. The high concentration of improv practitioners in the audience also lends a feeling to the theater that it is a social club of sorts in addition to being a performance space.

There are also special events that cast the UCB as more of a community space than a high profile, Broadway theater. The annual Del Close Marathon, for example, is a 48-hour festival that takes place primarily at the UCB, with additional shows at multiple theaters. The shows included in the festival all take the structure of the 30 minute “Harold”, a long form improv technique to which Close was an instrumental contributor, and run back-to-back continuously through the weekend. Attendees buy a \$20 wristband that serves as a pass to the festival, and, though the lines are often long to enter the theater, once an audience member has entered he or she is free to stay for as many of the ½ hour performances as he or she wishes, with new patrons admitted as exhausted ones free up capacity. One has to show some care for the wristband if one wants to sleep or shower over the course of the weekend, but many audience members choose not to. While waiting in line a couple of years ago I spoke to young enthusiasts who had come from as far away as Florida to spend the weekend camped out in the theater, enjoying what they considered to be some of the best acts from around the country. Most of the audience members I spoke to at the festival practiced improv themselves, and counted the UCBs founders among their personal heroes. Throughout the weekend performers periodically checked in with audience members who had camped out for the duration, conducting brief interviews to see how

they were holding up, and whether their sleep deprivation had resulted in any interesting hallucinations.

Though the New York theater hosts occasional parties, and there's an extensive backstage area where performers can congregate before and during performances, shows are booked back to back, and there is no place for audience members to hang out afterwards. Some migrate to nearby bars after the show, but fans of the UCB who were also frequent patrons of Riffifi often mention that they miss having a social space that had a fluid attachment to the performance space itself. Audience members at the UCB are in fact ushered quickly not only out the door but down the street after shows, so as not to incur the potentially deadly noise complaints from neighbors.

What perhaps speaks to the need and desire for such a space is the enthusiasm many audience members express for the time they spend waiting in line for shows. As the theater's reputation has become more broadly known, it is not unusual for audience members to begin lining up an hour before a show starts. Particularly for ASSSCAT, a free Sunday night show that often features high profile performers, fans will line up two hours beforehand, even in the dead of winter, sometimes bringing blankets or sitting on the ground with acoustic guitars. This is an informal venue for subcultural practice. Once I was scheduled to meet an interview subject outside of the theater, and waited by the door for him to come out of a late-running show. During the 10 minutes I leaned against a streetlamp a guy with an acoustic guitar asked me what my favorite food from Taco Bell was, and proceeded to compose a song about it¹⁵. A friend from the Riffifi days then popped out of the theater and we caught up on the status of projects we'd been involved in in the past month. A certain atmosphere or type of social space thus emerges even in these seemingly inhospitable zones on the periphery of the theater.

¹⁵ The anthropological community will be relieved to know I have not eaten at Taco Bell since high school. But possibly appalled to hear me confess that my answer was, "Seven Layer Burrito".

Significantly, the downtown comedy scene has emerged contemporaneously and in many ways parallel to increasing fragmentation and segmentation of mass media markets. Content produced for television and the web aims for a much smaller market share than it did 20 years ago, and is thus geared to win the loyalty of a much smaller and more specific viewer demographic. The current salience of downtown comedy in NYC is certainly supported in a significant way by the recent emergence of new media platforms, much in the way that cable television undergirded the expansion of standup during the 1980's. Comics are able to make small amounts of money producing short videos for the web, for example, and thereby fashion a living, or at least part of one, in a piecemeal fashion.

New media has also created many more opportunities for promotion of live shows, and for this promotion to be a task that is shared by many people, including fans who have symbiotic interests in becoming professional photographers, videographers, or cultural critics. Many of these fans maintain independent blogs or websites on which photos of comics, reviews of their shows, and/or announcements of upcoming shows regularly appear.

Most comics who perform or have performed regularly in the venues discussed above are highly dismissive of the terms "downtown" and especially "alternative" comedy, arguing, rightly in my estimation, that their work is too diverse to be characterized as belonging to a particular aesthetic. They in fact often view them as reductive, potentially dangerous labels that suggest their work appeals to a limited demographic, and thus threaten to pigeonhole or ghettoize their work. But perhaps what is being named is not a new aesthetic but a new sense of economic viability for this aesthetic, a viability signaled by the very emergence of reductive, advertising-ready terms.

Moreover, in the process of articulating their frustrations with what they see as reductive labeling, many comics do nonetheless distinguish their tastes and performance strategies from what they term “club” comedy.

Most of us who get described as alternative comics don't like the term. Vaudeville, Bob Newhart, the Marx Brothers...in the 1980s that would have been weird, but alternative comedy is an alternative to what was a short blip in comedy – 70s and 80s observational comedy. All the classic comedians, Steve Martin, Woody Allen...were all doing stuff that wouldn't have worked in the clubs in front of a brick wall with sleeves rolled up.

There is nonetheless an enduring hierarchy differentiating clubs and “alternative” rooms in the minds of many comics, producers, and talent managers. Clubs are generally viewed as more mainstream, perhaps appealing to a broader audience, or, as is sometimes discussed among members of the social network in question here, an audience that is more differentiated from the comic's own cultural milieu. Some comics who move back and forth between downtown rooms and clubs, and who have been successful in both, feel that comics who only perform in downtown rooms insulate themselves from the challenges of communicating with a less friendly, welcoming, or predisposed audience.

The merits of developing work in front of a potentially hostile audience are a matter of some debate within the comedy community. While all agree that it takes a long time performing in front of an audience to hone one's craft, the cultural gatekeepers that work at clubs, television networks and film studios are regarded as a mixed bag of genuine talents and avaricious bureaucrats. They are frequently accused of pandering to an imagined audience, most often one that is unsophisticated and unlikely to actually exist. One comic, for example, who wrote for a late-night sketch show, complained that its producers were constantly frustrating efforts to develop interesting work, because they wanted to air what they thought the audience would think

was funny, rather than what was actually funny. Several comics have worked for years to land staff writing positions on network television shows, and then quit those positions after a few years because they found them creatively unrewarding. Other comics who rarely if ever performed outside of downtown comedy venues during the early stages of their careers have now become highly successful. In fact there is a good case to be made that they have succeeded in shifting the criteria for what constitutes “good” comedy, on a scale that extends far beyond the borders of downtown Manhattan¹⁶. Indeed, fans have observed that “downtown” audiences have occasionally given lukewarm reception to well-established, seasoned club comics, suggesting that they are not simply more patient or more receptive, but have developed their own set of criteria for what is funny and what is not funny.

Comics seek an audience that will enable them to hone their craft, but not cause them to stray from an authentic voice. How does one find the properly or appropriately “resistant” audience for one's work? Who is and who is entitled to be the arbiter of what is fair, useful, or productive criticism or appreciation from an audience? What are the forces that might create nurturing-yet-challenging audiences, and what forces might pervert or undermine their capacity to function as thoughtful and intelligent critics? As we will see this is the subject of much contention, both overt and subtextual.

¹⁶ Diane Crane notes that many artists whose work may at first seem too original to be economically viable eventually achieve professional success by having an impact on the criteria by which they are evaluated.

Chapter 3 - Framing, Irony, and Provocation

When I tell people that my research involves spending numerous long evenings watching standup comedy, many of them light up with delight, and even envy. There is, however, a second, slightly smaller faction that recoils in ardent horror. The latter reaction comes from a significant percentage of the population that finds watching standup unbearably awkward.

I just feel so *embarrassed* for the person if they aren't funny.

I would never have the guts to do that. They seem so...*naked*.

Can you tell me what comedy shows are good? Because I want to go, but I'm scared to. I went to Comix one time with a friend and the guy was sooo horrible, like, not funny at all. So people started leaving, but then he started yelling at them for leaving! Like, people are heading for the door and he's calling them out, pointing at them! So we were terrified. All we wanted was to get out of there, but we just stayed there cowering in our seats.

If you go to a bad rock show, or a play, or whatever, it's still your job to just sit there quietly. But if you go to a comedy show and you don't laugh, it's like...it's like some guy is doing Hamlet, and he's up there with the skull, and you yell out, "Fuck you!"

The quotes above suggest that some audience members feel they are entering into a potential double bind when they walk through the doors of a comedy club. The socially appropriate response, when someone is clearly trying to be funny, is to laugh, but what ought

they to do if the comic fails to genuinely elicit this laughter? They will be caught between the exigencies of social grace and authentic emotional response, with no way to reconcile the two.

I would like to suggest that the anxiety these audience members express stems in particular from standup's striking formal similarity to everyday conversation. More than one of the non-fans who cringed at the idea of performing standup is a musician who performs in front of audiences on a regular basis. These musicians uniformly differentiated their performances from standup by referring to the protective layer afforded by the amplification and the structure of the performance. The structure of the standup performance, by contrast, engages the audience to a degree that non-fans find uncomfortable. As in everyday conversation, their sympathies and sense of etiquette are mobilized, even if the comic is decidedly not delivering on an implicit promise to entertain. They feel very much put upon to laugh, and express concern that if they don't the feelings of the comic will be devastated.

This anxiety is amplified by the sense that the comic may be more than willing to violate norms of polite distance by directly addressing an audience member (a common technique in standup referred to as "crowd work"), or otherwise failing to respect the conventional performer/audience boundary that seals the audience member in the role of passive spectator¹. Even die-hard fans are wary of being engaged on this level, and for this reason the front row at a comedy show is often the last to fill up.

When one talks to comics, however, they don't seem terribly afraid of "bombing". They aren't necessarily enamored of the idea, but they don't seem as afraid as comedy un-enthusiasts are afraid for them. Lenny Bruce describes a thrill or rush associated with bombing, the idea that

¹ One friend who kindly inquired about my dissertation mentioned that he enjoys comedy, but does not always enjoy comics. He told me he once struck up a conversation with someone while waiting in line to enter a club, and mentioned that he was from London. When he sat down to watch the show he realized the stranger he had been talking to was actually one of the performers, who proceeded to look out into the crowd and say, "Anyone here from England?" My friend refused to engage, feeling the comic had tried to reel him into the act under false pretenses.

failure, almost more than success, is what really hooks one on performing. I've seen comics come off the stage after an entire set misfired wearing a wry smile. As previously discussed, serious fans of downtown comedy also seem to have a much higher tolerance than non-fans or occasional audience members to joke failure. One fan of Tim and Eric, a comedy duo that has produced several short videos that generate and play upon emotional discomfort, specifically mentioned the appeal of this “cringe factor”². These are filmed, mass mediated images that insulate the spectator from the social interaction depicted, but downtown comedy belongs to a lineage of live performance that includes Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufman, and fans seem to accept having the cringe factor even enter into their interpersonal interactions with comics, in the social context surrounding performances. What accounts for downtown comics and fans’ increased receptivity to these moments of failure or awkwardness?

This chapter will take a closer look at downtown comedy as an epistemological and performance strategy by looking in more detail at the formal mechanisms of humor, with particular attention to the role of framing, as theorized by Gregory Bateson and subsequently explored in the context of human social interaction by Erving Goffman. Framing refers to a reflexive, second-order level of knowledge, or meta-knowledge, via which people (and other animals) organize and interpret the fundamental elements of their experience. Frames are what give this experience meaning. Bateson and Goffman both underscore the point that frames often operate in a habitual manner, as undercurrents in social interaction that largely escape our direct attention.

The idea of framing has been very influential in humor studies, and is central to Victor Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor, a formal linguistic analysis of joke structure that is

² *The Office* (particularly the British version) and *Borat* are two more popular examples of this cringe-producing style of comedy.

definitive in the field. Raskin's theory is based in script-based semantics, which demonstrates that the frame or context for an utterance is extrapolated from the utterance itself, as the listener draws upon a combination of linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge in order to make inferences and conjectures about the speaker's meaning. Rooting his humor theory in script-based semantic theory allows Raskin to account for the way humor evokes social realities that are shared by the speaker and listener, as well as how meanings of discrete linguistic elements change over time as they circulate in social spaces (Raskin 1985).

Consonant with Raskin's analysis, Goffman argues that scripts or frames are locally grounded and contestable. He elaborates his argument by drawing numerous historical and hypothetical examples from everyday life, highlighting the ways that framing devices serve not only to influence cognitive interpretations, but role definitions, and affective relationships to shared social contexts. Notably, a given frame works in myriad ways to the advantage and disadvantage of particular social actors, rendering certain perspectives, utterances, and behaviors more legible and authoritative than others. Moreover, social actors approach everyday interactions with different knowledge, predispositions, roles and agendas, and thus have differentiated ways of framing the same information or shared experience. Social actors can even intentionally manipulate these frames, choosing to withhold information or to deceive other interactants, allowing incommensurate frames to operate in tandem and thereby producing myriad partially managed effects (Goffman 1986).

The task of the comic is to advance a certain perspective and successfully control a conversation-style social interaction with an audience, ideally building a relationship in which he or she is trusted and admired. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, many of the techniques of stand-up and improv are simply finely-honed elaborations of the everyday conversational techniques

Goffman uses frame analysis to identify. I will illustrate some of these techniques using ethnographic examples.

Most central to the discussion will be the generation and exploration of what Goffman terms “negative experience”, which I will argue is a particular focus of downtown comedy (ibid). Negative experience denaturalizes the often-habitual relationships social actors have to their interpretive frames, by rendering social participation or evaluation of events based on those frames somehow problematic. Negative experience raises a challenge for the project of establishing trust, as it often violates norms of politeness, and/or disrupts other ritualized forms of engagement, which are often used as tools to build a sense of trust and rapport between social interactants. As we will see in this chapter and throughout the dissertation, trust then has to be established through other means.

By exploring examples from both comedy performance and everyday life, I hope to demonstrate that downtown comics seem interested – in fact, one might say bent upon – drawing our direct attention to these frames, or otherwise disrupting the habitual, naturalized modes of interaction that unreflexive adherence to these frames makes possible. This interest is evidenced both in the context of performances and in social context surrounding them, as comics perform material that is confrontational, conceptually challenging or difficult to interpret, comment reflexively on this material, and engage at times in provocative, or even abrasive social interactions.

I will also discuss the relationship of these techniques of reframing and provocation to the ironic mode. Viewed through this theoretical lens, irony is a second-order mode of communication, or “keying”, that plays with frames, often bringing them into destructive or productive conflict. For this reason it at times confounds interpretation. As previously discussed,

it is also an important contemporary trope, and has been described and often maligned as a pervasive cultural style of contemporary young people, blase urban intellectuals, and subculturally savvy “hipsters”, all terms which might aptly describe our comics and their audiences.

I will argue that the ironic mode in which downtown comics often engage their audiences and interlocutors can be likened to Socratic irony as described by Kierkegaard. While this conception of irony suggests a relentlessly violent hermeneutic trajectory, destructive in particular of established mores, as a mode of discourse it is nonetheless characterized by provocation and engagement. As such it contrasts with what Mark Crispin Miller terms “prophylactic irony”, a largely defensive positioning that affords the subject an emotional and ethical distance from the object of his or her ironic regard³ (Miller 1988). In the context of the live performances explored in this dissertation, this self-protective or “prophylactic” mode of irony, while often present to some degree as a cultural trope, gives way to an ironic mode that incorporates emotional engagement and intersubjective recognition. While the violent element contained in this irony raises ontological problems for social actors, calling into question their relationship to experience, it does not suggest that these problems can’t be solved, or that they are best solved by disengaging from the problematic aspects of social life.

In each case, these provocations and deviations, from conventional comedic forms or social mores, serve to reveal and/or to disrupt the ways in which framing works to shape social life. Perhaps because actively forming their own relationship to the audience is such a large part of their craft, comics seem very interested in the ways these cognitive frames, via which social

³ The ironic subjectivity that is often disparagingly attributed to contemporary urban “hipsters”, and is said to be generated by saturation and exhaustion with aggressive, overstimulating mass-mediated images, is of this prophylactic variety (Miller 1988, see also Postman 1985). Further discussion of this concept and its differentiation from Socratic irony appears in Chapter 4.

actors interpret social situations and decide how to act in them, have implications (as Goffman painstakingly documents) for the ontological status and social power of these actors. In this and subsequent chapters I will explore ways in which frame-manipulating techniques, such as drawing direct attention to frames or bringing opposing frames into direct conflict in the sphere of action, present challenges to their efficacy and call forth reflection on their deployment. The techniques employed by downtown comics serve not only to refer to existing frames in order to produce humorous effects, but destabilize both the frames and the relationships of social actors to those frames. Even when it is not necessarily their intention to do so, when comics generate negative experience they thus engage in a Socratic mode of ironic questioning, effected on the level of performance.

Drawing on Bateson's application of his own conceptual apparatus to his research efforts in psychology and animal behavior, with specific attention to his discussions of schizophrenia and learning, I will suggest that these techniques serve not only to call into question specific ways of framing information, but to change audience expectations as to whether a stable frame is expected or desirable. As discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter, Downtown comics suggest that "uptown" or club comedy rarely poses much of a challenge to the audience member's expectations. Club audiences are described as having little patience for performances that are not immediately funny. I would like to suggest that downtown comedy has a proclivity for destabilizing and questioning ways of framing information that exceeds both the reputed techniques of club comedy and Raskin's account of the formal mechanisms of humor. Broadly stated, more conventional or "safe" comedy tends to shift symbolic material into unexpected, but nonetheless previously existing frames. Downtown comedy has a greater tendency to destabilize

or problematize the frames themselves⁴. This discussion should illuminate in much more detail the specific formal mechanisms by which comics engage audiences in the more experimental, more failure-prone performances that, as discussed in the previous chapter, set downtown comedy apart from “club” comedy.

This analysis has a couple of important applications. First, there are debates as to whether humor is inherently a progressive or conservative force – which is to say, is it a weapon of the weak, via which actors who are not favored by dominant social structures and cultural paradigms can articulate subaltern positions, thus posing a challenge to those dominant frameworks, or is it better suited as a tool to shut down deviations from established practice, as in the humor of the schoolyard bully? These debates often seem to hinge on the interpretive strategies applied to the joke⁵. I argue in this chapter that this question can best be investigated by examining the mechanisms by which humor positions the speaker and listener in relation to established frames. This should expand the methodological apparatus by which we understand how social power is operating via humor, in both subsequent chapters and in general. It is worth noting in relation to this point that while these humorous techniques may have significant micropolitical effects, the comic may produce these effects for no other reason than to generate laughter, for which purpose he or she may seek to induce in the audience the heady vertigo of a rapidly shifting positionality. This should shift the conversation away from the question of intention when evaluating the political effects of humorous speech, as I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

Second, it merits particular attention that the frame destabilization at which these comics are so expert isn’t simply a hermeneutic or critical technique, isolated to the realm of the stage,

⁴ Either of those moves ought to make a thing funny.

⁵ Helga Kotthoff has conducted an interesting and nuanced investigation, albeit brief, of the complexity of such interpretive strategies as they operate in social context (Kotthoff 2003).

but extends to the performance of social identity in a broader sense. To underscore this point I will discuss similarities between joking in the context of performances and related joking, teasing, and other provocative modes of interaction in the social life surrounding performances. The frequently aggressive, arguably ill-mannered ways these comics may approach social interaction should not be read as straightforward efforts to dominate their interlocutors, I will argue, but efforts to call into question the appropriate way to respond, and thus the established way of framing the interaction. Looking at the processes by which the organizing function of frames is thereby undercut may illuminate the processes by which social cues, which Bourdieu demonstrates are used in the reproduction of social hierarchies, might be revalued, and the processes by which systems of valuation might be called into question. The confrontational interactions are a provocation, an immanent, practical critique, made on the level of performance. It is thus crucial to study humor in social context, as much of its power is lost in the process of interpretation, even when the latent meaning of a joke is perceived and translated by an acute critic.

Apropos of this focus on social context, I will at the end of the chapter link this proclivity for destabilizing frames to the sociocultural positioning of downtown comics as members of a subordinate, but commodifying, subculture. While many identify themselves and their style as “weird” or otherwise marginal to dominant cultural mores, many of them have also achieved some degree of professional success articulating their idiosyncratic perspectives. Comics are positioned somewhat paradoxically as charismatic social outsiders; they occupy a problematic position between the accepted or established and the marginal or abject. Their delight in moments of open conflict, and in the dynamism of frames, is in clear evidence as they entice

others to engage with their own somewhat frightening positionality, to which interlocutors often don't know exactly how to relate.

Finally, the way comedy brings incommensurate frames into open conflict is its defining characteristic as a hermeneutic technique. As these frames are brought into conflict via the text of a joke, listeners (and audience members) evaluate their validity. Again, these evaluations are not abstracted assessments of truth-value, but take place in social context, and signal and mobilize various affective relations to the material, the comic, and other audience members. Evaluations of authenticity are thus fraught with social power and charismatic energy. This chapter will look at some important mechanisms by which this affective energy is mobilized, setting the stage for more detailed exploration in later chapters of the complex imbrication of semantic and performative notions of the true. The hermeneutic that constitutes the "inside" of this particular community favors open texts and extended, even contentious dialogues.

Framing is indispensable in rendering experience meaningful. Drawing upon Russell's typology of orders of knowledge, Bateson describes framing, or context, as a metacommunicative, second-order reflection on a series of perceived phenomena or events, that allows an organism (a person) to make sense of those events (Bateson 1972). Frames according to Bateson are the basis for learning; they serve to classify and organize experience so that it does not appear as an endless stream of idiosyncratic and unrelated phenomena. Via framing experience can be viewed in the abstract, allowing organisms to understand two separate events as different instances of the same type of event. The features of experience that are attended to as significant criteria for classification purposes also depend on how the organism frames that experience, as frames serve to direct an organism's attention and perception.

Bateson emphasizes the automatic, second-nature quality of application of frames, even in more highly evolved, complex organisms. They serve a function of economy, allowing organisms to categorize information and then respond to it appropriately or adaptively, while devoting little thought to its less relevant details. Which is to say, people in general interpret the discrete phenomena they encounter via established frameworks on which they have a habitual reliance, and which are held and acted upon at an unconscious level. Frames thus persist over time, if unchallenged, disposing an organism to confirmation bias. Many frames employed by adult organisms are the product of instinct or very early learning.

In spite of this stubborn quality, frames can be learned and changed even in adult organisms. Significantly, frames are organized hierarchically; an organism doesn't simply frame experience, but engages in second-order reflection on the frames themselves, developing catalogs of frames that are applicable in different contexts. Drawing examples from his studies of animal behavior, Bateson suggests that learning to press a button in order to obtain food, for example, would be an instance of first-order framing, or Learning I, indicating that the animal has learned to punctuate a series of events in such a way that the button is recognized as instrumental, as a means of obtaining reward, and that this recognition persists through time. An animal in a research lab might also over time come to recognize that when a scientist walks into the room in a white lab coat, a context is arisen in which a system of tasks and rewards is likely to obtain. The animal might then begin to actively look for a task to perform. This would be an example of learning II, a mode of framing that has a second-order relationship to learning I, as it organizes the activity of butting-pushing and food-receiving into a particular category of activity that may be viewed in abstraction, and then itself may be repeated in appropriate contexts. A

complex organism has a sophisticated, multi-tiered repertoire of perspectives from which to interpret experience, and to decide on appropriate, context-specific, responsive behavior.

Goffman elaborates on Bateson's idea with an exhaustive number of examples of how frames are deployed in everyday life. He is in agreement that experience is not only ordered according to first-order frames (what Goffman terms primary frameworks, and describes as the minimum required to render experience meaningful), but is ordered and interpreted according to layers of frames, which overlap in various ways and may even conflict. It is also significant that the cues for superordinate levels of framing, while distinguished for the purpose of analysis, are often seamlessly embedded in actions, and liable to misreading or misfiring (Bateson 1972, 289). As Bateson discusses in his essay on play, which pertains quite directly to the current discussion, very similar actions may be read entirely differently depending on the context. Thus while an experience may be understandable in terms of what Goffman terms a primary framework, it may be best read in what he glosses as a transposed "key". Such second-order or keyed framing is at work in interpretations of irony, for example, or camp, wherein a performance or text contains subtle signals that it is not to be taken entirely seriously, earnestly, or literally. These multi-leveled genres of communication contain both first-order information (absent of "tone"), and second-order cues embedded in the text or performance, which signal the position the reader/interactant should take with respect to the communication (Booth 1975). These cues are often subtle and may be entirely misread. The outrage elicited by Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" provides a classic example of the possibility for ironic or otherwise "keyed" communication to misfire.

As Goffman points out, frames that organize social activity are often very clearly delimited, and a number of auxiliary devices may be employed to contain ambiguity in framing.

One goes through an entire transitional routine entering the social, physical, and temporal space of a theater performance, for example, signaling that the events on stage are to be understood as fiction (Goffman 1986). Thus if a gun is fired onstage it can be the occasion for excitement and interest rather than momentary panic. Sometimes these frames are nonetheless more ambiguous, which can generate moments of risk, even prolonged risk. If a gun goes off on a street corner and everyone applauds, one might deduce that one has stumbled upon an open-air performance piece, but most likely this conclusion will be reached after some emotional and cognitive disruption.

In higher organisms cultural knowledge also contributes greatly to one's ability to correctly decode the metessages that signal appropriate framing, containing their complexity⁶. Moreover, as Goffman argues, the fact that these habitual frameworks are culturally sanctioned often makes them very difficult to disrupt. If participants agree on ways to frame the social context, or if it does not occur to them to question whether they agree, harmony is maintained and framing mechanisms go unchallenged.

Bateson himself argues that logical types (or, modes of framing) come into direct conflict in humor. Which is to say, amusement is one possible reaction when two irreconcilable – or, at first glance irreconcilable – ways of framing reality come into contact in the mind of an individual (Bateson 1972). This idea has been enormously influential in humor studies, Victor Raskin's General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) perhaps being its most theoretically significant and widely cited outgrowth (Raskin 1985).

Victor Raskin's analysis of the semantic structure of jokes is rooted in script-based semantic theory. His analysis is quite reminiscent of Freud's theorization of processes of

⁶ Cultural knowledge may be very local.

condensation and displacement that characterize the joke structure. Freud emphasizes that the spoken text of a joke is just the tip of the iceberg, a little vehicle that mobilizes or conveys a wealth of more weighty (impactful) implicit messages (Freud 1989). Raskin argues that these implicit messages are in fact shared cultural scripts, which, though unspoken, are nonetheless known to speakers and listeners who have the linguistic competence required to appreciate a joke (Raskin 1985). They are analogous to Bateson's notion of framing or context, again giving the listener the ability to interpret the spoken material. In spoken language or performance the context of an utterance is thus always conjectured to some degree by the listener, but conditioned by cultural assumptions⁷.

Raskin develops his theory on a foundation of Gricean maxims. In bona-fide communication, as theorized by Grice, speakers and listeners seek to come to an unambiguous, mutual understanding of the shared frame or context. They employ what Grice terms combinatorial rules in order to evaluate plausible frames and and thus deduce intended meanings. The rules outline a procedure by which the listener runs each linguistic element uttered by the speaker through a series of known, possible, likely contexts, deduced from a combination of semantic and encyclopedic knowledge. An implicit frame emerges via process of elimination, as some frames prove incompatible with one or more of the linguistic elements in a given sentence. A successful bona-fide utterance clearly suggests one frame and thereby disambiguates meaning. "I forgot the key" might have multiple meanings, but the likelihood of a particular interpretation is narrowed down when a speaker continues with either, "so I had to use the one I hide under the doormat", or, "so I had to consult the sheet music". Myriad other signals available in the social

⁷ Anthropologists such as Keith Basso have reverse-engineered this process, in order to draw conclusions about cultural knowledge and values from analysis of their subjects' jokes (Basso 1979).

world also serve to constrain likely meanings - standing in front of a door or sitting at a piano, for instance.

The task of the joke, by contrast, is to present a text that mobilizes a script or frame which is obvious, and seems likely to result in an unambiguous reading of the text, but that fails to rule out one or more additional, less likely scripts that are not readily apparent. This (or these) subordinated script(s), Raskin argues, should have a relationship of opposition to the first script. Towards the end of the joke a linguistic element is introduced that renders the first, most obvious meaning untenable, and unceremoniously shoves one of these alternate meanings, scripts, or frames into the spotlight. This linguistic trigger is colloquially known as the “punchline”. This second script emerges as a revelation that displaces the first, often explosively, or perhaps, if the listener is slow on the uptake or the joke tends toward the absurd, with some intervening moment of friction or ambiguity between opposing frames⁸.

Keith Sawyer's detailed analysis of improv performances gives further insight into the ways comedians work to establish and manipulate ways of framing experience (Sawyer 2003). He demonstrates that a shared reality is constructed by performers, from the ground up, as they take turns introducing discrete features of that reality into a given scene. Practitioners of improv construct scenes according to what they term the “yes, and” principle, which states that an actor must build upon the prior utterances of their collaborators, without introducing contradictory information that would undermine their teammates' contributions. Each discrete action or utterance serves to further concretize and delimit the emergent frame. So, for example, if one performer enters a scene miming that he or she is dragging a heavy object, and another performer steps onto the stage and asks him or her, “Why do you always bring the walrus?” The first

⁸ This moment of friction or ambiguity is often telegraphed by a blank stare, or, under social pressure, feigned laughter, on the part of the listener.

performer can't respond "it's not a walrus, it's a horse", without violating the improviser's code of ethics. No matter how absurd the reality that emerges, performers are obligated to act within the confines of its particular logic or frame. Sawyer is interested in the ways in which each element - each object, utterance or event - that is introduced into the space of the stage serves to both constrain the reality within which actors operate, thus constraining their options for action, and also facilitate options for action, by establishing a meaningful reality performers can then play with. By following the "yes-and" principle of non-contradiction they follow Gricean maxims and create a reality that is consensual and legible to the audience; by taking liberties with implicit scripts and their possible trajectories, they produce humorous effects.

Raskin also points out that speakers can cue a switch to the joking mode, with such conventional introductions as, "Have you heard the one about...". Entering a venue for a standup performance also signals a shift to the joking mode. What Raskin describes as a mode is analogous to what Goffman describes as a keying - while it doesn't affect the listener's sense of the fundamental reality the text seeks to describe, it affects the way listeners will respond to it, which elements will be attended to as having greatest importance, etc. Acquiring a sense of humor - or, in Raskin's more technical terms, the ability to shift with facility and dexterity between bona-fide and joking modes - is an instance of what Bateson would term second-order learning.

The joking mode has its own set of cooperative maxims - listeners familiar with the genre are actually looking for multiple, opposing scripts. Thus an audience at a standup show may be looking for the hidden script, and an audience at an improv show may be looking for how the comic will take the emerging frame in unexpected directions. Raskin's description of humor as a cultural convention explains how ironic communication can be entered into fairly easily, and

how ironic interpretations of particular kinds of texts can even become routinized. His analysis also suggests why comics have to remain innovative in order to surprise and challenge audiences, and “comedy nerds” in particular. Familiar structures of opposition for comedic scripts will, over time, come to be easily recognized or anticipated, and received as “hacky”.

Raskin gives numerous examples of fairly routinized jokes, and is able to categorize them into basic types. His examples of ethnic humor are striking in this regard. Significantly, he argues that one need simply know the script in order to get the joke, and that these jokes are so conventionalized as to be largely disconnected from the realm of sincere or actual beliefs about the lived experience of ethnicity and race. This perspective is echoed in Mulkey’s assertion that the humorous realm is bounded and distinct from the realm of the “serious”, and that the two rarely interpenetrate (Mulkey 1988).

There is significant evidence, however, that play with frames is a high-stakes affair, indicating that it merits attention and linkage to the realm of the “serious”, even if it seems at first glance to be frivolous. The idea of framing, which, broadly put, deals with the culturally and cognitively established patterns according to which people interpret the information, events and experience they encounter, is also implicit in Bourdieu's work on symbolic communication and embodied practice. As Bourdieu's concept of habitus demonstrates, gestures and mannered interactions can also serve as a signal to indicate the relative status of social actors (Bourdieu 1977). This has been further documented in studies of the way humor uses markers of ethnicity as a shorthand means of alluding to stereotyped characteristics, in the fashion of “mock Spanish” as theorized by Jane Hill (Hill 1998). Goffman also emphasizes the importance of such habitual practices in indicating one’s social role within a given context (Goffman 1986).

In Goffman's theory, as in Bourdieu's concept of habitus, use of these markers of social status by human actors is largely citational, rather than creative. Actors model their actions according to an existing repertoire of recognizable, socially legible behaviors. These small gestures are learned in practice and escape conscious attention. Notably, their meanings don't have to be understood in order to be effective. Judith Butler in fact argues that they derive their performative efficacy precisely from the fact that they escape conscious attention.

A performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating history of force (Butler 1997b, 51).

As Bateson and Goffman point out, cues as to how to frame experience are embedded in actions, and the order of information to which discrete phenomena belong is not always easy to differentiate. Context markers may be embedded in the contingencies of the immediate environment, or they may be pieces of information that refer specifically or primarily to context, to the order of information that we classify as context. Observances of etiquette are context markers, and cue the participant in a situation as to how they should be read, resulting in a sort of feedback loop. (Bateson 1972, 290). Manners are thus examples of social cues that both invoke certain frames and express deference to those frames.

The fact that power relations are endemic to frames is evidenced, at times in a glaring way, when one violates these frames. Research in social psychology suggests, perhaps surprisingly, that people on the whole have a hard time being rude. Rather, to be more precise, they have a hard time violating what they perceive to be the social expectations established by a given frame of interaction. When an able-bodied Stanley Milgram, as part of sociological experiment, asked a fellow passenger to relinquish his seat on the subway, he found himself

feeling lightheaded and ill, and hypothesized that the breach of etiquette was so uncomfortable that his body produced the symptoms that would have made his request socially acceptable (Milgram 1977)⁹. Goffman also emphasizes the lengths to which participants in a given scene will go in order to maintain mutual, harmonious engagement in a shared reality, to the extent that this desire for harmony may supercede conflicting individual interests (Goffman 1959).

Bateson's analysis of schizophrenia – the “double bind” theory – addresses the emotional perils individuals can experience when different ways of framing experience come into conflict. Bateson hypothesizes that schizophrenia can develop when an individual is subject to prolonged exposure to mixed and contradictory signals, a scenario in which no means of framing, no way of interacting with his or her environment, produces satisfying results. The schizophrenic thus experiences and comes to anticipate a painful uncertainty in his or her relationships, because he or she has been taught that metacommunicative information is always dangerous and unreliable, or that any reading - any reading or misreading - of this information is dangerous. Judith Butler echoes this point in her work on abjection, highlighting the risk of incomprehensibility and social exile when a subject is not legible in terms of existing frames.

I think the dangers of operating within unstable or poorly functioning frames ground the anxiety that often surrounds the more complicated jokes, experimental jokes, and failing jokes, of the sort that are common elements in downtown comedy performances. Raskin's model suggests that humor results from a sudden shift from one cognitive frame to another. The listener/interpreter laughs at the moment when he or she substitutes one semantic script for another. But listeners can have all kinds of relationships to these scripts/frames, including doubt, lack of familiarity, hostility, etc. What if a joke just renders an existing frame untenable without

⁹ Notably, Bill Wasik cites Milgram as a favorite “performance artist” in his Harpers’ article on the Flash Mob (Wasik 2006).

offering new frame, offering instead a visceral (rather than logical) sense of perspective? Might comics pursue a performative solution to the removal of a cognitive frame, supplanting an emotion or a sense of social locatedness for an idea? Audience members sometimes laugh precisely because they don't understand what a comic is saying, as though they can't believe he or she has the audacity to make the confounding assertion they find themselves confronted with.

While club comics may offer new perspectives on familiar social situations, they spend little time lingering in the moment of a frame's being unstable. To cite one example, the markers of status Bourdieu calls attention to are often employed citationally in humor - accents and speech patterns, etc, are caricatured *ad infinitum*. But such citations can be performed to varying effects, depending on delivery. Sometimes, in more experimental comedy, they're performed in such grotesque caricature (as in the case of Borat, for example) that it's hard to believe they're intended to be taken uncritically.

Per Bateson, contextual signals that indicate that play-fighting is to be understood as play both serve to frame the situation and are shaped by the context, such that it is possible for signals to "misfire" and for play fighting to devolve to real, in-earnest fighting (see also Goffman). Thus, in addition to employing often-subtle markers of context and key to produce effects, as in the case of irony, downtown comedy often capitalizes on the possibility for these cues to be misread, generating and playing with complicated emotions like fear and anxiety in addition to amusement.

Bateson, in his aforementioned discussion of the double bind, highlights the psychological risks for a subject who is unable to arrive at stable and emotionally safe means of framing his or her experience. However, he also argues that frames can be problematized or brought into conflict in more productive ways. He suggests that calling second-order responses

into question, which is to say, complicating but not completely frustrating an organism's framing mechanisms, can stimulate creativity. Disruption of an expected stimulus-response chain can provoke changes on meta-level, generating the idea that an organism should perhaps choose his or her reaction from another set of options - perhaps a set that has yet to coalesce, that has not yet been framed as a set. This is a higher level of learning. This is also highly evocative of Bergson's theory of humor as a corrective to mechanicity - the figure he describes as the quintessential butt of the joke is unduly rigid in his application of prefabricated frames to the vitality and unpredictability and unclassifiability of everyday life situations, even when elements of unpredictability make it glaringly clear that current frames are inadequate or inappropriate.

The styles that prevail in downtown comedy, I argue, tend to create a liminoid environment in which the sanctions against prolonged indeterminacy in framing are reduced. Downtown comedy is thus distinguished from uptown comedy by its proclivity to destabilize the frames themselves, rather than simply offering the audience member a new perspective on first-order knowledge and experience, by putting it in the light of an alternate, but already-existing existing frame. This is what is meant by the colloquial description of downtown comedy as primarily consisting of "weird stuff". As one comic observed, downtown comedy fans are tolerant of prolonged bits that don't come to an immediate funny resolution, and much more tolerant of awkwardness, whereas "in the clubs it's more, 'make me laugh'". To put this in Raskin's more technical terms, club audiences expect for the emergence of the second, subaltern semantic script to be clear and unmistakable. Downtown audiences are tolerant of more prolonged confusion, or, negative experience.

Significantly, negative experience may result from the fact that jokes are somehow risky, experimental, or still in a workshopping state, in which case audience members are actively

collaborating in the production of new modes of framing. Other jokes or bits may be carefully constructed with the intention of generating negative experience. In this case the audience must still work to arrive at a viable level of understanding or acceptance, but he or she labors under the active guidance of the comic¹⁰.

The repertoire of techniques that are used to effect this destabilization and to generate negative experience, in both the context of performances and in social interactions, tend to situate their effects within the ironic mode. Kierkegaard regards Socrates as the seminal ironist, and the techniques of frame-destabilization employed by comics bear striking resemblance to the Socratic method of provocative questioning. Specifically, comics often alienate¹¹ audience members from first-order readings of the presented material by a) amplifying the central principle or organizing framework beyond the point of normalcy or plausibility, b) introducing a contrary or negating element, or c) employing some combination of these two techniques¹². In each case, the overall effect is to render the presentation of the implicit frame somehow hysterical. The viewer can't then inhabit this frame without becoming likewise hysterical.

Slovin and Allen, a comedy duo, often draw upon classic structures for their routines, resulting in a sort of "madcap" film-comedy structure, rendered contemporary by its incorporation of (and devolution into) elements of the absurd. Many of their bits begin with a simple premise, which is then elaborated far beyond its logical conclusion. In one bit, they are bored attendees of a professional conference. They sit in folding chairs, silent, as a recorded

¹⁰ People who do not enjoy this sort of comedy might choose to exchange the word guidance for manipulation.

¹¹ The reference here to Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt* is intentional, if not fully explicated at this juncture. As Kierkegaard points out, irony is characterized by a distancing of the subject from the concrete objects and terms of the social world. As will be illustrated in the following pages, comics often effect this distancing by generating some form of negative experience, then provide some basis for the interlocutor to reengage. Related to these dynamics of distancing and engagement, Hutcheon also raises the idea that there is some lingering engagement with the original meanings and emotional valences of the object of ironic regard, even as one is removed to a negating perspective on it.

¹² Kierkegaard suggests both of these techniques, outright negation, or a hysterical, unsupportable amplification of the "straight" perspective as means of achieving an ironic perspective.

voice drones on, welcoming participants and promising an unendurably long day. They begin to find ways to amuse themselves. Eric pulls a flask out of his pocket, takes a swig and offers it to Leo. Leo then pulls out a syringe and an elastic band and rolls up his sleeve. As he slips into a heroin-induced semi-consciousness, Eric sticks his hand down the front of his pants. Noticing that Leo is in a compromised state, he then grabs Leo's hand and sticks it down his pants. The bit ends with Leo, suddenly alert to what is happening, yanking his hand away. His hand emerges holding a bouquet of fake flowers.

There's almost the faintest waft of pathos in the bit, in that by the end the joke has nowhere to go. It evaporates in the end into unmistakable clowning, into infinite absolute humor. It draws attention, in fact, to what is at times a subtle difference between comedy and tragedy. In tragedy a certain premise is inescapable, its effects escalating to the eventual misfortune of those confined within it. In comedy, the effects of such a premise may escalate until the premise itself explodes. The structure of *Time Machine*, another bit of theirs, is like this too, repeating a one-minute interval in an increasingly absurd and deconstructed manner, and ending with a pie in the face. The joke doesn't bring conflicting scripts into play, but reiterates one inescapable script, the center of which turns out to be creme-filled and cannot hold¹³.

As discussed in chapter 2, comics often play with the expectation of the performance frame, making direct attacks on comedic conventions, and even toying with the audience's expectation that they will be made to laugh. Andy Kaufman is a pioneering and brilliant example of comedy that does not fulfil expectations, and puts the audience in the uncomfortable role of not knowing how to react. Chris Jurek does an awkward, incompetent comic, so excruciatingly unfunny that his wife, though knowing full well the awkwardness is intentional,

¹³ There is a *30 Rock* episode that has a very similar structure, entitled "Double Edged Sword". I highly recommend it; it is a masterfully constructed and pithy demonstration of the parallels between the escalating structures of farce and tragedy.

finds it unbearable to watch. Audience members watching the act, though they presumably have less of a personal stake in the integrity and presentability of Jurek's "face" (as Goffman would term it), and though many of them are by now acculturated to the possibility of failure in this workshopping environment, laugh with palpable relief at his halfway passable fourth joke.

Rendering the frame problematic calls attention to it, generating an attentiveness to and critical perspective on this second-order knowledge. Fans of improv clearly delight in watching comics play with frames, and deploy them in creative ways. Audiences want to see comics expand their idea of what the frame might contain. In the process of collaborative emergence Sawyer describes, performers have a lot of latitude, within the confines of the clearly established features of the shared "reality" (the world in which the scene takes place) to effect shifts in emphasis or focus, and/or to introduce plausible but unlikely elements. Thus the way the "yes, and" principle plays out on stage at the Upright Citizens' Brigade is very complicated. Much of the humor in improv is in fact derived from highly creative, surprising yet plausible innovations on the part of the performers, that push the boundaries of audience (and fellow performer) expectations as to what might happen in the framework that the scene has established. Complicating the frame, without breaking it, or operating in some playful tension with it, is interesting to watch. The idea is to build a box that is legible to the audience, and then in certain ways think out of it. The process of evolution of frames is a significant part of what engages the audience.

Improv creates a dramatic or narrative situation, and explores human interactions in the mode of a narrative art form, but what draws audiences to improv is not the same as what draws them to a scripted performance. The Gricean elaboration of a plausible reality is only half the story. Audiences delight in reflexive moments that undercut their suspension of disbelief.

Performers will break the narrative frame in order to briefly express that they are impressed with the tactical choice of another performer. Audience members seem to delight in the insight such moments provide into the performer's thought process, i.e. into his or her own appreciation of the technique and the unpredictable outcomes of the form.

In the case of Jurek's awkward comic, and more famously the example of Andy Kaufman, we see the frame that is rendered problematic - i.e., that of the comedy performance - is the frame in which the audience is currently engaged. Performance thereby bleeds into social life, and the protective functions of the performance frame, which socially and ethically position the audience member as passive, uninvolved spectator, begin to crumble just a bit. This incites the sort of ethical engagement that makes non-fans of comedy cringe - audiences have to figure out what to do with a performance that, framed as comedy, fails. Downtown audiences may experience discomfort as they figure out how to navigate these confounding interactions, but, curiosity, along with the ethos of the community, indicates they don't disengage.

Audience members are in fact often excited, though some of them are frightened, by actual engagement. One comic told me that nothing in a performance is as exciting as heckling, and that the hardest part of dealing with a heckler is maintaining the same level of energy when this spontaneous moment is over and the comic returns to scripted material.

Comics also tend to initiate provocative interactions in the social context surrounding the performance, with greater frequency, in my experience, than the average person. These provocations sometimes contain a surprising level of aggression. Many of my respondents wondered aloud why one of their talented colleagues has never been physically assaulted by a member of the general public, after he or she was unexpectedly subjected to his particular brand of absurdity.

Remember how he used to get drunk and lick people in the face?

He slapped a woman one time at a party. I think they're actually friends now but at the time she was *super* mad.

We were coming out of a restaurant late at night, and there were a bunch of fratty-looking, tough-looking guys waiting in line outside, and he said something along the lines of, 'ha ha, we've already eaten'. And you could just see one of the guys start to puff up, like a peacock showing his feathers. And I grew up around those kinds of guys, so I knew better than to fuck with them. So I just turned around and basically shat on him, and probably myself, like, joking with them, but, like, prostrating myself as much as possible, and dragged him out of there before something bad happened.

We were leaving this club and this guy outside was starting shit with somebody. Like, screaming, really getting in his face. As we passed him [the comic] just yelled, "Chill out, drunky!"

These examples seem perhaps to illustrate nothing more than a lack of propriety, or instinct for self-preservation. But taken as a whole the provocations in which comics engage are not simple efforts at dominance, or a callous disregard for social graces. They are not intended as bullying, though they may misfire and have that effect. They are rather intended to complicate, or even confuse, the situation's framing, to the extent that the interlocutor is forced to engage, to question his or her actions, or produce a spontaneous, authentic response. Comics explicitly express the desire to provoke little crisis moments, of the sort Victor Turner identifies on a micro level. This cultivated taste for the awkward serves to initiate a reflexive attention, to destabilize and thus problematize the routine nature of social interactions.

That such provocations also have an earnest, humanitarian dimension becomes legible in the reactions of comedy fans, who are often delighted by what would seem on the surface to be a lack of good manners. Will has a very dry delivery, a tone that could be (and has been) taken as dismissive. Matt can be shy sometimes, and self-describes as awkward in social interactions. Matt remembers when he was introduced to Will, by a mutual friend. Will looked him up and

down, shook his head, and said, “I can't do this right now”, and walked away. Matt loved it. “It was the funniest thing he could possibly have said, to me in particular”. What caused Matt to read Will's transgression of polite norms in this way rather than as a genuine and hurtful affront? Perhaps Will's reaction was so over the top and socially inappropriate as to be difficult to take seriously. Or, as Matt put it,

I guess I think of a lot of things as involving both style and content. So I guess if you look just at the content of what he said, yeah, someone might be offended. But Will is, or at least I find him, a very charming fellow.

Will's affront came across here as directed at the frame itself, rather than at Matt personally - Matt in fact took it as an act of solidarity, a collusive sort of attack on a mutually constraining and alienating frame. Thus, for Matt, Will's affront produced greater feelings of affection and camaraderie than could have been accomplished by ritual politeness.

Comics also talk about the importance of justice in destabilizing these frames. Their desire to push people out of their comfort zones becomes particularly acute when they suspect that their interlocutors are too comfortable. Or, when the frames they occupy have no legitimacy beyond the comfort or privilege they provide for those who subscribe to them. One comic told me he only gets aggressive with powerful people, or people who somehow “deserve it”.

Frames that have more obstinacy than legitimacy smack of the mechanicity Bergson describes. It thus stands to reason that comics would seek to undermine people's ability to wield established forms of social power, particularly when the grounds of this power are suspect. One comic told me about a day when he felt particularly affirmed in his choice of career, and a sense

that he was contributing something meaningful to society. He had gone by himself to the Guggenheim, to see an enormous and well-publicized Matthew Barney retrospective.

Everyone there was talking about the art, coming up with these elaborate interpretations. And I was like, this is such bullshit! This stuff isn't saying *anything*. You're making all this up to convince yourself that you're smart.

He characterized the behavior of his fellow museum patrons as a particular kind of cowardice, an effort to stake a fixed, safe position for themselves in relation to the work, by foisting an interpretation on it when (according to his reading) it was clearly designed to frustrate interpretation. he said, "I felt sorry for those people, and lucky, and like what I do is actually meaningful¹⁴."

Destabilizing or problematizing frames can thus serve to challenge an unquestioned sense of entitlement to occupy and operate in a particular social space. It is important to note the connection between this particular sense of mission and comics' self-perception as outsiders or marginal. Comics often seem to see themselves as having little investment in the existing structures of micropolitics, little to lose by open attacks on them.

As Bateson warns in his analysis of schizophrenia, comics can't push so much that they alienate people entirely. Comics have to provoke but also retain the audience in an interaction. They have to keep the audience with them, they have to maintain a relationship of trust. They can't "lose" the audience. The comics are good at recuperating the relationship, keeping the lines of connection open, even after sending out the confounding signal. Their goal is to emerge

¹⁴ Interestingly, this same comic was delighted by an exhibit by Vik Muniz, an artist whose work includes a large-print photograph of a two crudely drawn clouds, such as might appear in a child's drawing, written into a clear blue sky by a hired plane. Muniz has said that he chooses his materials to contrast with his subject matter, describing their desired effect as that of "bad actors".

as charismatic, to maintain allure even as they provoke (interesting in relation to what Kierkegaard says about adoring followers of Socrates).

One respondent said that comics want to be honest, but also really want you to like them. Which I understand to mean they want to maintain the connection with the audience. This is also reflected in the uncontroversial idea that it is essential for comics to win audience trust. Comics may in fact balance honesty and likeability by vacillating between a potentially alienating statement and a conciliatory gesture of some sort. One audience member said that it was excruciating in some ways to watch a particular set by Marc Maron, because it came across as misogynist, but also interesting, because he seemed to be aware of it. Fans express an affection for a certain “horribleness” in Louis CK as well – fans often remark that he says really awful things in such a genuine, honest, forthcoming way that you’re more likely to consider the possible validity of his perspective.

We were walking up Madison Avenue, during the summer, probably around 11:00, and there was a group of maybe 10 men in expensive suits sitting around a table. He was working out some bit in his head and he went up to them and totally interrupted their dinner. I was so uncomfortable, but in 15 seconds he had them all laughing.

He used to hang out all the time at 7A, and one time he was there hitting on this girl, and her boyfriend got pissed off, and he was this big dude, I really thought for a minute things were going to get ugly. But then somehow he charmed the guy, and the next thing I know he's grabbed the guy and they're waltzing around the bar and the guy is laughing.

[A certain comic] and I used to fool around sometimes, and once at Rifi he wanted to have sex in the bathroom, which is totally out of character for both of us. Plus the door on that bathroom didn't lock, and there's a hole in the bottom of it. He's trying to pull my clothes off and I'm giggling but also pushing him away. Finally I say, are you drunk? And he just stops and looks at me like I'm out of my mind and says, 'Of course I'm drunk. I'm trying to have sex with you in the bathroom'.

Reflexive comments on the performance are very often used to recuperate audience trust when the perspective of the comic is unclear, muddy, or distasteful. The comic in this case will comment fairly directly, but in an ironic tone, on the failure, signaling his or her distance from it, and also welcoming the audience to join him or her in this position of critical distance. The audience and comic are thus transposed, from opposing sides of a failed performance, to an allied second-order perspective on that performance.

This technique, while appropriate in many ways to the workshopping environment, and productive and welcome from the point of view that it helps to generate what many audience members seek to gain from this particular social interaction, is considered by some, at times, to be a bit of a cop-out from the point of view of comedic performance. I once saw an improvised performance that was part of a weekend festival at the Upright Citizens' Brigade, wherein such shifts to meta-perspective, manifested largely in ruptures of the "fourth wall" of the scene, became a point of contention. The scene was performed by a very large cast, composed of several troupes that had no prior experience working together. The scene rapidly became chaotic and directionless, and several of the performers tried to recuperate the situation by resorting to reflexive commentary. This was seen by other performers as disruptive to sincere and concerted efforts to build the internal structure of the scene under trying circumstances, one of whom yelled, "no meta!". Subsequent reflexive commentary elicited further chants, in chorus, of, "no meta! no meta!!", signaling dissolution of the scene¹⁵

¹⁵ As the chant of "no meta" was repeated, it took on the structure of an ongoing debate between the performers who saw their reflexive comments as a solution to the problem of a failing joke, and those who vetoed each of these comments, indicating by the chant that they considered them to be all of one category (i.e., "meta") of mechanistic responses to - mechanical escape hatches from - an uncomfortable situation. Perhaps because the audience recognized this escalating conflict, "no meta" itself evolved into an inside joke over the course of the half-hour performance, eliciting laughter and echoed chants from members of the audience.

Some audience members/comics who hang out with comics over time learn the reframing technique, or learn that reframing is what's being positively reinforced. Others do seem to have schizophrenic (as Bateson characterizes them) responses - aggression or withdrawal (ironic distance, prophylactic irony, is also a form of withdrawal. When people talk about awkwardness, they are talking about being asked to participate in an unstable moment, wherein the rules of engagement are not clearly defined. This takes a lot of work, as Milgram's strained efforts at rudeness demonstrate. To say that one has good manners is to say that one participates in a series of conventional, culturally recognized practices. These practices signal, among other things, the willingness of a social actor to engage harmoniously in a shared social reality. They can be a gesture of general good will or good faith; they can indicate a desire to avoid conflict. To subject a metalinguistic element of communication to critical interrogation is a move that can generate anxiety and distrust. It is a violation of rapport; it causes the locus of rapport to be shifted to another location in the complex field of interaction, or it threatens the interaction with failure. Interrogating the framing of a social context by way of generating negative experience destabilizes every interactant's sense of how he or she fits into and ought best to operate in that context. It creates new possibilities, but it requires a certain amount of work on the part of interactants. As Turner's concept of reintegration suggests, the tendency is for this work to restore order, in some fashion, whether it be conciliatory or disciplinary.

Some people make generalized complaints about everyday, offstage engagement with comics. They complain that comics always seem to be "on", that they demand a level of energy and attention that is out of proportion with the norm. I myself have felt at times, talking to certain comics, that I must seem very closed-off and unwilling to engage, sort of cold and exhausted and needing to be drawn out, unable to key into a moment or space in the interaction

where I knew what I wanted to say or what my relevance was. Certainly at times there's a feeling of competing, perhaps for attention. Is there, with some comics, simply an aggressive insistence that you accept their terms?

Comics appreciatively describe "downtown" audiences as more patient than "club" audiences. The characterization of the club attendee as someone who sits back with his or her arms crossed and demands "make me laugh" smacks of laziness. Downtown audiences by contrast are game to follow comics into unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory. Again, this is appreciated, but signals a great deal of trust and an unmistakable generosity, which also puts the audience member or interlocutor in a vulnerable position, as will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

People who have described an aversion to comedy shows seem to feel an obligation to maintain a sense of rapport, of mutual, consensual engagement in the context. They seem to fear the failure of the common frame, they fear that their way of framing both the situation and the roles of the participants will come into open, ugly conflict with the way the comic frames the situation, and the comic will be unable to "save face". Indeed, the personal risk for a social actor who steps out of frame is social non-existence or un-recognizability, in itself a severe censure (Butler). What we think of as a person's character is in fact composed of interactions between the organism and his or her environment; the entirety of what we think of as the self is threatened by the possibility of un-recognition. Frames make their elements legible.

All manner of audience members, from those who cringe at the idea of attending a comedy show to die-hard fans (though maybe not so much those in the middle), marvel at what they perceive as comics' immense courage. They say that it seems that comics are exposing very private selves to public judgment, and that there is no safety net for the ego if people don't laugh.

Idea of risk in the context of performances – audience members think comics are taking huge social risks. The comics, and the regular audience members, seem less afraid of this possibility. Some of them even delight in it.

There are social benefits to taking risks, when they have positive outcomes. Charisma and implications for individual comic, who is going through process of self-commodification. John Limon and standing up the abject as the phallus. Audience members at improv shows respond to reflexive asides, moments of stepping out of the frame, with particular enthusiasm when the performer in question is a hero of theirs. Audiences lionize performers who demonstrate high levels of creativity, fast thinking. This accounts for some of the excitement of improvised performances, akin to that of watching a sporting event, wherein the spectator knows the rules of the game, but doesn't know the outcome or what the players will do to try to achieve it. The idea that performers might fail makes the successes more exciting, makes exhibitions of skill, when they occur, more exhilarating. The atmosphere among performers, while collaborative, isn't entirely uncompetitive either, which maybe is why the yes-and rule doesn't go without saying. Violating the normative workings of a social context is a power move, it's a power move when you get away with it. Who, in a differentiated social context, gets to participate in what ways? [maybe also important here is the fact that they can accrue power to themselves by...taking on the champ. They're as tough as whomever they beat - Rosenblatt's citation of Hans Christian Anderson tale, in which act of destroying the most incredible thing becomes the most incredible thing. In this particular subculture, creative manipulation of frames is considered a heroic act. Link to the true, that articulating a perspective in this mode gives the perspective a particular resonance [to be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters].

Subculture performance example and tie-in

Sub Pop is an independent music label that, having released such definitive acts as Nirvana, has something of iconic status in hipster subculture. They have also released records by comics such as David Cross, Patton Oswalt, Flight of the Conchords, and Eugene Mirman. When asked to perform at their 20th anniversary party, Eugene wrote a bit for the occasion he called a “cool quiz”. He brought two audience members up on stage and challenged their knowledge of the kinds of independent music and contemporary hipster subculture Sub Pop can take some credit for promoting. Each “contestant” received a hand held buzzer; Eugene read them questions in the style of a gameshow host, and they were supposed to buzz in when they thought they knew the answer. Correct answers would receive a point.

Several questions into the competition, Eugene asks the sound person to cue up a music track. The track begins with a low, ambient sound similar to crashing waves, during which both contestants stand perplexed for several seconds. Finally, the ambient sound gives way to a relentlessly catchy keyboard riff, which is immediately recognizable to most audience members as belonging to a #1 billboard hit from the late 1980s. Both contestants move to buzz in, one just ahead of the other.

Eugene: Yes?

Contestant #1: “We Didn't Start the Fire”, by Billy Joel?

Eugene: No! The correct answer is, I have no idea, I've never heard that song before.

(massive audience laughter).

What happens in this bit is that Eugene, referencing the gameshow format, establishes a framework for action in which his “contestants” engage. He makes jokes, which are recognized by audience laughter, before this point, but says nothing that challenges the framework for action around which the bit is constituted. Acting in good faith, as they understand the frame, the contestants draw upon (sub)cultural knowledge, mobilizing memory and other cognitive

resources in order to behave appropriately. They get caught up in the guessing game aspect of the joke itself, which as Raskin attests is a cooperative principle of the joking mode, and the appropriateness of engaging in guesswork and puzzle-solving is reinforced by the gameshow format.

The “punchline” of the bit, “I’ve never heard that song before”, signals to the contestants and the audience that there is an additional dimension to the frame for action, a dimension moreover that can be immediately and quickly extrapolated from the (implausible) content of Eugene’s correct answer, namely: being cool not only involves being enough of an “insider” to be aware of obscure subcultural material, but being so deeply immersed in this subculture, and so unconcerned with what goes on outside of it, that one is entirely ignorant of the pap that is spoon-fed to your average philistine by mainstream media. It is a question of public secret - the importance of knowing what not to know. The very implausibility of the disavowal¹⁶ has an additional humorous effect – it makes fun of the frame itself at the same time that it, more on the face, catches up the contestants in their own inflexibility. Further, while the previous questions require the contestants to provide *factually* correct information, the "punchline" question requires that they provide *socially* correct information, or a socially appropriate response. This problematizes all that went before - reframes the factually correct information given in previous answers as also socially appropriate, casts an unfavorable light on the whole business of being cool by revealing the pretense and the face-management involved.

I saw Eugene workshop this bit twice before he took it to Seattle. In an earlier version, “Hotel California” was used in place of “We Didn't Start the Fire”. The latter song was more effective (i.e. produced a bigger laugh in the audience and a bigger look of chagrin on the face of

¹⁶ The song was quite omnipresent when it was popular.

the “contestant”). I propose that this was for two reasons: 1) “We didn’t start the fire” begins with an ambient-style intro that departs from the structure of the rest of the song, and doesn’t seem to have lodged in the memory of most audiences - thus the song wasn’t recognizable at first. The delay before the highly familiar riff began seemed to heighten everyone's anticipation and involvement, catching them up more completely in the guessing-game framework of the bit. 2) the more immediate recognizability of the simple riff that repeats throughout the song caused recognition, once the riff began, to happen more simultaneously and conclusively for both audience members and contestants. Everyone was thus more fully caught up in the game at the moment Eugene pulled the rug out from under them, and they were all the more delighted at being thus bested [note that all participants are partially and differentially implicated in the hoax - everyone is partly laughing at themselves and partly laughing at someone else. Shared responsibility].

The important thing here is that Eugene catches the “gameshow” participants, and the audience, up in admitting that they recognize the social efficacy of certain knowledges and certain disavowals of knowledge (this extends into the next chapter - actually linked to ironic racism - part of the idea is to force fans to acknowledge that they know what not to know. revelation of public secret.)

Socratic irony as practiced here isn’t the utter negation or destruction of meaning, akin to the ironic sensibility Dick Hebdige attributes to English punk subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hebdige argues that the montage of contrasting established cultural styles effected by punk subculture sought to effect the destruction of meaning, an unreadability¹⁷. The intended

¹⁷ The facility with which popular culture has absorbed punk aesthetics in the time since Hebdige authored this breakthrough text suggests that social meanings and effects will cling to the most confounding of objects. Connects to section above (maintaining audience trust) and to routinization of irony, in the next chapter.

audience for this display is authority figures, teachers, parents, police, representatives of the repressive institutions of the state and family, etc. The comic seems to engage his or her audience from a very different position of social and ethical relatedness. The audience member at the downtown comedy performance is not an enemy but a potential convert. Comedy practices a Socratic rather than a prophylactic irony. It shows that prophylactic irony is in fact caught up in a community of disavowal and negation, rather than actually eschewing ideology and conformity. Community engaged in self-critique.

The vacillating can be seen as stepping back to a reflective, speculative, solitary position, and then stepping forward into engagement. While the stepping forward is provocative and at times aggressive, the stepping back consists of an oblique reference to a speculative position, an oblique indexing thereof. The mode is Socratic because the comics, too, claim ignorance. They don't occupy a space of synthesized knowledge and produce an argument, a literal, straightforward argument therefrom, they instead render the foreground uninhabitable, and direct attention to a certain area of the obscure.

Kierkegaard underscores the ironist's enduring, relentless pursuit of the negative, his/her insatiable commitment to an external vantage point, from which he or she seeks to destroy, as Kurt Vonnegut might say, the whole world¹⁸. Irony in its pure form stands entirely outside of the restricted and expiring consciousness of a given age, responding instead to the gravitational pull of an incipient and as-yet inarticulable consciousness¹⁹. Kierkegaard's ironist is a destroyer of

¹⁸ "Now I will destroy the whole world" is what Bokononists say when they commit suicide. Perhaps this can be construed as a nod to the power of framing, indicating that the world exists only via perspective. In any case, I would be remiss to engage in discussion of the ethics of ironized social attachment/detachment without making at least passing reference to Vonnegut.

¹⁹Kierkegaard's description of the incipient consciousness indexed by the ironist evokes Freud's famed discussion of the structure of wit; namely, that wit or humor indirectly references an unconscious idea shared by speaker and listener, thus allowing it to bubble up unchallenged through the membrane of authorized discourse. Jonathan Lear

worlds. But his portrait of Socrates, when viewed in its details, conjures the image of a friendly, deeply aggravating but no less endearing oddball, a tireless and enthusiastic interlocutor, eager to attend to another's thoughts in the most minute detail. A destroyer of worlds, and yet on some level a savior of human beings. He may not be entirely sincere, but neither is he bored. He asks us to imagine the quintessential ironist not locked away in stone tower, but rather loitering at the bus stop, probably with a half-functional umbrella. And one imagines that the infinitely playful Socrates would be a little enervating to run into at the end of a long workday. His character in fact seems aptly evoked by the occasional complaints of fans, even, that comics demand too much attention.

The ironist is a little unmoored from the world. He or she isn't sincere, in the conventional sense, but neither is he or she quite conventionally a deceiver. Downtown comics and their audiences are suspicious of falsity. In fact mechanicity in social interactions is likely to be read as falsity. They are attuned to and play with the framing of a situation. They show a willingness to put themselves at personal risk, but it's a gamble that sometimes pays off in terms of complicity or acceptance by their "audience" or interactant. They are credited with greater honesty, with creativity - the interactants feel a sort of affinity for them or alliance with them, if indeed they are willing to put in the work to achieve mutual understanding, to stabilize the social situation on the more slippery terms the comics provoke.

has brought Kierkegaard's concept of irony into very productive and interesting discussion with contemporary psychoanalytic practices. All of this will be discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter 4 - Ironic Racism

In spring of 2012 Lesley Arfin, a writer for the HBO series *Girls*, then in its first season, briefly made headlines when she tweeted the following in response to criticism that the show's lack of non-white main characters: "What really bothered me most about *Precious* was that there was no representation of ME" (cited in Reeve).

I have known Arfin for several years, initially through mutual friends (we attended the same college, though at different times). Though she was not directly involved with the downtown comedy scene, I had also occasionally run into her at comedy shows. While the tweet does not serve as an example of the types of ironic provocations I'll be continuing to discuss in this chapter, it is worthwhile to note that she was part of an imbricated milieu of young, urban professionals engaged in small-scale cultural production in New York City, often conducted in what can be broadly described as an ironic mode¹. Moreover, the tweet provoked some of the most interesting and relevant critical discussion of the problem of irony I have seen in the popular press.

The controversy generated by the tweet followed a pattern common to these sorts of eruptions - following the initial blowup, which took the tweet as evidence of the casual racism

¹ These people are colloquially known as "hipsters".

underlying the lack of nonwhite characters on *Girls*, Arfin tweeted an apology, seeking to contain its unintended effects. She asserted that she didn't intend or anticipate that the tweet would mean what it did to her critics.

Memorable gaffes by other public figures, with or without apology, have frequently been followed up by a similar disavowal of conscious intention, citing various reasons for misinterpretation. Even in cases that seem unequivocally to enter into the realm of hate speech, the offending party often argues that the offense was intended “as a joke”, and therefore can't be evaluated in the same way as a “serious” statement. This was Don Imus' defense after he described the Rutgers University women's basketball team as a bunch of “nappy-headed hos” (Chiachiere 2007)². Others have argued that the statement has been taken out of context, or was uttered without conscious intent. One of the most infamous instances of this type was Michael Richards highly vitriolic attack on two African-American men who heckled him at a live show at the Laugh Factory in West Hollywood. This spectacular tantrum was recorded by an audience member on a cell phone video camera and circulated on the internet³. In the wake of public outrage, Richards attempted to explain:

² This defense calls to mind Raskin's argument that jokes about race are not necessarily associated with actual beliefs about race - a defense which is irrelevant to one's choice of whether or not to use such language, as this chapter will argue.

³ This specific situation is actually something comics have talked about wanting to avoid, because their standup, particularly as they're working it out in front of an audience, is designed to elicit a specific reaction in that context, and may be received or interpreted very differently when it circulates out of that context. While it's difficult to imagine alternative ways of interpreting Michael Richards' rant, another comic raised this fear about a video he had made in which he rattles off a string of racial epithets. He made the video after a production company that had solicited some of his work provided him with a list of verboten words - a list that, taken out of any sort of social context, struck him as absurd. Again, this was considered “safe” - i.e., unlikely to be construed as representing or to generate/contribute to racist feeling - in the context of the downtown NYC bar in which it was screened. But the comic was wary of the effects it might have out of this small, known context - and of being held accountable for these effects.

I'm a performer, I push the envelope, I work in a very uncontrolled manner on stage, I do a lot of free association, I'm spontaneous, I go into character...I don't know...the rage did go all over the place. It went to everybody in the room. But...I'm not a racist, that's what's so insane about this, I don't, and yet, it's said, it comes through, it fires out of me...(Letterman apology).

Following such claims to have been misunderstood or somehow possessed, reporters and critics tend to turn a microscopic lens on the incident itself, as well as other productions by the same author, mining them for further evidence of racist intent. Following Michael Richards' rant, Greta Van Susteren interviewed Paul Mooney to ask if he thought Michael Richards was racist.⁴ A debate emerges that somewhat elucidates the positions of various stakeholders with respect to the gaffe. In Arfin's case, some confounding evidence emerged, including a swastika (tweeted by another user) that she had marked as a "favorite" on twitter (Arfin is Jewish). Reeve comments on Arfin's elusive position as follows:

She deleted the tweet Wednesday night, and apologized -- "Without thinking, I put gender politics above race and class. That was careless. The last thing I want is girls vs girls" -- and then deleted the apology. (Perhaps because there do not appear to be any gender politics involved in her original response.) But there are some other weird racial quips Arfin's written that haven't been erased, and they highlight the creepy strain of "ironic" racism among the crowd she is a part of. Racism is cool if a young urbanite is doing it ironically, right? (Reeve)

I first heard the term "ironic racism" in the downtown comedy scene, several years prior to the incident described above. To put it simply, ironic racism refers to a statement that, taken literally, would be fairly interpreted as racist, but that is uttered in a context that suggests a non-literal - most specifically an ironic or oppositional - overall meaning. Downtown comedy

⁴ This broadcast, viewable on YouTube, bears an uncanny resemblance to a recurring segment in which Mooney appeared on the Dave Chappelle show, called "ask a black man". An interesting case of satire repeating itself as farce. Mooney rejects the questions that would position him as an ambassador to Susteren's viewers from the other side of a racial divide, instead choosing to explain to them how comedy works (a subject on which he is a recognized authority).

audiences, and comics, overwhelmingly identify as politically liberal. Thus, while the immediate social context is fairly homogeneous, the idea that any of these performers or audiences would knowingly subscribe to racist ideologies is generally considered out of the question. When I was conducting interviews on the topic, subjects asserted that “everybody knows that racism is wrong”⁵. Thus these racially charged utterances take place in a social context wherein “genuinely” racist beliefs are considered implausible.

As previously discussed, downtown comics lay claim to an artistic lineage that includes Lenny Bruce. As such their cultural critique interrogates the choice to mark anything as obscene or offensive, instead attempting to create latitude for alternative interpretations, resignifications. However, it is fair to ask whether the critique is effective, and whether they might even simply delight somewhat in the offensive, in an uncritical fashion. The vast majority of both performers and audiences are middle class Caucasians, living in a city which, while diverse and cosmopolitan, is greatly segregated, which raises the question of whether there is a generalized insensitivity or unawareness of the full effects of racism. The work can be ambiguous. One comic, for example, does a bit that includes racist statements in which he performs an amplified version of his own southern accent, distancing himself from a “straight” or literal reading, but also raising visible discomfort among some audience members as to whether other audience members are laughing at him or laughing with. The effect complicates the relationship between irony and sincerity, effect and intention, in a way that merits further discussion. If performers

⁵ This context is important to bear in mind. The forthcoming critique of “political correctness” may seem gratuitous in a national context where overt, crass racism hasn’t been nearly eradicated from public discourse. However, this particular community of speakers self-defines in part by the absence of overt racism, as they are urban liberals who consider their relative freedom from racism as a mark of education and worldliness, and moral rightness. The critique implicitly advanced by the comics, I will argue, is somewhat avant-garde - an exhortation not to be satisfied with even the more advanced thinking about race in a country that continues to be racist, and which continues to evidence this racism in glaring structural contradictions.

and audience members are categorically opposed to racism, what exactly is “ironic racism” trying to accomplish?

I will argue that ironic racism begins as a Socratic provocation, intended to expose racism as a public secret, and the discourse (or lack thereof) surrounding race, particularly among whites who identify as politically liberal, as therefore hypocritical. Consonant with my overarching interest in the social construction of the true or authentic in this particular context, and comedy as a means of accessing this truth, as it shapes and is shaped by social context, I cast this hypocrisy as a form of “bad faith” in the Sartrean sense. The question of existential freedom in this context overlaps with the question of what kind and degree of social power individuals have in relation to the socially constructed meanings and effects of language. Kierkegaard’s ironist, characterized in his analysis by detachment from social context, is here implicated in everyday linguistic practices, wherein the attachments and detachments performed via the structure of irony have measurable performative effects.

The choice to frame the debates surrounding the effects of racist speech as implicitly raising questions of existential freedom converges well, I think, with the emic frameworks of my research subjects, as will be discussed below. It also echoes other theorists who have applied existentialist philosophy to questions of racial identity (West, Birt, Yancy), even in the context of analyzing comedic texts (Willett). My contribution to this line of thought is to use ethnographic evidence to map out the mechanics by which irony is working in this particular context, in relation to prevailing contemporary “straight” discourses concerning race and racism. By grounding this analysis in social context, I seek to shift the central question away from interpretation, meaning, and intention, and map out the social effects as they are experienced in this context. While cumbersome to document, I argue that tracing these effects is invaluable to a

more nuanced, and thus persuasive, understanding of the performative effects of racist language. In this case my emphasis on performative effects reveals the profound anxiety surrounding the performative effects of racist speech and the possibility of misfire.

The notion that words can have effects that exceed their communicative value is largely foreign to the popular consciousness; where it has gained the most theoretical traction is in the legal analysis of hate speech and pornography. Central to the debate about hate speech is the question of whether this speech is essentially communication, in which case, many argue, it should be protected by the first amendment, or whether its *raison de etre* can be found rather in its effects, by which it should therefore be evaluated and for which prohibited. In *Words that Wound*, Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw put forth an argument that hate speech is qualitatively different from the content-based forms of speech that the first amendment is designed to protect. Hate speech evokes a long-standing historical context of racial inequality, which is fraught with extreme violence and which endures (mostly, but not reliably, in attenuated forms) in contemporary life. Racist speech triggers cultural knowledge of that history and of the possibility for it to be repeated in any given moment; it mobilizes that entire context against its target. A threat is thus implicit in any racist speech, directed towards anyone who inhabits a racialized identity. Matsuda et al thus argue that hate speech is experienced as a direct attack both the psychological well being and the subjective status of its target, undermining his or her ability to engage with any ideas the speech may represent. Hate speech thus forecloses rather than engages in discourse; rather than communicate ideas about race, gender or sexual orientation it injures those to whom it is directed, reproducing the history of discrimination to which it refers.

The arguments of the Critical Race Theorists are an important effort to apply contemporary insights about the social construction of identity and the performative power of discourse to public policy. As such it is an important corrective to liberal notions of citizenship that rest on a notion of citizens as atomized individuals, and an idea of speech as that which communicates their interests in a democratic public sphere. However, while the Critical Race Theorists are correct to draw attention to the way racial identities are performed in social context, and the ways in which these performances may encroach upon the exercise of rights of citizenship, some important critiques have been advanced.

Judith Butler, to cite one notable example, argues that the theory of performativity implicit in this theorization of hate speech accounts for no possible dissonance between what the speaker articulates in hate speech and what the speaker brings into being. Thus the historical method the Critical Race Theorists employ to evidence the performative effects of words is not extended to account for future changes in meaning or performative efficacy. She goes on to argue that power does not very often operate through language with such absolute efficacy as that which the Critical Race Theorists attribute to hate speech, describing the action they describe as that of a “sovereign performative” (Butler 1997). She thus makes a case for developing a theory – and a politics – of the performative that accounts for a greater variety of possible relationships between words and the impact that they have in the beliefs and emotional lives of their speakers and hearers, rooted in the study of concrete forms of social relationship.

Butler also expresses concern that the Critical Race Theorists’ reliance on legal models and state power may overstep the boundaries of the first amendment, and that such power, if codified into law, is likely to be exerted against marginalized groups. Efforts to legislate against hate speech, even in a largely symbolic manner, demonstrate that the legal model can in fact be a

cumbersome and inflexible tool for dealing with the nuanced effects and meanings of language, as this news report illustrates:

For many years the "N-word" has been used by young African Americans who have appropriated it as a, perhaps ironic, term of endearment. Now, other ethnic groups have started to use it in a similar context, and those who insist it should be banned are growing increasingly outraged. The New York City resolution was sponsored by Councilman Leroy Comrie, who says the "N-word" was derived solely out of hate and anger and that its meaning cannot be changed. But for America's so-called hip-hop generation using the word among themselves is about self-empowerment. (BBC news article)

Contemporary anthropology has also documented a number of ways in which racism is embedded in cultural and institutional structures, often in covert and complex ways. Stolcke documents a contemporary shift to "cultural" models of discrimination, which imports assumptions of difference based on embodied characteristics such as race and to cultural practices associated with particular ethnic groups (Stolcke). People associate myriad other linguistic and embodied practices with "blackness", and they may be more or less aware of these associations. Bourdieu's notion of habitus encompasses the range of practices which may covertly signal, and naturalize, one's position in a social hierarchy. As Jane Hill has demonstrated in her work on "mock Spanish", whites may be familiar enough with linguistic practices of cultural others that they are able to mobilize linguistic elements borrowed from cultural others in order to signal semiotic associations with stereotypes of those cultural others, but at the same time may disavow or be entirely unreflective about this knowledge. Embodied and linguistic signals form a complex pattern of race-ing that isn't black or white, but indexes

multiple positionalities. Collins notes the complexity of this “outsider within” position (Collins 7)⁶.

While efforts to legislate against hate speech have met with limited success, more informal taboos on racist speech have permeated the mainstream. However, nuance Butler calls for in performativity theory, and in particular the development of a theoretical apparatus that disaggregates performative force from intended meaning, is almost entirely absent in the scant popular understanding of the effects of racist speech. With the advent of multiculturalism, and the increased consciousness of the discursive bearings of social power, racial epithets, and even words used to express racial difference that were fraught with a long, naturalized history of hierarchical segregation, took on taboo status. This signalled a collective desire to move towards an era of racial equality, to leave behind the violence of this history. But, the prevalence and entrenchment of individualism makes the performative weight of this history hard to conceptualize, without which a catalog of taboo words proves inadequate. Even if one is critical of this ethic of individualism, discursive and performance-based forms of discrimination are in part covert because people simply don’t understand the complexities of how they work. There isn’t a nuanced popular understanding of the myriad ways in which racialized poverty is maintained and reproduced, through both material and discursive means.

As Collins argues, the increased consciousness of the discursive realm as one in which power is exercised and reproduced, converges in unfortunate ways with an ethic of colorblindness, a legacy from the 1980s. “logic of color blindness and tolerance instituted in the

⁶ We also see this “outsider within” positionality at work, albeit in very different ways, in the positioning of downtown comics with respect to mainstream pop culture. The dynamics that thereby arise in the relationship between embodied and professional identities will be further explored in subsequent pages.

1980s...in which to talk of race at all meant that one was racist” (Collins 51-2). Thus certain words have taboo status, but that’s largely the extent of it.

The incompleteness and perhaps inadequacy of this catalog of racially charged words and gestures, and an enduring emphasis on intended meaning, also lends some legitimacy (however minute) to backlash against these taboos, by people who liken advocates of “political correctness” to “thought police”. The analogy to Orwell’s 1984 of course falls apart when one considers that these taboos are not upheld by the violent power of the state. But the focus on prohibition, rather than understanding, lends some credence to a false perception of victimhood on the part of these self-described advocates of “free speech”.

Colorblindness as a political strategy, while it is emblematic of respectful recognition of the equal inherent worth and potential of individuals of all races, converges also with an enduring US popular faith in a concept of negative liberties that ignores the productive aspects of power, and casts the material realities of many people of color as being of little relevance to their opportunities. This is highly problematic in a context where there is enduring inequality. Moreover, “the advent of the multiracial American regime coincided with escalating levels of wealth inequality” (West). This is in a context wherein people of color are disproportionately poor, underrepresented in positions of power, etc. In the post civil rights era wealth inequality has increased dramatically. As Collins argues, poverty and segregation of black people worldwide has an “entrenched fixity” (Collins 13).

Moreover, the exceptions to this statistical reality serve to obscure the institutionalized forces that contribute to its reproduction (Collins, West).

New “politics of containment” seems to rely on the “*visibility* of African-American women to generate the *invisibility* of exclusionary practices of segregation” (Collins 14).

Collins suggests here that the effect of taboos on hate speech may be to civilize discourse at the *expense* of publicly interrogating deep-seated beliefs and other, more material expressions of racism. “[with the advent of the colorblindness ethic] it became even more difficult to tackle false universalism concerning race” (Collins 51-2; cites Frankenberg 1993). There thus endures a great difference of opinion, often divided along racial lines, as to the causes of enduring inequalities and how they should best be redressed (Whites see racism as zero-sum game).

The lack of open dialogue seems to breed suspicion and misunderstanding, highly divergent viewpoints that become evident when an incident makes the news.

“hate speech breaks the rules of civility that characterize this imaginary culture of tolerance” (Collins 83). Members of dominant groups see incidents of hate speech as isolated; African-Americans as a group see them as representing “deep-seated ideas and practices that permeate and define the social structure itself...expressing things that many people think but are too polite to say in public” (Collins 83).

Overt forms of discrimination have been attacked and forced to become more covert. Yet the legacy of white supremacy lingers—often in the face of the very denials of its realities (West).

“One may mark the difference between old racism and new by generally shifting the weight of supremacy from codes of enunciation to codes of evasion” (Moses 50).

Quotes Christine Sleeter, “Most white people do not talk about racism, do not recognize the existence of institutional racism, and feel personally threatened by the mention of racism” (Moses 63).

Here we see a surface-and-depth structure emerging, wherein outwardly “correct” speech comes to signify endorsement of or indifference to enduring racism. As John Jackson points out, because “political correctness” has focused largely on the outward manifestations of racism, the consensus surrounding this body of appropriate or civil language may serve to conceal rather than resolve enduring conflicts.

White Americans feel anxiety about being demonized for statements that might be construed as racist and police their speech accordingly. The demonization of public racism is clearly a social and moral victory, but it has come at a cost. Political correctness has proven tragically effective at hiding racism, not just healing it (Jackson 91).

Jackson's concern is that "political correctness" provides a "safe" zone of agreed-upon, mannered speech and performance, which serves not only to civilize public discourse, but also to conceal or efface enduring racisms. Jackson describes "de cardio" racisms - racism that Caucasians may be educated enough to conceal, but that may nonetheless continue to influence their decisions, who to hire, who to vote for, etc, etc. Political correctness as Jackson frames it is thus largely a strategy of disavowal⁷.

Finding a way to think and talk about race that moves past the false universalism of colorblindness without slipping into a racialized essentialism is very difficult in a culture that largely ignores the productive function of power, and the social production of individual and even embodied characteristics. The color-blind approach, which John H. McLendon III describes as an "ostrich head approach to racism", absolves whites of the task of contributing to the development of an adequate discourse about race, instead allowing them to withdraw or absent themselves from a public debate that is emotionally fraught, socially risky, and may threaten existing forms of privilege. "Our truncated public discussions of race...fail to confront the complexity of the issue in a candid and critical manner" (West).

⁷ In this sense, "political correctness" may often be a variety of what Harry Frankfurt terms "bullshit" - language uttered without regard for its truth or falsity. Interestingly, Frankfurt argues that, in a postmodern social context where truth, for many subjects, seems prohibitively difficult to arrive at, the condition of truth as an evaluative criteria for the value of statements has been supplanted by a condition of "sincerity". This is particularly interesting in light of debates that tend to arise after public gaffes involving racially charged speech, in which questions of speaker intention are often foregrounded. Frankfurt argues that this is not an adequate solution, stating, rather, that "sincerity itself is bullshit".

This dissonance between surface and depth, between the routine politeness surrounding talk (or lack thereof) about race in liberal circles, and the often glaring evidence, abundant in a multicultural urban setting, of ongoing segregation and discrimination, is exactly the sort of thing comics like to sink their teeth into. For whites, political correctness serves an ego-protecting function, allowing them to operate within the confines of the “permitted” without engaging in any deep exploration of their own positionality, which includes both the privileges that accrue to them via their whiteness, and their own disavowed associations and assumptions related to racial others. Per the comics, it’s a shame that it is so easy to perform Good White Liberalism, and it’s their civic duty to poke a hole in the balloon. The possibility that such politeness, such an impoverished form of social engagement, might be adequate source of self-satisfaction is just asking to be made fun of.

Several comics have argued to me that eliminating hate speech does little to disaggregate and interrogate the complex of social cues via which people evaluate one another. The argument that hate speech should be met with more, and more sophisticated, speech is the civil libertarian opposition to the critical race theorists’ argument. This is not a radical argument, we’ve heard this before. But it’s interesting to me that in the context of the comedy performance the discussion seems to be happening on the level of performance, in terms of visceral experience or emotional engagement. As professional perlocutionists, comics don’t disavow or attempt to minimize the performative dimension of hate speech. In fact, they’re often fascinated by it. But they regard the catalog of taboos as grossly incomplete, and somewhat arbitrarily demarcated.

What the comics refer to as “ironic racism” thus serves, in its most progressive and provocative form, to call forth and render explicit the disavowed knowledges that lurk under the

surface patterns of contemporary racial etiquette. Here, without further ado, is an example, by the talented Zach Galifianakis:

I wear a lot of Axe body spray. I live in a black neighborhood, so I call it Ask body spray (pause, nervous laughter). If you don't get that joke (pause), then you're not racist.

The marketing campaign for Axe body spray, at least as it's been deployed in New York, references an aggressive, hypermasculine sexuality. When I saw Zach perform this joke live, he came up on stage wearing a heavy coat and slouching, looked at his feet and mumbled into the microphone. His physical self-presentation doesn't suggest the persona Axe body spray is associated with at all. So it's already sort of funny and confusing, but clearly this is just the setup, so the audience waits for him to give them that piece of information that makes the joke make sense. They are anticipating something funny, they are waiting to be instructed as to why they should laugh. Then he says, "I live in a black neighborhood"⁸. With the next line, "so I call it Ask body spray", he references, by reversing it, a particularly stigmatized piece of the lexicon of African American Vernacular English. What you hear in the room at this point is some nervous laughter, a couple of groans, a few people laugh really hard...the room divides a bit on their reaction but it's clear that some people are made uncomfortable. And then the tag comes in two parts. "If you don't get that joke..." He says this in a confrontational tone, as though he's going to challenge the audience for not thinking the joke is funny, or for being so stodgy or thin-skinned as to be offended, which comics do sometimes and the audience eats it up. But instead

⁸ I don't know to what extent the audience at this point references a racist image of African-American men as sexually aggressive. I don't think I did when I heard the joke, I didn't make the connection until I thought about it a bit, but I think it's fair to ask whether audience members might see this as a possible direction to take their thoughts in order to understand the intended meaning of the joke.

he turns it around, "...then you're not racist". He opens himself up to the accusation of racism and also implicates the audience.

In Jane Hill's work on Mock Spanish she demonstrates that speakers will often switch linguistic codes in order to construct their own subjectivity for the benefit of listeners, often without recognizing the racial constructions they index, and thus reproduce, in the process. The structure of this joke makes it very difficult for an audience member to disavow his or her awareness that the phonetic difference between ask and aks indexes something. Once you're actively looking for the information that will let you understand the joke, and then discover that you have it, it's hard to disavow it. Moreover, the audience hears that some people laugh and some don't, some people laugh easily and others with reservation. The joke here is on the audience. Along with their awareness of what this piece of language indexes they are made aware of their own discomfort with that awareness, and of varying degrees and types of discomfort among their fellow audience members. This moment - watching the audience move through an emotional reaction to the joke - is what's most interesting to me. Zach's joke draws attention to submerged, disattended symbolic material that operates dynamically in social context, in ways that are not well understood. It challenges the presumption that racial identity, or rather, the process by which racial identities are produced and reproduced, is unproblematic, already-known - a presumption that is implicit in unreflective adherence to political correctness. The joke works to mark whiteness, not just as a social construction, but as an ontology that is characterized even in this politically liberal context by a suppressed anxiety about awareness of cultural difference, combined with a lack of understanding of its implications.

Well-meaning white people have very legitimate reasons for being confused and anxious about the effects of their speech. This ontology, undergirded by unmarked forms of power, is

characterized by a dynamic efficacy, which is subject to misfire. Their anxiety reflects unanswered questions about the ethical dimensions of inhabiting a society where cultural difference overlaps with segregation and stratification. The joke highlights the existential ambiguity associated with this ontology, an ambiguity that Caucasians in the US often have the privilege of disattending.

By drawing attention to this anxiety, and thereby the dynamism it evidences in the operation of symbolic material, Zack's joke also challenges the more mechanistic elements of identity politics. There's good reason for doing this. The mechanical operation, the utter fixity attributed to the performative efficacy of racial epithets, is evidenced on one side by the impossibility for those subjected to them to resignify them, and on the other side by the sovereign efficacy of those who wield them. This split parallels a split in the ontological status of white and black subjects, as theorized by contemporary philosophers of race. The idea that performative effects of words never change carries with it the danger of segregated possibilities for performative efficacy, and a notion of existential freedom that is fraught with the colonialist practices - the sovereign efficacy - of whiteness.

Being Black negates the 'ex' of existence. Being Black has been reduced to facticity...As Black, I am the very obstacle to my own metastability and transphenomenal being. As Black, I am not a project at all. Hence, within the framework of the white imaginary, to be Black and to be human are contradictory terms (Yancy 235).

Both whites and blacks try to claim "just me" status, which is impossible in this country, as exemplified in instances when one is caught up 'driving while black' or 'shopping while black' (Yancy 236). It is easier for (normative, unmarked) whites to claim "just me" status, and more dangerous for blacks to do so (honorary whiteness can be revoked from those who live in the belly of the beast (Yancy 236). Black celebrities, intellectuals, creative types often say, I just

want to be considered an artist, journalist, etc, without consideration of my being black.

Commentators also speak in terms of this model of transcendence (not just a great black artist but a great American artist, etc). Malcolm X calls this uncle tom ism (McLendon 277). Valued and creative selfhood intimately linked to individualism. “Premature transcendence” attributed to whiteness (Moses 65).

Kumail Nanjiani’s joke speaks to the desire to transcend racialized identity, though he does so in a clever way that retains the absurdity of racial identity and turns it on the racist: he describes arriving in Orange County for a show, “which we all know from Real Housewives of Orange County”...they have a reputation for being closed minded, so he was a little apprehensive. 10 seconds after he gets out of his car a guy pulls up and yells out of his car, “Hey Kumar, where's Harold?” And drives away.

...like he'd been waiting around the corner for weeks, like, I can't wait for a brown to come to town!!! (big laugh) I've got a pop cultural reference that will belittle him!

When somebody's racist to me I get so angry, and he was trying to think why, he thinks it's because there are no comebacks, what is he going to do, be racist back? No, because he's not racist, and because most of the people who are racist to him are white, and

...it's very tricky to be racist to white people. What am I going to be like, oh, I'm Kumar? Well, you're the lead in most movies that come out. [big laugh]. That's the only real reason I want to be famous. I want to be so famous that I'm the pop cultural reference that people would make to try and be racist to me, you know? So I would be walking down the street and the car would pull up and be like hey, look at this Kumail Nanjiani. Oh shit, that IS Kumail Nanjiani! [Big laugh, clapping. They LOVE Kumail Nanjiani.] Thank you for knowing my name.

Here Nanjiani turns the mechanical effort to categorize him based on race into an inadvertent recognition of his singularity. Importantly this takes place via the mechanism of fame, a

transcendent charisma that trumps racial hierarchies, or perhaps supplants it with a hierarchy of class. Of course we can't all be famous - this is not a workable solution for the material inequalities and other forms of social hierarchy in which racial hierarchies are embedded.

Comics of color attest to a feeling that they have to answer for their identities; that a social perspective is ascribed to them based on their physical appearance. This social perspective, which presents as facticity, becomes a form of anonymity they have to actively work against. While Kumail's elegant joke skillfully addresses this problem, we should not underestimate the work involved or the difficulty of the task. Crispin Sartwell argues in his essay "Wigger" (in black on black) that ironic play with white stereotypes of black people is lost on most white hip hop audiences. A comic of some note was invited to be the "featured lesbian" in a show entitled "one of each" at the Eugene Mirman Comedy Festival, a show so named as to satirize the crass demographic orientation of comedy shows at mainstream festivals, but she declined, because she was worried about being pigeonholed by those who were blind to the critique intended by the satire, or whose entrenchment in the conventions of mass marketing made them disinclined to accept it. Her concern suggests that the perils of pigeonholing are greater for those who inhabit marked identities, and that irony isn't considered sufficient insulation from this marking.

Butler suggests that the sovereign efficacy attributed to hate speech in the legal model of performativity espoused by the Critical Race Theorists supposes a citizen who is able to carry out intentions, able to bring an intended reality into being by speaking it. She links this to a liberal model of citizenship that doesn't take into account the diffuse and multiple nature of contemporary power (as theorized by Foucault) (80-81). She argues that theorists such as

MacKinnon seek to recuperate this outmoded model of citizenship for women, African-Americans, and other historically marginalized groups.

Butler cites Foucault's "anti-voluntarist account of power", in which he suggests we refrain from asking what is the aim of the subject as we currently conceive it, rather "studying power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in its real and effective practices" (Butler 79). Contrary to this, prosecuting someone for hate speech locates the power of racist speech and the social reproduction of racism in the isolated act, in the power of the speaker and the injury of the target. The speaker is cast as sovereign and the target is cast as lacking the power required for full linguistic citizenship (80-81).

Interestingly, intention, or, specificity of meaning, is precisely what the joker withholds. The conjectural nature of the speaker's position is, moreover, what makes joking work in a variety of contentious contexts - it allows a position to be advanced while leaving an opening for retreat. Hence the common defense, previously discussed, that racist speech is "just a joke".

However, it is arguable that certain contexts - institutional contexts rife with hate speech, pornographic contexts, perhaps - are sovereign for all intents and purposes. In seeking to fix the meanings of certain utterances, it seems that theorists such as MacKinnon are seeking to keep empowered people from using a classic "weapon of the weak"⁹. It is disingenuous, she seems to argue, to fail to acknowledge the power one has to define the social context within which meaning takes shape. In John Jackson's analysis we see speakers of racist discourse making use of the same evasive techniques deployed by speakers of subaltern status. Equivocation, when it comes from people who are powerfully positioned, seems designed to guard the borders of a sphere of impunity, a latitude of cavalier enjoyment of saying whatever you choose without regard to its effects. MacKinnon's argument can be seen as trying to pin down, to fix the

⁹ See Scott for further discussion of the evasive codes of humor.

meanings of these words, and thus hold representations and their speakers accountable for their effects.

Interestingly, Michael Richards, who was trying very hard to produce exactly the effects the Critical Race Theorists describe, failed in a major, laughable way¹⁰. Discussion of the incident, among downtown comics, focused on what a colossal failure it was. If by any chance you missed seeing it, among the things he said were, “50 years ago we’d have you hanging upside down with a fork up your ass”. He then proceeded to yell “he’s a nigger”, over and over, as his hecklers exited the room. Watching this performance, it’s a textbook illustration of what Critical Race Theorists define as hate speech. He desperately wanted those two men to just stop talking, and in an effort to accomplish that aim, and to reestablish himself as the only authorized speaker in the room, he reached for an available weapon in a cultural repertoire of linguistic violence. His feelings about people of color, whatever they may be, weren’t really the topic at hand. What was at hand was the audience member’s unwillingness to accept what Richards thought by rights should be an asymmetrical power relation.

Comics who had seen the video cast the effort as glaringly unsuccessful. Per their analysis, generously peppered with eye-rolling, Richards’ tantrum signaled a total failure of his authority and power as a performer. A colossal failure on his part, in particular, in the task of performing comedy¹¹. He was trying to shut up a heckler and he picked the worst way to do it,

¹⁰ It is important to note here, in the interest of clarity, that Richards never claimed that he was being “ironically” racist. Nor can I see how such an interpretation would be possible.

¹¹ There seems to be total agreement on this, in spite of the unfortunate fact that you can hear people laughing in the video. Dave Chappelle also made some interesting comments on the incident, during a set he subsequently performed at the Laugh Factory. He says, “all I can think about, standing on this stage, is Kramer going nuts...I learned from that that I’m only about 20% black, and 80% comic. Because the black part of me was like, you motherfucker. And then the comic in me was like, Don’t let them break you, Kramer! Hang in there, Kramer!...You know he was thinking, I’ll get them next time. There isn’t gonna be a next time.” I like the bit a lot, I feel he defuses the force of Richards’ words, laughing all the way through this performance of his own emotional response, and also portraying Richards himself as a joke by refusing the respect of even referring to him by his real name -

the way least likely to get the crowd on your side. The question of his beliefs was of minimal relevance and interest. Their perception was that his relationship to those words was best construed in terms of their effects, not their intentions.

Comics have an interesting relationship to the question of intention. They sometimes seem a little bored by it, or reluctant to discuss it. Perhaps this stems from a desire to preserve the power at the core of the joke - the power of what is hidden, not articulated. Jokes call attention to the conjectured positionality of the speaker, but the joke is no longer a joke if this position is pinned down, explicated. A joke has to have some indeterminacy. The position nonetheless exists, and is important. Their implicit critique of “political correctness” rests on the idea that it conceals ideas and feelings that lurk beneath the surface of language. Language is produced by a knowing subject, with an agenda, but this subject is also constituted in language, strategically (or symptomatically) deploying tools in a socially constructed linguistic repertoire.

Butler and the Critical Race Theorists agree that the performative force of hate speech is socially and historically constructed. "The Austinian subject speaks *conventionally*, that is, it speaks in a voice that is never fully singular" (Butler 25). Butler argues that this introduces an additional difficulty into the effort to reconcile theories of performativity with legal frameworks, as legal frameworks deal in individual culpability, thus mystifying the actual social origins of performative efficacy (Butler 52).

It seems it is not the right to equivocate about one’s intentions that is really at issue, since such equivocation is also a defense used by disempowered groups, often to productive effect (Scott). It seems that what is at stake is willingness to use a power that is not acknowledged.

But the focus on specific words, while theoretically suspect in the sense that it tells a limited

instead calling him “Kramer” after his character on Seinfeld. He also takes it as a given that civilized people will never give the man another show. This clip is also viewable on YouTube.

story of how power works and thus simplifies a complex process, doesn't necessarily have to be about intention. It can also be a way of recognizing the specific history that has accrued to this word at this point; it could be an opening for discussion of the complexities of social responsibility. Intention is ultimately a red herring. It is undecidable. The goal of hate speech legislation, it seems, is to arrive at a social consensus that the effects of this speech are so well-established that as a citizen you are accountable for being aware of these effects and for not creating or facilitating them. This idea is analogous in some sense to legal injunctions against drinking and driving. When drivers drink they are more likely to cause accidents; they are thus culpable even though such accidents don't happen every time.

Speakers are responsible for "negotiating the legacies of usage that constrain and enable" their speech (Butler 27). Per Leonard Harris, "the ultimate meaning of racism lies in its social effects" (Moses 60); therefore scholars such as E. Nathaniel Gates support a "symbolic system model" that "foregrounds actors and practices rather than noxious attitudes," shifting the conversation away from emotions and intentions (Moses 61). From a materialist perspective,

Racism can exist without conscious aims and purposes. This is particularly evident when racism assumes an institutionalized character. Here what is important is not racist *intent* but rather the *impact* of racism...This is why much of the legal discussion around affirmative action often gets bogged down when the matter of demonstrating intent is presupposed as salient...institutional racism overrides the notion of social atomism and methodological individualism, where individual action is thought to be at the source of racism as social practice (McLendon 286).

Zach Galifianakis' joke forces the audience to admit to their own disavowed knowledge, forcing them to admit complicity or collusion in the public secret of racism. The question of intention causes the meaning to regress to individual definition, but the meaning is in fact socially constructed. The reaction of the audience - a mix of laughter and discomfort - indexes

the existential ambiguity of racialized subjects. In successful cases of “ironically racist” jokes, we see the audience provoked to thoughtfully reflect on the ways in which performed identities are embedded in social context. This is precisely what Willett argues comedy is good at.

MacKinnon’s argument, if linked to the question of intention, allows the equivocating racist to position him or herself as misunderstood and unfairly persecuted. However small the gap may be between the absolute, sovereign performativity of hate speech as rendered by the Critical Race Theorists and its functioning in everyday life - and social science suggests that it is smaller than most caucasians realize - it opens up a space for a discourse of counter-victimization.

"Racist is the new nigger," says Riz Rollins, the writer, DJ, and KEXP personality. "For white people, the only word that begins to approximate the emotional violence a person of color experiences being called a nigger from a white person is 'racist.' It's a trigger for white people that immediately conjures pain, anger, defensiveness—even for white people who are clearly racist. 'Racist' is now a conversation stopper almost like that device where you can skew a conversation by comparing someone to Hitler. It's an automatic slur. And only the sickest racists will own up to the description." (Graves).

The nice thing about separating effects from intention is that it allows white people to apologize, and also to be not so defensive. Willett raises this when she casts bad faith as a question of mechanicity, characterized by unawareness rather than ill will. Humor is a different form of social censure and one that is hard to argue with, one that gives less of a position to argue from. When one is being laughed at one suddenly bears the burden of standing in an unstable spot; one loses one’s bearings or one’s authority to frame the situation. Butler argues for the importance of creating new grounds of authority, "producing legitimation [that will make speech effective] in new and future forms" (Butler 41).

Consonant with the need for grounded social relationships that Willett, echoing West, emphasizes, it seems many comics are actually more interested in the question of responsibility than intention. Willet argues for the importance of empathy, and the power of comedy to conjure it. The question then becomes, why would you choose to hurt someone's feelings? Some of the popular discussion around the effects of hate speech, surrounding the recent *Girls* controversy and recent episodes of Marc Maron's podcast featuring Todd Glass and Anthony Jeselnik, are promising in this respect - these discussions begin to earnestly describe and interrogate the pain these words can produce, and acknowledge that the power of the words comes from a history we would prefer not to repeat.

It is important to raise the point that the intentionality that the comic withholds is also that which he or she draws attention to, as exemplified in Zak's joke, and discussed in the previous chapter. Relating to the comic's conjectured perspective is at times made difficult for the audience, but at the same time they feel compelled (because they are in the room, because the joke structure presents a puzzle, because they paid five dollars) to stay engaged; they feel they have to figure out that relationship¹².

It is also important to note that a great deal of charismatic power of comics comes from successfully breaking taboos. The prohibition on racist speech combined with the instability, contested nature, unspeakability and of what it connotes, gives it an almost magical power. The mechanics of transgression indicate that white comics can personally profit by challenging the taboos surrounding racist speech.

Even if the intention of the comic is understood within the audience to be non-racist - to be simply taking an ironic or absurdist stance to what is vaguely felt to be an overwhelmingly

¹² There will be more in the gender chapter about what compels audiences to stay engaged with or be drawn to certain conjectured perspectives.

complex and poorly theorized social problem, perhaps in some vague way reacting to, or protesting, the misery...the comic accrues a social power in proportion to that which he or she battles. Forming a relationship of alliance or affiliation or desire with the conjectured subjectivity of the comic does not rest upon a literal reading or translation of the joke's meaning, or attributing a rich set of content to the conjectured perspective. The comic can accrue charismatic authority simply by asserting a certain structural relationship to a particular discourse: in the case of taboo, a willingness to transgress it, an ability to manipulate it to his or her own ends, suggests an alluring sort of social power and discursive authority.

White comics are particularly well-positioned to profit from this transgression, as their subjectivity, as previously discussed, is more likely to be fraught with what appears to be a "premature transcendence" - an inflated appearance of dynamism that comes from wielding unmarked forms of social power. That this subjectivity holds an allure is indicated by the troubling circulation of ironically racist statements, to the extent that, I would argue, they have become somewhat routinized, and the Socratic dimension of their irony defused.

Journalist Alyssa Rosenberg connects Lester Bangs' 1979 Village Voice article, "The White Noise Supremacists", to the discussion surrounding Lesley Arfin's tweet. In this commentary on the prevalence of racist language and imagery in NYC's late 70s punk scene, Bangs describes a thoughtless indifference to the enduring meaningfulness and consequent hurtfulness of racist speech, among white punks who employed it as pure aggression, or transgression. From their comfortable (if disavowed) position as members of a dominant majority, they were able to view racist speech simply as something that got a rise out of people, out of more complacent members of the establishment of which they were a part (Bangs 1979).

The irony Reeve refers to, and Bangs illustrates, is of a variety that Mark Crispin Miller describes as “prophylactic irony” (Miller 15). In contrast to irony employed as a provocation, as discussed in the previous chapter, prophylactic irony is a sedimented stance in relation to repeated exposure to paradox. Miller describes it as characteristic of a culture steeped in the aesthetics of television, which juxtaposes rapid-fire, decontextualized, often contradictory images, with an intensity and volume that breeds exhausted disaffection¹³. Television moreover presents these images in a tone of self-mockery that welcomes the viewer, makes him or her part of a knowing, superior group. This ironic stance has caught on because of “widespread” “self-disgust” (15) - normal human problems seem ludicrous when compared to the super-people one sees on TV (16). Per Miller, “no contrast, however violent, could jolt TV’s over-seasoned audience, for whom discontinuity, disjointedness, are themselves the norm” (Miller 13). TV audiences are “protected by the sense of their own knowingness” (Miller 14). This disengaged, ironic stance, what Miller describes as a “corrosive cynicism”, is particularly reviled as a cultural style of contemporary youth¹⁴, echoed in Neil Postman and other theorists of popular culture and civil society (Miller 15).

¹³ Miller’s description here evokes that of another cultural critic, Dick Hebdige, describing the aesthetics of punk in the late 1970s. Hebdige argues that the violent contrasts in punk imagery were intended to thwart interpretation, to put non-initiates at a distance. It is interesting to note, then, in relation to the present discussion, that subsequent works in cultural studies have documented the ease with which mass culture has appropriated and commodified such imagery, repackaging the seemingly radical as merely “edgy”.

¹⁴ Commenters on Arfin’s post also pointed out that she had worked for *Vice Magazine*, a publication targeted at a “hipster” demographic, that had previously been criticized for publicly making racist statements. There is some discussion of this in N+1’s *What Was the Hipster*. The book’s editors argue that these racist statements are most likely a reaction to a perceived prissiness in politically correct US culture, and suggests some of the statements are intended as pranks, rather than sincere. This converges with the magazine’s overall aesthetic: “In contrast to older and gentler downtown style guides like Paper magazine, Vice shuns the Nirvana generation’s wounded sense of responsibility, instead embracing a frat-boy crudity and ethnic stereotypes. Think of it as a lad magazine for the Williamsburg set” (Grigoriadis 2003). I am arguing that this brand of (prophylactic) irony is quite distinct from the irony of the downtown comics, but their convergence in a shared cultural milieu is also worth considering. “If you think Vice is misogynistic, then you are a self-centered white woman” said Sarah Silverman, a comedian (and Jimmy Kimmel’s girlfriend). ‘Because Vice is so much more. It harshly makes fun of men, women, all races, nerds,

Prophylactic irony shields its wearers from the infection of involvement, and the contaminant of commitment. It is...the knee-jerk skeptical ethos that had, by the close of the twentieth century, come to permeate American culture both high and low. What the silver-lining crowd hoped September 11 had banished from the land was this shrugging sense of detachment - a bargain basement version of existentialism, in which not caring is the height of hip (Strange Bedfellows 198).

It is said to breed a shortsighted self-involvement, an insularity and a turning away from public life.

While the ironic provocations described in the previous chapter have certain formal affinities to the aesthetics of contemporary televisual culture as Miller describes them - in particular, they are characterized by contrasting signals of a certain jolting quality - televisual aesthetics fail to recuperate the viewer into a thoughtful, active, creative relationship with the subject matter - a reconciliation of seeming paradox in what we might fairly call the Socratic mode. On the contrary, the defensive quality of the prophylactic-ironic stance is reminiscent of the disengagement Bateson describes as emerging in response to the double bind - exposure to signals so contrary that they frustrate any effort at synthesis, causing the receiver to disengage. Generating such a defensive, already-knowing stance in the audience member or interlocutor would be, for alternative comics, going too far. As the examples in chapters two and three demonstrate, the most valued and interesting pieces work against what is expected in such a way that the audience is drawn into the work itself, following the comic's implicit train of thought towards a solution to the puzzle. Neither does Miller's characterization fit the experience of

hipsters, the elderly, the short, the tall, the fashionable, the hopeless. It's without boundaries, which is what makes the playing field even.'" (Grigoriadis 2003). For my personal taste, there's a little too much accommodation in Silverman's particular brand of resistance. But I've had the privilege of a good education. Maybe the idea that racism and sexism are anything *but* funny is new to a lot of people, and the more disturbing elements of Silverman's humor indeed generate a needed discourse around this point, as several comics have argued.

downtown comedy audiences, who describe live comedy shows as a place to recuperate from the disconnected, blasé emotions generated by other contemporary cultural experiences.

However, my fieldwork observations suggest that as “ironic racism” becomes conventionalized, the appropriate response gets routinized. The discomfort that calls racialized knowledge or racist presumptions into question dissipates. What was communicated in complex joke structures comes to be communicated in the shorthand of simple racist statements.

Audiences feel more reassured that they’re in on the joke and the meaning becomes, “other people are racist, it’s okay for us to laugh at these words”. Creating a space in which it’s safe to say racist things, because we all know nobody really means it, seems a sad end for this sort of irony. The implication is that it’s absurd to think anyone could *really* be racist, hearkens back to the “it’s just a joke” excuse. When the irony becomes routine, it takes on the quality of prophylactic irony - a casual, thoughtless, of-course-I-didn’t-mean-it quality, that lends plausibility to the evasions and equivocations that inevitably follow when someone using weaponized language a la Michael Richards is caught in the act. Some comics have noticed this trend and voiced concern about it, including Sarah Silverman in a recent article in Time.

Unfortunately, the moment of discomfort and anxiety produced by the initial ironic provocation does not guarantee the emergence of a coherent, progressive discourse around race. Perhaps Mulkay and Raskin lend insight into this, as they argue that the humorous realm is marked off from the serious realm in significant ways. But I think it is more a question of the absence of supporting evidence or discourse, especially given that comics would hang around shows and talk about various social occurrences, onstage and off, much more analytically. The mechanics that facilitate the trickery Zak’s joke effects also allow the meaning to remain covert, undecided. It’s possible for this covert meaning to present as problematic and dangerous enough

that the frame of comedy gets punctured. But there is no guidance as to what to do with the anxiety - that is not the ironist's role. Are there limits on what irony can articulate? You can force people to admit they know public secrets, but you can't really tell them what their level of responsibility is. Hutcheon raises this point. And as the irony gets routinized people see it less as something, or as indicating something, that necessitates further discussion.

My tip-off that irony had become routine was the fact that some of the jokes were unfunny, seemed lazy, drew on worn or obvious stereotypes, were being said off-the-cuff and without much attitude or focused attention on the part of either speaker or listener. Racism intended to be ironic was increasingly performed in a sort of shorthand. This happened during an interchange between a black and a white comic during a show at the Bowery Ballroom, resulting in a bit that most of the audience, familiar with the conventions, was probably able to decode, but which the African-American security guard found shocking. He just paced around angrily.

Here intention presents as already-known, or not worth worrying about, because the utterances have become more commonplace. The discomfort, the long build of tension preceding the laugh in the earlier, more experimental provocations gets attenuated, as does the laugh. The whole thing gets cheaper, is reduced almost to an inside joke. These racist statements come to signify fairly simply the opposite of what is said, but retain some of the social power of what is said, a condition Hutcheon describes. The dangerous result is to reduce taboo material to its status as taboo, engaging in indiscriminate transgression, without interrogating why the taboo might exist, whose interests it serves or doesn't serve.

Making such jokes then comes to constitute a form of bad faith - the irony serves to distance oneself from the performance, and thus disavow responsibility - postures as a critique

but still clings to some of the power of the original statement. This is perhaps a transformed power - the comic still retains the power of his or her positionality, taking a cavalier approach to racism, flaunting their being able to manipulate it to their own ends and advantage, unproblematically, or, such that the problem accrues to others and not them. Hate becomes taboo, but it is still about who can say and who can't, who can manipulate language and who can't.

Reeve is correct to point out that there is no articulated gender politics in Arfin's post, but the question of gender I think is crucial in understanding - in fact it is formative of - Arfin's mode of self-defense against the initial criticism of *Girls*. Prophylactic irony is closely aligned with an evasive, retrenching white masculinity, with which Arfin has no doubt had to contend in a competitive industry. As a female writer for television at the early stages of her career, she also occupies an "outsider within" position. The *form* of her tweet is a form of cultural capital that works against the liability of femininity. The text of her apology, "The last thing I want is girls vs. girls", moreover, seems to indicate a feeling that an untenable situation has pitted struggling people against one another. In one sense her tweet fails to acknowledge the differential privilege conferred upon her by whiteness; in another it reflects her relative disadvantage as a female writer, and perhaps a perception that this is not acknowledged by the show's critics.

It's also interesting to wonder whether the same "realness" credited to *Girls* makes it vulnerable to criticism, in the sense that it is positioned as articulating an outsider perspective, thus conferring a sense that the discussion (between the show's writers and the cultural critics who seek to hold them to account) is happening among equals, in terms of both an accountability to a shared experience of discrimination, and a proximity that makes it accessible to critics in the

way shows that fit more into established genres may not. The underrepresentation of women of color on a show like *Seinfeld*, which incidentally launched Michael Richards to superstardom, didn't generate a similar controversy¹⁵. Such underrepresentation on a more mainstream show just isn't news. It may also be a strategic choice to challenge *Girls*' claims to "realness" - a specific, hip kind of realness, operating in the moment of co-optation between marginality and professional success.

While stand-up comics are highly skilled at manipulating the mechanics of performativity in this context, they may not be aware of how they work. In particular, they may misunderstand what kinds of power they are mobilizing as they turn abjection into charisma, they may have an inflated sense of their own outsider status that isn't supported by the privilege they possess or forms of power they wield, whether they be economic power, or racial or gender status. Particularly in the precarious and competitive entrepreneurial work context comics and audience members occupy, individuals may be highly attuned to what they perceive to be their own obstacles, and isolated from experiences that might help them understand the struggles of others. One can hope that better dialogue, which the comics' Socratic provocations might help to elicit, might help to remedy this. The complexities of intersectionality, and claims to marginality, will be further explored in the following chapters.

¹⁵ Interestingly, Mike Trapp, a writer for college humor, made the same point about the different treatment of these shows in a post on March 6th 2013, entitled, "If People Talked About *Seinfeld* Like They Talk About *Girls*"

Chapter 5 – Why Women Aren't Funny

Q: How many feminists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: Oh, is that supposed to be funny?

For me this joke recalls, with alacrity, my first heady encounter with feminist theory, at a New England liberal arts college in the mid-1990s. I landed there still sporting the shaved head and combat boots I'd worn in high school. I was venturing into creative territory from which I'd always, in subtle ways, felt excluded; I began to acquire a remedial musical education in a queer-oriented punk band, and was one of few women in the male-dominated film program. I was armed with a curious, somewhat contradictory combination of tools, which included a collection of Ani DiFranco records and a repertoire of masculine performance strategies I had self-consciously borrowed from male friends, all of whom seemed to move through life with an ease I envied.

In that intellectual atmosphere identity politics were having their heyday, and the frameworks they provided helped me understand the frustrating occurrences of my daily life in a new way. They gave sudden and gratifying direction to a militant spirit that had heretofore been fueled by many years of unfocused resentment. I learned to prefer awkward language to exhausted language, steeped myself in an aesthetics of unpleasure. Years later, as a scholar of

comedy, I spend what even I sometimes think is an inordinate amount of time describing why the jokes the people around me enjoy are not in fact funny.

All of which is to say, I and many of my dearest friends are very much the intended butts of the above joke. Still, I've always liked it, because it so pithily illustrates two important, and imbricated, popular conceptions: That women aren't funny, and politics aren't funny, and, ergo, that the least funny thing you can do is put them together.

The stereotype that women aren't funny has remarkable - one might say mind-boggling - staying power (Hitchens 2007, Kohen 2012). And in fact this stereotype has some basis in the normative performance of gendered roles, as documented by scholars in fields ranging from social science to psychology to literary studies. Instances of joking documented by social scientists indicate that "...a male is more often the joke teller, whereas a female is typically in the position of reacting to humor" (McGhee 1979, p. 201; quoted in Purdie 1993, p. 128). Moreover, as Purdie observes, "the general capacity to produce and to receive joking - the possession of 'a sense of humor' - is conventionally constructed as a male attribute" (Purdie 1993, 128).

This tendency, documented in the realm of everyday life, for men to dominate the realm of comic performance, extends to the sphere of professional comedy, where women form a small minority (Kohen 2012). This dearth of female comics extends to the downtown scene as well. Downtown audiences comprise roughly equal numbers of men and women, and women make a strong professional showing in various support positions such as producers, managers, and the development staff of various media outlets. But the vast majority of comics are men. If a woman performs at a show she is often the only one, or perhaps one of two, in a lineup of 6 or 7.

Many of the comics I interviewed were at a loss to explain this disparity. Several male comics told me that women often self-select out of the scene, and went so far as to lament,

unprovoked, that their female friends weren't performing enough, or that they were sidelining performing or writing while they pursued other careers. It is also common to say that women are underrepresented on the writing staffs of sit-coms and talk shows simply because they don't apply for those kinds of jobs. While male comics acknowledge stereotypes about female comics, they tend not to feel that they account for the low numbers of women on bills or in other professional positions. Such preconceptions are outweighed, they argue, by the novelty of seeing a female comic. Precisely because they are less numerous, they argue, female comics stand out among their peers. They are more likely than men to capture the attention of industry scouts and other taste-makers, and, "if they're funny", to retain it.

Indeed it does seem, in the context of the downtown scene, which celebrates creative, innovative, and even contentious responses to the more stale habits of popular culture, that female comics would provide a welcome breath of fresh air. To the extent that their style or perspective might depart from that of their male counterparts, this departure ought to be welcomed by downtown audiences. Kohen in fact argues that the predominant style in the alternative comedy scene in L.A., which shares certain features with downtown comedy, including a less punchline-oriented, more personal, and more narrative style, is more consonant with historically feminine styles of performance. Moreover, many comics and audience members in the downtown scene have had the privilege, like myself, of a well-rounded liberal arts education that included critical studies of gender. In a context where "everybody knows that racism is wrong", everyone ought also to know that overt forms of sexism are wrong. And yet women continue to appear on the bills of downtown rooms in much smaller numbers than their male counterparts. Why?

As stated in previous chapters, when audiences attentively engage with comedy performances, they peer beyond the manifest content of the spoken text in an effort to arrive at some understanding of, or relationship to, the comic's subjective perspective. Comedy mobilizes a range of intellectual and emotional responses in audience members, acting differently on different subjects. But undoubtedly some of these effects are intense. Comics speak in concrete detail from personal experience, and say things that resonate in personal and often private ways with audience members. They say things that allow audience members to reflect on their own experience - or, more powerfully, on what they may realize for the first time is a shared experience - in new ways. Fans confess, in hushed tones, of falling in love with comics. It is this aspect of the performance that I find most instructive for understanding the gendered nature of the performances and the social context that surrounds them.

I will argue that the comedy performance can be productively theorized as a seduction, and that the dominant mode of this seduction follows, albeit with a few signature twists, a heteronormative pattern of masculine seduction of a feminine target. Comics, for the most part, incite desire in audience members for closeness to and identification with masculine forms of subjectivity and power. This process of seduction creates a sense of relationship, in service of which fans perform various forms of emotional labor. Women in various professional support positions also perform emotional labor, in a context where they have to negotiate professional advancement according to gendered dynamics. This labor is then disavowed in the process of commodification, making it look like comics created something out of nothing.

The ethnographic sections in this chapter are drawn from evenings spent at Rififi, a bar that began hosting comedy shows in 2002, and by its closing in 2008 had become a major

downtown destination, hosting one or more shows a night¹. The conversations, performance vignettes, and atmospheric descriptions below are composites, drawn from many months of research, but are presented as though they took place on a single evening, so as to give the reader an impression of the feel of a typical such evening, and the connections between performances and the surrounding social context.

On a warm evening in July, the crowd is packed, hot and close, into the back room at Rififi, their drinks sweating in their hands. It's towards the end of the show, when comics trickle in after performing at other venues, and regulars stop by just to see who's around. People slip in and out the back door, and the room is relaxed and loose, but attentive, until a lone voice, female, pipes up from the middle of the room. And then pipes up again, talking loudly about something entirely unrelated. A wave of irritation washes over the audience. Stephen, who performs there regularly, is onstage, and he addresses her directly. She doesn't seem to notice him right away, and when she finally does her prolonged, semi-intelligible response suggests that she's very drunk. Stephen just nods and lets her talk. When she's done he cocks his head to one side, gestures in her direction, and, with bemused, exaggerated politeness, says,

“If anyone here likes to come on people when they fall asleep, may I recommend that person in an hour?”

The crowd explodes with laughter. Absolutely explodes. When it finally dies down she murmurs a response.

Stephen regards her with a contented admixture of grace, curiosity, and contempt. Like a well-fed cat with a sense of humor might eye a drunk, belligerent mouse.

¹ See chapter 2

² Additional critical reflection on this moment will be provided later in the chapter.

³ “Shaggy dog” stories are jokes that have a very long setup, that results in a minimal, intentionally disappointing punchline. The essence of this sort of joke is that a practical joke has been played on the audience, who patiently

“What was that?”

She hesitates, then, quietly, “Nothing”

Stephen chuckles. “No, I didn’t think so”².

Susan Purdie points out that the Symbolic Law that comedy manipulates is historically constructed as a phallic form of power, associated with the proper performance of masculinity. Amanda Sinclair uses seduction as a framework for understanding masculine exertions of power in her analysis of presenter-audience dynamics in the context of leadership training seminars. She documents differences in the way male and female presenters are received by audiences, and concludes that “Seductive scripts available to, and between, men and women differ” (280).

Purdie’s analysis focuses largely on humor that affirms established mores, reinstating the socially grounded authority of speech by marking transgression as outside of this authorized realm, and simultaneously reaffirming the authority of the comic to articulate and enforce these mores. Much of the work she analyzes thus differs from downtown comedy, which treats social mores as much more open to disruption and critique. Significantly, however, Purdie also argues that “shaggy dog” stories and other “anti-jokes” are “actually an aggression against the Audience, no matter how playfully offered” (Purdie 39)³. As documented in previous chapters, Downtown

² Additional critical reflection on this moment will be provided later in the chapter.

³ “Shaggy dog” stories are jokes that have a very long setup, that results in a minimal, intentionally disappointing punchline. The essence of this sort of joke is that a practical joke has been played on the audience, who patiently listened to this long story only to be delivered a “groaner”. Interestingly, the payoff of the joke often comes from a disattended subplot of the “Shaggy dog” story, which the audience bears some responsibility for having failed to recognize as important. This structure is consonant with the method of humor elaborated in Raskin’s GTVH, but is elaborated over such an extended period of time (as compared to the average) that the emotional reaction of the audience tends to be, “Why did you put me through that, and why did I let you?” I suspect these sorts of jokes are mobilizing the frustrating emotions associated with the pressures of contemporary, first-world time-management, but this is conjecture on my part.

comedy, which often plays with audience expectations in order to create awkward moments, certainly has an aggressive edge to it.

The links between this aggressive quality and the performance of idealized masculinity aren't always readily apparent, particularly to comics themselves. As previously stated, comics tend to think of themselves as social outsiders to some extent, as occupying a sort of underdog position in relation to normative ideals of personhood. As one comic told me, "Muscles aren't funny" on a male comic. Male comics will also frequently perform queered, antiheroic, or juvenile personas, positioning themselves in terms of the ways they fail to measure up to conventional standards of male adulthood. There is often a boyish, playful quality to their aggressions, framed as both reckless and hapless, a disregard for safety rather than a quest for power. I was told that any effort to position yourself as somehow "above" your audience, to talk down to them in any way, is deadly. Comics are much less likely to do this than they are to emphasize their own marginality or abjection, even to contaminate themselves with references to the scatological. As one comic put it, "fart jokes are funny".

They're aggressive nonetheless. Youdell makes important theoretical links between everyday microaggressions and the mechanics of seduction, drawn from her ethnographic study of high school students. She describes interactions between girls and boys that take the form of provocative flirtations, in which the male student acts as the aggressor, physically moving female students, or even hitting them - in short, acting upon the bodies of female students in a way that seizes control⁴. Male students' efforts to establish rapport across the social division of gender

⁴ Such aggressive interactions call to mind Bateson's essay on play, in which the difference between a playful, mock-attack and a serious attack is a question of framing. The punchline to the joke that leads this chapter can be viewed as an effort to contest appropriate behaviors on the level of framing.

thus involves an aggressive testing of boundaries, and the female students respond in ways that largely accommodate this aggression.

Youdell links these interactions to enduring practices that come to definitively characterize gendered identities. She observes that, “Overall, the girls sit in ways that minimize the space taken up by their bodies. Their postures cite and inscribe a discursively constituted heterosexual femininity in which the feminine body is small, tidy, restrained and deferential” (Youdell 255). By contrast, “Boys’ bodies are not compacted like those of the girls, knees are not pressed together or hugged to the chest. Unlike the feminine body, the masculine body does not need to be reigned in or controlled—it is in control (Youdell 256).

Stephen’s containment of the heckler, above, which is gendered in its content, thus also draws upon a gendered pattern of interaction, to predictable effects. The process of seduction that runs as an undercurrent through the comedy performance converges seamlessly with an exertion of power that is masculine in its style, and further grounded in his heckler’s relative lack of the historically masculine ideal of self-possession.

The capacity to seduce doesn’t converge nearly as neatly or automatically, for women, with the successful exertion of comedic authority. Popular writing on comedy frequently voices a sense that, in women, funniness and sexual attractiveness are, or are generally perceived by audiences to be, antithetical (Kohen, Sweet, Rivers). Female comics also attest to being advised, by male comics, that they should be careful not to dress in a way that is “too sexy”, for fear that they will “distract” the audience from their work⁵. This converges with ethnographic data drawn from various professions, suggesting that femininity, and female sexuality, often presents as

⁵ Chelsea Peretti, a female comic whose work, interestingly, often pairs self-deprecating reflections on dating with an aggressive style of delivery, has led sets with, in a highly ironic tone, “I’ve been told by male comics not to dress too sexy, so I just wanted to apologize to you guys, I know this is really distracting for you” **[check for exact quote]**.

irreconcilable with professional authority (Rucker). As I will continue to argue throughout this chapter, heteronormative masculine sexuality does not seem to present the same overt conflict with comedic authority, and in fact may even enhance it.

Women may also encounter obstacles when attempting to mobilize the transgressive, creatively individuated qualities of comedy – the proclivity to speak about taboo subjects from a grounding in personal experience, in a way that balances transgression with maintaining trust. Women are subject to different, and more highly contested, obscenity standards than men, making it difficult for them to strike the “proper” balance of transgression and comfort. Jacqueline Novak does a joke about how she thinks a woman shouldn’t perform oral sex on her birthday. “Not to criticize women who find it empowering, or claim to”, she says, but she thinks it’s sad, on the day you took your first breath, to have “a mouth full of genitals”. I personally find the joke very funny (her delivery is much better than mine), and I think it speaks very eloquently to the suffocating nature of gendered forms of repression. But the range of responses to this kind of material is striking. Male comics have reacted to the joke in absolute horror and revulsion. At the other end of the spectrum, one woman went so far to as to say that she thought it was “cheating” for a woman to talk about sex onstage in front of a largely male audience, because it is such an “unknown quantity” that it seems like it’s really original when it isn’t. So female comics are at times confronted with a double bind when they attempt to speak about personal experiences of alienation, particularly when these are fraught with gendered forms of violence, because they are simultaneously so violent that they’re repellent, and so routinely experienced by some audience members that to observe and comment upon them is considered uncreative or hacky. There’s a stereotype that speaks to this conundrum, about mediocre female comics doing “tampon jokes” – which is to say that they do jokes that are only relevant to half

the audience (alienating to the other half), and moreover really belong in the private rather than the public sphere. So fart jokes are funny, but tampon jokes are decidedly not. While it's arguable whether farts or tampons are more gross, it's clear which has the power to permeate the public sphere.

A female comedy fan described stand-up to me in a way that parallels Youdell's attention to the aggressive nature of the interaction, and made it clear that she felt the standardized mode of performance was something she, as a woman, didn't have access to:

There's something really aggressive about doing stand-up. And maybe that's the frustration, too, I feel like I could perform in that way if the method didn't feel so attacky. And so violent. It's violent I think.

Sinclair also notes the power of these performances to interpellate audience members into particular subject positions. She describes in particular the highly charismatic performance of one presenter, by whom she herself was transformed into a "fawning groupie" (Sinclair 267). I spoke to a comic who said that he sometimes receives obscene fan mail, and, regardless of the gender of the fan, he is invariably positioned as male in the imagined sexual act⁶.

It appears, then, that ironic provocations, the transgression of manners, and the willingness to engage in socially risky behavior are modes of interaction that overlap in masculine socialization and effective comedic performance. Women may experience more censure for acting upon an audience in this way, or simply may not be as frequently socialized to engage people in this way. While women as well as men have some access to masculinity as a cultural paradigm or performance trope, differently embodied subjects have different levels and

⁶ Much of the fan mail he described is clearly jokingly obscene - indicating a passionate attraction, but also simply employing sex as an edgy metaphor. Regardless of whether the imagined sex act is intended to be taken literally, it illuminates the gendered nature of the performer-fan relationship the comic performance instills.

types of access to it, and are thus differently able to mobilize it to position themselves as authoritative speakers in relation to audience members.

Gender is, of course, a moving target. The details of the convergence between the enduring efficacy of masculinity, and its performance and reproduction in the realm of everyday life, is the subject of the ethnographic investigation in the rest of this chapter.

After the show everyone spills out of the back room, into the bar and onto the sidewalk out front, and lingers. I sit against one wall of the narrow front room with Jack, a congenial, outgoing comic in his mid-30s. Jack was recently hired as a staff writer for a late-night talk show, on occasion of which he relocated to New York after two years in LA. I see him hanging out late after shows fairly often, usually with a college friend who is also a comedy writer, and recently divorced.

Jack asks me how the dissertation is going as we lazily, covertly, people-watch the other patrons. Across from us a woman in her mid-20s leans against the wall and plays with her phone. She's strikingly pretty, unusually tall with short dark hair, and dressed casually except for a pair of red alligator heels. She isn't a regular, but I've seen her here several times in the past month or so. Every time someone passes by she looks up surreptitiously, then looks back down at the phone again. After a while an equally pretty friend joins her, and they sip vodka tonics and watch people move in and out of the front door. A comic walks in and they lean towards each other and murmur. Jack is watching them, and he catches me watching him watch them.

"I think you'd be missing something if you didn't look at what goes on out here", he says, scanning the bar, the entryway, the rows of little tables. "Because what goes on out here" - he gestures with his chin towards the back room, where the stage is - "feeds into what goes on in there, and vice versa".

“How so?”

“Well...well, for one thing, I had a manager tell me once that I shouldn't hang out in the bar before or after shows. Actually he told me I shouldn't have any contact at all with people from the audience. He said it would destroy the mystique. He said something about - or he implied, I guess - that it was like a supply and demand issue. Like you would be more desirable if you were harder to get to, if you kept some distance between you and them.”

“Do you think that's true?”

“No” he laughed. He then reconsidered, chewing thoughtfully on his straw. “Well, I don't know. Maybe it is. I don't know if it matters so much in a place like this, where everyone kind of knows each other”.

We were silent for a minute, watching the crowd mill about.

“Here's the thing,” he said. “All these girls come to the shows,” He gestured with his eyes towards the women still standing across from us, now joined by a third friend. “All these girls who are like, 23, 24, who wouldn't have looked at us when we were their age. I mean, we're nerds. But now that we have some success, however minor it may be...Certain girls start coming to shows, and then they start hanging around after shows, and you know...” he pauses. “You just know that they're going to sleep with one of us, and then pretty soon, they're going to sleep with all of us.” He flashes me something between a grin and a wince. “It's so ridiculous. It's terrible, really. We act like we're in high school.”

What Jack describes here, reluctantly, is an economy of desire readily identified by other comics and producers from the scene, and palpably dominant in the social context surrounding

many comedy shows. In the logic of this economy, female desire is often read as incited by and proportional to the professional accomplishments of men⁷.

Dishearteningly, but unsurprisingly, this exchange renders both parties more or less fungible. As another comic, Martin, states:

Sometimes a girl will come up to me after I perform and she'll say she liked it, and I'll think, oh, that's great, she's really interested in what I had to say. And then somebody famous will walk by and all of a sudden I'm talking to the back of her head.

In addition to being nonplussed at the suggestion that he is capable of being outranked by more established comics, Martin seems chagrined as he comes to understand that the woman's interest in him is not entirely personal. He finds it alienating to discover that what he has tried to communicate, as a performer, is not so unique that it can't be reduced to its exchange-value, which is subject to quantitative rather than qualitative assessment. His act has been reduced to the status of a commodity.

A much starker form of this depersonalization occurs at the reciprocal end of this commodified relationship, where fans, particularly young, highly available, female fans, can occupy a rank of almost-negligible exchange-value. This status is evident/encapsulated in the moniker "comedy sluts", which is readily applied to female fans who "sleep with everyone", or whose open performance of feminine heterosexuality suggests that they may be available to "sleep with everyone". These fans occupy the same niche as "groupies", and are treated as similarly disposable.

⁷ This observation was corroborated by another scholar of comedy I spoke to at the biannual conference of the International Society Humor Studies, who, being male, was most likely privy to a different tone of conversation. He told me that during his fieldwork he listened to comics talk at exhaustive length, to himself and each other, about women they'd slept with after shows. What he came to realize, eventually, was that comics weren't telling these stories to brag about their sexual attractiveness, per se, but to brag about what they considered to be an important indicator of their level of comedic talent.

I asked Jack if female comics also hang out after shows, capitalizing on opportunities to sleep with young, impressionable comedy fans. He said that it's different for men and women. I asked why and he said at first that the female comics have boyfriends, more often than male comics. But then he thought about it and disagreed with himself. But, he said, "You don't see them hanging out after the shows in the same way".

Dana works in development for Comedy Central, and also produces the occasional live show. She doesn't perform, but she's hilarious. We worked in the same building for awhile, and she used to take pictures of the union rat, print them out, write my name on them, and tape them to the vending machine for me to find when I arrived at the start of the night shift. She is wedged into a corner next to the DJ booth, flipping through a leatherbound day planner and irritably nursing a pinot grigio. I sneak up next to her and bump her hip with my hip.

"Oh – Hi!!!" She says, with sudden excitement, like all five senses just switched on like a lightbulb. Very charming.

"You're in the crow's nest," I say.

"What?"

"Like on a ship." I squint one eye and hold up an imaginary telescope.

"Oh!" She laughs. "Yes, I am. That's because I don't want to talk to anybody." She cases the room disapprovingly and then suddenly turns back to me. "Wait - I'm sorry, I didn't mean that I didn't want to talk to you."

I laugh. "I should probably have enough social skills to have picked up on that cue, but I don't, and I didn't."

She shakes her head emphatically. "It wasn't a cue, honestly. How are you?"

“Not bad,” I say. I look around. I want her to tell me why she doesn’t want to talk to anybody. I try on a provocation. “It is kind of weird in here, right?” I say. “It’s like...New Year’s Eve.”

“Totally”. She gives a theatrical shudder. “You can taste the desperation.”

I’ve seen fans, both male and female, compete for attention from comics in what seem like fairly urgent ways, suggesting that the atmosphere puts them at a deficit. This makes sense, considering that the comics engage in unilateral speech/performance, inciting desire among audience members who are concealed and anonymous. When they approach face-to-face interaction, they then work from an imbalance and struggle to catch up on a metric of desirability. One fan, who has dated several comics, described this feeling thusly:

Fan: They are seducing you when they are on stage. And then you're already seduced, and then they step off stage, and you're like, “hey”

AJ: You're at a huge imbalance, right?

Fan: *Huuuge* imbalance. You know who they are, you've seen them perform, enormous imbalance.

Given that comics are disproportionately heterosexual men, attention-seeking from this imbalanced fan perspective is most visible, in the public space of the venue, from heterosexual women. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the most expedient tool many of these women, particularly younger women, have at their disposal, is a very overt display of sexual availability, and it is equally unsurprising that this proves to be a double-edged sword. It is interesting to note that, for all the suggestion, in the uneasy reception of comedy performances,

that female sexuality is a private matter, comedy scenesters are quite willing to appropriate it as a matter of public discussion.

One fan related a story of seeing another fan, who was female, trying to get the attention of a male comic. The male comic was not very responsive, and two minutes later, according to my respondent, the fan was in the middle of the floor making out with another woman. This testimony reflects a widespread perception that sexuality is sometimes performed, in inauthentic ways, for attention. Inauthentic pandering, of course, is considered a code red faux pas in this scene.

I recently spoke to another woman, a long-time comedy fan who also worked in the industry, who remembered watching a relationship develop between a lesser-known female comic and a very successful male comic almost 10 years ago, and her comment was, “Those girls know what they’re doing and they’re well rewarded”.

While sexual availability is sometimes criticized as a power-seeking strategy, women have also voiced the concern that, in this atmosphere, female heterosexuality is dangerous to exhibit, because it is a marker of - in essence - having nothing else to exchange. At times women find themselves in the double bind of being the object of both accusations simultaneously. A woman who helped to run a live show with a close friend expressed the anxiety she would feel when her friend would flirt with comics, fearing that she would be assumed to be a “comedy slut”. While she has not had sex with a comedian, she did have sexual contact with one on one occasion, and was accused by a female friend of doing so for professional reasons:

People kind of assumed, I think, that we were both trying to sleep with all the comedians. I'm proud to say I've never had sex with a comedian because I refuse to date a comedian, because I know so many comedians. I hooked up with one, stupidly, and when I started working with this guy [the female friend] was like, it's just because you fucked him, and I'm like, I didn't fuck him, fuck you, don't be jealous, it's nothing to be jealous of. People will fuckin' judge you. I was just like,

no, disassociate myself from any comedians. Don't shit where you eat. She thinks, oh, you're sleeping your way to the top, and that had nothing to do with it. And then I – I don't want to be thought of as a fan girl. I don't. I don't want to sleep with them, I want to listen to them make jokes. It's kind of messed up.

I brought up the topic of “comedy sluts” with another woman who has worked in various support positions, and she jokingly offered to list them all for me by name. She then said that she herself had slept with a few comics over the years, and was terrified of anyone finding out. “I have nightmares about it,” she said.

“But for every comedy slut, there’s a comic who slept with her, right?” I asked.

“Of course” she said. “But they’re men”.

So, female heterosexuality is policed, by threat of loss of face that is very important currency in a scene where “everybody knows everybody”, and professional success rests largely upon an informal status that is constituted by gossip and hearsay. Unfortunately, it seems that those men and women who actively espouse a somewhat progressive gender politics, one that values women for their intellectual and professional accomplishments, misrecognize or downplay the forms of social power that may constrain the behavioral options for “comedy sluts”, and certainly constrain public reception and interpretation of their actions. Male sexuality is not visible in the same way here; it is not under discussion as a performance technique or a status-seeking technique in the same way, even though male comics openly admit to their own experience of a connection between sexual attractiveness and professional success.

“I feel like I always have weird conversations with women in here,” says Dana. “It's like” – she cocks her head to one side and puts on a catty, syrupy voice - “Oh, what do YOU do?”

I laugh and turn my back to the rest of the room. “See that girl in the black dress, talking to Brian?”

“Yeah”

“Ten minutes ago she addressed me as “Cookie”.

She rolls her eyes. “Eewww.”

My experience with comics is that they are inclined to describe almost any social situation as, first and foremost, “awkward”. My own perception is that comics are in fact often very gracious, even precociously gracious, but not always in conventional ways. They may decide at any moment to generate negative experience, as described in chapter three, and often describe fighting the urge to do so as they chat with industry people and make other professional contacts in the social space surrounding shows. I should thus include the caveat that there are a number of reasons why the atmosphere at Rififi would be anxiety-producing for anyone.

But a few female comics went so far as to describe the atmosphere at Rififi as *prohibitively* awkward - enough so that they were disinclined to spend time there after shows, though it was difficult for many of them to pinpoint exactly why. This certainly wasn't the case for all female comics, or all women. But several women who produced female-centric shows also talked about the importance of creating a social space that was welcoming to, and celebrated, female comics, in which performers and fans could interact after shows.

If indeed female comics find the social atmosphere surrounding shows inhospitable, it puts them at a professional disadvantage. Social interaction after shows provides a venue for making connections with producers and other comics, which lead to show bookings and other

work opportunities⁸. Moreover, many comics have told me that the emotional support provided by a network of peers was indispensable to them in arduous decade (on average) they spent working to establish a foothold in the industry. One woman, who described feeling a sense of isolation when she was the only woman in a room full of comics at an open mic, told me, “in this business you absolutely have to have allies”.

Moreover, in the downtown scene, which values a sense of connection and community, social relationships between comics are often on display during performances, to the delight and rapture of audience members. Audiences are sensitive to the kind of energy that comes from seeing relationships among their heroes displayed in front of them, and, moreover, value the downtown comedy community as a whole⁹. Friendly engagement among comics thus enhances all of their status and affective force. Kohen raises a similar point in her chapter on the alternative comedy scene in L.A., in which participants recall that audiences would come back every week to hear the next episode in the ongoing drama of comics’ imbricated personal lives. If indeed, as Kohen suggests, the style of downtown and alternative comedy, which incorporates longer bits more focused on personal narrative, is more hospitable to traditionally feminine performance styles, women’s ability to produce compelling narratives may be compromised if their connection to the heart of the community is tenuous or unclear.

⁸ The extent to which networking possibilities among women are untapped, at least in the context in which I did the bulk of my fieldwork, was driven home to me during a particular show, for which the host had assembled two improvisational teams, one consisting of three men and the other consisting of three women, to compete with one another in a gameshow format. The male team connected much more fluidly, building upon each other’s contributions with a practiced familiarity the female team seemed not to have, though all of the women were experienced comics I had seen around the downtown scene for over a period of several years. At the end of the show, I heard the women saying things to each other like, “it was really great to meet you”. I was surprised that they hadn’t encountered each other long before.

⁹ When *Invite Them Up* did its farewell show at *Rififi* - a three-part series over the course of three consecutive nights - comics’ embeddedness within this particular community was a *lot* of what was on display.

Thus, if women are not entirely comfortable or embedded in the social context, they are both isolated from professional opportunities and deprived of important sources of emotional support. These factors in and of themselves can have marked impacts on careers, and can also have an effect on the performance itself. When I asked one female fan what she “didn’t like” about female comics, she told me, “A lot of them just don’t seem confident”¹⁰.

Dana is writing a novel, and I ask her how it’s going.

“Oh my God, thank you for asking! It’s terrible. Well, it’s not terrible, it’s just that I don’t have a lot of time to work on it”.

Justin, a comic who has been producing some video shorts for a website recently launched by a rival cable network, approaches us and begins to talk, primarily to Dana, about recurring conflicts he is having with an executive at the network who is very hands-on. Per Justin, the executive has been “doing everything in his power to make it unfunny”. He felt the exec was forcing him to write for an imagined audience, having no respect for Justin’s considerable experience writing and performing for actual, live audiences, via which he had cultivated his unique voice. The unique voice for which, ostensibly, he’d been recruited for the project. He then repeated an argument with an editor about the timing of a certain cut, an argument that had less to do with the content of the piece, to Justin’s extreme frustration, than who had the right to make the decision. He called it a pissing contest. He said, to Dana, “I know you understand because you work in that kind of environment. I don’t know how you do it. Honestly I could never do that, full-time”. He’s a polite conversationalist, in some sense,

¹⁰ Confidence, conceived of as a property that just naturally inheres in or is auto-generated by certain individuals, is to my mind one of the most poisonous ideas in American culture.

periodically soliciting our opinion. When he's done ranting he says how nice it is to see us, and walks away.

Dana watches his back retreat in silence. She turns to me. We laugh.

"You were saying?"

"I have no idea", she says. She makes a crack about comics being self-obsessed.

I can't argue with her, but point out that he at least seems, implicitly, to respect and value her professional accomplishments.

"See, I feel like he already went around and told that story to every 22 year old in the room he thought he might want to fuck, and when none of them understood he came and told us."

Dana has a lot to say on the topic of "comedy sluts".

"It's fucked up because there are a lot of people there who valorize the comics like they couldn't do what the comics are doing, like they're just brilliant. Clearly I can't do what they do either, but I can do other things."

After a minute of reflection she shows them some sympathy, and a more structural analysis of their actions. "Well, you know what? They have a job to do too. They give these guys the confidence to keep doing this stuff."

That this sexual availability can be construed as work, work that is essential to the continued operation of the comedy scene's mechanics, is an important and undertheorized point. Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor is a notable exception, which helps map out a continuity between these sexualized forms of interaction, fan appreciation and acceptance, and the professionalized forms of support provided by producers, managers, etc. My intention here is not to conflate these very different types of "work", to suggest that skilled labor such as

producing and managing is indistinguishable from providing comics with sexual attention, or to suggest that the “comedy sluts” are simply very poorly compensated prostitutes¹¹. Many women who are branded as “comedy sluts” may be having a perfectly delightful time, getting exactly what they want out of interactions with comics, and are simply operating in a context where their agency is difficult to recognize.

However, my data suggests that women who occupy these diverse positions negotiate their activities and their status in relation to the material and emotional needs of the performers, and in relation to the material exigencies and emotional tenor of the performance as a whole. This is unsurprising, given that the creative work of comics is the focal point and *raison d’être* of the downtown scene - the locus of value around which the community has coalesced. Secondary contributions to the production of this creative work are poorly understood and mystified by the process of commodification, which converges with a normative pattern of invisibility and degradation of what is perceived to be “women’s work”. Moreover, the prevalence of men in high-status positions also makes for a pattern of interaction in which the behavior of women, and the prevailing public interpretations of this behavior, are constrained by status that is relatively lower. There are continuities in their experiences, and this continuum is held together by normative gender expectations.

Hochschild’s theorization of emotional labor takes place in the context of regular, structured employment. She thus makes a distinction between emotional engagement in times of leisure, which is characterized by spontaneous response and an associated sensation of naturalness and authenticity, and emotional labor during times of work, wherein emotional responses of flight attendants are carefully constrained according to an ordered logic of self-

¹¹ Very poorly. I imagine sometimes people buy them drinks.

presentation, predetermined by the company that employs them. Hochschild roots the alienating nature of emotional labor in the repression or eliciting of emotions in the service of industry, indicating an unnatural or inauthentic relationship to the “natural” emotional responses an interpersonal interaction might otherwise provoke. But she also documents strategies women use to conjure emotions that serve the needs of the workplace, blurring the line between authenticity and inauthenticity as women exploit the latitude in a situation’s possibilities or framing - imagining traumatic pasts in irate customers, etc. This strategy calls attention to the malleability of subjective perception, blurring a neat dividing line between authentic and inauthentic reactions.

A work/leisure divide as a standard for authenticity falls apart in the context of the comedy scene, wherein work and leisure spheres overlap. But certainly the management of affect, and the ability to guide the emotional responses of audience members, is central to the work. The carefully crafted personas comics present to audience members are the sedimented and continually developing result of many years’ investment of emotional labor. The emotional strains associated with this work have reverberating effects in the community surrounding them, and people who occupy support positions in the comedy scene often find themselves performing secondary, supportive forms of emotional labor.

Comics develop and remodel their personas according to a flexible and entrepreneurial model, characterized by innovation, creativity, and singularity. There is thus not a coherent, programmed model for emotional management along the lines of what Hochschild describes - only a dynamic system to which different actors respond, via a series of unmanaged, but patterned, intersubjective encounters.

Hochschild's characterization of emotional labor as alienated and inauthentic can be recuperated in this context by relying on a more traditionally Marxist concept of the process by which labor becomes alienated, which is the idea that the process of exchange masks the social relations embedded in the context of production. Any necessary work that is forgotten or fetishized can be framed as alienated labor, and worthy of theoretical attention. To the extent that sexual attention is read as an index of professional status, the attention can be construed as work. It is not the kind of emotional work required to make for a happy customer, but to build an entrepreneurial force in a flexible labor market. There is, moreover, a perception among those who gossip about the comedy sluts that their actions are inauthentic, in the sense that they are motivated and conditioned by the commodified status of comics, and that the mode of relationship in which comics and "comedy sluts" engage erases the interiority and specificity of both parties. Whether this perception is correct or incorrect in individual cases, I am inclined to think it indexes a social reality: to wit, that the social context surrounding comedy performances is fraught with exigencies of emotional management that give rise to questions about authenticity, making the actions of lower-status actors the object of speculation and doubt.

Women who have dated comics describe patterned frustrations associated with comics' difficulty in achieving a work-life balance -comics don't have time for them, are very focused on high-pressure careers, etc. They have to fill in for what the career takes away - they have to do labor to tolerate it and pretend they don't mind. This echoes the lived experience of inauthenticity in the context of emotional labor as Hochschild describes it.

It is important to note that indeed it seems that some of the attraction fans feel for comics, whether it be sexual or platonic, derives not just from a sense that they are charismatic or powerful, but from a sense that they are vulnerable, and that they are in need of various forms of

support in order to accomplish the creative work that the community as a whole values. It's interesting how female fans describe male expressions of vulnerability. Women emphasize the risks associated with transgression, and feel they have to recuperate it. Audience members and supportive personnel such as producers (who are often women) also perform emotional labor to assuage the vulnerability that comes with transgressive aggression, and support the comics through the emotional risks associated with aspiration.

One female producer mentioned that a good deal of her work with comics takes place on an emotional rather than a purely technical level - she finds herself not just promoting shows or offering career advice, but also offering encouragement, reassurance, etc. - and at a volume that sometimes interferes with her ability to do the more recognized, professionally legitimated aspects of her job. Particularly when doing promotion, she felt that she had to assure comics that, indeed, an upcoming show would be a success. She was called upon not just to do a reasonable job of ensuring the show would be a success, but to quell the anxieties associated with marketing oneself as an attraction, and the ego-injury that would result if the effort failed. This producer, like many other women in the scene, has a strict policy against dating comics. I asked her about it, and, aside from not wanting to mix business with other forms of relationship that might complicate her business relationships, she also voiced concern that doing so would raise the expectation that she offer certain kinds of support and encouragement that she already found herself having to struggle to withhold.

Comedy fans also perform emotional labor, in their role as active and engaged consumers. While the work comics do to create a relationships of trust with the audience members is often discussed, far less frequently or overtly recognized/acknowledged is the work that audience members do to build relationships of trust with comics. Downtown comics, who position

themselves as charismatic figures in a marginalized subculture, display a combination of authority and vulnerability. When a comic produces ruptures in existing ways of framing, especially when he or she engages in risky material that can't quickly or easily be recuperated by an established cultural frame, as in the case of the most valued forms of downtown comedy, the audience does cognitive and emotional work to recuperate the confusing, threatening, aggressive, and/or vulnerable statement back into the social context. This work recuperates the threatening statement into an “us”, recuperates the comic into the accepting arms of the fan community. In a sense comics risk social “death” when they violate community norms; audiences then feel a responsibility to recuperate the interaction, to prevent mutual social death or nonrecognition. The exigency of this situation of conflict, as theorized by Milgram and Goffman, was discussed in chapter three.

Comics describe “downtown” audiences as more patient than “club” audiences, and more tolerant of the unpredictable outcomes of unorthodox or improvised performance. They don't have to be made to laugh immediately; they are willing to defer or at times even forego that pleasure in exchange for seeing something that challenges their expectations. Thus “downtown” audiences offer comics a level of creative interpretation and supportive attention that allows comics greater latitude to develop iconoclastic styles and perspectives. This performance style overlaps, as described in chapter 3, with styles of interpersonal interaction in the downtown comedy scene. Consonant with Youdell's analysis, microaggressions are experienced as a violation of polite boundaries, a push towards greater intimacy, and are either rejected or accepted. When accepted, they produce feelings of relationship, identification and alliance. Downtown comedy performances often reference the close-knit community, drawing on cultural material that is uniquely familiar to this very specific niche. While often done in a tongue-in-

cheek fashion, these references indicate the extent to which comics are embedded in, and can also succeed from appealing to, a shared local culture.

Fans speak of a sense of relatedness that emerges from this dynamic, and a sense of mutual obligation:

I feel weird about being passive watching comedy, because they're giving me so much, and it's kind of like, you have to give something back to them.

And, from a fan who has worked in various support positions over a period of several years:

It's fulfilling. I did have other stuff going on in my life but nothing that was so fulfilling as...helping people. I really like helping people, and I can't change the world, but when you see that they're so funny, and you start talking to them, and you become friends with them, and they're so sad because they haven't made anything of themselves in five or six years, and they've been putting their heart into everything, and they're still not making it, you're like, what can I do to help you? I know I'm not getting anything from it, monetarily, or anything like that, but it makes you feel good when you're like, OK, I'm doing something little to help them reach their dreams. And it is satisfying when you see them on TV, and you're like, oh my God they finally made it. And I have no aspirations to be on TV, but in a way you're satisfied because you're like, I helped them, and I was here when they needed me, and that's not why they are where they are, but it didn't hurt, you know, it helped. I think that's a big reason why I do it. It's nice to feel like you're helping someone, even if you're not curing cancer, or feeding children, it's helping them in their own way.

She code-switches here into an overblown midwestern dialect, like a character out of *Fargo*, and says, with irony,

Making our next big stars.

There's a maternal note to her tone. She almost sounds like a kindergarten teacher praising one of 35 near-identical art projects. But, at the same time, wistful and nostalgic. She grins, and, returning to her normal voice, says,

So I'm glad I've been able to do what I've been able to do.

Adding back in some of the “*Fargo*” tone,

Even if it was very minimal.

If you count up the hours this person has devoted to work in the comedy scene, it is quite the opposite of minimal. But she detaches herself from the seriousness of her contribution, and positions herself, interestingly, in a linguistic space that is stereotypically abjected from the metropolitan sphere of creative dynamism.

Gilligan, like Hochschild, suggests that supportive work of this kind is typically “women’s work”. She argues that women’s moral judgments are made in the context of relationships, rather than according to abstract principles. They proceed from a sense of connectedness rather than separation. Women describe a sense of responsibility to others, to the specific and personal needs of others, that men do not articulate in their discussion of morality as a set of abstract principles. These principles, which focus on negative liberties, tend not to take into account the complicating factor of disparities of power in relationships. While Gilligan’s approach risks essentializing conventionally male and female behaviors, she points to a significant and enduring pressure to fulfill gendered roles.

[Comedy is] a sacred thing, like Pete Holmes talks about this a lot, it is a calling, it's a spiritual guide kind of thing, it's a mirror of life...it's a very important service. And they're working really hard, and they take a lot of risks, and they do something very difficult in order to, like, bring this incredible thing to the world. And the reward is a lot of people loving them. It's not a selfless thing, they're not monks, but, it's a real service, it's something that's really affected my life, so I kinda buy into it.

Again, it is important to note that this work is undervalued and at times disavowed, or can even become a source of shame. The moniker “comedy sluts” alludes to the possible pitfalls of selflessly engaging this sort of labor. When women are recognized as engaging in this sort of work, particularly when it is unclear what material benefit they may be getting from it, some

women seem to feel it puts them in a degraded position. Or there is a fear that it is misinterpreted. They have to fight to position themselves as people with valuable professional skills, or taste-makers. In the downtown comedy community, where personal and professional relationships merge in informal, undocumented, and complex ways, women can feel they have been called upon to perform emotional labor, then find out they have done too much and have lost some personal authority because of it. The lack of theoretical ways to document or recognize historically feminine forms of labor creates an impression that the important, creative work and the love each flow, unidirectionally, from opposite poles.

It's this weird dynamic. Plus I'm really bad at interacting with people anyway, and so when they're awkward, which most comedians are, I'm more awkward. I don't know how it comes off – maybe it comes off as me being a fan, or maybe it comes off as me being in love with them, I don't know. And I always get weird about it. Looking back I wish I would have treated some comedians differently than I had, just in a way of being more like...not nervous. But the nervousness didn't come from them being comedians, because they're not famous, it came from me feeling the awkwardness and not knowing what to say to them. Cause comedians are not who they appear to be onstage, and you can't talk to them about that kind of stuff, because that's not who they are a lot of times.

Like [mentioning a certain comic], we're never going to be friends. He's great, but I can't talk to the dude. I can't. I remember once in the beginning we shared a cab home...I'd be like, what are you up to this weekend? And he'd be like, looking out the window, (repeats in a vacant monotone) “going to a friend's birthday party”. And I'm like, oh that sounds fun, is it in Brooklyn, or in the city? (same monotone) “it's in Brooklyn”. And I was like, I'm not trying to sleep with you, I'm trying to have a conversation with you, like, why is this so awkward, and I think it's just because he's awkward. And after four years, that's still how we are. You know? Like I think he appreciates things I've done to help out, in the past, but maybe because I helped out I was just still like this kid that was hanging out. [After several years] it still feels like, “whaddya want, kid?” I don't want anything from you. That's another thing, I worry that they think I want something from them, really I just want to help them. Some people I just have a weird relationship with.

Engaging in ritual politeness in this context, this supportive, helpful person feels, is interpreted by her comic interlocutor as a sort of deference, or excess generosity, indicating her lower status or fearful response to the interaction. As discussed in chapter three, ritual politeness is a favorite object of scrutiny, and frequently distrust, in this social context.

While people in various professional support positions find themselves under pressure to perform emotional labor (not so much of a make-nice variety as a cheerleader variety) emotional labor isn't labor in a formal sense¹². So, how are people, particularly non-professionals, compensated? What is the exchange?

Felman points out that the actual efficacy of language, the performative property, is located precisely in excess of meaning, in a space of scandalous indeterminacy that reveals the limits on the power of language to transparently both represent and reproduce the real. Seduction is founded on this indeterminacy, which is concealed by the promise and also creates its necessity, creates the anxious dissonance that makes the promise compelling. The unspoken, unremembered part of the interaction is what is doing the actual work, having the most important effects.

Comics make an implicit promise to entertain, to inform, to conjure insightful and compelling impressions of a shared social reality, and to *succeed* - to emerge as spokespeople for the community and amplify its collective voice beyond the scale of the immediately local. Comics and audiences want the energy in a room to be high, want something a little magical to happen. They are looking for something a little transcendent, a little indescribable. A remunerative return on the indeterminacy of risky, personal, self-disclosure.

¹² A lot of the labor in this scene isn't formal labor - it may be performed on an ad-hoc basis, as a favor, etc.

While Felman's location of the power of language in the context of dialogic processes is enormously insightful, I think she is too much seduced by Don Juan, giving short shrift to the work done by the women he seduces. If we accept that the promise bridges a phenomenological gap of "scandalous indeterminacy", then the women who choose to believe the promise also make a leap of faith.

Nancy Bauer's reading of Simone de Beauvoir provides further insight into what satisfactions fans might be deriving, and costs they might be enduring, from engaging in this feminized side of the performer/fan relationship. Bauer argues that Beauvoir's view is that human beings are always at the same time in-themselves and for-themselves. Following Hegel, and echoing theorists of existentialism, she calls this dual residence on both sides of the Cartesian split "ambiguity" (143). Bauer argues that Beauvoir departs from Hegel and Sartre in arguing that humans aren't horrified by being objectified, but actually want to be reified in a state of either fixed subjectivity or objectivity, in order to resolve the anxiety of this ambiguity. So, men "wish to be objectified in the eyes of women as relentlessly existentially free", and women "are happy to pretend to reify men in this way, as long as it means that they can fantasize that playing this role absolves them of the need to embrace their own fundamental freedom" (144).

A good deal of what the comedy performance promises is relatedness or identification - an alliance based on a shared perspective. But the performer/audience power differential, frequently complicated by a gendered power differential, results in a division of labor, where one party articulates an iconoclastic and risky perspective, and the other listens, appreciates, and recuperates this perspective into the social fold of the performance space.

As discussed in previous chapters, comics' professional success rests on cultivating a singular creative voice that is simultaneously surprising and recognizable to audiences. Ideally, this voice illuminates a shared social world in ways audience members didn't anticipate, but find compelling; the voice should be alluring and relatable, should leave the audience wanting more. This voice indexes an enhanced, dynamic subjectivity. As suggested by the testimony from fans, cited above, comics take on something of the aura of a charismatic leader or prophet - a status that arises from their iconoclastic perspective, and is certainly enhanced by the secondary apparatuses of performance, such as the isolated and elevated position they occupy onstage, and the electronic amplification of their voices.

Comics are increasingly embedded in and aided by such apparatuses as they achieve greater levels of professional success - their voices and images are disseminated via multimedia channels to ever-wider audiences, rendering the communicative contexts in which they appear increasingly unilateral and authoritative. The work of comics and audiences is being performed in a context where individualist notions of creativity frame the communication, and, perhaps more importantly, the goal of the performance is to establish the comic as a valuable and saleable commodity. The endgame is a level of fame capable of transcending social forces even as powerful as racism and sexism, as the discussion of Kumail Nanjiani's joke in Chapter four suggests.

Downtown comedy rooms are intimate spaces, and comics and fans alike attest that they enjoy them for precisely this reason. But the relationality, the more dialogical nature of communication in these spaces, is antithetical to the process of commodification comics are continually seeking to advance. This creates the necessity for the work of audience members to be effaced, so that the comic can be extracted from the social context of performance without

loss of the performative efficacy that comprises his or her value. Sinclair points out that this is also the case in leadership training, wherein the goal is to package the leader-trainer as a saleable commodity, available for future speaking dates, book contracts, etc. There is thus an economic interest to frame the exchange between speakers and audiences at these events as unilateral acts effected by a single person, rather than as a relational dialogue among multiple people. But Sinclair points out that this one-sided history does violence to the realities of corporate life and effective business practices. To wit, when one highly charismatic but arguably incompetent presenter enraged several female conference participants by failing to show them the respect they felt they deserved, several female conference organizers sacrificed time in their own sessions to team-building activities that would recuperate the good will and active participation of the offended participants. In the absence of an economic apparatus or political will to identify, value, and reward this emotional labor, the work simply gets effaced, written out of leadership training's official narrative.

In the downtown comedy community, where charisma and desire is mobilized along different lines,

I remember there was one comedian I was dating, where we would walk down the street, and people would be like, I LOVE you, to him. And I would be like, *I love you. I fucking love you. Are you fucking kidding me?* So there's this weird way in which you share them. I don't even really care about that stuff, like I'm not [sexually possessive], but it's that sharing when it's an object of love when it gets tough for me.

It is clear from this fan's description that negotiating different levels of notoriety in a relationship, not to mention the emotional confusion that arises from engaging with the comic's subjectivity via different - some of them mass-mediated - channels, is a burden. But to acknowledge this work, and the violent nature of these confusions, also threatens the comic's status as saleable commodity and as existentially free, in the first case by reframing the

performance as dialogic and unreplicable, and in the second case by threatening to define the performance as something other than unilateral creative genius, define it as a part of something, embedded in a community in which needs and values are actively negotiated, rather than simply as a singular voice that speaks out in contrast to existing norms. There is a silence surrounding emotional labor that is also crucial to understanding the gendered nature of comedy performance.

The process of commodification also explains how this socially grounded resonance comes to be understood and remembered as a referential true - framed in terms of its decontextualized content rather than its social effects. Shoshana Felman's work is enormously instructive in understanding the process by which a dialogic communication between performer and audience member is understood and remembered, such that the content of the performance is remembered and talked about primarily as insightful commentary. In other words, Felman lends insight into the processes via which performance comes to be misconstrued as reference, and whereby the communicative acts, exchanges, and relations embedded in the comedy performance comes to be written/remembered as a series of statements about the world made on the part of the comic.

The statements the comic makes, the reader will recall, are implicit. He or she uses (broadly speaking) ironic techniques to imply a critical distance from shared cultural material, perhaps by arranging it in such a way as to highlight hypocrisy and contradiction, or by amplifying it to the point of absurdity...in short, by structuring juxtapositions that destabilize existing frames. The relationship to existing frames, or established modes of thought and practice, is, as one fan described it earlier in this chapter, "attacky".

In her discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's re-theorization of Heidegger's concept of the *Mitsein*, Nancy Bauer points out that, for Heidegger, the challenge for individual consciousness

is not encountering radically other minds, but having the courage to distinguish oneself (133). Heidegger is critical of what he terms “deficient modes of solicitude”, which he claims are predominant in human relations, among these indifference, or ultimately harmful forms of caring, such as the attempt to “spare someone else the pain of living his or her own life” (136). Comics’ implicit critique of routine, mannered interactions, described in chapter 3, resonates with Heidegger’s sense that the *Mitsein*, the consensual concepts that organize human social life, can create the illusion of connectedness without authentically encountering another’s subjectivity. Acting on this false basis is encapsulated in Heidegger’s idea of “leaping in”. Bauer terms this “empathy on the cheap” - acting too quickly as though we understand another person, instead of putting in the hard work to know him or her (137).

While Heidegger argues that philosophers commit the fallacy of imagining they stand apart from the social life in which they are embedded, Bauer’s reading of Beauvoir suggests that this tendency is an effect of masculine socialization. Bauer argues that, for Beauvoir, the *Mitsein* offers women a resolution to the pain of ambiguity that stands in reciprocal relation to men’s reified subjectivity, in the form of enhanced facticity:

The temptation to alienate yourself in the gaze of the other, to become something less than you are, is Beauvoir’s version of the seductiveness of idle talk and the lure of authenticity that Heidegger so memorably describes in *Being and Time*...*Mitsein* entails a huge threat to my assuming of my ambiguity (and, particularly, my freedom)...For woman, I think Beauvoir suggests, the lure of inauthenticity is likely to be particularly strong: in effect she argues that women are socialized to drown themselves in the *Mitsein*, to let others - men- tell them who and what they fundamentally are (144).

Comics certainly recognize the importance of common ground with an audience. At the same time, they seem to have an ambivalent relationship to the deployment of shared cultural material, as though this too buys them “empathy on the cheap”. I spoke to a comic who

performed, as part of a duo, a hilarious set that incorporated elements of familiar pop songs. He said that he and his partner had discussed what was happening in the minds of audiences when they laughed at these pop cultural citations, and they were both unsettled, they agreed, by the impossibility of knowing for sure what sort of “recognition” was taking place. Were audiences recognizing their work as artful, creative, funny, or insightful? Or was the citation simply familiar? He was concerned with the idea that these different qualities of recognition might in fact be emotionally/cognitively too subtle for an audience to distinguish in the context of a fast-paced, rapid-fire performance. Certainly they were aiming for their particular artistry, an individual subjectivity, to be recognized.

Bauer argues that Mitsein also provides the opportunity for genuinely reciprocal recognition, but she doesn't really say how. Like many theorists, her salient definitions of subjectivity rely on contrast rather than affinity with social mores - a subjectivity marked, in its concrete features, only by distinction and not by solidarity. This is a common and stubborn problem in existentialist philosophy. Sartre has been criticized for emphasizing the conflictual nature of social interaction, and Willett also raises the point that the extent to which authenticity might be rooted in social engagement rather than detachment is undertheorized.

There is thus a false dichotomy, underwritten I think by cultural values that valorize certain forms of masculinity, between violence and bullshit (bullshit as theorized by Frankfurt). Creativity often takes the form of creative destruction, and is in fact recognized as creativity by the force of its destruction.

A chapter on gender in comedy performance would be incomplete without discussing rape jokes, which are an enduring point of contention. Jokes about rape often become loci for debate around the appropriate ethical limits of a comic's right and duty to say absolutely

anything. They make light of a painful subject. Making painful subjects palatable enough to be discussed and reflected upon is one of the indispensable values of comedy, as the next chapter will discuss. But there is often some question as to exactly how much rape jokes actually have to do with rape. Rape is often invoked as a sort of abstract horror, even at times treated casually. Rape jokes also transgress a taboo, and, like the racially charged speech of Bangs' punk scenesters and the lazier forms of "ironic racism", one wonders at times whether the force of the taboo is the central thing comics seek to mobilize.

The most instructive example I think actually comes from Orwell, in a scene in 1984 where the protagonist, Winston, confesses to his lover, Julia, that when he first saw her in the hallway at their mutual workplace, the Ministry of Truth¹³, he wanted to rape her. His urge to rape her arises from his sense that she unproblematically embodies the ideals of the party.

Interestingly, she takes the confession as a sort of gift, an intimacy, an inclusion in the violent force of his desire for transgression. There's a narrative logic to this; the violent force of the urge is in proportion to the violences of doublespeak and thought policing, a violence to which, as it turns out, they are both subject. And there is indeed something intimate about the ugliness of Winston's confession, the naked revelation of his own embodied refraction of this violence, his vulnerability to the social world. But the aggression comes from him and is directed at her. Try to imagine their roles reversed¹⁴.

The promise held out by the comic's commodified subjectivity, encapsulated in the fetishized figure of the genius, is of the hope for success in risk-taking and in challenging social norms, at times radically. The comic stands in for the alienated audience member, who identifies with his or her seeming marginality, and vicariously profits (use Freud to set up this emotional

¹³ The militant wing of what Frankfurt terms "bullshit".

¹⁴ Actually, note to self and female comic friends, that could be funny. Maybe with Morgan Murphy as Winston? Too weird?

response?) from his or her explosive efficacy. This model for the emergence of individuated subjectivity resonates with Hegel's construction of the free subject in the master/slave dialectic, as he who risks [social] death. But I think it holds particular currency for contemporary audiences due to the exigencies of their participation in the flexible labor market. They want to see their heroes take risks and succeed, according to an entrepreneurial model that singlehandedly creates the world anew at every turn. Forms of social power one deploys to minimize risk should be invisible, so as to enhance the illusion that emerging victorious from a risky situation is due to personal characteristics. Perhaps it is also that these forms of social power should be unmarked, so as to appear universal and relatable.

While some traits conventionally associated with masculinity are inessential to grounding comedic authority - and, some argue, can even work against it - essential ones that retain their masked association with phallic power in this context include a willingness to engage in risk-taking, an aura of self-reliance which includes the former as well as iconoclastic thought, and emotional independence/unassailability. Successful seduction of the audience by the comic thus involves mobilizing the power associated with certain forms of transgression and marginality, along with more conventionally phallic forms of power.

Mystification is central to the force of the performative. In the figure of the truth-teller, the genius, is a fetishized masking of social power, of relatedness. The speaking subject appears as the origin of speech, whereas the authority actually comes from prior authoritative repetitions. "a performative 'works' to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating history of force" (Butler *Excitable Speech* 51). Significantly, Sinclair points out that a heteronormative logic of seduction limits the

efficacy of feminine performances even when the centrality of seduction to the overall logic of performance is disavowed (Sinclair 281). This is the case in the traditionally homosocial business community, wherein sexuality is abjected from the notion of professional relationships.

Stephen's attack on the heckler works so well because he is totally polite, presents her as creating not only the necessity for him to cut her down, but creating the opportunity. He in fact takes advantage of her gender, but casts her vulnerability as so obvious and her self-awareness and self-care as so absent. If he had said "woman" instead of "person" he would have had to admit the gendered nature of her vulnerability and, further, his own recognition of it. Via his choice of words, he gets the charge without the accountability. It really was the funniest thing he could possibly have said, the most glaring unspoken way of recasting her as not an authoritative speaker, but as one who would soon be entirely without self-possession. This is an example of a much more skillful dealing with a heckler than that attempted by Michael Richards. The audience was delighted, howled with laughter and commented appreciatively after the show, but this particularly sexualized form of degradation would be less readily available if the heckler were a man. In one sense she drank so much she lost control of herself, in another sense she didn't have that control to begin with. The response both oriented her to her surroundings and put her in her place.

Performativity, as Felman argues, is the true referent of speech - it refers only to that which it produces. But it does not create something out of nothing. The mystification of masculine power adds to the aura of risk, creating the illusion of indeterminacy when in fact the deck is stacked in favor of those who can successfully and covertly perform certain key features of masculinity. The process of seduction rests on disavowing facticity because everyone wants

to think the comics created something out of nothing. Everyone has an investment in the possibilities raised by this illusion.

Gilligan argues that women are socialized to prioritize the feelings of others, and specifically to avoid doing them harm. Many of the women in her study eventually come to realize that by strictly adhering to this mode of behavior they isolate themselves from social life; by avoiding conflict they also avoid authentic communication. For Gilligan authenticity resides in attending and listening to one's own emotions and needs. Certainly resolving internal conflicts in an honest way is a central piece of this - Gilligan argues that women need to acknowledge their own desires and take responsibility for making choices based on these desires, rather than seeing themselves as not having choices, and thereby freeing themselves from responsibility for causing harm. This study suggests that those who occupy feminized positions in relation to valued creative work might also do well to more publicly acknowledge the painful aspects of the power imbalance to which they're subject, and the non-recognition of their contributions.

Quotes from female fans and producers suggest an effort to do this, and resistance to their efforts. A complex and fraught negotiation, in a world in which they too want to be respected for creativity and individuality. People (women, fans) aren't entirely complicit in this division of labor, but when their efforts to transcend it get thwarted repeatedly, they may have such a hard time that they reap more rewards from identification. Identification may give fans more mileage than contesting the terms of the exchange and the unfair distribution of credit. Especially under urgent labor conditions in which attaching yourself in some fashion to a rising star may pay the rent a lot faster than trying to become a star yourself - and you may only have a month or two to choose a strategy before you have to go home to Pittsburgh or Houston or Flint.

It's the job of alternative [downtown] comedy to tell people to be themselves, and be comfortable with who they are. Unfortunately sometimes it gets into this zone of, the same thing as indie rock, this is cool, this is not cool...that is disappointing...But there are comics that have this, I am full of love, this is all about love. Reggie, Pete Holmes...the message of, be yourself, do your own thing, express yourself. It's something none of us hear enough. Especially in New York where, it's like, ya, everyone knows more than you. It's one thing to hear it in yoga class, where you're being coddled, and it's really really intense to hear it from a very strong, definitive, critical voice. When you hear a really critical voice making fun of something really harshly, and then turn around and basically say, I love you? Holy shit, you just want to cry.

On the first page of the Tina Fey biography she says talent is not an STD. And I was like, FUCK! That's an incredible line...part of it is really wanting to take on those qualities. So it's like, I don't have that, I want that, I'm going to insert it into my vagina. I admire you, I look up to you, I want to swallow you, I want to be you, I'm gonna have sex with you. And then it's like, what am I bringing to this? You're bringing your being, and your trust in the universe, and your talent, and your fearlessness, and your courage, and I'm bringing sex. That's crazy. That is so not what I believe.

AJ: But that's not all you're bringing to the table.

Fan: of course, of course.

AJ: ...but that's how you feel?

Fan: I feel like I'm bringing that, and, like, support of them. And rather than inspiring my creativity, they're knocking it down. Not even them trying to do it, that's the position I'm putting myself in. I'm like flopping, because their talent is soooo prodigious. They...it just overpowers things. And that's especially true of comedians, maybe more than any other kind of talent. She leans toward me, exasperated, looking me in the eye, and draws out the last word for emphasis. "They talk *loudly*."

When I date these comedians, it's like I'm upholding, I'm like, oh, I'll help you be creative, and it's like, they didn't fucking ask me for that. Whereas really what I'm doing is I'm enacting what I want them to be doing for me. What I want someone to do for me, or what I just need to do for myself, completely not have anybody, and realize my potential that way. And I think these inappropriate objects of affection, all the things we do, if we drink too much, whatever the fuck it is, it's just a distraction from whatever you want to call it, the divine, creativity, your fucking potential, your badass-ness, all of it. So I think in a way those inappropriate people are just you sabotaging yourself, and your potential. And it can't be all bad. Not just about having an inappropriate object. They're masculine, and definitive, and proud of what they do, there's an uncomplicated relationship

with what they do, like, this is what I do. And of course everyone wants to be like that...but I keep on losing myself.

I think standup is totally about masculinity. And that's probably why its so appealing, it's what I am not, it's what I admire. Also maybe if femininity was more lauded, maybe I wouldn't be in such admiration of it. Maybe I'm taking in societal things. And maybe that's why it depresses me, because I can never be it.

A few words on the idea that women “can never be it”:

The popularization of identity politics, as discussed in the previous chapter, seems not to have succeeded in dismantling the erroneous notion that the borders around raced and gendered identities are ordered and neat, that identity is, in short, identifiable - legible in symbolic and cultural material, and embodiment. Thus the broader cultural landscape seems to have left female comics and audience members lacking in models of ways to recognize, or acknowledge, women's disempowerment as a dynamic process. As discussed in the previous chapter with respect to race, this reiterates the violence that associates them with “pure facticity”, and sends the message simply that they “can never be it”.

Moreover, the ways in which women's identities as such have been explicitly articulated cause them to present as an exhausted topic, before a nuanced exploration of the processes of their production has gotten off the ground. I mentioned to one comedy fan that mainstream festivals often organize shows around raced or gendered identities, putting together a bill of all women, for example, to appeal to a specific demographic. Her comment was, “They must get so *bored.*”

The irony here is that the processes by which certain subjects are relegated to the margins aren't well known at all, and women are losing access to critical tools that might help them confront the social power to which they're subject. There is a strong ethos that comedy should be a completely free or liberated zone of exchange. Consonant with this and with US capitalist

culture in general it is believed that one succeeds or fails according to one's individual merits. Attributing one's successes or failures to factors beyond one's control challenges individualism that is deeply rooted in US culture. It is seen as a disingenuous, resentment-fueled effort to cut down those who are successful, by virtue of their own merits. I told one female comic I was writing a paper about gender and asked her if she had any thoughts on the topic, and she said, "You know, I've done these kinds of interviews before, about women in comedy, and regretted it. For awhile I was really into theory, I took a lot of women's studies courses in high school, but lately I've been trying to focus on just being *undeniable*."

I spoke to another woman who hosted a show at a venue near NYU, who felt like she had to really fight for the audience - a "frat boy" crowd - every night. She was talking herself into a fury of resentment, a downward spiral of resentment. There was a pause after the diatribe and a male comic said, "don't hate"¹⁵. She protested that it was unfair, and he said, "I know, but...don't hate". And I really felt that it was coming from an excruciatingly dual place of empathy and dismissiveness. On the one hand, you are only hurting yourself, and on the other hand, you are hurting yourself in particular because we just don't talk that way.

Given the popular understanding of identity politics, I think it would be productive to orient theoretical scrutiny away from semiotic analysis of race and gender stereotypes, and toward the dynamic possibilities embedded in the ways people perform their selves, in shifting and manipulable social contexts. We are not rational actors but we are actors, with agendas, some of which escape us, articulated in strategic exhibitions and also in symptoms.

¹⁵ Per the urban dictionary, a widely recognized authority on such topics, a "hater" is "A person that simply cannot be happy for another person's success", or, "A person who feels anger and/or jealousy for someone who has succeeded in something they have worked hard for".

¹⁵

It is a depressing enterprise for a woman to write critical theory about gender, particularly given its lukewarm public reception. But I would be remiss if I left my readers, particularly any female comics among them, as depressed as I have been at times over the course of this project. There are a lot of very funny female comics who are making a very good living at their craft, and who perform on a regular basis to throngs of adoring fans. Their numbers are reported to be increasing (Kohen). While the downtown comedy community exhibits an enduring investment in the efficacy of dissimulating masculine power, there are also many critiques thereof contained in this chapter. My personal feeling is that some of these critiques should be spoken more “*loudly*”.

One instance in which one of these critiques was amplified was at an anniversary show for Invite Them Up, at the Bowery Ballroom. Chelsea Peretti performed her set as a “roast” of the show’s producers, and included a send-up of the prevailing norms around causal sex. Of the younger women who hung out after shows, she said,

I look at them and I just feel so envious. Not of their youth, or their beauty, but of their ability to still have dreams, to believe...that older means more grown up.

There was some commentary around the bit that it was maybe “too mean”, especially in the context of what was supposed to be a celebratory event. But it was pretty funny. I would argue, don’t hate the player, hate the game¹⁶.

Men, women, and those who identify with neither category are suffering from the violences of gender discrimination, perhaps not all equally, but certainly. The self-representation of many male comics as far removed from authorized forms of masculinity is a genuine lived

¹⁶ The quote is drawn from lyrics by Ice T, and has come to signify, in circulation, again per the Urban Dictionary, “Do not fault the successful participant in a flawed system; try instead to discern and rebuke that aspect of its organization which allows or encourages the behavior that has provoked your displeasure.”

experience. It's important to note that, while many of the exertions and effects of masculine privilege remain frustratingly obscure, they are obscure even to those who wield them. Their attention is directed away from the ways they embody it and towards the ways they fall short of it. Jack's comment that the younger women he and his single friends sleep with "wouldn't have looked at us when they were their age" is telling. During a discussion of the then-recent NYC legislation around the word nigger, a comic brought up the link between taboos and embodiment in the form it often takes in highly cosmopolitan yet segregated New York, where identity politics inform the issue of who-is-allowed-to-say-what.

I get it that it's different for me to say it than it is for a black person to say it. But I'm not sure...how different it is. Because there's the issue of reclaiming a word because it's hurtful, but...I'm not gay, but I got called fag all through high school. So, how am I supposed to reclaim that word?

As Pascoe points out, "homophobic practices in schools are central to the ongoing constitution of heterosexual masculinities" (Pascoe 251). Subjects who dominate particular spheres are also engaged in strategies of accommodation and resistance. Style of seduction, importantly, elicits a particular sort of inquiry on the part of students - they may become reverent and passive, or encouraged to explore new ideas (Sinclair 281). New styles might better achieve the downtown comedy community's stated goals.

I say, pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will. I hope this chapter has made it clear where some optimism of the will might be sourced. I would like to underscore the importance of teammates and allies. Several highly successful female comics also mentioned that they thought it was important that they had played sports as kids, which taught them a tolerance for failure and a "thick skin". Women may not be frequently socialized to accept criticism or anger from others with ease, but with the right support they can learn, and it is a

quality that is not necessarily antithetical to empathy. I think it is crucial for women to build networks of support that legitimate shared experiences, and provide them with the day-to-day emotional support necessary to develop a risky, potentially alienating, transgressive joke into something that connects with an audience, while retaining both meaning and performative force. Many men could use some coaching on the subjects of empathy and support (though some of them are in fact quite good at it). Until the importance of this work is recognized, women will continue to allow themselves to be in a position where they receive less of it.

There are also a series of practices and performance strategies that diverge from the paradigm outlined above, that seem to have been highly successful for women. As discussed above, comics sometimes use aggression to create a dynamic relationship with the audience – experiment with threat (of transgression of everyday social boundaries), or with a vaguely violent mode of engagement that puts the audience on the defensive. Some women engage in a more friendly way, but employ more covert forms of transgression. For example, women can violate obscenity standards to communicate – via contagion rather than reference – some of the discomfort of female sexuality and gendered repression. Sarah Silverman is a well-known example of this sort of style - she assumes power by toying with obscenity standards, making audience members uncomfortable via this transgression, but she packages it in a super-sweet demeanor, a campy impression of a “nice” girl.

Heather Lawless is another extremely funny comic who says a lot of genuinely creepy things about sex and pairs it with a friendly face. She is one of few comics who successfully laughs at her own jokes, smiles and/or laughs the entire way through her set. She has a soft voice and southern accent. She talks about being sexually attracted to her young nephews, sexually harassed by her boss (and simultaneously attracted to him), and I saw her once do most

of a set about the sheer volume of her pubic hair. She engages with material that seems designed to paint a picture of her own degradation, and in doing so communicates something about profound insecurity.

In Beth and Rachel's One Mic Stand bit they tell hacky jokes and mess up the punchlines so they don't make sense, or make funny sorts of nonsense. It's very structuralist, deconstructing the jokes and drawing attention to their formal structure. Does violence to the entire genre. They perform the whole thing wide-eyed and disoriented, bewildered, almost like two more robotic Gracie Allens. A jazz trio accents the performance, which lends it additional structure, a different sort of aesthetic interest and additional authority, and also helps to get the audience to quiet down and pay attention to a quiet, methodically-paced piece. Shift to more musical aesthetics cues you to tune in to the palpability of female voices. Ends in a tangential chant, back-and-forth of voices, that also has a very musical quality (one focuses on the aesthetic rather than semiotic properties of the experience (as if one could entirely make a distinction)). Beth later told me that after she wrote the piece she felt like the end was "totally orgasmic". This is one of few times where I did feel like the fact that you just don't see that many women doing comedy worked to their advantage, because the pitch of their voices, the presentation, the oblique reference to sexuality, etc. presented as a very particular aesthetic experience. The quality of this experience was also facilitated by the formal context (inclusion of music, etc).

Deconstruction of hacky jokes in One Mic Stand makes a comment about being alienated from certain types of discourse, without taking it on directly. Beth and Rachel perform themselves as alienated objects of the discourse. Orgasm bit suggests (more aesthetically than directly) what is being driven out of the public realm by this alienation. A very abstract, more aesthetic than properly discursive rendering of alienation and its possible transcendence, but a

powerful and resonant one.

People negotiate gendered identities from “outsider within” positions - power is differential, and always partial, and changes in different contexts, and can be wielded or thwarted dynamically in a single context. A lot of hope and anxiety centers around this dynamism. It is the hope and the anxiety of existential ambiguity, essentially.

The downtown comedy scene is characterized by diverse work, but what holds it together is a shared experience, a shared process of public trial and error and revision, shared struggles through the same process of self-building as a saleable commodity in a fragmented and rapidly-changing media market. Women may find themselves marginalized due to the fact that they articulate an unfamiliar perspective, producing content and speaking from an embodied social location that doesn't read with conventional forms of authority, and I think these semiotic bases of marginalization are important to interrogate. But I hypothesize that it would be more productive to look at the importance of solidarity among women, and between women and men, in the comedy scene. Focusing on the supportive possibilities in social networks, and the importance of these forms of support, would also correct some of the inaccuracies of perception that cause certain male comics to appear to have created something from nothing - the illusion that articulating a unique or idiosyncratic perspective also signals a radical social independence.

One is reminded of Kierkegaard's ironist, who is caught in such a double bind, and even more so of Abraham's radical solitude in *Fear and Trembling*. But further consideration of *Fear and Trembling* might be instructive here, in particular to the almost comically inadequately repressed feminine therein. As Kierkegaard struggles (“I cannot do it!”) to comprehend Abraham, the father of faith who manages to believe even as he is unmoored from every source of social support that might uphold this belief, the discarded feminine reemerges at every turn in

the form of thinly veiled love letters to Regine Olson. Perhaps the following quote contains the seeds for a more empathetic relationship to the Mitsein, or, rather, the other individuals who reiterate and disrupt it in practice:

Sarah is the heroic character...For what love for God it takes to be willing to let oneself be healed when from the very beginning one in all innocence has been botched, from the very beginning has been a damaged specimen of a human being! What ethical maturity to take upon oneself the responsibility the responsibility for permitting the beloved to do something so hazardous! What humility before another person! What faith in God that she would not in the very next moment hate the man to whom she owed everything!

Imagine Sarah to be a man, and the demonic is immediately present. The proud, noble nature can bear everything, but one thing it cannot bear - it cannot bear sympathy.

Coda

Megan is a manager, beloved to an exceptional degree by her many clients in the downtown scene. I haven't seen her since we both attended a comedy festival several months ago. She has a new short haircut and is wearing a white shoulderpadded blazer and chunky red plastic jewelry. Most of the 80s retro fashion you see on the street looks clipped from Flashdance; she's doing the female executive in the power suit. Dana and I flag her down from across the room.

"Megan, I LOVE your outfit."

"Thank you", she says, grinning.

"It's - I mean - working in comedy, which can be super sexist - you totally look like Sigourney Weaver. In a sexy way. You look like Melanie Griffith. You look like the best of both."

Megan laughs. “You guys totally get it”.

“You seriously look amazing.”

Michael, a comic in his 40s with a very respectable list of TV credits to his name, passes by and nods his assent.

“I like the haircut”, he says. “You look androgynous. In a good way.”

Around 12:30 the crowd is starting to thin, as it splits between those who remember they have work in the morning, and those who don't, or don't care, and are in for the long haul. I'm a little drunker than I meant to be on Karin's signature margaritas, and I go outside to see if I can bum a cigarette. Megan is silently, sympathetically nodding at a young comic who talks emphatically, almost frantically, with his hands. A young woman I don't recognize is cajoling Brendan, a comic who has just finished the first season of a well-received sketch show, to pose for a photograph. He is approaching that intermediate level of notoriety another comic once described as “New York famous”, where he is just beginning to have to learn to negotiate encounters with people who have seen him on television.

“I don't want pictures of myself smoking,” he says.

“Come on”

He shakes his head. “I don't want to contribute to kids smoking”.

“But you're not a kid,” she reasons. She's a lot closer to being a kid than he is. They're in a battle over who has the bigger - or perhaps the most relentless - personality, and she stands her ground and is persistent. Eventually a compromise is reached; they are standing shoulder to shoulder, he is watching as she scrolls through the pictures she's already taken.

The more established press has already called it a night. Owen is a graduate student of photography, and a regular contributor to Brooklyn Vegan. He's a couple of doors down, fishing

through his camera bag, probably already on his way to the train. I run over and loop my arm through his.

“Take my picture with Megan?”

He grins.

“Look at her,” I insist. “How fucking sexy does she look in that jacket?”

He’s five years younger than I am but eight inches taller. He sights her easily over the top of my head, and smiles down at me when I turn around. I clutch his elbow, warmly flirtatious, just like everyone else. Everyone else who thinks they can afford it.

“Okay,” he relents.

“You’ll be glad,” I promise, leading him back to the crowd by the edge of his sleeve.

“Trust me, she’s the next big thing.”

Chapter 6 - Darkness Risible

Audience members engage in interpretive work during comedy performances, and experience a sense of intimacy with performers. The process of commodification systematically sidelines this experience. As comics take on increasing “star power”, comics and audience members are entwined in increasingly unidirectional - one might go so far as to say authoritarian¹ - structures of identification, which position the audience member as silent and passive in relation to the active, speaking performer. The immediate social context surrounding performances in small venues, however, offers myriad possibilities for renegotiating the ambiguities of performer-audience relationships, and at times for even simply reveling in these intimacies.

Comedy also involves the partial revelation of public secrets. Speaking (and acting) in what I have broadly characterized as the ironic mode, comics provoke and cajole their interlocutors into questioning established modes of framing experience, and at times assenting to a shared perspective. This perspective remains unspoken and therefore ambiguous, but nonetheless resonates in the public sphere. The emergent quality of these communications rests on a complex admixture of marginality and power - the perspective communicated is subaltern,

¹ Colleague David Borenstein insists authoritarian is the correct term. He admits, however, that Louis C.K. is growing on him.

taboo, or idiosyncratic; it is advanced by the force of transgression, the valorization of risk, and various unmarked forms of more established power, such as whiteness, masculinity, and even celebrity.

The previous two chapters have highlighted ways in which certain forms of ironic provocation or inquiry can become routinized or frustrated, particularly when they are imbricated with the unmarked exercise of established forms of power. In the case of “ironic racism”, what begins as a provocation devolves into a routinized affirmation of white privilege, embodied in the power to transgress social taboos with impunity. Exhibitions of personal distance and alienation from authorized performances of masculinity are applauded in men, but “boring” or “hacky” when they come from women, whose failure to measure up to these norms is so imbricated with their embodiment as to be considered “uncreative”.

This chapter treats a form of marginality that is qualitatively different, in that it allows for “passing”, and converges in interesting ways with forms of alienation experienced more universally (albeit assumedly to very different degrees in different people) in the competitive, hierarchical, and precarious context of New York City. It should be said once again that alienation is a fundamental concern of comedy, and of downtown comedy in particular. Comedy refers to the outside of discourse, it deals in what (with consequence of varying degrees of censure) cannot be said. Downtown comedy takes a particular interest in that realm of the unsaid that provokes anxiety, that might lead to conflict, that might offend. The previous two chapters identify some limitations on comedy’s power of social critique - limitations which are conditioned, in significant ways, by popular (mis)understandings of the lived experience of marginality and performative efficacy. Nonetheless, the community that has coalesced around this form of entertainment has an enduring and particular interest in investigating feelings of

anxiety and discomfort that are alienated from the “proper” performance of selfhood. This chapter explores depression, characterizing it as a performance of selfhood that by culturally normative standards “fails”, energetically and effectively.

Inspired by Judith Butler’s effort to bring Foucault’s understanding of the operation of power into dialogue with psychoanalytic insights, and building on the work of the previous chapters, I will discuss ways in which comics position themselves in relation to both authorized displays of affect and behavior, and more unruly ones, as they build relationships with audiences. I will argue that downtown comics perform depressed or melancholic positionalities, and audiences receive them, in such a way as to reinscribe these failings of individual affect as a social process, and to ease some of the taboos surrounding open discussion of this form of marginality. In doing so, they open a space for audience members, or, create a community in which it is permitted, to communicate more openly about feelings of anger and sadness, anhedonia, irrationality, and self-loathing. Perhaps more interestingly, and consonant with the discussion of ironic provocations and destabilized frames in chapter three, they open a space in which it is more possible to have feelings that are unresolved and ambivalent, feelings which, due in part to the attendant social prohibitions, often result in a lack of coherent identity or authentic voice.

I also want to make it clear that I don’t seek to conflate chemical depression or other forms of mental illness with alienation as a more general, perhaps universal social experience. However, in this chapter I want to look at affinities between the discourses and the silences surrounding the cluster of symptoms commonly diagnosed as depression, and the silence surrounding similar feelings of self-alienation as they are experienced among a more general population in the US, in more or less acute forms. These affinities will provide a foundation

from which to examine the ways comedy deals with these silences and discourses, as yet another public secret surrounding the question of identity. My argument is that the social taboos against open discussion of these feelings, which may include social isolation, a plummeted sense of self-worth, anhedonia, an inability to communicate in a way that resonates as authentic, and lack of personal energy and efficacy, serve both to exacerbate suffering among the clinically depressed and to politically disenfranchise all members of an excessively individualistic and precarious society. The cultural-political context in which people in the US experience depression makes for a gray area between depression as a pathology, and a similar constellation of socially grounded symptoms experienced by what McGee terms the “belabored self” (McGee 173, 183). The pressure to manage one’s affect, to circumscribe and manage emotions, is acute in either case, and it is this self-policing facet of the depression and/or alienation experience that I argue the downtown comedy scene successfully critiques and disrupts.

The notion that comics root their humor in emotional pain and suffering is widespread and oft-repeated. As Woody Allen famously wrote, in the script for *Crimes and Misdemeanors*:

There's so much tension and pain and misery and craziness here. That's the first part of comedy. But you see, you've got to get some distance from it, you know what I mean? The thing to remember about comedy is, if it bends, it's funny. If it breaks, it's not funny. So you've got to get back from the pain...Comedy is tragedy plus time. The night Lincoln was shot, you couldn't make a joke about that. You just couldn't do it. Now time has gone by, and now it's fair game.

This strikes me as a highly insightful analysis, and the wide circulation of the formula of “tragedy plus time” suggests it resonates with others. However, this study offers an important caveat: in the downtown scene, sometimes when it breaks it is also very funny. Or at the very least, it is interesting enough to be talked about for months, as in the case of the critically acclaimed “Drunk Show” discussed in chapter two. Moreover, one comic, in an effort to

characterize the mind-set of his social network, told me that comics were the first people to start joking about 9/11. It was the kind of thing, he said, that you knew you couldn't joke about with anyone else, yet. But secretly, among other comics, they were laughing about it almost immediately. And not because it wasn't painful, he said.

This willingness to delve into painful ideas or experiences overlaps with a tendency, on the part of many comics, to self-identify as having a dark or melancholic character. It happened on several occasions that I told a comic I was writing my dissertation about comedy and he or she said, "Oh? Are you writing about why we're all so fucking depressed?" While a dark or depressive nature is a characteristic by which many comics self-identify, within the comedy community there is some debate as to how this self-identification should be interpreted.

Certainly not everyone suffers from depression, and there may be some deference to this mode of self-presentation that converges with the self-effacing, marginal status comics ascribe to themselves². Eugene Mirman has voiced the supposition that computer programmers are probably also depressed, it's just that no one asks them about their feelings³.

Regardless of whether comics are indeed more likely than non-comics to suffer from depression, it seems clear that they are more willing to talk about it. I myself suffer from episodic depression, and this gave me a particular insight into how willing downtown comics are to talk openly about this particular ailment. One spring, while doing field research, I was feeling particularly unlike myself - to the point where I felt I should offer some explanation for what must come across, I imagined, as a very disengaged and off-putting affect. Several comics I spoke to responded with an unusual level of knowledgeability and generosity. One comic,

² One comic clearly identified a depressive character as a genre convention in comedy, and told me he in fact thinks most comics do themselves a disservice by emphasizing, to excess, the dark or negative side of experience. This opinion, however, seems to be in the minority.

³ He told me this personally but also told a reporter at some point. Still tracking down cite.

whose playful manner generally verged on the absurd, asked me quite earnestly and seriously if I had people I could talk to, and warned me not to let myself get isolated. Another comic, a woman I didn't know well at all, sat down and talked to me for a long time, sharing the profound feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and despair she had experienced during her own episodes of depression, and comparing the effectiveness of various coping mechanisms. At the end of the night she hugged me warmly and gave me her cell number, and said, "You can call me any time, night or day. Even if you don't want to talk, you can just text me and say, I'm so depressed I'm lying on the floor and I can't even talk right now".

Comics' willingness to talk about depression might not seem particularly noteworthy, given the ways in which the diagnosis and treatment of depression, as well as its place in US culture, has changed radically in the past 30 years, most notably with the proliferation of psychotropic drugs. Treatments of various kinds have become more common, more varied, and less stigmatized, including individual talk therapy and group therapy. Broadly "psychological" discourse has also increasingly permeated the popular sphere in the form of self-help books and talk shows (McGee 11). The twelve-step movement has concomitantly continued to expand and diversify (McGee 181).

While the increased availability of treatment has made great strides towards the treatment of depression, there are enduring taboos around self-identifying as depressed, and a silence surrounding depression as a subjective experience (Karp, Martin). There are, however, several books that seek to remedy this gap in understanding, from which one can glean some sense of the lived experience of depression, particularly as it relates to the questions of discursive and social efficacy with which this study is concerned.

William Styron's memoir, *Darkness Visible*, is one of the few classic texts on the subjective experience of depression. He speaks in the passage below to central features of the illness - cognitive torpor, anhedonia, and emotional and physical exhaustion - that can have devastating effects on an individual's sense of self, personal efficacy, and social relatedness.

The madness of depression is, generally speaking, the antithesis of violence. It is a storm indeed, but a storm of murk. Soon evident are the slowed-down responses, near paralysis, psychic energy throttled back close to zero. Ultimately the body is affected and feels sapped, drained (Styron 47).

While sadness is often a component of depression, it is important to note that they're very different. Depressed persons find themselves inexplicably deprived of basic cognitive and emotional tools they use to interact with the world. Depressed persons experience an inability to emotionally react to their surroundings in ways that they or the people around them find appropriate or even at times understandable. There is not just sadness, but a disconnect, a palpable break of the link between external causes and internal effects. Styron describes pervasive "confusion, failure of mental focus and lapse of memory", severe enough that routine tasks become difficult (Styron 14). In his sociology of depression, which also focuses on the subjective qualities of the experience, David Karp's respondents describe increased difficulty with decision-making, as well as severely depleted levels of "concentration, motivation, and energy" (Karp 30; see also 105).

Moreover, many are afraid of being judged for failing to meet "normal" expectations of job performance and social response. Family and friends may see the depressed person as selfish, self-absorbed, or not doing enough to address their own illness (Karp 106). They thus experience a sense of having

...a deeply problematic self, a self that feels socially uncomfortable...wholly unworthy of public presentation...inability to meet social obligations expands the disdain and hatred people feel towards themselves, thus sustaining and extending the need to withdraw (Karp 47).

Depressed people often slip into a state of constant, very strenuous “impression-management” or “passing”, resulting in “chronic, unremitting emotional alienation” (Karp 43).

The unruly and problematic self expands in one’s view and takes over, resulting eventually in isolation. It becomes very difficult to have flow experiences. “Depression makes it impossible to “lose” one’s self in the flow of life activities. To the contrary, sufferers become swamped by their selves and then lost in them” (Karp 105). They experience feelings of enormous precarity and vulnerability. Styron describes an emotional deadening, “enervation” and “numbness” paired with an “odd fragility - as if my body had actually become frail, hypersensitive and somehow disjointed and clumsy”, leaving the sufferer “emotionally naked, vulnerable as I had never been before” (Styron 43).

The seeming unjustifiability of depressed feelings makes them difficult to express, as does the (often quite accurate) sense that those who have not suffered from depression will find the experience incomprehensible (Karp 38). There also tends to be a great deal of confusion and ambivalence surrounding the feelings themselves. Pervasive feelings of sadness and despair may seem unrelated to their external life circumstances, which depressed people may consider to be objectively very good (Karp 33). The enervation, cognitive confusion and fatalism that characterize depression also frequently usher in a loss of imaginative and creative capacities, perhaps explaining why accounts such as Styron’s memoir are so few.

One of the defining features of depression is thus a sense of voicelessness and disconnection, an inability to articulate the experience, not only to others who have not undergone it, but even to oneself.

Depression is a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self - to the mediating intellect - as to verge close to being beyond description. It thus remains nearly incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it in its extreme mode...(Styron 7).

The difficulty in expressing or even knowing oneself converges with profound feelings of guilt, disorientation, social anxiety and cultural prejudice to deepen the isolation of the depressed person. If left unchecked, depression often results in a spiraling disinvestment from social relationships.

The self is in fact a bond between the person and social world (Karp 27). The inability to be one's authentic self is thus inextricably linked to one's social existence. As one of his respondents puts it, depression is thus:

...an insidious vacuum that crawls into your brain and pushes your mind out of the way...When you are in it there is no more empathy, no intellect, no imagination, no compassion, no humanity, no hope...Depression steals away whoever you were, prevents you from seeing who you might someday be, and replaces your life with a black hole (Karp 23-24).

Depression thus results in a profound loss of identity; "a radical constriction and narrowing of the self", which extends to one's ability to imagine how personal efficacy and authentic social connection may be possible in the future (Karp 13). In fact, as depression takes its toll on the individual over time, this pessimism often seems quite reasonably warranted. People with depression find life trajectories affected - may be chronically underemployed, unable to maintain personal relationships (Karp 107).

Notably, depressed persons may recognize all the while that something is "wrong" - all the while be highly self-reflective about the experience even as they are unable to control it.

They experience a severe internal dissonance wherein feelings of anxiety, anhedonia, despair, sudden lack of motivation and energy, etc, seem both totally unwarranted and totally engrossing. Karp in fact argues that depression necessitates self-reflection, as people struggle to understand their problematic selves. Styron describes a self-alienation so severe that he had a sense of one part of himself standing by as an observer, while another part plotted his own suicide:

“A phenomenon that a number of people have noted while in deep depression is the sense of being accompanied by a second self - a wraithlike observer who, not sharing the dementia of his double, is able to watch the dispassionate curiosity as his companion struggles against the oncoming disaster, or decides to embrace it” (Styron 64).

As should be clear from the above passages, depression instantiates a particular form of critical self-reflection, which often extends to self-policing. As one’s emotional responses, energy level, and various cognitive and physical abilities begin to diverge from socially accepted norms, they implicitly raise questions of conscience. Conscience mediates an existential ambiguity, emerging from the paradox that affect is something to be managed, deployed strategically in social life, and yet is supposed to index the self in an authentic, unrestrained and spontaneous way. This dual role for emotions makes them a site for the experience of alienation, which, Svenaeus reminds us, is rooted in the experience of something as simultaneously ours and not-ours.

Discursively, identifying a cluster of cognitive and emotional responses as symptoms of depression serves to bracket them off, circumscribing an unruly and alienating aspect of the self. When the body falls ill it demonstrates “a life of its own”...”the otherness of my own body...lends facticity to my existence...the body becomes *alien* in illness” (Svenaeus 58). Svenaeus argues that the alienating effects of the doctor’s gaze, following on the heels of the

alienating experience of illness, actually serve to contain this first alienation, setting the problematic part of the body apart from the person's holistic identity, containing the disruption. To name the trouble is to name and thus contain the unruly and uncontrolled aspect of the self.

A diagnosis of depression, as Karp documents, thus serves to explain the problem and alleviate the individual of responsibility to some extent. It allows for some reclamation of the self as a social being, as apart from the effects of the illness. However, this bracketing is incomplete and problematic. Prior to adopting the diagnosis, people who suffer from depression may hold out the hope that a change in employment, personal relationships, or other life circumstances may hold the key to happiness. Deciding the problem is within "implies a problematic identity far more basic and immutable than those associated with social statuses...to see oneself as somehow internally flawed poses substantially greater problems for identity change or remediation because one's whole personhood is implicated" (Karp 61). It is also enormously hard to accept the probability of reduced life chances, which statistically is the case for many depressed people.

There is also a social stigma and attached to this diagnosis, which contaminates the person's identity as rational and autonomous. The therapeutic context positions the psychoanalyst as medical authority, with the psyche of the patient as the material to be reworked, though some practitioners have argued for the modification of this imbalanced power dynamic (Lear 2003, Shaw 2010). The fact that individuals can make the *choice* to adopt a stigmatized, marginal identity such as "depressed" sets it apart from gendered and raced marginal identities. As discussed in previous chapters, comics experience such marked identities as obstacles to the performance of creative individuality.

Karp also argues that diagnosis holds out a false promise of complete relief and recovery - the idea that the bracketed-off portion of the self can be handed over to a professional for “cure” or eradication, treatable in the same manner as an inflamed appendix. Contemporary methods of diagnosis and treatment can exacerbate this misconception, as they tend to emphasize the biological dimensions of depression. Research is frequently geared towards biological explanations, and the development of pharmacological solutions, because this type of research is relatively well-funded and promises expedient forms of treatment (Manninen). Talk therapy, by contrast, which has the advantage of incorporating attention to social context, and can help patients develop tools for self-reflection and coping, is much more laborious and costly (Manninen). While these methods are less “efficient”, they might help sufferers address problematic social relationships and develop new perspectives or life strategies that would have lasting benefits, and perhaps interrogate the boundary between biological and social bases for depressive feelings (Marino). Mental illness is a problem that occurs in and may very well be a function of social context. Thus Oliver Sacks argues for case study analysis that includes social context as factors in both pathology and healing.

Emily Martin suggests that a diagnosis of depression can also become a sort of fetish, masking continued silence surrounding the subjective experience of depression, which remains a taboo subject. She documents her experience in support groups, wherein she was surprised to discover that people talked in very little detail about their experiences living with bipolar disorder, choosing instead to articulate their positionalities in terms of DSM categories. She raises the possibility that many people may not be as highly trained in self-reflection as she is, as she has had access to long-term psychotherapy, but she also suggests that even in the context of support groups they rely on the safety afforded by DSM categories - that the label protects them

from further scrutiny. DSM diagnosis serves as a mark of inclusion, a social presence and legibility, if a pathologized one. But talking in terms of the label may preclude exploring other possible avenues of self-discovery. Karp argues that isolation isn't transcended by saying to family and friends that you suffer from depression, because it doesn't convey the inner experience. "Depression is still only a code word that cannot bridge the chasm of feeling separating their world from that of friends and family whom they believe, in contrast to themselves, are 'normal'" (40).

Moreover, critics have voiced concerns about the ways in which both medical psychology and popularized psychological discourse has been employed as a technology of the self. Popularization of psychology, in the form of self-help books, talk shows, etc, has often cast it as a tool to reconcile one's emotional life to the demands of public life (McGee, Rose). Among these critics' concerns is that this scrutiny of the self might be better directed towards a broader social context. There is a political dimension to quelling anxiety and disciplining feelings of alienation and anger, for example, among populations facing prolonged unemployment and other forms of economic precarity. One of Martin's main points is that the social experience of what is now termed bipolar disorder has changed over time, and that the "manic" pole of this disorder, when moderated, is adaptive, or suited, to the demands made upon workers by contemporary capitalism. She describes a shift from citizenship to entrepreneurship as a model for subjectivity that is well documented in studies of the "creative class". "In this environment the individual is responsible for his or her own success or failure in a high-stakes and ever-changing set of arenas...there is an imperative for people who are always adapting, scanning the environment, continuously changing in creative and innovative ways, flying from

one thing to another, pushing the limits of everything..." (Martin 42)⁴. She thus asks, "Does manic depression only involve a disorder of moods or does it more centrally involve a diminution or exaggeration of *motivation*?"⁵ (Martin 43).

Indeed, as Karp documents, people who suffer from depression find it very difficult to determine the extent to which they should act upon the unruly force that their idiosyncratic emotions and drives have become, as opposed to the extent to which they should work to police them. Negotiating a self-identity and set of practices that balance self-discipline and self-acceptance in such a way that maximizes the good is very difficult. Arriving at a diagnosis of depression is a long and arduous process, prolonged by the difficulty of determining whether the problem is inside or outside of the self (Karp 61). One also navigates out-of-control emotions and drives in the context of a complex and varying field of social relations, and in a context where the usual rules of reciprocity that apply to social relations are rendered unclear. The practices surrounding depression, including shame, blame, and social isolation, reveal its ambiguous and contested status as an illness, and the difficulty depressed persons have making claims on the sympathy that might be extended more easily to those who suffer more physical, transparent, or short-term illnesses. While, as Gilligan and Kramer point out, psychology tends to encourage the adult to work towards differentiation and independence in the context of his or her relationships, Styron argues that very devoted friends and loved ones, when they manage to

⁴ This imperative to maintain and perform an optimistic, energetic outlook in the face of precarious and shifting criteria for success, and to produce a prolific repertoire of creative and innovative responses, aptly describes the predicament of downtown comics, as documented in previous chapters. Interestingly, Martin also notes that managers of Hollywood comedians have been known to involve themselves in treatment decisions for clients suffering from bipolar disorder, reasoning that they don't want their clients' mania "damped down too much" (Martin 221).

⁵ Comedian Greg Johnson has a joke about motivation. "Did you guys read that scientists think they've isolated the chemical responsible for motivation? What I want to know is, when is that shit going to hit the streets? I can't wait until I'm snorting motivation. Duuuudde...I got so fucked up last night...I spent 10 hours editing my resume". Interesting how the joke alludes to, conjures the latent image of, a person in the throes of addiction - quite distant from the ideal model of the rational, effectively self-disciplined subject.

have an almost religious faith in the life that the depressed person has deemed worthless, may be able to keep a morbidly depressed person from suicide (Styron 76). Karp also devotes extended discussion to the difficulty in determining the level of responsibility loved ones and caregivers can be expected to accept for a depressed person, who may exact a measurable toll on emotional and financial resources, and be unable to reciprocate in the usual fashion. Thus,

“...people’s experience with clinical depression is an exercise in negotiating ambiguity and involves the evolution of an illness consciousness often extending over many years” (Karp 75)⁶.

Importantly, Karp’s discussion of treatment demonstrates that in spite of the complexity and difficulty of this problem, patients are loathe to relinquish it as a defining aspect of themselves. They feel dehumanized when the complexity of this problem is underestimated. Many of Karp’s respondents described doctors’ efforts to neatly circumscribe the effects of depression, as though they did not present a complex ethical problem, as a form of violence. They emphasized the spiritual dimension of coping with depression, at times even valuing it for the insights it produced, and the way it initiated deep reflection on their ethical relationships to others.

This ambiguity raises questions of conscience not only for those who are diagnosed with depression, but for any subject who experiences feelings of anhedonia, etc, that compromise his or her performative efficacy in a context where forms of productive vitality such as the ones Martin describes are a normative cultural expectation. The above suggests that perhaps some of

⁶ While out of the scope of the current discussion, contemporary debates around addiction and its treatment often raise related questions regarding personal responsibility and power/powerlessness. Of particular interest are the philosophy and practices of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Bateson, etc), and the uses and critiques of the “disease model”.

the silence and inarticulateness surrounding depression results from the fact that the experience itself is abjected from social life - it is an emotional and cognitive condition that manifests as an impairment, it is fraught with culpability. The authorized discourses that have emerged to disculpate the individual sufferer from social censure have some efficacy, but they belie his or her ongoing existential struggle to resolve the ambiguity created by unreliable, untrustworthy, or maladapted emotional responses.

Though problematized differently following Foucault, the notion of a self that is split between public and private, authorized and unruly, moral and idiosyncratic, etc, endures as an organizing concept for understanding human subjectivity. Vikki Bell argues that the project of being a modern subject is an “infinite task”, a continual reworking of the relationship of self to self⁷. Indeed this project of navigating the relationship of self to self, as mediated by conscience, remains a central dilemma of the western subject, with political consequences not limited to the lives of the palpably melancholic. To what degree should the individual abject, or remain complicit in the abjection of, those aspects of an unruly self that do not conform to these normative expectations, and to what degree is such abjection not in fact ethical?

As discussed in previous chapters, Judith Butler seeks to unravel notions of authorized discourse as sovereign, as necessarily both literal and totalizing in its performative effects. Quoting Foucault’s assertion that “The soul is the prison of the body”, she asks why Foucault uses the prison, a totalizing institution, as metaphor (Butler 85). Similarly, the scene of interpellation as narrated by Althusser, in which the individual responds to the call of the policeman to assume an alienating and subjected social identity, is over-fraught with religious and punitive baggage (109). In mobilizing religious and authoritarian metaphor, she argues,

⁷ The poststructuralist moment is perhaps best distinguished by the fact that both of these facets of the self are suffering a simultaneous crisis of authority.

“Althusser inadvertently assimilates social interpellation to the divine performative” (110). The voice of the policeman has all the force of the voice of God, a singular and omnipotent authority as opposed to a socially and historically grounded figure, whose authority emanates in varying forms and degrees from different social fields.

Butler thus seeks to open the process of subjectification in discourse to investigation, introducing Freudian insights into the affective dimension of its mechanics. She seeks to account for how social prohibitions, repression, and the productive effects of power might not just be reproduced mimetically in practice, but be subject to disruption in the process of repetition, in the personal and historical contingency of each instance. Butler says there must be a founding scene, in the “non-narrativizable pre-history of the subject”, that sets the stage for the submission to interpellation that is understood to form the subject (112). Interpellation, per Althusser, is a misrecognition. What causes the person to accept these terms as a condition of social identity - misrecognition characterized by subordination? (112).

Butler elaborates melancholia as a social condition, as that which predisposes one to violent interpellation. I don't intend to conflate her analysis of social life with depression as a form of mental illness, but I think she speaks meaningfully to the discursive violences surrounding the common features of depression and social alienation. In particular she speaks to the silence and un-knowingness at the heart of melancholy. Butler draws on Freud's concept of melancholia as unresolved mourning and denied loss to argue that this vulnerability to interpellation is related to a founding loss, preceding the formation of the subject, of abjected, foreclosed forms of love and social engagement. These losses cannot be mourned because they are socially prohibited; to acknowledge the pain of such a loss would be to risk one's social identity. Rather than acknowledge this loss, the subject is founded on the disavowed knowledge

of its own vulnerability to loss, transforming an ambivalent relationship to the social world into an ambivalent relationship of self to self (188, 191).

Butler thus takes up the notion of conscience, as elaborated in Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault, and Althusser. For each of these theorists, conscience is present in the founding moment of the subject, as a mediating force that splits the individual in two. On one side is the socially conditioned subject, enduring, moral, rational. On the other is a more unruly aspect of the self, cast in Nietzsche as the individual will, in Hegel as the embodied and contingent aspect of lived existence, and in Freud as the ego, fraught with reckless drives, that the superego must keep in check. Returning to Althusser, Butler casts conscience as vulnerability to a certain kind of recognition. Conscience preexists the formation of the subject, and predisposes the individual to emerge as a subject in response to a call, an interpellation, that is fraught with existing guilt, a debt to be paid, a complicity with being recognized by the terms of a punitive power. Conscience is founded on melancholy, is disposed to accept violent terms of recognition, having undergone the trauma of loss that cannot be named or mourned.

In the process of incorporating the lost or foreclosed object, the individual takes on a subjectivity that is split not only internally, but split off from the external world, from which he or she cannot anticipate satisfaction. “If the melancholic turn is the mechanism by which the distinction between internal and external worlds is instituted, then melancholia initiates a variable boundary between the psychic and the social, a boundary, I hope to show, that distributes and regulates the psychic sphere in relation to prevailing norms of social regulation” (171). Conscience marks off the domain of one’s sovereign efficacy and power (inside) from the social world in which one is subject to rejection, prohibition (outside). Conscience institutes the outside as that which it is wrong to control, that which it is wrong to possess, that from which it

is inappropriate to receive satisfaction. “melancholia is the limit to the subject's sense of *pouvoir*, its sense of what it can accomplish, and, in that sense, its power” (Butler 23).

Questions of power are also questions of conscience. Intensity of melancholia is in proportion to intensity of “thwarted grief and illegible rage...in the social foreclosure of grief we might find what fuels the internal violence of conscience” (183). “The loss that the ego suffers is a loss of commensurability between itself and the ideal by which it is judged” (185). Butler thus suggests working back from conscience to see what losses we are not grieving, what embodied or incorporated violences might actually originate outside the subject. “Is the psychic violence of conscience not a refracted indictment of the social forms that have made certain kinds of losses ungrieveable?” (185). In linking the individual’s vulnerability to interpellation to embodied, unresolved grief, Butler’s microscopic exploration of the problem of conscience reveals a rough terrain, an ethical complexity that emerges in the narratives Karp collects.

Bell takes up in particular the temporal dimension of this subjective experience. Drawing on Arendt, she argues that modern notions of freedom place political freedom at a teleological and experiential remove from everyday life. Citizens of the modern, liberal state are encouraged to believe in the promise of future freedom, the eventual outcome of reasoned discourse and political participation. The notion of an enduring, individual will as Nietzsche would have it, that is able to make promises, to operate with continuity over time, is a political fiction, inoperable in the idealized public realm of liberal politics, wherein it will encounter other equally empowered wills with which it must negotiate (Bell 90). Freedom is thus known, subjectively, as a conjectured future, radically free but also interiorized, disconnected from public life (Bell 90). Because these notions of freedom are in fact unpracticable, they tend to result in a hopeless withdrawal, a focus on a removed and idealized future, and failure to see opportunities to

practice freedom as they exist in the present. Per Bell, both Foucault and Arendt thus argue for a practice of liberty, an “aesthetics of existence”, in which the person occupies political space in the present time, performing freedom in a form that departs from the abstract concepts thereof that prevail in modern western thought (Bell 85).

Significantly, Bell does not argue that we collapse the space marked out by conscience, or abandon the tasks it sets before us, a perspective which follows logically from her more optimistic analysis of Foucault’s later work, in particular, which, she argues, is concerned with “a political space that arises in the relation of self to self” (Bell 85). She argues rather that Foucault proposes that the *terms* of the relationship of self to self be questioned, and in particular that we develop political practices that move out of the “anxious ethos” that focuses this relationship on questions of future consequences for action, which are informed by existing discourses and the unequal power relations embedded within them.

Bell’s argument converges with Butler’s in its emphasis on locating possible resistance in the realm of practice and within a political present. Butler takes up the question of anxiety in relation to the threat of non-being that underwrites the subject’s acquiescence to violent interpellation. She argues rather that the foundational sense of loss at the core of our passionate attachments to subjected identities renders them unstable, and that in the unstable process of attachment is the possibility for detachment. She suggests that people may be able to cultivate an ability to detach, a quelling of what Bell glosses as anxiety, in order to bring conflicting discursive regimes into play with one another, and open up new and less dominated forms of social recognition. She raises the idea of risk – “what would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued [authorized] social existence?” - and the possibility that the

subject could risk this existence, court social death, in order to bring the haunting melancholy to the fore (Butler 28-9).

The idea of detachment and risk should be familiar by now to the reader. Irony suggests an alternating detachment and engagement, flitting between critical reflection and immersive provocation. As they engage in ironic provocations comics are acting out a drama of social risk, positioning themselves as abject or marginal in the hope that this position or perspective will be met with social recognition rather than “death”, will in fact emerge as a privileged perspective, an implicit reference to a public secret, or will mobilize empathy and desire on the part of audience members.

All of this bears an interesting relationship to Jonathan Lear’s argument for the use of irony in therapeutic practice, a notion he elaborates from his study of Kierkegaard. Lear argues that therapists should depart from the common practice of offering interpretations of their patients’ narratives and gestures, as these interpretations offer patients fixed, potentially alienating frames, causing the therapist to step in as authority where the patient should be developing his or her own authority and voice. The therapist, he argues, should rather offer ironic provocations, in the spirit of Socrates as discussed in chapter three, that provide patients with the opportunity to reflect on the contradictions and dissonances in their own habitual thoughts and practices. Perhaps the “detachment” of the ironist can provide his or her interlocutor with an opportunity to “detach” in the manner Butler suggests.

Further exploration of psychoanalytic frameworks lends insight into ways in which the mechanics of the comedy performance might facilitate the emergence and recognition of perspectives fraught with “haunting melancholy”. The structure of comedic texts and performances allow for particular structures of identification and communication to develop

between comics and audience members. Existing theories on audience identifications with filmic texts, which incorporate psychoanalytic insights, inform the following investigation of these structures. The structure of filmic texts and comedy performances have important points of congruence and divergence, particularly as they relate to the symbolic realm in its more literalist manifestations and theorizations.

Christian Metz argues that filmic texts position the viewer in a relationship of identification with the camera's perspective. The authorial presence in film is not represented in the objects depicted; rather, the perspective of the viewer is directed by the camera's selective attention to these objects, as they appear in a symbolically structured relation to one another in the space of the screen. Film spectatorship is also significantly characterized, Metz argues, by a wealth of sensory perception that is nonetheless characterized by absence - objects from the real world appear to the viewer, and yet are not present, inciting desire that cannot achieve satisfaction, that is displaced from possible sources of satisfaction in a manner formally analogous to that of the fetish. Metz draws on Lacan's concept of the mirror stage to argue that these combined lures - this fetishistic mode of engagement, and the omnipotent relation to the symbolic via identification with the camera - capture the viewer's ego in an imaginary relation to the subject matter depicted.

This theoretical paradigm has been taken up in subsequent iterations to explain the power of film (and television)'s allure, and its capacity to bypass critical consideration on the part of the viewer. The ideologies coded in filmic representations gain a sort of privileged entry to the subject's consciousness, as they orient the viewer's perception towards an illusion/experience of coherence and meaningful immediacy akin to the ego's imaginary, and yet undergirded by the authority of the symbolic (Williamson).

Joan Copjec takes issue with the closed-circuit authoritarianism that characterizes many of these theories, arguing that they rest on interpretations of Lacan that erroneously conflate his theorizations of the imaginary and the symbolic. She traces this conflation to the influence of Foucault and Althusser, in an analysis that resonates with Butler's critique of the sovereign efficacy frequently attributed to discourse. Copjec argues that the formation of conscience in the construction of the subject marks off a realm of the unspeakable that forms the locus of desire. The very culpability that predisposes the subject to violent interpellation thus also instantiates and draws attention to a realm that presents as more real, more compelling, than that which can be represented.

The fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth - that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal - *founds* the subject...The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see...The subject comes into existence, then, through a desire which is still considered to be the effect of the law, but not its realization. Desire...is occasioned by impossibility...the impossibility of the subject's ever coinciding with the real being from which representation cuts it off (Copjec 450-1).

Copjec thus argues that the allure of filmic representation can only be understood by examining the way it mobilizes a subject's desire for access to that which cannot be represented.

The poetics of comedy, I would argue, direct the attention of the audience precisely towards a realm of the "true" that exceeds representation. As Raskin points out, the crux of a joke rests on submerged scripts and unarticulated meanings. Freud delves more specifically into the affective charge associated with these meanings, linking them specifically to social taboos, to realities that cannot be spoken. Because the formal structure of the joke requires that the central meaning is not articulated, audience members make an unspoken contribution to the construction of the joke's implicit meaning.

The “apparatus” or mechanism of comedy thus also facilitates an imaginary relation between implied author and spectator. In her discussion of humor’s “implicit meanings”, Douglas cites Anton Ehrenzweig, who argued that the “perception of inarticulate forms [e.g., the implicit meanings that form the core of jokes] is itself a direct source of pleasure”, as they are experienced as “an image of the subconscious” (Douglas 94). The poetics of the joke do not draw a sharp distinction between their own subjectivities and that of the comic - in fact the experience of shared laughter serves to blur the distinction. Shared laughter is cathartic and communal - a form of flow experience that renders ego boundaries less subject to scrutiny. Winnicott also talks about play and the potential porousness of ego boundaries, in a discussion that evokes the experience of improv, which also celebrates a sort of explosive emotional immaturity. Central tenets of improv philosophy/practice - emphasis on spontaneity, “don’t think”, don’t try to be funny at the expense of being authentic.

The presence of a theater performer indicates consent, exhibitionism - creates "the illusion of a fullness of the object relation, of a state of desire which is not just imaginary" (Metz 422-3). In the cinema the actor and the viewer have "missed" one another in time and space, but the presence of a theater actor, in the same time and location as the spectator, makes for an "authentic perverse couple" (Metz 423). Per Butler, “The body is not a site on which a construction takes place, it is a destruction on the occasion of which a subject is formed” (Butler 92). i.e., the body we know as subjects is actually our work to regulate the body. The body is negated or repressed so that the subject might live (ibid).

For both Bergson and Freud “the essence of the joke is that something formal is attacked by something informal, something organised and controlled, by something vital, energetic...” (Douglas 95). A joke juxtaposes “a control against that which is controlled”, in such a way that

“the latter triumphs” (Douglas 96). Per Butler, in Lacan’s theorization the psyche resides in excess of the subject, “is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject” (Butler 86). She goes on to argue that Foucault’s notion of power supplants Lacan’s more immutable, legalistic model of the Symbolic with a model of discourse that is more malleable, subject to reconfiguration through its deployment (98-99).

Louis Sass introduced the term “double bookkeeping” to describe schizophrenics’ understanding of their own symptomatic behavior. They might operate under delusions but at the same time “treat these same beliefs with what seems a certain distance or irony” (Martin 55). Martin describes a support group member moving rapidly between different perspectives as he interacts, provocatively, with her, like an “improv actor” (Martin 57). She has a sense that while he is acting to disarm her, there is an intentionality to it, that comes from knowing she is viewing him in a certain way. Martin indirectly raises the notion of framing - “performance provides a way, in actions as well as words, for people cast into the category of the irrational to comment on their putative ‘irrationality’. In doing so they demonstrate that they are rational” (Martin 59). She lists a couple of performance techniques: “mocking, reframing, or caricaturing” (Martin 59). She says that people who suffer from bipolar disorder experience a sense of multiplicity or interruption of self. Illustrates this with a Robin Williams comedy routine (Martin 64). Multiplicity works against an appearance of rational coherence and self-control that characterizes the ideal subject since the 19th century (Martin 66).

Performances of manic subjectivity in the context of Martin’s support group are often collaborative efforts. These shared performances are initiated by moments of eye contact – a flash of recognition that goes around the room. The performance locates mania

...squarely in a social setting, in the intersubjective space among group members...For those living under the description of manic depression, the inside site of emotion is where what is wrong with them is said to be, and for which they have trouble finding a legitimating form of description, apart from medical discourse. The force of these performances is that they enact a nonindividualized mood...and give this enactment legitimacy in the social space of their meetings (Martin 79).

Martin further points out that the performances of mania have a meta focus, and asks if they could be moving towards a view of manic depression from their own perspective (Martin 80).

In downtown comedy venues, experiences of alienation are not so congruent, from subject to subject, as to be so easily shared. Performances are not likely to be as immediately recognizable to audience members as they are in the context of Martin's support group. But the structure of the joke, and the emphasis on unfinished or experimental work, allows for a more locally idiosyncratic perspective to be articulated via similar performance techniques, and to obtain recognition and resonance.

As previously discussed, I depart from Purdie's application of a Lacanian framework, wherein she argues that comedy positions itself, in the final analysis, as allied with the "law" of discourse, encouraging audiences to identify with existing social norms against marked transgressions. Comedic authority in the downtown comedy scene is rather rooted in multiple and often contradictory forms of power, often mobilizing both unmarked authority and declared marginality. Successful comedy about affective dissonance/melancholia does not position the alienated individual as entirely rational or irrational, entirely as an authorized subject or entirely transgressive, but rather articulates the quandary of the self-policing subject - a subject that is qualitatively distinct from the sedimented or codified power of discourse evoked by the figure of the law, and in fact negotiates between this "law" and the more unruly aspects of the self.

The structure of the performance provides some protections for performers, allowing them to articulate and claim ownership of difficult, contentious, or even failing selves, while at the same time preserving some detachment from these selves. Use of framing devices, discussed at length in chapter three, allows the comic to communicate a meta-subjectivity, which objectifies the public self and observes and comments upon it from a remove. This protective structure allows for an elevated level of risk-taking in the partial articulation of marginal perspectives. This meta-subjectivity is not fully or concretely articulated, but nonetheless has an authorial presence and emotional resonance for audience members. As in the case of the comic's interlocutor as theorized by Freud, audience members partake in the power of the comics' conjectured subjectivity, profiting from a vicarious experience of empowering transgression. The fact that the meta-subjectivity is not articulated also provides some protection for audience members, and a sense of intimacy and co-production of meaning that blurs the boundary between performer and audience member.

Below we see several techniques employed by comics over the course of performances that articulate the experience of affective alienation, at times with acute perspicuity, in such a way that question of individual responsibility, or conscience, can be left more or less open in relative safety. In order to do this they manipulate splits - between authorized and unruly aspects of the self, or between performer and audience - in ways that locate the experience of negativity, trauma, failure, or difficult emotion in a social context shared by the audience. As they shift these experiences from the private to the public realm, authorized discourse doesn't bear down on the question of conscience with the violence that is frequently theorized to be customary.

Jacqueline Novak does a joke about invasive, obsessive depressive thoughts. She attempts to keep a self-hating inner voice at bay by reciting a series of positive affirmations -

mimes herself walking down the street, chanting affirmations in time with the rhythm of her walk. But at length the negative thoughts return, working themselves into the thought pattern, “looping” them into the rhythm of the affirmations, “like some shitty house DJ”, rapping along, “you should really kill yourself”. The part of her that voices the affirmations is cowed, intimidated by this second loop, afraid to contradict the imagined house DJ no matter what he says, “like as if he’s black, and so he’s automatically cooler than I am⁸. The supposed disciplinary power of positive, affirming discourse, to which she has an ambivalent relationship (she wants it to save her but in the end it just isn’t persuasive or funny) fails here, as the unruly part of the self takes on a competing voice.

Leo Allen has a joke about getting angry as he waits in line at Whole Foods⁹. Someone makes a small move or gesture towards the front of the line, and Leo imagines that the stranger is going to cut in front of him. He imagines the ensuing argument, and gets angrier and angrier as he imagines it escalating. In the end he has totally misread the intentions of the stranger; the imagined aggression was the refracted image of his own anger and aggression, seething just below the surface.

There are two Leos present in the telling of this joke. Reminiscent of Styron’s description of the splitting of self that occurs in some periods of deep depression, there is one Leo that acts, and one that stands back and watches himself acting. This structure is not unlike the one Purdie describes in her examples of jokes that work to mark transgression, in which the

⁸ One might argue that this joke mobilizes the cultural association of blackness with authenticity, giving added weight or resonance to the unruly second “voice” (see ch. 4).

⁹ The joke is funnier if you understand that the process to access a cash register at Whole Foods is complicated enough that at least several of the throng of people waiting are usually confused. Customers line up like cattle in several parallel rows and are cued to move forward by color-coding and numbers, all of which is mediated by a robot voice. It’s moreover a little dehumanizing, and one feels the anxiety associated with a power vacuum.

final authority emerges to contain the transgressive element of the joke. Leo describes a transgression and then marks it as irrational. And yet he does not align himself entirely with the rational against the irrational. As Leo narrates and to some extent acts out his own thought process, he connects with the audience from an ironic, almost confused perspective, the rational self bewildered yet amused by the irrational self. It's not hard to see how the context produces the reaction, even as it is overblown and hysterical. In fact it is vicariously satisfying to imagine the explosive confrontation, even if at the end of the joke it doesn't happen.

This splitting of perspective, in which the authoritative perspective contains a note of irony, is akin to Kuthoff's discussion of self-deprecating humor. The subjects of her study assert a certain authority by regarding some aspect of themselves as alien, by subjecting it to critical scrutiny, but in doing so they reinforce ownership of this unruly aspect of themselves. In fact they seem to mobilize the energy contained in their own fallibility, reversing its trajectory to project a certain iconoclasm. As was addressed in previous chapters, this particular sort of comedic authority holds great sway in the downtown comedy scene. Comics also mobilize an affective relationship with audience members (see previous chapter), aligning themselves with audience against the disciplinary social norm. In fact the locus of final authority may be so unresolved as to be disturbing or unsettling.

The explosive, irrational, censored self is not naturalized as the "real", necessarily, over and above the rational self, but the two work together. A certain tenderness is extended to the irrational by the rational, as though they have a discordant friendship. The conscience of the comic is thereby positioned as negotiating between the demands of socially appropriate behavior, the "law" of social life, if you will, and the unruly emotionalism of the self. The audience is drawn into empathetic alliance with this position. The behavior that is modeled, then, is not

social appropriateness, but an ongoing negotiation between existing norms of appropriateness and one's idiosyncratic impulses.

Leo Allen, ITU 070801:

I talk to myself out loud, a lot, I've realized recently...what's depressing is it's never in a positive context, it's always (laughing with some chagrin) profoundly sad. Over the winter I was walking around by myself on a very cold day and I heard myself say out loud to myself, aw man, it really looks like it's going to snow today. And then I was like, Oh my God, I'm talking to myself about the weather! Is that how bad it's gotten between me and me?! That I need to fill the awkward silence with weather chat? I can't just be with myself? Talking to himself for being hungover, in a mirror...hears blah blah blah - I was talking to myself and I wasn't even listening! That is so insulting! I guess part of my brain heard myself and was like, oh, great...the guy who took the seven dollar bet to drink a bottle of salad dressing has some life advice. No, thank you. The guy who had three roommates until he was 35 has a suggestion. Not interested. Do serial killers have these conversations with themselves? Come on, man! This isn't you! You don't need to kill all those people...What ever happened to the dream of painting? After this long holiday weekend, is over we gotta stop. After these hikers go back to their regular job schedule, we'll definitely call it quits. Yelling at himself - where are my shoes? What borough am I in? It would be fine if it worked, but it doesn't. The next day at the bar the bartender's gonna be like, you want a drink? You're not going to say, ooh, I would, but I don't want to be yelling at myself later. I don't want to hear it from me.

Karp raises the idea that crisis moments in the career of a depressed person result in critical self-reflection. These jokes prolong the moment of reflection, mitigate the anxiety associated with this alienation from self by putting it in a context of absurd extremes.

There is even an "out" available if the audience is not drawn into this negotiation - a framing out of the unruly (or pathological) aspect of the self more akin to that which Svenaus and Karp discuss. This occurs in retreats from failed moments in performance, in the form of reflexive commentary.

Audiences attend to this splitting of self, and their responses suggest that it provides a vehicle to engage with and understand problematic or uncomfortable selves. I spoke to one fan

after a show in which a male comic engaged a female audience member in an unnecessarily aggressive way, imputing a sadistic intent to her inattention to his set. The comic then retracted and apologized, attributing his overreaction to deep-seated problems with women. The fan said, “it’s uncomfortable to watch, because he’s a misogynist. But he’s so self aware that it’s interesting”. Several fans of Louis C.K. have said that part of his appeal is how *wrong* he is, but that he expresses misanthropic inclinations in such an earnest way that he forces you to think about it, he gets you to confront the horrible qualities in yourself. It seems audience members identify with both aspects of these comics, the irrational and rational sides of their personhood. This perhaps can create a sense of personal relationship that allows for some negotiation between the two.

I am reminded of the voice of one fan as she described comics she is fond of. There was a certain wistfulness, but also a tone of feeling allied with them, a generous sort of tone, the authority of familiarity. She would recede into herself as she talked about them, into the space of resonance, it seemed, that they had evoked within her. Crushes on stars (per Dyer, etc) are projections, of self onto an unresisting receptacle. It is interesting to compare what’s facilitated by visuality with what’s facilitated by this particular language structure. “They say things that you think”, she said. And when I repeated another fan’s idea that they “said things you would have thought if you’d thought of it”, she said, “yes, exactly, they put thoughts in your head”.

Another fan told me that laughing at the Luna Lounge comics on Monday was what gave her the energy to face her shitty week.

Comics also occasionally draw painful experiences out of fans, in the public forum of the performance, at times unintentionally. One comic told me that he once engaged a woman in the crowd, and she came out with a horrible story about her sons dying in a car accident. This was

entirely unexpected and he felt she was destroying the show, but then she came up and thanked him afterwards. Perhaps his positioning in that space, and his charisma, offered a vehicle for her to bring something difficult, something people don't want to hear about, to light.

An improv troupe called Death by Roo Roo does a show called *Your Fucked Up Family*, wherein they interview a volunteer from the audience about his or her family members, their personalities, activities, and relationships, and then create a long-form show based on the material. It's very interesting to watch the amount and the kind of attention they pay to the audience volunteers during the interview, the way they defuse the audience member's inclination to play him or herself for laughs, coax him or her with calm attention into delivering the "straight" story. The show itself doesn't so much represent the family situation as play with the possibilities it provides for elaboration. And yet a woman who had been an interviewee told me she found the experience very "cathartic".

Psychoanalytic discourse, from which the patient may be alienated, originates from institutional structures arguably aligned in significant ways with the Law, but comedy does not. In comedy the speaker *necessarily* wields language in complicated and variable ways. "The joke merely affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. It's excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective. It is frivolous in that it produces no real alternative, only an exhilarating sense of freedom from form in general" (Douglas 96). "...the privileged form of obliviousness is the joke, in which Freud begins (though it does not end) in a prolongation of lost, ludic, childhood freedom" (Limon 39).

Melancholia refuses to name grief, refuses to declare in fact that the lost object of ambivalence is lost, dead (Butler 185). "his or her speech is neither verdictive nor declarative

(assertoric) but inevitably indirect and circuitous. What cannot be declared by the melancholic is nevertheless what governs melancholic speech - an unspeakability that organizes the field of the speakable” (Butler 186). The melancholic is evasive but nonetheless communicative.

The comic is also evasive, organizing overlapping plates in the field of the speakable in such a way as to illuminate the unspeakable and unspoken gaps and fissures - disorganizing the speakable so that the unspeakable can emerge. Althusser theorized that possibilities to resist or misrecognize interpellation reside in the domain of the imaginary (Butler 95). Butler argues that in Foucault’s formulation it’s an important moment when conflicting discursive regimes come together and create friction (93).

It is important to note that while the mechanics of the performance facilitate risk-taking, performing also does take a lot of a certain kind of courage. I watched one comic respond to a heckler who was unimpressed with her for being self-critical - she shot back that she’d rather hate herself than be totally lacking in self-awareness. She told me later that this was a pivotal moment for her, that she was shaking when she said it, she felt she was confronting a profound fear. It also seems significant that the way she tells the story, which she is still telling four years later, she was afraid to come to Rififi that night, and joked to Eugene that she could only make it if the crowd came and carried her there and demanded to hear what she had to say. She suffers from depression, and told me that her father, in an effort to give her some tools to cope with it, told her that you can’t win an argument with the devil, you just have to say, me and the devil are going to Rififi. Bringing “the devil” along with you constitutes license to publicly present an incomplete or imperfect self. The moment of carving out that space, where you don’t know whether or not it will be successful, can be deeply frightening.

What was particular about the year of fieldwork during which I started to talk about feeling depressed was that I was approaching the 20th anniversary of my father's suicide. It occasioned reflection on how much I had and hadn't come to terms with the event and its impact on my own life. Among a series of complicated and ambivalent emotions was the sense that at least it was an accomplishment, and one once deemed a dubious possibility, I think, by various psychologists and social workers, that I wasn't dead myself. I confided to Eugene that I felt like throwing a party. A suicide party. He was delighted. "This combines my love of throwing a big event with my love of awkwardness". It became a running joke to imagine invitations, favors and party games. When I proposed the idea of a pinata hanging from a noose he was again delighted, and said, "I love it that I'm sitting here wondering what things are too horrible to say, and you just came up with something way, way more horrible".

What was particularly interesting was that Eugene was moved to take the joke public. There were certain mutual friends we thought would like the idea, and we told them, and they reacted with the combination of hilarity and studiousness and emotional gravity that was customary to discussing any complicated bit. That was one thing. It was another thing when we were drunk in a fast food restaurant late one night after a show, and as he squeezed past a stranger on our way out the door said, "Excuse me," and, then, gesturing towards me, "Her father committed suicide". I exploded with laughter, and then immediately apologized to the woman, who looked horrified. "I'm sorry," I blurted out, "that's true, but it's really not your concern at all, he's just drunk". A couple of weeks later I was filming a show and he told a mutual acquaintance, a comic named Wilson, of our plans for the party, instructing me, "don't turn off the camera, this is good". Wilson is a very sweet guy. I had his number, not because we knew each other well, but because we lived in the same neighborhood, and several months before had

talked about sharing a cab home from a party that was so crowded we were afraid we'd lose each other. I called him up the next day to apologize. I had to identify myself by first and last name, that's how far we were from being intimate friends. He said, no need at all to apologize, I just wasn't sure how to react because I didn't know if it was true. I said I'd felt it put him in a weird position, to present him with something that he would not know how to react to.

What I was running around trying to contain, to clean up after, was Eugene's unmitigated delight in the capacity of this reality, my reality, to do violence to other people's worldview, to their casual, naturalized ability to function socially. It made me nervous and it compelled me in some sense to work against it. And yet I felt this was a profound act of solidarity. Reminiscent of the bullying Todd Glass calls for in Marc Maron's interview, wherein he asks that heterosexuals deploy the social power associated with "straight" status to casually demean homophobia, I felt Eugene was taking on the responsibility for voicing the violence, taking on accountability for its unruly trajectory. And this is a key double bind of depression and the silence surrounding it, I think: In situations of conflict and dissonance, one is faced with the choice between doing violence to oneself and doing violence to others. I felt Eugene did the violence of breaking the frame, breaking into the frame so that I could occupy it¹⁰.

At the same time this particular sort of discursive violence plays upon, and at worst plays with, people's capacity for empathy, in that it makes it makes the anxiety surrounding possible failures in empathy a site of public vulnerability. It makes that first tentative curiosity that might become empathy the axis, the fulcrum, of a crisis moment. Someone might get hurt. These losses, or traumas, that don't find articulation in conventional or understandable terms, have unpredictable and reckless effects. The narrative has an emotional valence that exceeds the

¹⁰ As discussed in the previous chapter, this is also to some degree a gendered division of labor. But, as was also discussed in the previous chapter, I think the skill can be taught.

control and the intentions and the understanding and the expectations of the person whom it happened to. This puts the protagonist, as storyteller, in an awkward position. You create an effect that feels violent, and, moreover, disconnected from your own experience. The story fails to communicate an emotional reality, or, you as a teller cannot swing the listener around to your perspective. Anxieties, misconceptions, assumptions intervene. The inclination is to contain the effects of the narrative. But work happened, in that scene, to recuperate such threats, to maintain mutual trust, to make those things okay to say.

John was already a fan of Eugene's when he started coming to Riffifi. He was fairly new to the city, having recently graduated from college, and would hang out after shows, often with friends from his hometown in nearby Long Island. He was working in a neuroscience lab and was interested in the comedy project, and we would talk about it with the little bit of overlapping language we had available to us.

He had become a regular by the time *Invite Them Up* ended. In the last week they hosted three shows in a row, on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Monday night he showed up after it was over and kept me company while I was breaking down the camera, coiling cords and packing up microphones. He asked for a detailed recap of the show, and lamented that he'd missed it. I asked him why he'd come so late.

"I don't know if I told you about my sister?"

I shook my head. It seemed this was about to have some gravity.

"She's a lot of the reason I got into comedy. When we were younger we would put on shows together, like just for our family and stuff. And then actually we did this one variety show as a fundraiser when she was in high school..."

He trailed off, then continued.

“She died last year. She died a year ago, actually, so I was having dinner with my family.”

“I’m so sorry, John,” I said. “I didn’t know”. But it made sense, suddenly, a few other things that he had mentioned...that he had worked at a summer camp for kids with cancer.

He talked about the fundraiser, that she loved that sort of thing, and so many people came out to support her, and they had been so hopeful. And the next day they had gotten some test results, and they weren’t good.

“That’s when my mother started lying to her about her prognosis”, said John. Which all the psychologists say you shouldn’t do, because then it’s like the person is already gone”.

He looked around the room. “I was hanging out with my family and all I could think is that I wanted to be here”.

It seemed he felt the grief in his family to be oppressive, and somehow untrue to his relationship with his sister. The fact that his mother started to lie to his sister about her diagnosis right after the big fundraiser - is there a craving that builds up, then, for a sort of reckless honesty?

It’s also interesting to me now, in retrospect, reflecting on that phone call to Wilson, a few years after the immersion in the downtown comedy scene that constituted the bulk of my fieldwork. Now I spend that same quantity of hours alone in the library. I feel a longing, almost, for the emotional courage it took to make that call to a mere acquaintance, or, more likely, for the social context that made it seem natural¹¹.

I interviewed a fairly ardent fan named Adam after he came up to me at a reunion show for *Invite Them Up*, about 18 months after Rififi had closed. He recognized me from Rififi, and

¹¹ I would like also to underscore the ways in which this relationship of trust, if you will, was rooted in a transient community, a scene, rather than a personal relationship. I don’t happen to run into Wilson several times a month anymore. I still have his number, I think, and I could still call him, but as our spheres of work have diverged it would be hard to put my finger on a reason.

approached me to urge me to make a film about the scene. He's energetic, looks you in the eye as he talks, touches your arm to make a point. Talks about comedy with a zeal I'd almost describe as missionary. He is quite passionately annoyed by the popular sit-com *Friends*.

I would have been really fuckin' angry if I was watching *Friends* and in my 20s and that was supposed to be my life. This set of idiots who can't talk to each other. You live next to a woman that you're madly in love with and every time you get face to face with her you clamp up, you can't just man up and tell this person how you feel. It became such a model for a generation for how to treat your emotions, and how to treat yourself. And I think there was a rebellion from that, that's what alternative comedy became. Less of a polished image, more raw, more of what we wanted to do and how we wanted to do it. Scrapping all the rules about what people said about what was supposed to be funny.

I think it creates a model for a lot of people who love comedy...it's a good, positive social message that comedy has now. Just to not be afraid of stuff, to open up about things, and that the painful stuff in your life is probably a lot funnier than you think. And this idea that people don't want to hear about it because it's painful enough, or whatever, that's not true. Some of the most original, rich material comes from just talking about your life, and it's so much more interesting than just being an insult comic. You can be other kinds of comics, but it's really cool and interesting for a comic to just open up, get super raw, and let people into that closet of their lives.

Butler asks, how can we occupy sites of injury (violent naming) in such a way that “our very attachment to it becomes the condition for our resignification of it? (104). A sort of “alienated narcissism” takes hold...”This will not be an unconscious outside of power, but something like the unconscious of power itself, in its traumatic and productive iterability” (104). “the performance of melancholia as the shameless voicing of self-beratement in front of others effects a detour that rejoins melancholia to its lost or withdrawn sociality” (Butler 181).

Comics echo this idea - a shameless voicing of self-beratement - in a common self-characterization of comics as combining self-loathing with self-absorption. I mention this self-characterization to Adam. He says,

Yeah, it's good for a comedian to be that way because you're a lone performer, so you need to be self obsessed, and the self loathing and self obsession work together to create really introspective comedy. You have to be self-loathing enough to delve into those deep levels of sadness, and find humor in it, and be self-aggrandizing enough to want to go up onstage and tell everybody about it. So it works for comedians, but for other people, because they don't go up on stage and tell everybody, it just exists in this sick place in their head, where they're very very self obsessed, they're not able to communicate truthfully to people and honestly, because their truth is so sacred, and so special, and so unique from everybody else's...but everybody has done all the things that you've done. Everybody can feel, has access to the things that you've felt before, and if you can make a person understand about what you feel, and if that person has empathy for you, that's a good thing. And you don't need to be so afraid of the judgment of other people. It's going to take so many years for a generation - for a whole people to really have that get into their heads, that there's no reason to worry like this all the time. There's no reason to perform your whole life in deference to these anxieties. Like constantly be feeding into these anxieties, and that's how you build the narrative of your life, is through your successive retreating into the anxieties and recovering, and retreating and recovering from these anxieties, this is going to be the story of your life. I mean it's just so sick, you just might as well get shit out, and try and work with each other, and be honest with people, and be friends with people, I mean it gets into like...I mean when I talk like this it gets into, well, everyone should just be loving each other, and being peaceful...I think there's a middle ground of course, but I don't think it's so idealistic to think about that. And I think so much of comedy has driving people towards that.

Adam's testimony here links the private revelations in which comics engage, private revelations made public, to an ethical relationship to communication that might have interesting political possibilities in a precarious, late-capitalist context. In *Radical Hope*, Lear also characterizes the process of becoming a subject as a process of endless self-making. Like Bell, he does not propose abandoning this project in the context of a crisis of discursive authority or authenticity, but instead characterizes it as a fundamental part of being human. He focuses on the importance of the authority to narrate one's own life in a meaningful way. In particular, he asks to what extent this might be possible in a context of cultural breakdown, a hostile

environment in which all interpellations seem violent, all the ways of knowing that subject might call one's own are rendered unpracticable.

Discussion of Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" (92). The Crow, facing genocide, somehow transcend their own subjectivity - "surviving the demise of the established ways of constituting oneself as a Crow subject" (96). Describes Crow chief Plenty Coups' position as ironic, as opposed to leadership strategy of Wraps His Tail, who maintained an active commitment to outmoded cultural practices (i.e. stealing horses) (97). Lear admits that one might criticize this form of hope because it might encourage complacency in the face of cultural destruction, but Lear credits it with forestalling despair, which, he argues, is a remarkable accomplishment (100).

Discussion of Aristotle's concept of courage, how radical hope might contribute to a "thinning out" of a traditional thick concept of courage, and as such be courageous, with respect in particular to Aristotle's idea that courage must face up to reality (106-111). The risks that arise in relation to cultural breakdown are "of a different order" - "the courageous person has, as it were, to take a risk on the framework itself" - a second-order risk (112). Considers "imaginative excellence" as a component of courageous, ethical engagement with the world - a wishful component need not entail a turning away from reality - what matters is how (or whether) desire is geared into reality (117). During a historical period wherein there is a "call for concepts", facing up to reality requires imagination, creativity (118).

Very interesting discussion of the inherent vulnerability of "finite erotic creatures" - our lives necessarily entail risk because we "lack omnipotent control" over the world and it may "outstrip the concepts with which we seek to understand it" (120). Courage is a virtue in such creatures because "the courageous person is someone who is excellent at taking those

risks...[courage] is an excellent way of inhabiting and embracing our finite erotic nature” (121). According to both Plato and Freud “we are born into the world *longingly*” (122). Lear leaves the question of what constitutes a necessary risk in the hands of the individual, suggesting an emotional courage not unlike Butler’s suggestion that the psyche develop a tolerance, an ability to endure, moments of detachment or unmooring from authorized ways of acting and knowing.

Negotiating existential ambiguity, the appropriate limits of one’s power and the demands one can make on one’s environment, and the role of one’s emotions in determining intimacy and separation, authority and dependence, etc, etc, is a fundamental task of the modern American subject, and the complexity of the task does not indicate that it should be dispensed with, even if a mechanistic reading of Bourdieu or Foucault would seem to render it irrelevant. To what degree do authorized forms of self-understanding and self-inquiry serve to obfuscate or mystify certain types of emotional and social experience, rendering them illegible even to those who experience them? To what degree do normative expectations actually constitute a violent circumscription of the social, writing out the history of emotional labors in which interlocutors and significant others might privately engage, in order to support an individual’s public performances of authorized selfhood?

Comedy performances thus engage audiences in an ongoing drama of negotiation between authorized and unruly selves, calling attention to the mutable boundary between the two, and thus the question of conscience as unresolved and worthy of ongoing consideration. Moreover they put this negotiation on display in the public sphere, and, in the process of engaging audiences, mark it as worthy of public, collaborative exploration. While the structure of the performance positions the comic as active and speaking, and the audience member as passive and listening, it nonetheless, via its particular poetics and the structures of identification

facilitated by live performance, to some degree gives the audience member the opportunity to *practice* this public inquiry, albeit in a vicarious fashion. This experience of practice is enhanced by the supportive listening, the public recognition, in which audiences engage - they are in fact practicing the reciprocal social relation of the risk associated with this transgressive mode of inquiry, helping to build a social sphere in which this reciprocity, characterized by empathy and support, is normalized, and in which they may come to expect this reciprocity from others.

Power of the secret, of the public secret - that comedy can articulate something between the known and the unknown, can articulate incipient or repressed meanings. This is mobilized in the case of “ironic racism” to force audience members to acknowledge the known-but-not-said, to disavow knowledge that is inconvenient from the standpoint of preservation of face. Here we see a more exploratory, open-ended investigation of the secret.

The very appearance of risk-taking serves to isolate the comic from criticism, to some degree, in a social context that valorizes risk-taking as a necessary component of success. The forms of these risks may converge with the exigencies of contemporary capitalism, or may help to create a social context in which they can be critiqued. Rather than allying him or herself with, or demonstrating mastery of, the “law” of discourse, as Purdie theorizes, the performer has mastered the norms of the immediate community, and forges empathetic connections with audience members. He or she then positions him or herself as negotiating between the “law” and the demands of the unruly parts of his or her psyche. Thus a certain splitting or theoretical divide between forces - inner and outer, individual and social, imaginary and symbolic, freedom and facticity - is again in effect. However, while (as discussed in previous chapters) this divide often serves to mystify the workings of social power that reinforce and reproduce raced and gendered identities, here we see that it contributes to a practical engagement with power as it

works to foreclose or render un-viable a certain quality of inefficacy or anhedonia, that, I would argue, is intimately linked to the very erosion of empathetic engagement that underwrites raced and gendered discrimination.

Comics and audience members produce striking - in fact sometimes shocking and disruptive - moments of emotional articulation. As Butler argues, we should not fall into the romanticized notions of the unconscious as an “outside” of discourse that prevail in both psychology and in notions of liberation that theorize power simply as a repressive and not a productive force. Nor should we romanticize performance as the outside of discourse, as the previous chapters have sought to demonstrate that different social actors have access to different performance repertoires, and find their actions judged by different standards. But in the case of downtown comics’ work on - treatment of - depression, we see this romance working productively towards the possibility that a deeper relationship might develop, one that might contain elements of actual love.

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