"That's Gold, Jerry, Gold!"

The Sophisticated Contradiction at the Heart of Stand-Up Comedy

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the word "sophisticated" by re-situating it within the Greek tradition and explicating how such a move informs a study of humor and amusement. In regard to "techniques and theories," the *OED* suggests the word sophisticated can be used to mean "highly developed" and "employing advanced or refined methods," but also "not plain, honest, or straightforward," and "containing alterations intended to deceive." In other words, as a discourse descriptor, "sophisticated" can be taken complimentarily to mean complex, intricate, and worldly-wise, but also disparagingly to mean deceptive, misleading, and superficially-wise. The opposition between these meanings illustrates the central idea of this study—that what lies at the heart of both sophistic rhetoric and amusement is contradiction: a state of tension in which "incompatible things" are held together "because both or all are necessary and true" (Haraway). In the context of contemporary North American stand-up comedy, this dissertation links sophistic rhetoric and humor theory such that they mutually support each other, gain meaning, and become more approachable. Defined as an orientation to contradiction, sophistic rhetoric provides a way to theorize humor, while the universal phenomenon of amusement provides justification for theorizing a thing called "sophistic rhetoric."

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Dedication

To my father, who taught me a sense of humor, and to my kids, for whom I hope to do the same.

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Preface

Contemporary stand-up…is one of the most powerful if least investigated forms of postmodernist expression. – John Limon

Stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression. It is the purest public comic communication, performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present. – Lawrence Mintz

On stage, Jerry Seinfeld ponders the results of a study that found public speaking to be more feared than death. It means, he observes, that the average person, if attending a funeral, would prefer to be in the casket rather than giving the eulogy. Robert Stebbins points out that the term "stand-up" first appeared in *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* in 1966. The decades since have seen, according to John Limon, a vast "comedification" of North America that includes the proliferation of comedy clubs hosting an ever increasing number of stand-up comedians. Dread of public speaking does not keep these wily individuals from getting up in front of strangers and trying to make them laugh. Why do they do it? As a *New York Times* article about Comic's salaries made clear, it is not necessarily to get rich. Many, as the 2012 article published just prior to the New York Comedy festival remarks, practically "pay to perform."

As a form of entertainment, stand-up comedy shows are remarkably Spartan. Events produced for even the biggest names in the business rarely include more than a lone individual on stage with a microphone. Counterintuitively, perhaps, such frugal spaces play host to forensic constructions that are ripe for academic analysis. Consideration should be given to a form of oratory that not only continues to spread and gain wider fields of influence but whose

configuration is one of the most basic and straightforward in the history and theory of rhetoric. Admittedly, comics use words that titillate, irk, and sometimes infuriate and make statements that can elicit powerful emotional responses. Although this may contraindicate a need for serious study, it is precisely the loci of such power that should be noticed by students of rhetoric and investigated. From the "revolutionary…angry barbs" of Moms Mabley "packaged in the most nonthreatening of costumes" such that she could "pull off an act that few others could even approach," to Jerry Seinfeld speaking publicly about the terror of public speaking, the essence of that power, the essence of stand-up comedy, is contradiction (Tafoya 23).

Introduction

> *No one knows what it means, but it's provocative…it gets the people going!*
> *– Chazz Michael Michaels,* Blades of Glory

Humor can be as scandalously seductive as it is devilishly inflammatory. It is also notoriously resistant to explication. In his introduction to *Wit's End*, a study of women's humor as rhetorical and performative strategy, Sean Zwagerman presents the dilemma:

> Humor's use of multiple meanings, of indirection and implication, its play with language and conventions—in a word, its shiftiness—seems to confound every attempt to contain humor within clear categories, definitions, or theories. One can begin with Cicero's *De Oratore* and proceed to the present moment accumulating convincing but completely contradictory definitions of, and distinctions among, humor, wit, comedy, parody, satire, irony, and the rest. (1)

Instead of starting with Cicero, Humor Studies scholars might quickly suggest looking at observations made by Plato and Aristotle which eventually became foundational to contemporary humor theory. However, considering that humor is not "some arbitrarily defined cultural category," but, like the "involuntary physiological response of laughter" that accompanies it, is "cross-cultural," present in some form in nearly every known culture, perhaps even "universal," it seems fair to suggest that there must be many traditions through which to approach its study (Oring 12).

Although staying within the Greek tradition, this dissertation examines humor by considering some of the writings and teachings of individuals who were often denigrated for being *outsiders* to Athens. Simply put, this dissertation examines humor by placing it in the context of the contradiction sophistic theory holds to pervade every rhetorical situation. The

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central idea of this dissertation is that what lies at the heart of amusement is a conundrum—the notion that every movement towards meaning unavoidably generates opposing meanings. Jokes are the embodiment of the resultant contradiction and laughter is the indication that a contradiction has been perceived and appreciated.

Establishing a close relationship between humor and sophistic rhetoric immediately does at least two important things. First, it provides a way to approach humor that contextualizes and challenges the traditional lower class status of humor in the humanities by painting that status as a corresponding consequence of the successful campaign against sophistic rhetoric. For example, as Bremmer observes, both Plato and Aristotle "opposed coarse humour and ribaldry and stressed the need for restrained, inoffensive laughter" (19). Bremmer highlights Plato's hostility towards humor by pointing out that not only was laughter forbidden in Plato's Academy, but the *Republic* rejects "buffoonery in comedy," forbids "guardians of the ideal state" from indulging in laughter, and in the *Laws*, "Plato even wants to abolish comedy altogether" (19). Bremmer goes on to suggest that "In Aristotle we can see [this] tendency in Plato fully elaborated" (20).

Second, as a response to the kind of concerns raised by Schiappa, tying humor and sophistic rhetoric together provides a justification for focusing on a thing called "sophistic rhetoric" (occasionally just "sophistic" for the sake of brevity) in a way that does not necessarily reify or privilege the Greek tradition. As a theory, a practice, and an ideology, sophistic rhetoric recognizes and embraces contradiction. Linking that treatment of contradiction (not necessarily exclusive to the Sophists) to the (possibly universal) phenomenon of humor simultaneously signals the relevance, and yet non-uniqueness, of sophistic rhetoric. This project aligns humor and sophistic rhetoric in order to display parallel arts of persuasion which exemplify a reality in which distinctions are always, although perhaps uncomfortably, unhinged between licit and illicit

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petitions; between real and apparent wisdom; and between teachers of merit and clever speakers who, skilled in duplicitous speech, dispense credible but unsound discourse.

The Older Sophists are a group who have typically, until recently, been identified and characterized almost solely by detractors. In his introduction to *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism,* Steven Mailloux reminds us that "Since Plato, the Older Sophists have often been condemned as relativists and subjectivists, unscrupulous traders in opinion rather than knowledge, rhetorical mercenaries who taught their clients to disregard objective truth in making the weaker case appear to be the stronger" (1). Guthrie reminds us of Aristotle's insistence that the Sophists are those who deal in "apparent but unreal wisdom" for the sake of personal gain (36). Kerferd describes Plato's indictments as a stumbling block or a hurdle that has influenced countless generations of thinkers, "For much of our information we are dependent upon Plato's profoundly hostile treatment of them, presented with all the power of his literary genius and driven home with a philosophical impact that is little short of overwhelming" (1).

Plato's denigration stuck. As Edward Corbett argues, in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, "all the derogatory things that men have said about this art down through the ages have their roots in Plato's strictures" (597). And as Guthrie observes, "Modern champions" of the sophists point to the authority of Plato and Aristotle as the "specific reason determining the fate of the Sophists…Plato's idealism carried the day" (52). As a result, as Havelock argues, much of the subsequent theorizing about Greek culture and politics over the centuries has been written "exactly as Plato and Aristotle would have wished it to be written" (18).

For example, even as Corbett draws attention to Plato's criticisms, he also contributes to the derogation by arguing that "The object of the Sophists was to amaze an audience rather than persuade it. To effect this end, they encouraged all the flashy tricks of style and delivery" (603).

Corbett's summary of the sophists as "mere enchanters of the soul, more interested in dazzling their audience than instructing it" clearly expresses sympathy with Plato's opinion (598). Finally, Corbett argues that the "province of rhetoric" may be "extended" by instead "rejecting the sophists' preoccupation with style and the other elements of display" (604).

The fallout of Plato's denigration, according to Guthrie, is that "Until comparatively recently the prevailing view…was that in his quarrel with the Sophists Plato was right. He was what he claimed to be, the real philosopher or lover of wisdom, and the Sophists were superficial, destructive, and at worst deliberate deceivers, purveyors of sophistry in the modern sense of that term" (10). Until very recently, as Kerferd points out, many equated the sophists as the "equivalent of modern journalists or publicists at their worst…concerned simply with what can be given enough appearance of truth to persuade or deceive an audience" (175).

However, Guthrie marks the first edition of Zeller's *History* (1844-52) as "probably the last to uphold unchallenged the view that teaching of even the best of the Sophists was bound in the end to reduce everything to a matter of individual preference and prejudice, and turn philosophy from the search for truth into a means of satisfying the demands of selfishness and vanity" (11). Subsequently, since the 1930s, as Guthrie estimates, "we have seen a strong movement to reinstate the Sophists and their kin as champions of progress and enlightenment, and a revulsion from Plato as a bigoted reactionary and authoritarian who by blackening their reputation has ensured the suppression of their writings" (10).

Mailloux reports that since at least the mid-70s "revisionist interpreters have vigorously challenged this traditional negative view of the sophists" (1). For example, G. B. Kerferd's *The Sophistic Movement* (1978) is a self-proclaimed attempt "to provide an overall re-interpretation and reassessment of the nature of the movement as a whole, in the belief that this is now a matter

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of some urgency" (vii). He does this despite the fact that "No writings survive from any of the sophists and we have to depend on inconsiderable fragments and often obscure or unreliable summaries of their doctrines" (1). Kerferd concludes by likening his efforts to a "process of quasi-archaeological reconstruction on the basis of the traces that survive" (173). He argues that although such "notional reconstructions will be uncertain and open to challenge" it would be negligent to "pretend that the superstructures were either small or even not there at all" given the extent to which the traces have survived.

At the time of his writing, Kerferd reported that "the attempt to interpret the sophists along these lines has as yet hardly got under way" (2). This dissertation offers an interpretation of sophistic rhetoric through a study of contemporary stand-up comedy as the embodiment of a way of thinking about contradiction. In other words, using contemporary stand-up comedy as a testing ground, humor theory and sophistic will be blended in such a way that permits sophistic theory to be read as humor theory. This will allow the discomfort associated with sophistic to be portrayed as stemming from formidable power and not from deficit. It will also allow the difficulties of humor to be depicted as evidence of its value and not disorder that needs to be, or that can be, cleared up through categorization and classification. Indeed, as Zwagerman points out above, attempts to rigidly contain, categorize, and define humor have only led to more muddle and confusion.

For example, in the area of stand-up comedy, critical attempts to "distinguish between a traditional stand-up comedy characterized by an irrelevant quest for laughs, and a so-called new wave of comedy which is more socially and politically satiric or insightful," have only done more to muddle than to clarify (Mintz, "Stand-Up" 199). Lawrence Mintz, listing examples to show this classification to be artificial and unwarranted, argues that such categorization "belies

the *consistent* role of stand-up comedy as social and cultural analysis" (199). Mintz goes on to point out that while "The growth of stand up also fed a related genre of performance comedy," which may be characterized as "more theatrical, more scripted, more elaborate, and more fully developed," practically speaking, "The line between performance comedy and stand up is almost impossible to draw precisely," such that many performers must be seen as having "one foot in stand-up comedy performance and another in comedy drama" ("Humor" 291-2). Considering contradiction as the common source of amusement provides a way to approach Zwagerman's "indirection and implication," complex "play with language and conventions," and "shiftiness" of contemporary stand-up comedy in a way that is not reliant on containing and classifying but leaves plenty of space in which to twist and move.

Following in the footsteps of Lady Rhetorica; boldly claiming legitimate "forms, strategies, and goals used by woman," which have traditionally been castigated; both humor and sophistic rhetoric embrace all of the "manipulative" possibilities of language; what Plato and Aristotle labeled "rhetorical" in a pejorative sense; as legitimate for generating ideas and arguing in ways that may shock, amuse, or trouble an audience (Lunsford 6). Plato and Aristotle taught that doing so transforms discourse from something lawful and respectable into something invalid and unacceptable—a mere game or trifle—like cosmetics or "cookery."

Subsequently, as Andrea Lunsford argues in *Reclaiming Rhetorica*, "The realm of rhetoric has been almost exclusively male not because women were not practicing rhetoric," but because arbitrary differentiation between good and bad persuasion has continually included gendering (such as Lock equating "eloquence" with a façade or the cosmetics of "the fair sex" (106)) which allows what is deemed unacceptable (for whatever reason) to be gendered and then rejected on the basis of gender alone (6). As Cixous argues, such rejection has led to a "dark

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which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute" (1233). In order to "bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history" and out of the "enormity of the repression that has kept them in the 'dark,'" it must be understood that "Beauty will no longer be forbidden" (1233).

Efforts to retain but also re-frame Plato and Aristotle's denigration will engage scholars like Mario Untersteiner, W. K. Guthrie, and G. B. Kerferd, who are recognized as some of the first revitalizers, as well as other, more recent scholars like John Poulakos, Robert Wardy, Susan Jarratt, and Stanley Fish. These latter scholars have reflected on and contributed to the renaissance of interest in sophistic rhetoric in ways that have led some, like Victor Vitanza, to suggest we might be presently living within a third sophistic, and others, like Steven Mailloux, to discuss what Richard Rorty has called the "rhetorical turn" in the humanities, what Fish calls "the realization (at least for those it seizes) that the givens of any field of activity—including the facts it commands, the procedures it trusts in, and the values it expresses and extends—are socially and politically constructed, are fashioned by man" (209).

The scholars above have labored to convert the rhetoric of the Older Sophists into currency fit for reinvestment into contemporary rhetorical theories. For example, Untersteiner, through his study of particular Sophists, strove to make it clear that, as a group, the Sophists were united by "a single problem from which are derived all the variations and the mutual contradictions which are, however, set in motion by a similar preoccupation. This problem, usually defined as that of man is more accurately described as an interpretation of 'experiences' of what man encounters in the individual, in society and in thought" (xv-i). In other words, by considering Protagoras's often wrangled over assertion that "Of all things the measure is man," as a lament or a statement of humility about the human origin of all things rather than a boast

about the same, he made a move to receive the legacy of the Sophists as enduring and as applicable to current and contemporary rhetorical studies as they were to ancient Greeks.

Remarkably, while working to show how contemporary rhetorical theories are merely debating old essential sophistic ideas dressed up as postmodern for contemporary audiences, some scholars are left marveling at the "paradox that the Platonic condemnation still remains largely unquestioned" in a "modern world where the majority of scholars are not Platonists, and in general do not even wish to look for reality in the direction where Plato believed it was to be found" (Kerferd 175). For example, Stanley Fish, referred to as a "neopragmatist" by Mailloux and, disparagingly, as a "contemporary sophist" by Roger Kimball, has argued that

> In fact, there have always been *friends of rhetoric*, from the Sophists to the antifoundationalists of the present day, and in response to the realist critique they have devised (and repeated) a number of standard defenses…To the accusation that rhetoric deals only with the realms of the probable and contingent and forsake truth, the Sophists and their successors respond that truth itself is a contingent affair and assumes a different shape in the light of differing local urgencies and the convictions associated with them…I only wish to point out that the debate continues to this very day and that its terms are exactly those one finds in the dialogues of Plato and the orations of the Sophists. (206-9)

For example, Fish calls out both Aristotle and J. L. Austin for fighting against their own "best insights" (respectively, the duplicity of persuasion and the disappearance of the "formal core of language"); forgetting what they acknowledge; and finally, resisting the conclusions of their own work—namely, that the world is full of "utterances vulnerable to the sea change of every circumstance" (214). Fish also sees both Isocrates (in the *Antidosis)* and Thomas Kuhn (in *The*

Structure of Scientific Revolutions) questioning the notion that science and philosophy study abstract topics like geometry and astronomy in an impartial way. The effect of both thinkers has been (in Fish's view) to effectively "shift the balance of power between philosophy and rhetoric by putting philosophy on the defensive," since, "In short, the 'motor' by which science moves is not verification or falsification, but persuasion" (207, 211). Fish also clearly hears echoes of Plato in Habermas's search for the "ideal speech situation," and sees "the rhetorical force of antirhetoricalism" being revived in Bloom and Hirsch. And finally, he admires a host of others like Kenneth Burke, Donna Haraway, and Derrida for how, in particular, he responds to Austin ("there are no ordinary circumstances") and for how deconstruction "continually uncovers the truth of rhetorical operations, the truth that all operations, including the operation of deconstruction itself, are rhetorical" (215).

The increase in the study of humor over the past forty years has been as prodigious and interdisciplinary as the return of sophistic rhetoric. In the field of Humor Studies, this growth is evident in a wide range of conferences (colloquia and symposia at the MLA and the Speech Communication Association conferences as well as conferences devoted to Humor Studies); book and journal publications (such as *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*); as well as new organizations dedicated to the study of humor such as the Japan Society for Laughter and Humor Studies and the American Association for Therapeutic Humor.

Possibly most inspiring for this dissertation is the recent renewed interest in the importance of humor as both a legitimate rhetorical and philosophic strategy. As for rhetoric, this is evident by the inclusion of Thomas Conley's "Argumentation: What Jokes Can Tell Us About Arguments" in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* as well as book length academic studies on humor as a persuasive tactic such as *Wit's End*, mentioned above, an

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"analysis of women's deployment of performative humor," that Sean Zwagerman hopes will "provide insight into both the potential and limits of humor as a performative strategy" (4). Also, Joanne Gilbert, in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, strives to illuminate some of the ways that women rhetorically "perform" their marginality through humor and thus "call attention to their subordinate status," ultimately arguing that all marginal humor "is itself part of a larger rhetoric of victimage" (xx).

As for philosophy, some authors, coming from a Humor Studies perspective, have proposed that humor be taken seriously as a valid method of philosophic inquiry. For example, In *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, John Morreall identifies eight similarities between philosophy and stand-up comedy that support the idea that stand-up comedians are contemporary philosophers who use jokes and humor to make arguments. While reminding us that Wittgenstein claimed a book of philosophy could be written entirely in jokes, he insists that "from the beginning of philosophy, its practitioners should have appreciated the value of humor, since most of its benefits are benefits of philosophy" (126).

Even more striking, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Morreall argues that "A good deal of the philosophical neglect of humor…can be attributed to a longstanding prejudice that began with Plato and Aristotle" (ix). He explains this prejudice as stemming from the particulars of the "Superiority Theory" of humor (discussed in chapter two) "held by Plato and Aristotle, according to which, laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn. Even wit, Aristotle said, is 'educated' insolence.' Needless to say, in such a view, humor is at best a nasty business and should be kept in check" (3). Morreall argues that the "negative evaluation" of this particular theory of humor "became entrenched…in Greek thought" which resulted in humor being held in general as "ethically suspect" (3). I would like to suggest that these

"negative evaluations" of humor tagging it as "ethically suspect" and as a "nasty business" had

as much to do with how it may be linked to sophistic rhetoric as it does with how it may be

evaluated as a form of contempt. For example, as will mentioned again in chapter one, Aristotle

called out by name Sophists whom he felt crossed lines of propriety in their use of language and

labeled them comic writers.

Some other very recent works have been published by authors coming from a philosophy

perspective who seek to reexamine the relationship between humor and philosophy. For

example, in the first chapter of *Humor, Laughter and Human Flourishing: A Philosophical*

Exploration of the Laughing Animal, published in 2014, Mordechai Gordon makes a case for

adopting humorous philosophies of education. He lays out some of the traditional biases and

"historical tensions between traditional education and humor" and then proceeds to "lay out

some important, though often neglected similarities and links between humor and philosophy"

(x). Notable as well is *Humor and the Good Life in Modern Philosophy: Shaftesbury, Hamann,*

Kierkegaard, also published in 2014, in which Lydia Amir begins her analysis by identifying the

very significant ways that "relations between philosophy and the comic developed into traditions

in Antiquity [that] survived throughout the Middle Ages and flourished in the Renaissance

before being rediscovered in the Modern era" (1).

Amir "seeks to redress the neglect of such an important topic by concentrating on the

small number of modern philosophers who have explicitly entrusted humor with a role [in

philosophy]" (2). She has called for a reconsideration and reconstruction of persistent opinions

(such as those below) that place humor beyond the boundaries of suitable and fruitful

philosophical inquiry

Humor, it is thought, is frivolous whereas philosophy is grave; humor is irrational, whereas philosophy is the epitome of rationality; humor is ambiguous and equivocal, whereas philosophy aims for clarity; and humor is indirect, whereas philosophy is explicit. Moreover, humor is spontaneous and leads to a bodily reaction—laughter—whereas philosophy is systematic and addresses the mind. Thus humor has no place in philosophy's lofty enterprise. (2)

The legacy of denigration against humor mirrors, in many ways, the legacy of denigration against sophistic rhetoric. For example, the list of binary oppositions above, offered by Amir, is strikingly similar to the list of binaries where Fish charts the "largely negative" treatment that rhetoric (in a pejorative sense) has received over the centuries: "inner/outer, deep/surface, essential/peripheral, unmediated/mediated, clear/colored, necessary/contingent, straightforward/angled, abiding/fleeting, reason/passion, things/words, realities/illusions, fact/opinion, neutral/partisan" (205).

Puzzlingly, despite the prodigious and concurrent growth of interest in both sophistic rhetoric and humor, almost no one has argued for a direct relationship between the two. One notable exception, discussed in chapter three, is Robert Wardy's *The Birth of Rhetoric* in which he suggests that *On What Is Not* and the *Encomium of Helen* can be taken as jokes. Still, this dissertation offers the first full-length academic study dedicated to showing how sophistic rhetoric and humor share overlapping practical and argumentative applications as well as theoretical implications. As a form of discourse that blends Zwagerman's "shiftiness" together with Untersteiner's "variations," and "mutual contradictions," stand-up comedy is an expression of an individual's experience of the world that disrupts and challenges orderly or routine lines of reasoning. By working to make the known unknown and the predictable unpredictable,

humorous discourse contributes to the realignment of knowledge with the probable and the provisional.

This project grew out of a fertile conviction that humor (in all its forms) is more rhetorically and philosophically valuable than sometimes considered and a motivation to frame that value. Humor Studies, as a field, provides many friends of humor but, admittedly, has struggled, and continues to struggle, to find a simple yet sophisticated theory to guide its study. Although I have turned to sophistic theory to do just that, there are other traditions that would provide many of the same tools offered here. For example, Henry Louis Gates's suggestion, in *The Signifying Monkey*, that "The black tradition is double-voiced," could perhaps provide a way to approach contradiction by using the "trope of the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts" as a "unifying metaphor" instead of the *Ouroboros* (as will be done in chapter three) (xxv).

In a similar way, Ted Cohen suggests that the "abiding characteristic" of "Jewish humor" is a "fascination with language and logic" (67) rooted in the "Jewish tradition" of "reasoning and argument developed in the study of Jewish texts" (65). Such study has resulted in "centuries of inference from principles, attempts to locate principles for conclusions already at hand, the selective citation of authority" as well as the "subversion of authority" (66). Cohen argues that the "essence" of this process is that it, also much like the continuous cycle of the *Ouroboros*, inevitably "goes on and on" (66). Although "Of course resolutions are found, consensus develops," there is "no systematic finality" (66). This is the "Jewish style…the humor of outsiders" (67).

Binaries, such as those listed above from Amir and Fish, are mechanisms of control used to keep both humor and sophistic divorced from philosophy and "proper" rhetorical practice.

This has impoverished all involved fields of study. For example, in her introduction to *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*, Margaret Rose laments decades of critical depictions of parody as a "lowly comic form…of little real significance in the history of literature or of other arts" (1). She expresses dismay that even "structuralists and post-structuralists who were thought to have challenged" such disparagement had instead "either described parody in negative terms or not deemed it or its examples important enough to warrant extensive or thorough analysis" (1). And then, with registered disappointment, she asserts that "It was also in part because of the latter attitude that the role played by parody in the development of terms favoured by structuralist and post-structuralist theorists and critics, such as the term 'intertextuality,' was not fully recognized or acknowledged" (1).

The inclination to vilify sophistic is an integral part of constructing communication models privileging meaning over effects. As Muckelbauer implies, such models end up proving a disadvantage to both rhetoric and philosophy, "the domain of rhetoric has traditionally been limited to very particular concerns" that keep rhetoric confined within "managerial" boundaries within which "speakers turn to rhetoric" as a "supplement to the proposition…only after they have decided upon the proposition that they will advocate" (16). In contrast, the "most important legacy" of Greek rhetoric is the "highly ramified debate" that was "born in bitter controversy" between (in contemporary terms) communication and persuasion and which continues to define the discipline (*BR* Wardy 2).

For Wardy, the clash between rhetoric and philosophy is ongoing, violent, and includes, "no neutral territory on which philosophy and rhetoric can meet" ("PRRP" 56). It is a conflict that, as Fish recaps, "survives every sea change in the history of Western thought, continually presenting us with the (skewed) choice between the plain unvarnished truth straightforwardly

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presented and the powerful but insidious appeal of 'fine language,' language that has transgressed the limits of representation and substituted its own forms for the forms of reality" (206). Wardy goes so far as to say that "anyone who claims to be interested in rhetoric rather than philosophy is sadly deluded. By the same token, Gorgias will teach us that philosophers ignore the challenge of rhetoric only at their own peril" (*BR* 3).

Linking sophistic rhetoric and humor provides a way to approach this old quarrel by bringing the "insidious appeal" of humor's fine and foul language into the center of the debate. Once humor is considered as a type of sophistic rhetoric, then the labor of scholars, such as Gordon and Amir, to recuperate maligned relationships between humor and philosophy also works to rejoin rhetoric and philosophy. According to Wardy, the "key question, resuscitated again and again," that must be addressed if such a union is to be in order asks: "does rhetoric, at best (at worst), supplement philosophy, or, at worst (at best), threaten to supplant it?" ("PRRP" 58). The key to answering this question (as is often the case) is contained within the question itself. As Rorty suggests, sophistic theory "places rhetoric at the center of their philosophy, or better, makes sophistic philosophy and rhetoric indistinguishable" (Mailloux 15).

There is a conceit running through this dissertation that goes something like this: I will be asking my audience to imagine that if Gorgias, Hippias, and Protagoras travelling to the 21st Century (think of the shopping-mall scene in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* in which Socrates, Genghis Khan, and Joan of Arc are set free to engage with late twentieth-century pop-culture), they would be drawn to the rhetoric of stand-up comedy. Whether it be on TV, on the radio, or at a comedy club, they would appreciate its scope and play and notice how stand-up comedians employ contradiction (a central tenet of their teaching) in order to enjoy what Woody Allen calls "the most fun you can have with your clothes on" (Morreall, *CR* 2). Put another way,

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I would ask my audience to imagine a contemporary adaptation of *Protagoras* in which an impressionable and enthusiastic young college freshman, instead of Hippocrates, is off to see Louis C.K., instead of Protagoras, while his alarmed Humanities Professor, instead of Socrates, feels compelled to confront the young man about the dangers of entrusting his soul to such a master "manipulator of *logoi*" (Notomi 273).

Together, stand-up comedians and audiences form a sometimes disquieting but unique discourse community that expands the "scope of invention" (Muckelbauer 25). The way knowledge is constructed in those spaces addresses pressing questions in contemporary rhetorical theory about the generative and epistemic nature of rhetoric. As will be discussed in chapter three, John Muckelbauer, in *The Future of Invention*, considers that if "rhetoric is rendered indistinguishable from a broadly conceived art of invention, then this art of invention, in turn, becomes indistinguishable from the massive, interdisciplinary effort to rethink the basic principles that engineer western conceptions of truth, knowledge, and inquiry" (25). Also discussed in chapter three, Kevin Casper uses Muckelbauer's work to make an argument for a direct link between rhetoric's "earliest sophistic interests" and what Muckelbauer terms language's "asignifying operations" by appealing to the idea of rhetoric as "an art of persuading by means of a force that is not necessarily reducible to meaning and reason" (346).

By way of taking a swing at the man, Kerferd suggests Plato "resolved the problem of correct language" that he "inherited from the sophists," by "altering reality to fit the needs of language, instead of the reverse" (77). But if reality could indeed be a function of the way we use language, then what realities are shaped in the setting of a comedy show and how do those realities, in turn, shape larger realities? If knowledge is uncertain and constructed by argument, then what is to be made of a stand-up comedian's alogical and absurd arguments? The Sophists

are regarded as some of the earliest known to treat style as generative. Indeed, as Muckelbauer points out, "generative rhetoric's emphasis on the contingent nature of truth and knowledge explains why the group of ancient, itinerant teachers known as the Sophists have reemerged in the last few decades as influential figures in the rhetorical tradition" (24). If style is generative then what realities are being generated by the very odd styles of stand-up comedy?

Defining Stand-Up Comedy

Eddie Tafoya suggests "purists" will argue stand-up comedy "is about one person on stage talking directly to the audience in his or her own voice, using a set-up/punch line format for the explicit purposes of eliciting laughter from the audience" (179). Although "Sometimes the comedian steps in and out of characters," doing impersonations or just altering their voice, they will eventually return "to the organic, natural voice" (179). Lawrence Mintz concurs, describing pure stand-up comedy as "an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costumes, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle" ("Stand-Up" 194).

However, Mintz, taking issue with this kind of "strict, limiting definition" argues that because the roots of stand-up comedy are "entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than this simple definition can embrace…We must therefore broaden our scope" (194). As an alternative, Mintz offers a very broad scope indeed, including "seated storytellers, comic characterizations that employ costume and prop, team acts (particularly the staple two-person comedy teams), manifestations of stand-up comedy routines and motifs within dramatic vehicles such as skits, improvisational situations, and films, and television sitcoms" especially those which employ a stand-up comedian as the (a) main character

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and use their stand-up routines as inspiration (such as *Mork and Mindy*, *Seinfeld*, and *Mr. D*) (194). In order "To avoid also having to include all theatrical comedy and its media spinoffs," Mintz qualifies that this expanded definition "should stress relative directness of artist/audience communication and the proportional importance of comic behavior and comic dialogue versus the development of plot and situation" (194). Although "Such a definition is hardly pure," he suggests that it is "workable" (194).

For this dissertation, I sought out examples that would lean as far as possible towards the "strict limiting definitions" offered by Tafoya and Mintz above but I have also occasionally exercised the right to use something that would fall more in line with Mintz's expanded definition such as, for example, Abbott and Costello's baseball routine, a few "canned" jokes not attached to a specific comedian, and a couple of scenes from the sit-com *Mr. D* (based on the comedy of stand-up comedian Jerry Dee).

At the same time, however, an eyebrow is raised at the notion of "pure" stand-up comedy. Invoking purity based on ideas of a single "unsupported" person speaking "directly" to the audience in their "own," "organic, natural voice" obscures the notion that these are constructed performances and contingent rhetorical moments. Somehow, and strangely so, the idea that stand-up comedians, when on stage, are giving us their purest, truest selves has become an expected feature of the genre. It is, perhaps, an embedded contradiction of the genre that its discourse, which will even sometimes include explicit disclaimers about sincerity, should be regarded, quite often, as unrehearsed, spontaneous, and frank. In fact, from Moms Mabley's dentures, raspy voice, and "earth mother" persona to George Carlin's black t-shirt and "far-out" hippy persona, an entire history of "support" could be written.

Recent Graduate Work on Stand-Up Comedy

Most graduate work on stand-up comedy can be dated to within just the past twenty-five years or so and much of that promising work focuses on how stand-up comedy, sometimes as one mode of discourse in a multi-modal examination, can be useful for promoting a cause or advocating for a group by admitting complexity into socio-cultural discourse. Notably, there does seem to be a moderate tendency to focus on the effectiveness of stand-up comedy such that jokes and comic material which help nail down or affirm a project's sympathies are met with approval while jokes that do more to open up the playing field are backed away from. Of the five dissertations including significant discussions of stand-up comedy published in 2013, four are focused on how stand-up may be able to scrutinize, challenge, or possibly reinforce racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes. Two of these studies focus predominantly on African American stand-up while the other two focus on Arab American stand-up comedy after 9/11.

In "The Color Line as Punch Line: Negotiating Racial Discourse in Midwestern Comedy Clubs," Elise DeCamp claims her analysis "reveals how the subtlety and art of stand-up performance strategies combine with the pleasurable medium of humor to alternately reinscribe, challenge, or proudly celebrate audience racial stereotypes." Her aim, ultimately, is to show how "the exchanges of racial jokes and laughter in the permissive club space," can work as a method for "challenging racial assumptions" and "gradually shifting or complicating ingrained ideas about ethnic and racial difference through repeated encounters with those who either do not quite fit or actively critique familiar types." In "Firespitters: Performance, Power, and Payoff in African American Women's Humor, 1968-Present," Jessyka Finley looks at humor as "more than merely a technique of entertainment" but as a "mode of literacy and site of self-authorship for African American women across a variety of discursive fields, including literature, sketch

comedy, stand-up comedy." She then focuses on how "The professional stand-up comics of [her] study are in fact presenting new ways of thinking about race, class, sex, culture, and power."

In "Intimate Terrorism and Mundane Violence: Remapping 'Terrorism' Through Queer, Multiracial Feminist Theories, Fiction, and Stand-Up Comedy," Megan Sibbett, as part of a multi-modal examination, looks at some feminist novels and the queer stand-up comedy of Wanda Sykes, Marga Gomez, and Margaret Cho, as performances that work to complicate and subvert ideologies of 'terrorism,' and finally "(re)situate 'terrorism' within and against celebrated historical frameworks as well as 'war on terror' patriotisms." And Finally, in "A Rabbi and a Sheikh Walk Into a Bar...: Arab American Stand-up Comedians in the Early Twenty-First Century," Richard Tabor, as a first step in an "attempt to build cultural bridges between the Middle East and the United States" looks to Arab American stand-up comedy as a form of discourse through which Arab Americans might have the occasion "to speak as one voice, together, on stage," and then speak in such a way as to problematize and mitigate "the prevailing attitudes of Islamophobia in the United States."

Other noteworthy examples include Jeffrey Israel's "Jewish Humor and the Political Ethics of De-Stigmatization" where he looks at some Jewish jokes and the stand-up comedy routines of Lenny Bruce in order to support his claim that humor plays a "special role" in facilitating the process of de-stigmatization of Jewish people by loosening the hold that stigmatization has on Jewish people. Colleen Coughlin, in "Lezbe Friends, U-hauls and Baubo: A Study of Lesbian Stand-Up Comedy," recognizes that "Contemporary humor scholarship has focused on how humor functions for cultural groups and reflects how these groups make sense of their own construction and identity," and then participates in that practice by reflecting on how lesbian stand-up comedy offers "challenges to dominant conventions" of lesbian identity and

"renders lesbians visible and [speaks] to the multiple facets of lesbian experiences." Coughlin focuses on how "The lesbian comics analyzed throughout [her] work have been cultural change agents, who have helped to reflect and inform lesbian identity and community…their routines provide one way of considering the ways in which lesbians have come to define their identities and communities for themselves."

Katrina Bell, in "Language, Allusion, and Performance: A Critical-Cultural Study of Black American Popular Culture," offers an explication of how "the humor in African American stand-up comedy…serves as a type of comic catharsis that provides African American artists and audiences with a means for dealing with their marginalization; and finally, Rebecca Krefting, in "'Working the Crowd': Enacting Cultural Citizenship Through Charged Humor," looks at stand-up comedy as "One of a host of weapons in the arsenal of tactics, strategies, and offensive maneuverings available to individuals and communities seeking to redress inequitable distributions of wealth, power, rights, and cultural visibility." Krefting finally argues that "Humor intervenes on behalf of minoritarian subjects and it is part of our task to read these performances for the tactics and approaches they supply for being fully incorporated in the national polity."

Although Jessyka Finley considers stand-up as a "mode of literacy," that allows for "new ways of thinking," in a somewhat general sense, and Rebecca Krefting mentions tactics and approaches in a way that could lead to a more open ended discussion, and Elise DeCamp acknowledges the possibility that stereotypes could be reinforced as opposed to challenged, these studies seem to put a value on stand-up comedy in proportion to its efficiency at promoting a particular agenda. In other words, there seems to be an assumption of remuneration for the risks

involved when inviting and including the unpredictable discourse of stand-up comedy into the discussion—risks that might not payoff.

Notably, the central task for both Nathan Wilson and Lida Pahuta is to question the efficacy of stand-up comedy, for which they come to opposite conclusions. In "The Limitations of Ethnic Humour: Can Ethnic Humour Function as an Anti-Racist Discourse?" Pahuta "examines in what ways, if any, the use of ethnic humour can be used to promote anti-racist discourse," by focusing on how East Indian-Canadian comic Russell Peters "uses his comedy to draw out and break down the stereotypes that exist within our society." Her conclusion, however, is pessimistic, "given the aggressive and unstable nature of stand-up comedy…it will become evident that a complex site such as a comic's stage is not as conducive to anti-racist work as many seem to believe."

Similarly, Nathan Wilson, aware that "humor has been studied since Aristotle," and mindful that since then "many theories about its efficacy as a rhetorical form abound," finds, in his "Rhetorical Analysis of Politics, Problems and Contradictions in Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy," that most theorists "claim at best that humor produces a lesser effect than other, more serious forms of discourse," and "place humor as necessarily non-political and non-efficacious." His own conclusions are a bit more optimistic, if speculative, seeing potential in "humorous techniques" for political action based on "possibilities for audience judgment that is prudential in the sense of operating without pre-set models." As scholars interrogate and employ the rhetorical influence of stand-up comedy, they must eventually deal with the unpredictable and unruly nature of humor. What lies in wait to be discovered is that the efficacy of stand-up comedy is inherently problematic because its potency can work in multiple directions at once. In other

words, the very things that make stand-up comedy tantalizing as a rhetorical strategy also ensure

that, as a mode of discourse, it resists exclusive appropriation.

Similarly, "A New Sophistic: The First Sophists and Contemporary Rhetorical Theory," a

dissertation on sophistic rhetoric attempting to bring sophistic practices into contemporary use,

comes face to face with the same issue of efficacy. Cynthia Sheard seeks to "validate the

continuing significance of the first sophists' contributions and their enduring influence in

contemporary rhetorical theory," by identifying what could be called the "new sophistic," and

showing "that sophistic rhetoric is a viable mode of critical inquiry that can promote real changes

in the world." However, Sheard comes to the conclusion that the "epistemological foundations"

of sophistic rhetoric limit one's "capacity to dictate how such changes will be actualized or to

anticipate what their consequences might be." Attempts to revitalize sophistic bring one to

discover how applying concepts like *metis*, *kairos*, and *phronesis* is an inherently unruly and

unpredictable affair. In much the same way as humor, this keeps the efficacy of sophistic rhetoric

inherently problematic since such persuasive techniques can work in multiple directions at once.

Academic Studies on Stand-Up Comedy

In 1987, Lawrence Mintz's contribution to *American Humor,* a research guide for Humor

Studies, called attention to the "complex, ambiguous, and to some extent paradoxical…motives

and functions of standup comedy" (Dudden 87). He reminded scholars that "there is no

developed study of the social and cultural functions of standup comedy as such" (87). He

concluded with a plea for action, "There is much more work to be done…[including] thorough

studies of joke texts and comedy routines…as well as more careful analyses of forms and

techniques…if we are to appreciate properly the role of standup comedy in America" (96). This

call was either unheard or ignored. Over a decade later, the very same essay by Mintz, including the same appeal, was included in *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture*, a research guide for Humor Studies published in 1998.

In the years immediately after the second appearance of Mintz's article, academic publications devoted to a serious rhetorical and theoretical study of stand-up comedy continued to be scarce although some entries began to surface. One notable example is John Limon's 2000 full length study, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America,* in which Limon theorizes that what is "stood-up" in stand-up comedy is abjection. There are also some articles that, much like the doctoral work above, tend to focus on the efficacy of stand-up. For example, in "Native American Stand-Up Comedy: Epideictic Strategies in the Contact Zone," a 2010 publication from *Rhetoric Review*, Amanda Morris examines Native American Stand-up Comedy as a form of Aristotelian public discourse that transcends entertainment and enters into the "persuasive realm of epideictic rhetoric by arguing for Native peoples' inherent right to survival and sovereignty in the twenty-first century" (38). As a result, she argues that "Native American stand-up comedy potentially functions as a resistance strategy for cultural survival and as a criticism of mainstream culture, politics, and beliefs about First Nations peoples" (38).

Echoing the language of Richard Tabor who, as cited above, looked to Arab American stand-up comedy as a way to "build cultural bridges between the Middle East and the United States," Morris concludes "comedy that incorporates epideictic characteristics and markers of Native humor can benefit both the comedians' indigenous communities and their audiences by acting as a bridge between two worldviews" (50). Optimistically, Morris concludes that "Hopefully, this type of comedy opens a door to more acceptance, understanding, and, frankly, less racism and misinformed assumptions about Native peoples" (50).

Morris hopefully claims that "comedy is concerned with practical knowledge useful in guiding everyday action; therefore, at its base comedy is a form of moral education that can connect people across time, space, and cultures" (43). However, on a contradictory note, Morris must eventually confront the unpredictable and unreliable nature of such discourse admitting that "one of the dangers inherent to Native American stand-up comedy is the potential to deepen divisions between people, or create indifference, depending on the audience and how a particular audience receives the comedic messages" (43).

Like the conclusions of Nathan Wilson and Lida Pahuta above, Raúl Pérez and Susan Seizer, in their 2013 and 2011 articles respectively, come to conclusions that are similarly discordant about the potential for stand-up comedy to enact progressive change in the real world. In "Learning to Make Racism Funny in the 'Color-Blind' Era: Stand-Up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re) Production of Racist Jokes in Public," Raúl Pérez takes a pessimistic view, "In this ethnographic study on the training of stand-up comedians, I probe how comedy students learn to use rhetorical performance strategies to couch ethnic and racial stereotypes in more palatable ways, in order to be 'funny' rather than 'offensive' in public" (478). Finally, he argues that such "performance comedy serves as a mechanism for expressing ethnic and racial stereotypes in public and presents a challenge to studies of contemporary racial discourse which suggest overt racetalk in public is on the decline" (478).

On the other hand, Susan Seizer, in "The Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-Up Comedy," analyses "the register of dirty words" and argues for the "recognition of the communicative artistry displayed in such work" (209). She sees real potential in the taboo, but insists that, in order to tap into the "ripe…performative possibility" of dirty words they must be used in a "non-standard," or "non-referential" manner (229). She concludes that "By using obscenity in this

way," stand-up comedians "shift audience expectations away from sex and the potty," and allow those words to be used for "other sorts of pleasures" (230). Meanwhile, she holds that using these words in their standard colloquial sense remains a "proscribed register" that is left for the "hacks" (230).

Humor Studies

Humor, it is a difficult concept. It is not logical. – Mr. Saavik, Star Trek

Proclaiming the difficulties of analyzing humor has become the standard preface to analyzing humor. In other words, reiterating E. B. and Katherine White's notorious warning, found in the preface to their 1941 *A Subtreasury of American Humor,* 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," is usually an announcement that frogs are about to die (xvii). In the same vein, George Bernard Shaw declared that "There is no more dangerous literary symptom than a temptation to write about wit and humor. It indicates a total loss of both" (Nilsen 243).

Such warnings, and the legitimate issues prompting them, can lead to a seemingly justified tender-footed avoidance of, or even contempt for, humor. For example, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, who leave very few stones unturned as they navigate and chart argumentation landscapes in their 1969 tome, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, declare "We do not believe that a study of humor in the art of oratory is directly pertinent to our task—although humor is a very important factor in winning over the audience or, more generally, in establishing a communion between the speaker and his hearers, in reducing value, in particular making fun of the opponent, and making convenient diversions" (188). The contradiction here is striking. They simultaneously proclaim that studying humor is not pertinent and then list a number of its

significant functions such as *ethos*, disparagement, and departure. Meanwhile, Zwagerman's approach presents a different contradiction, "The problem is not that all past definitions and theories of humor are wrong, but that they all are right—somewhat and sometimes. But they all invite easy exceptions, and as comprehensive explanations, they fall short" (2). Instead, he declares that his study of humor will attempt to "describe American humor and the American character without attachment to abstract theory" (1).

Lamenting inadequate theory is a continuous theme in Humor Studies. Humor research guides in the 80s bemoaned the dire state of humor studies in the 70s. In the preface to *Handbook of Humor Research*, published in 1983, editors Paul McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein recall that the process of editing *The Psychology of Humor* a decade earlier was tough because "in the early 70s there was only a handful of social scientists studying humor and laughter…We confess that it was not easy to fill that volume with first-rate contributions," but that the eleven papers they ended up with "represented the state of knowledge at that time" (v). Further, they recall that prior to the 1970s, the history of humor research can be "characterized in terms of a short-term commitment to investigating humor among those who did venture out and try…For reasons that remain unclear, many investigators published only one or two humor studies before abandoning the area in favor of some other research domain" (v). Since that time, they go on to report, sentiments of humor as a "fringe" area faded enough that their next project faced the opposite challenge, "so many investigators were making valuable contributions that we now ran the risk of losing old friends because of our selective invitations" (vi).

One of the challenges that needed to be met in order for this trend to continue was the fact that, as Arthur Dudden reported at the time, "Criticism of humor is a less well-developed genre than the criticism of fiction or nonfiction, drama or poetry [and] is defined more often than

not by highly personal tastes…by gut reactions rather than by any widely accepted evaluative or analytical standards" the fallout of which is a reception landscape where "What strikes one individual as hilarious can bore or disgust another" (xv). These remarks can be found in the introduction to *American Humor*, a research guide Dudden declares was compiled and published in 1987 as a direct reaction to the "sin of omission" committed by the legions of critics and historians who had given American humor "little serious attention" despite the "genius of many of its practitioners" (xi). Dudden concluded by throwing down the gauntlet, "It is not enough to leave the field to popular culture studies or the enthusiasts of the American Humor Studies Association…There is a need to investigate American humor more systematically and intensely in all of its rich variety than literary scholars or American Studies disciplinarians have managed to do so far" (xvii).

The trend did continue through the 80s and 90s and into the present albeit in such a haphazard nature that Victor Raskin; founding editor of *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research,* as well as the series editor of *Humor Research,* an ongoing book series sponsored by the same journal; felt prompted to publish the eighth installment of the series, *The Primer of Humor Research*, to function as, in Raskin's words, a long overdue "one-stop place for a not so quick and dirty introduction to the multidisciplinary areas of humor research," and provide a "first line defense against, and a helpful tool for, the first-timers in humor research, those who venture into humor from their disciplinary perch in total innocence and/or oblivion of the often sizable and growing body of knowledge on the subject" ("Theory" 1-2).

Those "first-timers" were venturing into humor from areas as diverse as neurology, Zoology, psychology, literary history, art history, ethnology, and sociology. For example, at the 1987 Annual Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, humor was

chosen as the topic of "Section 'X' the "General Section,'" the task of which is to tackle topics that are "intrinsically interdisciplinary," or that have a complex but not straightforward relationship with science (1). John Durant, a zoologist, historian of science, and the Recorder of Section X, confesses, in his introduction to *Laughing Matters: A Serious Look at Humour*, the title of report on the program of Section X, that one of his first (fearful) thoughts after being told the topic of his section was "Were there really important things to say about humour? And could they be said in a way that did not drain the subject of all interest?" (2).

In the mid-90s, as Jan Bremmer reports, "first-timers" were also joining the festivities from the field of history, "Humour has been studied since antiquity and from many different perspectives, but historians have mostly eschewed the subject…It is only recently that historians, seeing humour as a key to the cultural codes and sensibilities of the past, have become interested as well" (xi). Bremmer's remarks come in the preface to *A Cultural History of Humour: From Antiquity to the Present Day,* a collection of contributions to a 1994 colloquium devoted to representing the growing interest in, as well as encouraging a wider cultural perspective on, the cultural history of humor.

The eclectic nature of humor and Humor Studies also led to some eccentric theories. For example, Don L.F. Nilsen spent at least a decade cataloging, indexing, and annotating, in four exhaustive volumes, published between 1992 and 2000, every instance, as he saw it, of humor to be found in British as well as American Literature. The first published of these four volumes, *Humor in American Literature: A Selected Annotated Bibliography*, is a fairly conservative effort that stays within the bounds of what one might expect from such a title. However, the next three volumes, *Humor in British Literature, From the Middle Ages to the Restoration*; *Humor in*

Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Literature; and *Humor in Twentieth-Century British Literature*, stretch the limits of what might be useful.

Specifically, Nilsen covers everything from the Latin riddles of Aldhelm, Bishop of Shirburn (c640-709) whom he credits for having provided the "only sophisticated humor that was available to the Anglo Saxons," to all the notables one would expect from a survey of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century literature including Defoe, Swift, Addison, Gay, Pope, Richardson, Fielding, Johnson, Smollett, Cowper, Burney, Blake, Burns, Wordsworth, Scott, Coleridge, Austen, Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Thackeray, Browning, Dickens, Bronte, Eliot, Arnold, Meredith, Carroll, Wilde, Hardy, Conrad (whom, Nilsen notes, "had the 'humor to perceive' both sides of a serious issue") (14). Nilsen also provides long entries on somewhat unlikely figures such as Harold Pinter, David Lodge, Tom Stoppard, and Salman Rushdie late in the final volume. At some point, such an exhaustive pursuit feels indistinguishable from a history of British Literature, which should suggest that the study of humor is not really divorceable from the study of literature.

Eccentric theories also include Robert L. Latta's "Theory L" found in *The Basic Humor Process*, where Latta offers "a new theory of humor, to be called 'theory L…after its author…designed to cover all examples of humor of all types, and to provide the foundations for a full account of the global (entire) phenomenon of humor" (vii). With swagger, Latta announces that his new theory, "quite distinct from any theory proposed previously," will set right the "historic error" that is called the incongruity theory, an error "comparable to the notion that the earth is a flat, square disk" which "in all its forms, fails" (vii). Latta describes humor as a reasoning process, evidenced by laughter, which mediates between general emotional/mental states in which a subject is relaxed or unrelaxed. Most promising in his analysis is the suggestion

that this reasoning process is characterized by "cognitive shifts" which, as will be discussed in

the inter-chapter, is a useful term for describing the perception and appreciation of contradiction

(44).

Eccentric in a different sense is the work of Victor Raskin who admits that he has been

attempting, albeit "largely unsuccessfully," to bring linguistics to bear on humor for over a

decade. He believes linguistics can provide a methodology for generating descriptions of

humorous texts since it is "the most theoretically advanced discipline among the humanities and

social sciences" and ripe for use in Humor Studies ("Theory" 6). Raskin is confident that because

> Linguistics has been most successful in developing such theories in the syntactic
>
> analysis of sentences, providing methodologies that match natural language
>
> sentences with syntactic descriptions that may be represented as trees or as
>
> constructions with parentheses [it] could extend this approach to humor research
>
> by addressing the short verbal jokes and offering a methodology to match the text
>
> of the joke with a description/explanation. (6)

The result is a theory he calls the "Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor" or "SSTH" (see

Raskin, 1985). Salvatore Attardo, his former Ph.D. advisee, later expanded the SSTH into the

"General Theory of Verbal Humor," or the "GTVH," which "opened the theory to

multidisciplinary input but left the semantic foundation the same" ("Theory" 7). Attardo later

fully articulated the GTVH in *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*, where, on

the dedication page, Attardo playfully includes the opening sentence of a review of his book,

"This has to be the least funny book one has ever read" (v).

Semantics, according to Raskin, enables linguistic theories to connect with the "much

more powerful, better formulated, and empirically tested ontological semantics" that has evolved

outside of humor research ("Theory" 7). In language that starts to sound like Raskin is having a

bit of fun, he explains how ontological semantics can be put to work in analyzing humor by

using a few programs

> to represent, comprehensively, the meaning of each sentence and ultimately, of
>
> the entire text in a simple LISP-like formalism to model as closely as possible the
>
> human understanding…Using first the preprocessor taking care of the special
>
> characters, removing the markups, stemming the morphology, and performing the
>
> minimal syntactic parsing drive by the SYN-STRUC zones of each lexical entry,
>
> the semantic processor called the OntoParser transforms the sentence into the
>
> simplified text-meaning representation (TMR). (9)

Although those specializing in linguistics will surely be equipped to understand these terms, it is

hard to ignore the comic potential of applying such technical expressions to a mode of discourse

driven by evasion, duplicity, and irony. Raskin, who, like Attardo, is not unaware of the

disparity, finally declares that it is premature to attempt "a full-fledged ontological semantics of

jokes because some elements, especially the semantic analyzer, or OntoParser, are still in rapid

development," and jokingly warns, "It seemed timely to warn the research community that

linguistic imperialism is continuing unabated, and even more complex and unreadable

formalisms are coming!" (12).

Raskin's work is most inspiring when he tries to reconcile the disjunction between "One

of the main bragging rights in ontological semantics…its disambiguation ability," and what must

be the focus of any systematic ontological semantics of humor, the "ongoing search for the

intended ambiguity" ("Theory" 11). In his *Semantic Mechanics of Humor*, Raskin's central idea

is that "Deliberate ambiguity" underlies "much, if not all, of verbal humor" (xiii). He argues that,

in order to be perceived as a joke, any deliberately ambiguous text must, firstly, be "partially or fully compatible with *two different scripts* and secondly, a special relation of script *oppositeness* should obtain between the two scripts" (xiii, emphasis added). It is interesting, in this context, to note Raskin's remarks concerning "sophistication" in humor

> My interest in sophistication started with humor: I realized that there were levels of sophistication in jokes. I knew that it was so—except that I did not really know what sophistication was…I have a strong intuition about sophistication in jokes, however…My own sophistication about sophistication is still growing ("Theory" 13)

That enjoying humor could lead to an interest in the "sophistication" of jokes or that one might be searching for a relationship between the two are certainly encouraging notions for this study.

The Three Branches of Humor Studies

As Amy Carrell reports, in the time since these calls from Dudden and Apte for "legitimizing the field of humor research, forays into the area have expanded and multiplied" such that humor research is now being conducted all over the world and catching the attention of a varied and increasing group of researchers and scholars who have taken up the topic and proliferated ways of approaching it (306). Despite a wide variety of developments, Carrell still sees all of these new approaches falling into one of three main categories: "cognitive/perceptual or incongruity, social/ behavioral or disparagement, and psycho-analytical or release/ relief" (310). These three categories line up with what Billig calls the "three great theoretical traditions for understanding humour," or what practically all Humor Studies scholars recognize as the three "classical" approaches to humor: "superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity" (Kuipers

35

362). In *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, John Morreall concurs, claiming confidently

that, after studying the "history of thought about laughter…from Plato to Bergson…three

dominant theories emerge, the Superiority Theory, the Relief theory, and the Incongruity

Theory" (ix). In sum, one might say that these three categories represent the best of what Humor

Studies has to offer. As a pragmatic move inspired, in part, by such high levels of agreement, this

study is organized around them.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that these theories are not tightly

circumscribed schools of thought. As Morreall explains, in *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive

Philosophy of Humor*, they were originally presented as "psychological accounts" offering a

"causal explanation" of humor and laughter, and not academic brands "adopted by a group of

thinkers consciously participating in a tradition," but rather as "term[s] of art meant to capture

one feature shared by accounts of laughter that differ in other respects" (6). In other words,

laboring to maintain tight distinctions between them is counterproductive because they are not

mutually exclusive but rather "characterize the complex phenomenon of humor from very

different angles and do not at all contradict each other—rather they seem to supplement each

other quite nicely" (Raskin 40). This dissertation will explore how sophistic rhetoric provides

useful tools for interpreting and intersecting these three "term[s] of art."

As challenging as it might be, it is important to attempt some level of distinction between

the terms "humor," "amusement," and "laughter." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines humor

"with reference to action, speech, writing, etc." as "the quality of being amusing" or "the

capacity to elicit laughter or amusement." Troubling here is the circular reasoning present when

humor is claimed to be a quality for producing an effect that is only detectable by said effect.

This is especially true when one considers some attributes of those effects. First of all,

"laughter," which the *OED* defines as an "action," or, not that much more precisely, as "sounds and movements" that are "produced by laughing," is often frivolous, can be very unpredictable, and comes in many forms. What is more, one may experience amusement, what the *OED* defines as "The pleasurable occupation of the attention, or diversion of the mind," without laughing.

Making matters even more perplexing, some argue that not all laughter is caused by amusement. Morreall suggests that, "however we are to specify the nature of amusement, it is essential to distinguish between amusement as a mental state and laughter as a bodily phenomenon, and to notice that not all laughter is caused by amusement" (*PLH* 4). As examples he points to "laughter at being tickled" or a baby's laughter "at being tossed into the air and caught" (4). In such cases, although it seems there must certainly be something amusing about being tickled or tossed in the air, he maintains that "there need be nothing humorous causing the laughter" (4).

Morreall suggests that because of this distinction, the "most common mistake," as it relates to these terms, "is to treat all cases of laughter as cases of humor" (*PLH* 5). He goes on to point out that this is true even for notable scholars, "Kant and Schopenhauer, for example, present their Incongruity Theories as if they were theories of laughter generally, when at most they could hope to serve as theories of humor. Bergson titles his book *Laughter*, when a more accurate title would have been *Humor*, or better, *Comedy*" (5). Conflation is difficult to avoid because laughter and humor are so intimately connected. Even Morreall is perhaps guilty of conflation when he reports that "In Greek thought a theory of laughter became entrenched that made humor ethically suspect" (*PLH* 3).

As Zwagerman notes, "a source of confusion among theories of humor is the fact that some address the use of humor, some the hearer's experience of humor, and some address both"

(3). Not only is it sometimes difficult to connect a particular individual's laughter to a source, it is also often the case that a particular text, thought to be amusing by one individual or party, may neither amuse nor prompt laughter from another. As if that were not enough, a grin, chuckle, or applause may be indicative of genuine amusement in lieu of outright laughter. And even more confounding, other reactions such as sneering, groaning, or even booing, can reveal a kind of amused displeasure or guilty delight. As a project to better understand humor and persuasion, this dissertation approaches humor as a quality of speech (transcribed into writing) exhibited by stand-up comedians that stimulates or persuades amusement or laughter (broadly considered as some sort of audible, physical, or otherwise visceral reaction) from an audience.

This is a project to examine how stand-up comedy manipulates language in order to persuade. It does so from the standpoint that many forms of discourse, including such diverse examples as political speeches, television commercials, or sermons, are engaged in a type of language manipulation. In other words, much of the conflict about what constitutes licit versus elicit persuasion could boil down to a semantic debate over the word "manipulate." Aristotle denigrated both sophistic rhetoric and humor as falling on the wrong side of such a debate. In fact, as will be discussed in chapter one, Aristotle even disparaged some contemporary Sophists by characterizing them as "comic" writers.

To carry out this study, other forms of comic expression could have been focused on. However, because stand-up comedy provides a format which regularly inspires other comic modes of comic discourse such as sketch and situation comedy, the results of this study can be applied to a wide range of comic subject matter. Additionally, and perhaps, more importantly, stand-up comedy is focused on in this study because, as a form of oral performance in which a single speaker addresses a live audience, it connects to classical rhetorical theory and practice in

a straight forward and convenient way. This holds whether the examples of oratory from antiquity were attempts to create humor or not. It also qualifies Lawrence Mintz's assertion, as seen in the epigraph above, that "Stand-up comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression… performing essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present" ("Stand-Up" 193). Such a connection attests to the humorous potential of persuasion as much as it attests to the persuasive potential of humor.

Investigations of humor and laughter are often done after the fact (i.e., "This is funny. Let us examine why it is so"). This presupposes that others will agree with the initial assessment. If they do not, which can easily be the case, such a project can uncomfortably transition into an attempt to prove that something is funny. This is a slippery business since, as Limon observes, it is far too easy "to refer behavior to a humor theory without quite knowing whether it is funny" (14). All of the examples in this dissertation were chosen because they seemed, to this author, to resonate with contradiction but many other examples would have worked just as well. None of the examples offered here are put forth as the best or monolithic. If readers supply their own examples, or focus on a different aspect of contradiction in the examples given, it is actually preferable. Such engagement would illustrate the kind of never-ending cyclic movement of consumption and reiteration of both serious and non-serious texts that this study alludes to and then concludes with in chapter three.

A word about transcriptions: All of the stand-up comedy samples used in this study were analyzed in speech and then transcribed. Unfortunately, much can be lost in transcription. For example, as will be mentioned again in the next chapter, the tone of a comedian's voice can sometimes be the single most important factor of a joke. Oration is a complex performance

including many facets that are difficult to put into words such as body gestures and facial expressions. The actual words spoken are usually the easiest part of the performance to put on paper. Although there would be drawbacks and challenges to overcome, there would also be advantages to including links to videos in a study such as this.

Finally, as others have wisely disclaimed, this project is not meant to be comprehensive or a "full-blown, complete theory that aims to explain every occurrence" of humor or laughter (Billig 2). As the, perhaps overzealous, reasoning sometimes goes, all laughter demands an explanation and devotees of particular humor theories will claim they have the tools required to explain any occurrence of laughter. This prompts other scholars to rigorously search for examples that do not seem to fit. Such could include, as Morreall lists, anything from "Hearing a joke, Peekaboo (in babies), seeing a magic trick" and "hearing clever insults," to tickling, "breathing nitrous oxide," or "simply feeling in a silly mood and laughing at just about anything" (*TLS* 1-2). It is difficult, as one can see, to imagine a theory being able to account for everything on such an eclectic list. Morreall's conclusion is similar to Zwagerman's, namely, that no single theory is "comprehensive enough to explain all cases of laughter" (*TLS* 18). These few theories are not, as Raskin points out, mutually exclusive; are not, as Morreall asserts, academic traditions; but actually all contain, as Zwagerman exclaims, various degrees of error and insight; and, as Raskin goes on to assert, operate and supplement each other quite well.

This dissertation defines humor as rooted in the guiding principle of contradiction which can be found as a common denominator among the three main branches of Humor Studies. The order in which those branches are discussed is deliberate and important. Chapter one constitutes the heart of the dissertation by arguing, in the context of the incongruity theory, that contradiction is what lies at the heart of amusement. Chapter two builds on this thesis by arguing,

in the context of the disparagement theory, that ridicule and insults meant to be jokes are still always reliant on contradiction in order to generate amusement. The inter-chapter focuses on the response of the audience by arguing that laughter is an indication that a contradiction has been recognized and appreciated. And finally, chapter three examines some of the practical implications of this theory of humor as it applies to the study of communication.

Chapter One: "Of Course…But Maybe!" Incongruity Vs Contradiction

...after all, where aren't there incongruities? – Gogol, "The Nose."

In *Born Standing Up*, Steve Martin recalls how his comic imagination "opened wide" in a college logic class when the word games of Lewis Carroll simultaneously "bothered" and "intrigued" him (75). Carroll's syllogisms appeared "to be silly nonsense" and yet, upon examination, they followed rules of formal logic. In other words, they were "absolutely logical—yet they were still funny" (75). Martin's insight, that a statement can be sound and ridiculous at the same time, that absurdity can have integrity, steered his pursuit of comedy. He remembers trying his own hand at such fare, "I began closing my show by announcing, 'I'm not going home tonight; I'm going to Banana land, a place where only two things are true: One, all chairs are green; and two, no chairs are green.'" (75). While admittedly "not at Lewis Carrols's level," he recalls that these lines worked for his particular audience and, most importantly, allowed him to do what he came to love, namely, implying that "the one thing I believed in was a contradiction" (75).

In his *Engaging Humor*, Elliott Oring admits that he is "not convinced that there is no single factor that underlies humor. After all, we are not speaking of some arbitrarily defined cultural category, but something that is cross-cultural, likely universal, that seems to be associated with the very particular and often involuntary physiological response of laughter" (12). At the center of sophistic theory is the idea that every movement towards meaning unavoidably generates opposing meanings. The result is a persuasive landscape where contradiction pervades every rhetorical situation. As a response to Oring's suspicion, the one sentence theory of this dissertation is that contradiction is the single factor underlying humor. As

the first step in working out this idea, this chapter proposes that the incongruity theory of humor can be, and needs to be, reframed in the context of contradiction.

In order to do so, a crucial distinction needs to be made between contradiction and incongruity. Any two unlike things can be incongruous. However, as Weaver points out, a very "old problem" with the incongruity theory is the fact that "Not all types of incongruity are humorous…why is one incongruity funny and another not?" (24). In similar fashion, John Parkin, after studying comments on humor made by some notable figures of the past century who did so, such as Bergson, Freud, Bakhtin, and Cixous, declares "I am convinced that humour depends on incongruity, and I feel that today I am in a majority in holding that view…That of which I have no certainty is what needs to be added to the incongruity in order that it become comic" (2). Although Weaver declares that "The problem of incongruity has not been suitably solved in humour studies," even suggesting that "it may prove impossible in the long term to resolve," he does insist that "In order to provide an effective analysis of incongruity it is necessary to explain why one type of incongruity might be humorous and another not" (24).

Contradiction is a state in which meanings clearly, even aggressively, clash and yet continue to coexist without diminishing in strength or vitality, or, as Haraway suggests, contradiction is "the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (291). As it concerns the difference between incongruity and contradiction, I argue that, in order to be amusing, an incongruity must be rooted in, reflective of, or draw out a contradiction. Often, "incompatible things" have been co-created but then subjected to some degree of arbitrary differentiation and designation. This chapter argues that amusement is the result when those discordant meanings are co-affirmed and brought together in a compelling and provocative way.

For example, Louis C.K. jokes that bringing a puppy home *means* "someone is going to be sad very soon," although probably not today, or tomorrow, but soon, as in, about fourteen years, tops. This is not to deny that a puppy also means joy and love and companionship but to stress that the potential is there for both. In fact, the best case scenario is a lot of joy as well as a lot of sadness. This can be an unpleasant way of expressing the meaning of a puppy. As will be discussed in the next chapter, one of the reasons comedy can be taken as offensive is because a comedian is often presenting a meaning the listener would prefer to ignore. For example, building on this joke, Louis then suggests that when two people smile at each other (romantically), it means "something shitty is going to happen" at some point, in some way, inevitably. In fact, just as in the case of the puppy, the best case scenario is a lot of happiness, when the two people discover that they are "soulmates" who "even argue together well," and then a lot of loneliness and misery when one of them dies leaving the other to "carry heavy bags home alone from D'Agostino's every night" just waiting for "their turn to be *nothing* also."

Jokes do their work by relying on "implausibilities, absurdities, and downright contradictions" or something that sets out an element of "incomprehensibility" (Cohen 50). In the case above, the joke is about the ultimate absurdity, "the incomprehensibility of death itself" (Cohen 41). Amusement results with the "layering," "combination," or "merging of separate elements," such as, but not limited to, "contradictory social discourses," "types of knowledge or frames of perception" which "exist in contradiction" but that have been brought back together to "intersect and coexist" (Weaver 21). My claim that contradiction runs 'deep' means it is an inescapable aspect of communication that is present, linguistically as well as conceptually, at every level and stage of persuasion. In other words, there is no limit to how far this concept of contradiction and this theory of humor can be pushed. It is also an assessment of communication

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that is resisted because of the disquieting yet unavoidable ambiguity that must be the ubiquitous result.

Sophistic rhetoric and stand-up comedy are both practices which enthusiastically embrace the alluring and yet often alarming persuasive potential of contradiction. To claim that contradiction is intrinsically amusing is not to say that it needs no assistance. It must be drawn out, framed, or presented in a manner that allows multiple meanings to be simultaneously appreciated. This is the role of the comic. The Sophists did not invent or discover contradiction. They suggested that it is powerful in and of itself and so should be embraced rather than avoided or obscured. This dissertation argues that contemporary stand-up comedians are doing just that.

The Incongruity Theory of Humor Vs Contradiction

As John Morreall outlines in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, the incongruity theory is not only the "most popular current philosophical theory of humor" but also the one that "seems more promising than its two competitors, simply because it attempts to characterize the formal object of amusement. It tries to say just what something has to have in order for us to find it amusing" (6). Specifically, the incongruity theory holds that the "formal object of amusement" is "the incongruous…What amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances" (6).

As Morreall explains in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, "The basic idea behind the incongruity theory is very general and quite simple. We live in an orderly world, where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, their properties, events, etc. We laugh when we experience something that doesn't fit into these patterns" (15-16). Although any incongruous thing may disrupt an expected pattern, this chapter contends that amusement results when

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patterns are disrupted by a contradictory or alternate meaning that, although possibly discarded as invalid or unsuitable, is unexpectedly reintroduced and given consideration. In this way, amusement can be understood as "an intellectual reaction to something that is unexpected, illogical, or inappropriate" but is also still viable in some way (Morreall 15).

In this way, the punchline of a joke can be understood as a blow, jolt, twist, or "something that we were not expecting" but which causes us to reevaluate what we have come to take for granted (Morreall, *TLS* 17). For example, Ron White tells a joke about taking his two dogs outside onto a "perfect little grassy area" where a sign posted says "No Dogs." The property manager notices and promptly comes out and yells "Hey, the sign says 'No Dogs!'" To which White replies, "Well, then the sign is *wrong*. The sign should say 'Two Dogs.'"

However, it is important to notice that the incongruity between the typical response and White's response is predicated on the idea that, although it could be taken as a statement, the sign is usually assumed to be imperative through rules that are implied and taken for granted. Read as declarative, the sign is indeed wrong. White's response works as a joke because it is a manifestation of an opposing, even if unlikely, meaning of the sign. A completely random response from White that is less connected to a possible way of interpreting the situation would most likely fail as humor. Although 'absurd' humor will often appear completely random and nonsensical, there must still be some kind of contradiction, or opposing view, present in order to generate amusement.

Some versions of the incongruity theory, such as those which insist incongruity, in order to be amusing, must be "appropriate" or in some way lead to a "resolution," come very close to framing such incongruity as a manifestation of contradiction. For example, in *Engaging Humor*, Elliott Oring proposes that humor "depends upon the perception of an *appropriate incongruity*;

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that is, the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous" (1). Oring cites one brief joke that he believes exemplifies the idea: "A man goes to see a psychiatrist. The doctor asks him, 'What seems to be the problem?' The patient says, 'Doc, no one believes anything I say.' The doctor replies, 'You're kidding!" Oring's explicates the joke by arguing that the phrase "you're kidding" is both appropriate and incongruous. As an "expression of surprise" it "appropriately" expresses a kind of reassuring hope that the situation is not as "severe as the patient describes" (1). However, at the same time, "the doctor's denial is incongruous" in that it "registers the physician's disbelief in the patient's report and seems to affirm the very proposition that the physician" presumably, is there to challenge (1).

What Oring describes as simultaneously "appropriate" and yet "incongruous" can be better understood as a contradiction embedded in the doctor's response. Namely, because of the patient's particular complaint, the doctor's literal words contradict what we can only presume must be his intentions as a doctor. The incongruity resides in the fact that the caregiver trusted and confided in has probably done harm by reinforcing the problem. If the doctor had said something like "That sounds like a difficult problem. Let's see if we can get to the bottom of it," or if the patient had come to the doctor with a different problem, then that particular contradiction, incongruity, and joke would all be absent.

Oring notes that "while the linguistic formulation of the doctor's response in this joke is critical, the joke is a conceptual and not a linguistic one. It does not depend upon a precise and unalterable linguistic formula" (2). In other words, not only can there be multiple contradictions present in a single attempt at communication, there are multiple ways to draw out the same contradiction, "Had the doctor responded, 'That's impossible,' or 'Aren't you exaggerating?' or

'No way!' a joke would still be discernible that traded on the very same idea" (2). This is to say, contradiction is a dynamic and multifaceted component of communication that can be drawn out in many ways. Simple word-games can carry large implications. This is not to say that all attempts at highlighting contradiction are equal.

For example, although Oring concedes that the phrase "you're kidding" is not "essential to the creation of the joke," he also grants that using that particular phrase might be one of the better ways to construct the joke because it is "particularly felicitous in that it is familiar, colloquial, and has a certain semantic density that requires some work to unpack" (2). What is more, the same essential contradiction could be taken in a disparaging direction. For example, if the psychiatrist had responded by saying something like "'Well, in that case you'd best pay me in advance'" then "the reported untrustworthiness of the man would have been extended to the implied promise to pay for his treatment" (2). Disparagement humor, and the essential difference between insults and jokes that are insulting, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Oring admits that "while the phrase *appropriate incongruity* is recent," and his own, "the concept is not," pointing out that "In the late eighteenth century James Beattie proposed that 'Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage'" (2). Oring reminds his readers that "This notion, that humor depends upon the perception of an incongruity that is resolved or made sense of, has come to be known as the *incongruity-resolution* theory of humor" (2). Incongruity-resolution theories of humor argue that incongruities are amusing once it is cognitively processed how they in some way "make sense." Oring's main point of departure with resolution theories is that he places no chronological demands upon the cognitive process. For Oring, one may laugh first and then later on (or never at all) consciously resolve the incongruity.

It is certainly the case that we do not always understand why we are laughing. The main point here is this: arguing that incongruities, in order to be amusing, require a level of "appropriateness" or should be in some way "resolvable," is essentially saying that jokes can be explained by working backwards from an incongruity that elicits laughter to a contradiction in which the incongruity is rooted.

Alternatively, Oring finds "straightforward incongruity theory" to be altogether misguided, proponents of which, such as McGhee and Morreall, "hold that incongruities can in themselves be humorous" (3). Oring rightly points out that

> There are numerous instances of incongruities that generate no humor…Were incongruities in themselves funny, incongruous pairings like "snake/veil" or "tomato/carburetor" might be expected to excite laughter, and formulations like "Why did the chicken cross the road?—Because the geese were eating corn" or "What is black and white and red all over?—A palm tree" might prove hysterical. (3)

For Oring, there must always be some kind of "appropriate relationship between categories" in order for incongruity to prove amusing. The reason that incongruity is not inherently amusing is because it must be seated in contradiction in order to generate humor. The contradictions in which incongruities may be seated cover a full range of linguistic and conceptual possibilities from simple word games, such as punning; to complex uses of irony, tone, metaphor, and imitation; as well as "absurd" or "nonsense" humor. Sometimes contradiction is even drawn out unintentionally, as when adults laugh at something said by a child (think: *Kids Say the Darndest Things*).

Contradiction flows deeply through all communication but it also floats on the surface. That is to say, it seems reasonable to suggest that a "sense of humor" can be understood as the appreciation, or sense, of contradiction that can be developed by every individual over time—becoming more nuanced and complex. For example, jokes and puns are usually based on simple linguistic contradictions and, as a result, might elicit groans rather than laughter. On the other hand, children are often amused by jokes such as "Why did the chicken cross the road?" "To get to the other slide" where the source of humor is the slight difference between the sounds of the words "side" and "slide." On the other hand, even individuals with a selective sense of humor can be caught off guard by a simple joke or pun. For example, a sign advertising a produce store, located next to a music shop, reading "Let Us Turn Up the Beat," recently proved amusing to this author. However, despite differing levels of complexity, incongruities are always humorous to the extent that they are rooted in contradiction.

A scene from an episode of the situation-comedy *Mr. D* will serve to illustrate the point. Stand-up comedian Gerry Dee, playing a forty-year-old grade school teacher, Mr. Dwyer, is listening to one of his students who is at the front of the class giving a presentation on naval aviators in World War II. The student mentions that the helmets the pilots wore were occasionally referred to as "bone domes." Mr. Dwyer, at the back of the room, snickers, but singularly, as all of his prepubescent students are oblivious to the sexual innuendo. A few minutes later, the same student, now discussing aircraft carriers, mentions that these craft were sometimes referred to as "bird boats" to which the whole class erupts in laughter. Mr. Dwyer, now indignant, addresses the whole class, "Really? You all laugh at 'bird boat' but not 'bone dome?'" Then, in derision, he sneers "Grow up."

There are at least three different levels of contradiction at work in this scene that increase in complexity. The children are laughing at planes being referred to metaphorically as "birds," as well as the idea that "birds" could have their own boat. This metaphor presents a simple contradiction that, although easily understood by adults, is new to the students and surprises them. Mr. Dwyer, unimpressed with what the children find amusing, is laughing at a subtle sexual insinuation that remains inaccessible to the students. Meanwhile, the viewing audience is meant to laugh at the contradiction presented by a grown man who, although he should know better but is oblivious (Homer Simpson style), is derisively telling a group of pre-pubescent children that they should "grow up" in order to attain an appreciation of the juvenile sexual humor that is currently beyond their reach but that he, inappropriately, is indulging in.

Children might have a predilection for simple jokes, but they also have a peculiar knack for unintentionally drawing out the contradiction that is always lingering below the surface. Like Pablo Picasso's kids, whose works of art thrilled their father until they grew out of their inadvertent skills for abstraction, children make statements and ask questions (like "Dad, does Google know everything?") that tap into contradictions the implications of which they are not fully aware. The resultant laughter from adults is often met with befuddled looks from the children. A consequence of ever present contradiction is that humorous incongruities can show up in rhetorical spaces meant to be somber and devoid of humor. This presents a way to understand Oring's assertion that "a seemingly appropriate relationship may be supplanted by a sense of its incongruity" (2). For example, in *Breaking up at Totality*, Diane Davis tells a story (which will be discussed at length below) about a time when she was overcome by laughter in church because of a contradiction she notices taking place in the service.

Holding contradiction as inherently valuable counters pedagogical models that train students to reject it as a flaw that should be resolved or eradicated. Such models teach "proper" language usage through repetition which forms patterns that become a "habit of thought that is condensed into a code" (Galligan 16). For Galligan, such habit is "the fundamental block to creativity of all sorts" because it "functions below the level of awareness" as it "governs a way of thinking" that will prefer certain meanings and discourage alternate or opposing meanings (16). This dissertation argues that both sophistic rhetoric and stand-up comedy is situated within this epistemological conflict by showcasing contradiction as not only unavoidable but also indispensable.

In order to draw out and frame contradiction, many different techniques and tactics can be used. The brief examples that follow to the end of this section illustrate some specific techniques as well as provide a thumb nail sketch of their range. For example, tropes and figures used by stand-up comedians can be identified, not as particular to comedy, but as common tropes and figures that have been used, perhaps, in a particular way. Although not meant to be a strict qualification, it could be said that, on such occasions, their use breaches conventional limits that typify normative operational spaces containing some level of preexisting agreement.

For example, Kevin Nealon includes alternate meanings in a very straightforward way by simply interjecting, in a subdued monotone (represented here by curly brackets), unexpected words into his monologues "I actually almost did not make it here tonight, got a little delayed {DUI}. I was coming down here, [hesitant laughter] no seriously, and by the time I came up with the directions {Bail Money} it was almost time to be on. Little scary, little scary, but man, glad to be here. It's a very, very nice theatre {Fire Trap} I've been here before." Nealon's technique, meant to evoke the idea of "subliminal messages," is a bit like filling in the blanks to a Mad Lib

puzzle and allows Nealon to say more than one thing at once by suggesting alternate meanings for words such as "a little delayed," "directions," and "very nice theatre." Nealon, and his use of this technique, will be discussed again later in this chapter.

While some comics interject words, others use words with multiple meanings and then interject those meanings. In *On Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle recalls a time when Lycophron, a sophist who was reputedly "an imitator of Gorgias," was pressed upon to "praise the lyre" and so proceeded to praise the "tangible lyre" for a bit. He soon, however, "found himself at a loss for many words" and so "then referred to the heavenly one; for there is in the heavens a constellation composed of many stars which is called the Lyre. On this subject he found many good things to say" (Sprague 69). Polysemy is a technique used by many comics, such as Jimmy Carr, Amy Schumer, and Anthony Jeselnik, to generate incongruity by using words or phrases "in a different sense" than is expected or frequently used in order to highlight "points other than the one mentioned" (Sprague 68).

For example, many of Jimmy Carr's jokes operate through misdirection that is dependent on words and phrases having multiple meanings. He leads his audience to expect one thing and then delivers his joke in the form of another meaning. He does this in jokes such as: "When you eat a lot of spicy food, you can lose your taste. When I was in India last summer, I was listening to a lot of Michael Bolton," and "Boxers don't have sex before a fight, do you know why that is? Because they don't fancy each other," as well as "No matter how much you give a homeless person for tea…you never get that tea." Carr occasionally draws attention to the maneuver by remarking, after a punchline, "You didn't see that coming, did you?"

Carr often relies on a strategic use of silence in order to play with his listener's expectations and to engage alternate meanings. An aspect of comic timing includes pausing long

enough for an audience to make an (often normative) assumption or attach a predicate. The punchline is then delivered by going in a different direction or attaching an alternate predicate. Comics also measure out silence at the end of jokes in order to let the punchline sink in, or as Limon describes it, to give time to let the "joke-work work." In these and other ways, silence can be as important to a joke as the parts filled with speech. For example, Carr jokes about having "one of those serious relationship conversations" with his girlfriend, "She sat me down and said, 'Jimmy, we're at a crossroads in our relationship. Down one road is hard work and commitment, but ultimately, happiness. Down the other road, well, the other road is a dead end'" to which he replies, "That's not a crossroads, that's a T-Junction." The audience is lead to expect a story about Carr's relationship with his girlfriend and not, as he makes it, a gripe about infrastructure nomenclature. In a similar way, Mitch Hedberg delivers a one-liner by saying "I used to do drugs," pausing, and then revealing, "I still do, but I used to too" where the punchline is dependent on the audience making an assumption. What is left out is as important as what is included.

Communicative silence embodies contradiction. It is the passage of information through the apparent absence of information. How this works in practice is nuanced and complex, although some disagree. For example, Nicholas Rescher, in "The Signification of Silence," works out some of the messages silence communicates and comes to the conclusion that although "silence can speak," what it has to say is not really too complicated but rather "stylized, uniform, and generic" (151). For Rescher, although silence does indeed convey information, "the meaning of silence pivots" upon just a few understandable "contextualizing presumptions" to the effect that "Silence can speak, but it is less expressive than language…its message is always

relatively simple" (151). For Rescher, "To make a response that is nuanced and detailed you have to get in there and say something" (151).

Rescher explains how "understood by traditional logicians," silence is indicative of enthymemes as opposed to syllogisms since there must be a missing or unstated part (major, minor, or conclusion) (146). He argues that "formal logic cannot do much" with it and that is "pretty much all that formal logic ever makes of silence…As far as pure logic is concerned, the unsaid does not count" (146). Beyond formal logic, the most interesting aspect of silence is that, because it is the absence of language, it does not, technically, *say* anything but it certainly *does* much. In retrospect, we say that "silence speaks." Or, in Muckelbauer's terms, as will be discussed in chapter three, silence communicates in a way that can be described as "asignification" as opposed to signification.

However, as Rescher points out, in any form of communication short of pure logic, "we never have enough time and space at our disposal to make it all explicit—to explain every detail…we have to let silence do some of the communicative work" (148). For example, scholars often employ "unsaidness" in their criticism by "passing over unmentioned someone whose work or views one would normally expect to be taken into account" when they wish to implicitly express "disapproval or disappropriation…by simply consigning objects of disapproval to the exile of a silence that marks them as outside of the company we keep and not worth bothering about" (147). In other words, and as will be discussed in chapter three as well, because silence is always doing some of the communicative work, asignification is always a part of signification which implies that contradiction is always an aspect of persuasion.

Irony is a staple ingredient in humor precisely because saying the opposite of what one means is the embodiment of communicating more than one meaning. As Linda Hutcheon argues,

in *Irony's Edge*, irony facilitates the layering of "multiple incongruities" and the "superimposition or rubbing together" of multiple meanings (19). Hutcheon argues that "irony can only 'complexify'; it can never 'disambiguate'" (19). For comics, or anyone crafting comic discourse, the "complexifying" power of irony makes it an irresistible technique precisely because it says two opposing things at once. As Haraway has suggested, "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes" (291).

What is more, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss it, one of the requirements of conversational irony also embodies contradiction, "Irony cannot be used if there is uncertainty about the speaker's opinions. This gives irony a paradoxical character: using it implies that argumentation is necessary; but in order to be able to use it, a minimum of agreement is required" (208). In other words, if irony is to be detected and properly interpreted, it "requires a previous knowledge of the position of the speaker" (208). In order to communicate irony effectively, both speaker and hearer must be in on the irony; they both must share a knowledge of what is being said such that "Irony is all the more effective when it is directed to a well-defined group. Only by having some idea of the beliefs held within certain social environments can we guess whether or not a given text is ironical" (208-9).

For example, when a provocative joke prompted a collective cringe from his audience, Louis C.K. reacted by bellowing out "I mean it!" His audience, in on the irony, understood that the irony itself was now the joke, a joke they happened to find funnier, and laugh at more readily, than the original provocative joke. This prompted the comedian to bellow out an even more emphatic "I mean it!" as if to say "No, you don't understand. I'm not being ironic. I do actually mean it!" which, of course, was not true and elicited even more laughter from the audience. In other words, contradictorily, the comic's increasingly fervent insistence that he is

being genuine was his way of ardently, and repeatedly, reminding the audience that he is joking. It is the contradiction present that turns this reminder that he is telling jokes into a joke itself.

Tone is closely related to irony and used in some very similar and some unique ways. For example, sarcasm is often used to communicate irony but there are many complex uses and types of tone. In his autobiography, Steve Martin recalls being trained in his comedic sense by listening intently to "every nuance" of Nichols and May recordings and noticing how "Their comedy was sometimes created by only a subtle vocal shift" (72). Tone is a greatly undervalued and under-discussed ingredient in rhetoric generally and in comedy in particular. Simply put, like interjection, redirection, and irony; tone is a way of layering meaning on top of meaning. In fact, tone can sometimes be the single most important element of a joke. For example, George Carlin's "Baseball—Football" routine is almost completely reliant on tone: "I'd like to talk a little bit about baseball and football…they are different from one another in interesting ways…Baseball is played on a diamond, in a park. Football is played on a gridiron, in a stadium…In football, you wear a helmet. In baseball, you wear a cap…In football you receive a penalty. In baseball you make an error." The humor in these lines, as performed by Carlin, is almost entirely lost in a transcription devoid of tone.

Mimesis, especially as Arne Melberg defines it, is an excellent technique for layering meanings. In *Theories of Mimesis*, Melberg defines *mimesis* as "inherently and always already a *repetition*—meaning that *mimesis* is always the meeting-place of two opposing but connected ways of thinking, acting and making: similarity and difference" (1). This understanding of *mimesis* can be used to explicate the contradiction in many different comedic texts such as sketch-comedy parodies, faux documentaries, and impersonations. Finally, in retrospect, literary tropes and clichés point out contradiction. Once the status of trope or cliché is acquired, what

started out as 'fresh' and 'new,' with a persuasive appeal one might label genuine or 'real,' is revealed to have always already been a constructed product.

Although this dissertation does not attempt to explain *all* laughter, it does propose that in cases where incongruity proves humorous, even in challenging cases of "absurd" or "nonsense humor," contradiction is present and driving the amusement. For example, Morreall, challenging the superiority theory in support of the argument that incongruity can be inherently amusing, tells a story about some friends of his who, as a joke, put a bowling ball in his refrigerator. He recalls, upon opening the door, that he "broke out laughing. But not *at* anyone" simply because he was "amused by the sight of this object in a completely inappropriate place" (*TLS* 11). A bowling ball and a refrigerator are fairly incongruous objects. However, placing a bowling ball *next* to a refrigerator is probably not going to be amusing. The question is why putting the bowling ball *in* the refrigerator (then opened by the unsuspecting Professor) constituted a joke.

Once the bowling ball is in the refrigerator, a contradiction arises between the assumed rhetorical meaning of opening the door (getting food) and the meaning that action must now carry (taking out a bowling ball). In other words, putting the bowling ball where Morreall cannot help but find it (and presumably remove it) necessitates a contradiction between the intended meaning of his action (what Oring would call the "appropriate relationship") and what the results of that action must then be. Simply put, Morreall was forced by his friends into an inappropriate relationship with his refrigerator. In an interesting twist, it is often the case that "nonsense" humor provides a link connecting humor hierarchies. That is to say, adults may be just as inclined to laugh at the bowling ball in the refrigerator as a child would and for much the same instinctual reasons.

It must be stressed that claiming contradiction is generated through the pursuit of meaning is not meant to devalue the pursuit of meaning. Rather, the essence of joking is to simultaneously appreciate more than one meaning at once. This is the distinction between joking and debating. Not that the two need ever be entirely distinct, but that, although both are fueled by the presence of contradiction, one more readily aligns with expansion and the other contraction. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this shared dependence on opposing meanings is one reason why joking is often taken as offensive, because it can feel like an aggressive act of deliberation.

For example, on a recent episode of *The Colbert Report*, in the context of a story about the Catholic Church, Stephen Colbert asks the question, "If God were trying to quit smoking, could He hide the cigarettes where He wouldn't be able find them?" Although this joke could be taken as a sneer at the worth of the pursuit of meaning through the discipline of theology, it is important to point out that it is also pretty much the same as asking the question, "Can God create a bolder so heavy He wouldn't be able to lift it?" a question that was used for years in classical medieval education to present and stimulate discussion about a serious and important theological paradox. In other words, and contradictorily, Colbert's joke can either be taken as a fresh way of expressing an old and important theological conundrum or as a fresh iteration of what should have been taken as a joke to begin with. Although one may approach Colbert's joke, as well as the old mediaeval question, from different presumptive standpoints, both approaches are pondering the difficulties of a finite consciousness comprehending the concept of infinity— and then merely coming to different conclusions. As a result, both a theologian and an agnostic could find Colbert's joke amusing. In other words, distinctions between joke and question blur as the contradictions generated by their articulation are brought into relief.

The following section introduces a passage of the *Rhetoric* in which Aristotle discusses metaphor as a form of surprise, a passage traditionally credited as the inspiration of the incongruity theory of humor. The idea that metaphors and jokes are intimately connected is then cast in the light of the sophistic practice of antilogic. The argument will be made that, since Aristotle's discussion of metaphor can be viewed as describing a form of antilogic, or contradiction, the credit for an early theory of humor should indeed be moved back to the Sophists. The following two sections will introduce the sophistic practice of *Dissoi Logoi* as antilogic in action that is intimately tied to *Kairos*.

Aristotle as A Traditional Source of the Incongruity Theory

The idea that incongruity lies at the heart of amusement (see Morreall, *PLH* 14) is usually traced to a passage in the *Rhetoric* where Aristotle explores the connection between metaphor and surprise, "Liveliness is specially conveyed by metaphor, and by the further power of surprising the hearer; because the hearer expected something different, his acquisition of the new idea impresses him all the more. His mind seems to say, 'yes, to be sure; I never thought of that'" (1412ᵃ). As the section continues, Aristotle then explicitly brings in the idea of humor by discussing riddles and jokes

> Well-constructed riddles are attractive for the same reason; a new idea is
>
> conveyed, and there is metaphorical expression…In these the thought is
>
> startling…They are like the burlesque words that one finds in the comic writers.
>
> The effect is produced even by jokes depending upon changes of the letters of a
>
> word; this too is a surprise. You find this in verse as well as in prose…Jokes made

by altering the letters of a word consist in meaning, not just what you say, but

something that gives a twist to the word used. (1412ᵃ)

The close relationship between metaphors and riddles, that they both convey new ideas in a way

that can be surprising, is mentioned earlier in the same section, "Good riddles do, in general,

provide us with satisfactory metaphors: for metaphors imply riddles, and therefore a good riddle

can furnish a good metaphor" (1405ᵇ). Although this statement privileges metaphor, aligning

riddles and metaphor is substantial given how Aristotle, in numerous places, lauds metaphor as

one of the most effective communicative tools, "We all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of

new ideas easily…it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh (1410ᵇ).

For Aristotle then, metaphors are one of the best ways to communicate new ideas and the

best metaphors do so by surprising listeners, jolting them with new information in ways

reminiscent of jokes and riddles. There is power in the jab because "the new idea impresses," the

listener "all the more" (1412ᵃ). As Morreall suggests, the incongruity theory focuses on the

"cognitive or thinking side" of humor theory such that "amusement is an intellectual reaction"

(*TLS* 15). In other words, "well-constructed" riddles, jokes, and metaphors all work to generate

surprise by admitting additional meanings, "not just what you say, but something that gives a

twist" to what is said as well (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1412ᵃ). For example, "When the poet calls old

age 'a withered stalk,' he conveys a new idea, a new fact, to us by means of the general notion of

'lost bloom,' which is common to both things" (1410ᵇ).

Oring, who, as discussed above, theorizes humor as "appropriate incongruity," observes

that "it is no wonder that metaphors have often been compared to joke" since metaphor presents

a "logically absurd proposition" which is "rooted in appropriate incongruity" (5). Metaphors not

only compare "two clashing conceptual categories" by proclaiming that "one thing is like

another," but they actually proclaim that "something *is* something other than itself" (5). As Aristotle puts it, metaphor claims "outright that 'this' *is* 'that'" (1410^b). In other words, metaphor is one example, among many, of how contradiction, in this case similarity expressed through difference, is an ever-present ingredient in communication.

Oring muses that "The curious thing about metaphors is that despite the fact that they, like jokes, depend upon the perception of an appropriate incongruity, they are only rarely laughed at. Why are metaphors not—or only rarely—funny?" (5). One way to approach Oring's quandary is to consider the possibility that, much of the time, metaphors are not permitted to be funny in the sense that their contradictory implications are ignored or not admitted. For example, in his opening monologue for a recent episode of *Saturday Night Live*, host Louis C. K. explores some of the implications of the metaphor, used in Judeo-Cristian theology, that God is our Father

> If there is a God I don't know if it's the one in the Bible because that's a weird story. It's "He's our Father and we are his children," that's it— "Our Father who art in Heaven"—where's our mother? What happened to our Mom? What did he do to our Mom? Something happened!
>
> Well, how can we not have a mother? At least maybe God's divorced. Maybe he has an ex-wife—God's a single dad and he's raising us alone and we're praying and he's like "I'm trying! It's just me up here!" Maybe that's what's going on. Maybe life is our weekend with dad. That's what life is. And when you die you go to mom's house.

Alternatively, in order to avoid unintended meaning and use language properly, Aristotle insists that metaphor be crafted and surprise generated by following certain rules that will keep discourse within respectable limits. For example, when interjecting words that are other than

"what the hearer imagined" Aristotle insists that "The point should be clear the moment the words are uttered" (1412ª).

Aristotle cites a few jokes that utilize surprise in a way that meets his approval: Stesichorus, "the cicalas will chirp to themselves on the ground;" Isocrates, "their empire *was* the beginning of their troubles;" Anaxandrides, "Death is most fit before you do deeds that would make death fit for you;" and finally, Theodorus' "remark about Nicon the harpist ('you Thracian slavey'), where he pretends to mean 'you harp-player,' surprises us when we find he means something else." Aristotle explains that the "liveliness" of these jokes is "due to the meaning not being just what the words say" but also something else which is "startling" because it "does not fit in with the ideas you already have…But [here comes the contradictory stipulation] the point should be clear the moment the words are uttered" (1412ª). If the idea is new, then what will ensure that it will be immediately clear? For Aristotle, this clarity is possible because "In these cases the saying must fit the facts…the speaker says something unexpected, the soundness of which is thereupon recognized…In all these jokes, whether a word is used in a second sense or metaphorically, the joke is good if it fits the facts" (1412ª).

Aristotle mentions "the facts" here twice. Two examples are given to help clarify what is meant by "facts." First, concerning Theodorus's joke about Nicon the harpist, Aristotle suggests that the rhetor's play on words "surprises us when we find he means something else. So you enjoy the point when you see it, though the remark will fall flat unless you aware that Nicon is a Thracian." That Nicon might be tagged a Thracian is contextual information that is not necessarily undebatable. Today, the significance of labeling one a Thracian might be unclear, but such a contextual "fact" is not static but, much like the jokes it is a part of, is subject to processes of time and cultural change that give humorous expression cultural and national character as well

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as a shelf-life. Even at the time when this joke was written, such a cultural "fact" concerning

Nicon's status, or his claim to such a status, could have been open for debate.

Second, a joke is cited whose play on words is translated "Baring (proper name) is past

bearing." This is precisely how the joke is recorded, with a blank space in the middle where any

proper name may be placed as the butt of the joke. Aristotle explains that "if the man is

unpleasant, the joke fits the facts." This is a very different type of "fact." The judgment of a

man's character is clearly more subjective than his national identity. In this particular case, the

judgment of that character is also the argument of the joke—a joke not even attached to a

specific person. It is non-specific and open-ended, an equal-opportunity joke, entirely contingent

and usable by anyone against anyone else. One might even imagine Aristotle's pupils turning the

joke on their teacher.

Although it may seem tempting to try and clarify things here by distinguishing between

facts as "contextual" and facts as "essential," such a move would end up generating more

questions than answers. Alternatively, if uncomfortably, it could be asserted that both types of

facts are equally contingent. Any statement about Nicon's status as a Thracian is just as

contingent as a judgment about his temperament. From a sophistic point of view, as Nelson and

Megill argue, "rhetoric is contextual and context is rhetorical" (Gaonkar 172). "The facts," as it

pertains to communicative acts, cannot exist outside of the rhetoric used to communicate them

and so "the facts" are whatever is able to be established, in a particular rhetorical moment, as a

common point of reference. In a sense then, for Aristotle to say that "the joke is good if it fits the

facts," is a bit like saying "the joke is good if I agree with the joke," or "the rhetoric is good if I

agree with the rhetoric," which are both statements that fall in line with how the *Rhetoric* frames

persuasion in general—as supplemental to the facts.

In other words, Aristotle approaches humor because of its connection with metaphor but then quickly backs away from the powerful and uncontrollable contradiction surrounding both. For example, in reaction to the possibility of generating unintended meanings, he describes metaphor as a trope "In which bad taste may be shown"

> Metaphors, like other things, may be inappropriate. Some are so because they are ridiculous; they are indeed used by comic (as well as tragic) poets. Others are too grand and theatrical; and these, if they are far-fetched, may also be obscure. For instance, Gorgias talks of 'events that are green and full of sap,' and says 'foul was the deed you sowed and evil the harvest you reaped.' (1406[b])

Using a bit of circular reasoning echoing the idea that a "joke is good if it fits the facts," Aristotle declares that some metaphors are inappropriate because they are ridiculous, a statement that would prove about as useful if inverted, "some metaphors are ridiculous because they are inappropriate." Aristotle is gesturing more towards an issue of opinion about what he feels is being communicated rather than objectively analyzing how language is being used. For example, the metaphor from Gorgias that he objects to, "events that are green and full of sap," is not really that much different from the example he gives earlier that meets his approval, "When the poet calls old age 'a withered stalk.'"

Oring, by way of responding to his own question as to why metaphors are rarely funny, addresses Aristotle's concern about "inappropriate" metaphors by distinguishing between jokes and metaphors on the basis of intent

> In jokes the engagement of the incongruity and the search for its appropriateness is *spurious* rather than *genuine*. That is to say that jokes emerge when some aspect of either the incongruity or its appropriateness is recognized as illegitimate.

It violates logic, the sense of what we know to be true, or the sense of what

traditional behaviors or expressions are supposed to do and mean. (5)

If jokes and metaphors are to be judged as, respectively, spurious or genuine, or appropriate or

inappropriate, based on predetermined notions about "what we know to be true" or the 'facts,"

then called into question would be the very essence of what it means to create meaning. On the

contrary, this chapter is arguing that a joke is funnier the more successfully it expresses

contradictory viewpoints in a way that lends a sense of validity to both, thereby blurring the line

between spurious and genuine, between appropriate and inappropriate—and metaphor is just one

way of doing so.

For example, Oring presents a riddle: "Q: Why should you always wear a watch in the

desert? A: Because a watch has springs in it," and argues that "the appropriate relation" between

deserts and watches, established by the word "springs," "is not recognized as a legitimate

relation" but "linguistic only…Watch springs do not provide water. If they did, there would be

no joke" (6). On the contrary, if it could be said watch springs provide "water" in some way,

then the "appropriateness" would expand (even if still linguistic only) and it would improve as a

joke. For example, the joke, discussed above, that Oring uses as his preeminent example of

appropriate incongruity ("A man goes to see a psychiatrist. The doctor asks him, 'What seems to

be the problem?' The patient says, 'Doc, no one believes anything I say.' The doctor replies,

'You're kidding!'") is more complex and more amusing precisely because the doctor is at once

expressing sympathy and reinforcing the problem (1). In other words, two opposing but

legitimate meanings are operating simultaneously—and in disregard of intention.

Antilogic & Dissoi Logoi

– Death is bad for those who die but good for the undertakers and gravediggers.

In *The Sophistic Movement*, G. B. Kerferd spends some time discussing "an art" dedicated to the idea of "contradictory predicates for the same subjects" called "antilogic" which is attributable "to the sophists above all others" (61). Antilogic "consists in causing the same thing to be seen by the same people now as possessing one predicate and now possessing the opposite or contradictory predicate…so the same things are alike *and* are unlike" (61). Kerferd argues that understanding "the true nature of antilogic…is in many ways the key to the problem of understanding the true nature of the sophistic movement" and that attaining this key must begin with understanding the difference between three terms, "eristic, antilogic and dialectic" which will allow "a good many things fall into place" (65).

Eristic is a derivative of the noun *eris* meaning "strife, quarrel or contention." As Kerferd points out, when Plato uses the term, "eristic means 'seeking victory in argument,' and the art which cultivates and provides appropriate means and devices for so doing" such that "Concern for truth is not a necessary part of the art—victory in argument can be secured without it" (62). As Plato frames it, eristic "is not strictly speaking a *technique* of argument. It can use any one or more than one of a series of techniques in order to achieve its aim…reducing an opponent to silence" (63). The most important aspect of eristic to keep in mind is that, as used by Plato, "the term eristic regularly involves disapproval and condemnation" (63).

The "essential feature" of antilogic "is the opposition of one logos to another by contrariety or contradiction" or by "discovering or drawing attention to the presence of such an opposition in an argument or in a thing or state of affairs" (Kerferd 63). Although making a clear

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distinction between eristic and antilogic is difficult, as Plato frames it, "unlike eristic," antilogic, "when used in argument constitutes a specific and fairly definite technique, namely that of proceeding from a given logos, say the position adopted by an opponent, to the establishment of a contrary or contradictory logos" (63) For Plato, antilogic "comes in between eristic and dialectic. It can be used simply for eristic purposes…But in itself it is for Plato simply a technique, neither good nor bad" (Kerferd 65).

What Plato rates above both is dialectic. However, as Kerferd points out, "Dialectic as understood by Plato is difficult to characterize in detail. Indeed, at crucial points he seems almost to shy away from the detailed exposition which the reader is expecting" (65). The most important aspect of dialectic to keep in mind is that "The word 'dialectic' had a strong tendency in Plato to mean 'the ideal method,' *whatever* that may be" (65). In short, "Plato is wholly opposed to eristic and is completely committed to dialectic" (65). I would like to suggest that clarity between the three terms can be achieved if they are approached as a noun and two adjectives. In other words, by defining antilogic as a practice and defining both eristic and dialectic as terms of judgment concerning that practice, one could argue that Plato does not prefer dialectic over eristic as much as he labels as dialectic antilogical practice that meets his approval and labels as eristic antilogical practice that does not.

For example, elenchus, the practice of countering another's position by arguing that "a given statement leads to a self-contradiction" or "two statements which are mutually contradictory," is condemned by Plato as an abuse of antilogic when it is used for "frivolous purposes" but is approved by Plato "when used for the purpose of dialectic" (Kerferd 65). However, both practices rely on drawing out "statements which are mutually contradictory" which is the "essential feature of antilogic," so, the fundamental difference boils down to Plato's

opinion concerning the results (Kerferd 65). In other words, the main difference between eristic

and dialectic is an attitude or judgement concerning the contradiction that has been brought forth.

For Plato, if one has done something appropriate with antilogic it is because they have been

engaging in dialectic, and if one has done something inappropriate with antilogic it is because

they have been engaging in eristic. Indeed, as Kerferd points out, "Plato's second point against

antilogic is not so much an objection as a constant fear over the danger of its misuse" because it

is seen as "liable to destroy respect for traditional authority" which benefits from keeping

contradiction out of the equation (64).

Diogenes Laertius claims Protagoras, (a man who, according to Guthrie, "gloried in the

title of Sophist"), "was the first to say that on every issue there are two logoi [arguments]

opposed to each other" (Guthrie 20, Sprague 21, Kerferd 84). Kerferd notes that, according to

Seneca, Protagoras meant "one can take either side on any question and debate it with equal

success—even on this very question, whether every subject can be debated from either point of

view" (84). Guthrie describes this as "One of the most important lessons taught in the lectures

and handbooks of the Sophists…the art of speaking with equal cogency on both sides of a

question" (24). Likewise, Kerferd suggests that the art of antilogic is "perhaps the most

characteristic feature of the thought of the whole sophistic period" (85). A key example of

sophistic antilogic in action is the anonymous *Dissoi Logoi*. As a practice, that stand-up

comedians embrace, *dissoi logoi* is a "method of antilogic" in which the "chosen positions" of an

opponent can be shown as "contradictory in that they imply also the negation of themselves"

(Kerferd 85).

The *Dissoi Logoi*, or *Dialexeis*, (meaning countervailing or contrasting arguments in

Greek) is an anonymous sophistic treatise written at some point after the Peloponnesian War

(Sprague 279). Allegedly the product of sophistic pedagogical exercises designed to develop cognitive reasoning skills by embracing Protagoras's claim that on every issue there at least two arguments, the *Dissoi Logoi* stresses the situational nature of discourse and stands as the primary sophistic document illustrating the practice of systematically setting out the "antithetic or opposing arguments" inherent in any topic (Kerferd 85). The first section proclaims to lay out "Twofold arguments concerning the good and the bad…put forward in Greece by those who philosophize" (Sprague 279).

> Some say that the good is one thing and the bad another, but others say that they are the same, and that a thing might be good for some persons but bad for others, or at one time good and at another time bad for the same person…Illness is bad for the sick but good for the doctors. And death is bad for those who die but good for the undertakers and gravediggers…Victory is good for the winner but bad for the losers…The capture of Ilium was good for the Achaeans but bad for the Trojans. (Sprague 279)

That any point can be countered is not an aspect of persuasion original to the *Dissoi Logoi* or invented by the Sophists. As Kerferd points out, "Of course there has always been opposing arguments as long as the human race had indulged in argument" (84). However, the legacy of the *Dissoi Logoi* is a "way of looking at things" which embraces the contradiction pervading every rhetorical situation (Kerferd 85). Stand-up comedians embrace this tradition as they put forth alternative arguments even if they are controversial or run counter to what one expects or would like to hear.

For example, Kevin Nealon incorporates multiple meanings by interjecting words into his monologues in a very direct and abrupt way

Do we have some married couples here tonight? Yeah, you guys are married? Sweet, sweet. Remember when you guys first met—how exciting that was—when you knew that he liked you and uh, how you responded to him {Pepper Spray} how great was that? Those are the fun stories…I mean, that's exciting. It's like a dance right? And it's fun to be together {Water Torture} am I right? And then you start to get to know each other and start to learn things about each other {STDs} and get to know everything about each other and then one thing leads to another {Restraining Order} and before you know it—you're married! {Big Mistake}.

Nealon, who has work experience as well as a bachelor's degree in marketing, voices all the words enclosed in curly brackets in a terse and subdued monotone. His choice of tone is meant to evoke the idea of subliminal messages such as the notorious one-frame Coca-Cola ads supposedly inserted into drive-through movie preview reels. Incidentally, Nealon, as an aside, will sometimes mention to his audience that working in advertising was very "deceptive the way they manipulate people to buy stuff" but admits that what he does now "is a lot more fun." He used this technique for years during his early stand-up career and then later brought the act to *Saturday Night Live* as a character known as the "subliminal message man."

Actually anything but subliminal, the incongruity between what Nealon is saying in his natural voice and what he is saying in his "subliminal" voice could be read in a number of different ways: the juxtaposition of polite speech with what Nealon is thinking, the difference between what is observable and what is hidden, or some combination of the two. In any case, such incongruity expresses contrary arguments about marriage. Intimacy consists of attractions as well as repulsions. By simultaneously claiming that such partnerships are "fun" and

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"exciting," like a "dance," but also "torture" and a "big mistake," Nealon simultaneously marks marriage as both.

Marriage, kids, and family life are perennial themes that comedians explore by first acknowledging the "good" side of an argument and then venturing to explicitly offer something else, something that could, perhaps, be labeled a "bad" counter argument. For example, a comic might start out by clearly stating that having kids is a worthwhile and rewarding experiences but then offer a reason why it might also be an experience best avoided. For example, Louis C.K. begins a joke by explicitly professing tremendous love for his kids and then complains that they are also "basically just buckets of disease" living in his house. Still, Louis C.K. insists that kids are "everything" in a marriage. Kids turn a marriage into a "family" because "Without a kid, marriage is dating." He explains that having a kid "changes everything" in ways that only having a kid can reveal, "Here's what happens. When you get married, you realize, 'Oh shit, I can't leave now. I mean, I wasn't thinking of leaving but now I really can't leave.' And then you have a kid and you realize, 'Holy shit, I could have left!'"

In a similar vein, Nikki Glaser, in her 2016 comedy special, *Perfect*, declares, "I don't want kids," however "I do want a baby." The problem, as she describes it, is that "eventually," that baby is "just going to be some dude named 'Doug,'" who calls just once a month because he can't remember the answer to his bank-account security question, "Mom, I'm locked out of my account again. Hey, what's your *old name*?" "You mean my maiden name?" "Whatever." Uh, Jones." "Can you spell it." "Uh, fuckin' Doug…why couldn't you stay a baby?!...I want a baby…I don't want a 'Doug.'"

In regards to marriage, Louis C.K. supports the idea that people who love each other increase the value of their relationship by getting married but he is also eager to point out that

being divorced for the past five years has easily been the "best part" of his life, "Every year has been better than the last" because, as opposed to marriage, which lasts for "as long as you can hack it…Divorce is forever." It just keeps getting "stronger, like a piece of oak. Nobody ever says 'Oh, my divorce is falling apart—it's over. I can't take it.'" He stresses: "I'm not saying "don't get married. If you meet somebody and fall in love, get married…if you're in a good marriage, stay in it. If you're in the best marriage ever, stay in it. I'm just saying, if you got out, it would be even better…because that's the best part...Marriage is just like a larva stage for true happiness."

On the contrary, Nikki Glaser is little bit more optimistic about her relationship, "My boyfriend and I have been together for three years. We've broken up three times but we always get back together so, we're going to make it." She explains that she is content not being married, "I don't want to get married. It helps that my boyfriend doesn't want to marry me, so, that's like, that's convenient. For a while he was like, 'I don't want to get married until gay people can get married,' and then I was like, 'They can!' and he was like, 'Yeah, I never thought that would happen." However, if she were to get married, she admits to having some reservations about giving up her last name, "It's nice to take your husband's name but then you're like, 'Oh, this thing I've had my whole life, that's my whole identity, that my great-grandparents came through Ellis Island with? I'll just through it in the trash—this guy seems cool." For Glaser, after giving it up, your last name is nothing, "It's just your shit-head son's bank account security question answer—that's all your name is."

In his 2013 comedy special, *Oh My God*, Louis C.K. explains this kind of contradiction as a "competition" in his brain between opposing points of view, or what, much like the "Twofold arguments concerning the good and the bad" found in the *Dissoi Logoi*, might be

called "good thoughts and bad thoughts," which he demonstrates through a performance he calls "of course…but maybe"

> Of course children who have nut allergies need to be protected. Of course we have to segregate their food from nuts, have their medication available at all times and anybody who manufactures or serves food needs to be aware of deadly nut allergies—of course! But maybe, *maybe*, if touching a nut kills you, you're supposed to die. Of course not! Of course not! Of course not! I have a nephew who has that. I'd be devastated if something happened to him. But maybe, *maybe*, if we all just do this [he covers his eyes] for one year, we're done with nut allergies forever. No, of course not!

Kerferd argues that the "essential feature" of the Dissoi Logoi is "not simply the occurrence of opposing arguments but the fact that both opposing arguments" are contained or originate from "within a single complex argument" (84). In other words, there is no such thing as a 'simple' argument because the process of constructing even the most straightforward claim always generates and implies opposing meanings. The thesis of this chapter is that amusement is the result of simultaneously presenting those opposing arguments in a manner that is compelling or surprising. For example, Louis C.K. professes support for American troops, "of course, if you are fighting for your country and you get shot or hurt it's a terrible tragedy," but he also considers the possibility that "maybe, if you pick up a gun and go to another country and you get shot, it's not that weird. Maybe, if you get shot by the dude you were just shooting at, it's a tiny bit your fault."

His audience, now privy to the pattern, lets out a collective groan of anxiety when he declares that "Of course slavery is the worst thing that ever happened." However, Louis is not

about to let them off the hook, "Listen, you all clapped for the dead kids with the nuts. For kids dying from nuts you applauded, so you're in this with me now, you understand?" He reiterates that "Of course, of course slavery is the worst thing that ever happened, of course it is—and every time it's happened: black people in America, Jews in Egypt, every time a whole race of people has been enslaved it's a terrible horrible thing, of course. But maybe, maybe every incredible human achievement in history" the achievements that get pointed at as markers of "human greatness," were only able to be accomplished through slave labor

> Every single thing where you go: "How did they build those pyramids?"
>
> "They just threw human death and suffering at them until they were finished."
>
> "How did we traverse the nation with a railroad so quickly?"
>
> "We just threw Chinese people in caves and blew 'em up and didn't give a shit what happened to them."
>
> There's no end to what you can do when you don't give a fuck about a particular people. You can do anything.

Louis then shifts slightly by pointing out that this pattern is alive and well today as much as any other time in history. We would not have the architectural wonders of Abu Dhabi without untold numbers of workers from India forced into indentured servitude nor would we enjoy "amazing micro-technology" at low cost without it being manufactured in factories containing a living "nightmare." Then turning, in a way, their initial groan against them, he implicates his audience by framing this as an on-going pattern perpetuated by tacit choices: "You really have a choice: you can have candles and horses and be a little kinder to each other or let someone suffer immeasurably far away just so you can leave a mean comment on YouTube while you're taking a shit."

This "Of course, but maybe" routine is a representative example in the sense that Louis makes it a feature of the routine to present both arguments. However, in order to work, opposing arguments, instead of being laid out so obviously, can be located elsewhere. For example, irony, in order to be successful, requires listeners to recognize and pick up an opposing meaning that might not be obvious. If they do not, the irony could fail. In a similar way, *mimesis* and parody both require observers to bring along previously acquired meanings that are usually shared by a group and then brought in collectively. Notably, it is existence of these meanings, as well as the action of carrying them into the comedy space, which presents the opportunity, or the *kairos*, for a comedian to put together a resonating contradiction. This is why a joke may fall flat or have a shelf-life and eventually die, because the audience could not, or can no longer, participate. This is also why, as will be discussed in the inter-chapter on laughter, Limon can go so far as to claim that laughter is what actually turns a stand-up comedian's material into jokes (13).

"Too Soon?": Kairos

Poulakos suggests that Gorgias was one of the first to assert that "situations have a way of revealing themselves to man and of eliciting responses from him" (59). The central idea of *Kairos* is that "ideas have their place in time and unless they are given existence, unless they are voiced at the precise moment they are called upon, they miss their chance to satisfy situationally shared voids" (60). *Kairos* is the movement of opportunity through time that governs how speech might respond to changing situations. In short, "*kairos* dictates that what is said must be said at the right time" (Poulakos 61). In other words, "comedic timing" involves much more than punchline delivery. It includes the idea that the opportunity for jokes appears because of transitory cultural/rhetorical windows of opportunity that allow them. In other words, jokes can

have a shelf-life. They can grow old and die. Humor past its expiration date may require research in order to make sense of it. Comedy, as much as any form of oratory, incorporates *kairos* through a recognition that timeliness goes hand in hand with persuasiveness.

Kairos intersects with *dissoi logoi* as socio-cultural meanings present opportunities for offering opposing meanings. Ted Cohen discusses a similar idea in terms of jokes being either "conditional" or "pure." (12). Conditional jokes "work only with certain audiences" which are able to "supply something in order either to get the joke or to be amused by it" and therefore "can receive the joke" while "A pure joke would be universal, would get through to everyone, because it presupposed nothing in the audience" (12). Cohen admits that "It now seems clear to me that there is no such thing as a pure joke. It is a kind of ideal, but it doesn't exist" (12).

Instead, "When you offer your joke," to an audience "you solicit their knowledge… and they find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work" (40). What this chapter has been arguing is that "to offer a joke" is to take this "background knowledge," in the form of a message or meaning or argument, and match it up with an opposing idea such that the contradiction will resonate, like striking a bell. Cohen then ponders, if an audience is ill-equipped to receive a joke, "Why can't the joke-teller simply inform his audience in advance, tell them whatever they need to know in order to get his joke?" (24). The problem is that, "so encumbered, the joke seems labored, and even contrived" and "good jokes" need to be "concise" and what "makes this concision possible…is that so much can go unsaid. And why can it go unsaid? *Because the audience already knows it*" (25 his emphasis). Cohen makes the point that this knowledge is not just solicited, but actually elicited, "in fact, virtually against their will…they are urged to supply it, virtually compelled to supply it automatically, without even considering whether they would like to be thus pulled in" (27). As will be discussed in the inter-

chapter, laughter is complex and multi-functional. It acknowledges shared "background information," admits the consideration of opposing information, and captures the laugher in a resounding contradiction.

At the same time, the more pressing a particular cultural message, the more profitable (rhetorically speaking) will be the attempt to respond with an alternate view. This speaks to why comedians welcome controversy or even seek out and move towards sites of unrest. Not only is controversy a form of shared "background information" providing a ready audience, it is *urgently* shared information that is calling for a response. The dispute primes the audience with eager, perhaps nervous, anticipation for a different take on a situation. For example, as controversy broke out prior to the 88th Academy Awards show, Chris Rock showed no interest in shying away but stayed on as host of "The White People's Choice Awards" even as some close to him urged him to walk away.

Although tragedy, like controversy, also provides shared background information, comedians must tread carefully. As Cohen points out, a comedian's topics will "inevitably include misfortunes, sometimes horrible ones" like earthquakes, hurricanes, plane crashes, space shuttle disasters, and, above all, death" (40). Although …They are topics that are hard to confront, difficult to accept, and yet relentless in their insistence upon our attention" (40). Hence the proverbial "To soon?" question asked when a joke about a recent tragic event falls flat.

Joke-thieves undoubtedly exist. However, if, as Cohen suggests, audiences are always providing some amount of the information that goes into a joke, the same information that many different comics will be drawing from, then that means, theoretically, that more than one comedian could come up with the same joke. *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* is a nonfiction short-format web series created and hosted by Jerry Seinfeld in which he discusses comedy with

other comedians over coffee. The third episode of the first season features stand-up comedian Brian Regan discussing the fact that they both do a bit that discusses what it means to have put a man on the moon.

Jerry exclaims, in amazement, "We had the same bit. The lines are so close." Jerry's bit centers on the idea that if all lunar attempts had failed, or if we had not gone at all, then life would make more sense, "We should never have landed a man on the moon. It was a mistake. Now everything is compared to that one accomplishment," and usually as a prelude to a complaint, as in, "I can't believe they can land a man on the moon—taste my coffee!" He goes on to suggest that "I think we all would have been a lot happier if we hadn't landed a man on the moon. Then we could say, 'They can't make a prescription bottle top that's easy to open? I'm not surprised. They couldn't land a man on the moon. Things make perfect sense to me now."

Regan's material is much the same. He points out that since putting 12 people on the moon, we now use this grand accomplishment as a way to complain about the little problems we have, "Like if your phone cord is all tangled up— 'They can put a man on the moon but they can't make a damn phone cord that won't bunch up!'" Regan then ponders that "maybe, if we never put a man on the moon we'd be happy, huh?" Then, for instance, if someone notices the phone cord trouble and asks "Is that phone cord driving you crazy?" then we would be able to say "Awe naw, we haven't even had a man on the moon yet! Why would I let something like this bother me?"

The conversation between them is non-confrontational. Neither accuses the other of plagiarism. Apparently, they both presume that there was no intentional foul play involved. Assuming, for a moment, that such is indeed the case, it is entirely possible that the act of putting a man on the moon has acquired enough common cultural rhetorical usage that more than one

person could draw out a very similar contrary meaning. In other words, in this case, both Seinfeld and Regan suggest that, in at least one way, perhaps this "great accomplishment" was not so great.

Implications of Aligning Jokes & Metaphors

In "What Jokes Can Tell Us About Arguments," Thomas Conley argues that on at least one significant level "jokes, metaphors, and arguments all work the same way" such that jokes may have as much to tell us about arguments as arguments have to tell us about jokes (268). In a similar way, Ted Cohen suggests that "The striking similarities between jokes, figures of speech, and works of art are worth attention, and wonder" (4). Indeed, aligning metaphoric expression with joking is no small matter when one considers the theoretical pervasiveness of metaphor. Richards goes so far as to suggest that metaphor is much more than just "something special and exceptional in the use of language, a deviation from its normal mode of working…a sort of happy extra trick with words, an opportunity to exploit the accidents of their versatility" but rather "the omnipresent principle of all its free action…its constitutive form" (90). For Richards, "most sentences in free or fluid discourse turn out to be metaphoric. Literal language is rare" (120). He extends this notion to words themselves as a type of metaphoric expression noting that "if words did not differ from their objects, they would not *be* representations: that is, they would not be *words*" (19). Consequently, there will always be incongruities, to some extent, between the signifier and the signified, between the vehicle and the tenor, which can generate contradictory meanings. To avoid incongruity one could simply say "empire is empire" but, as Aristotle laments, "there would be nothing clever" in saying that (1412[b]).

Concern for avoiding incongruity and preventing unintended meaning is in part

responsible for the great "Aristotelian compromise" that Dilip Gaonkar credits, in part, for

setting "into motion the 'supplementary' tradition in rhetoric" (163). Gaonkar, in "Rhetoric and

Its Double," reminds us that "The idea that rhetoric is no more than a 'supplement' makes its

initial appearance in the fabled encounter between the Older Sophists and the Platonic Socrates,

the first site of the so-called quarrel between rhetoric and philosophy" (161). This compromise

consists of a willingness to consider as unlimited the means through which persuasion may be

wrought but also reserves the right to judge the appropriateness of any particular effort. As

Gaonkar suggests, this compromise leaves readers with more questions than answers as they

contemplate the *Rhetoric* as a text which "stands profoundly divided against itself" in the sense

that Aristotle repeatedly illustrates persuasive techniques yet remains resistant to the implication

that the art of persuasion is generative (164).

That is to say, running through such a compromise are the presuppositions that content

precedes form and that rhetoric "is not a function of any other art" but a "faculty" that

supplements them and, because it exists independently of them, can be taken in hand and

properly managed (1355^b). As Gaonkar points out, "Both historically and in our own time" much

of the dispute about the "idea that rhetoric is no more than a 'supplement'" involves its epistemic

status which has led some to make claims such as "in the best of all possible worlds, there would

be communication perhaps, but no rhetoric" (Bitzer 13). What is at stake, "in its simplest form is

this: Does rhetoric, the art of discovering available means of persuasion in a given case

(Aristotle), have anything to do with the generation of knowledge?" (Gaonkar 162).

How does a dissertation about humor address these big questions? Simply put, jokes

embody the notion that rhetoric is generative. As the juxtaposition of multiple and conflicting

meanings that are inevitably and unintentionally created through every attempt to communicate, jokes are deeply connected to what Gaonkar claims is at stake about the nature of rhetoric. This can be seen, for example, in *The Comic Vision in Literature*, where Edward Galligan, in order to synthesize Arthur Koestler's theory of jokes and William Lynch's theory of comedy, leans on Koestler's theory, in *The Act of Creation*, that jokes are "an arrangement that brings about a sudden alteration in perception so that we bisociate two apparently incompatible matrices of thought" (6). Galligan, building on Koestler's assertion, argues that jokes offer "Two ways of thinking" about a topic which leads to the "pleasure of thinking both ways at once" and where there are "a number of understandings" available, jokes make them "all available at once" (8).

Galligan recognizes an important similarity between this theory from Koestler about jokes and Lynch's theory of comedy which argues that the comic mode is the "least univocal of the modes of the literary imagination" (24) to the extent that "comedy is hostile to the univocal mind" (31). In contrast to the univocal mind, the comic mode is a "celebration of the analogical mind" (37) which "delights in discovering similarities and pursuing them through the diversity that reality offers" (27). In other words, Lynch's comic mode aligns jokes with *metaphoric* thought that "can observe a set, think accurately about whatever it is that the members of the set have in common, and relish the qualities that distinguish one member of the set from another" (27).

The link between these two theories means that joking stems from and expresses a distrust against "assertions and explanations" which attempt "to make words mean *this*, not *that*; comedy prefers to celebrate both *this* and *that* as simultaneously as possible" (x). In other words, what Lynch proposes "gives us a very clear way of understanding that comedy is not anti-intellectual, it is merely anti-univocal," which, as Galligan notes, fits very well with Koestler's

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theory of jokes: "the bisociation of matrices" (28). Galligan argues that "comedy consistently calls for double vision, for the ability to see this *and* that at the same time…to maintain acute double vision in contradictory circumstances" (34). As was discussed above, this notion of double vision, or what Koestler calls "bisociation," contains the essential features of the sophistic practice of antilogic. However, because jokes have never before been linked to antilogic, Koestler coined the term "bisociate" to signify this phenomenon.

The connection between jokes and metaphor suggests that rhetoric has quite a bit to do with the generation of knowledge. Considering the concerns associated with ideas about rhetoric's epistemic potential, this sheds light on the castigation that humor has traditionally been subjected to as well as the traditional suspicion held against laughter as not in accordance with any form of serious inquiry. Such castigation and suspicion parallels the historical denigration of sophistic rhetoric that Wardy suggests is a result of a "tension between the conviction that unadorned right reason will necessarily, if only eventually, prevail, and a besetting anxiety lest false yet efficacious persuasion subvert the truth" ("PRRP" 49). However, what sophistic theory advises is that there is no place of rest, no rhetorical space one may flee to, where it is not necessary to be on one's guard, because all persuasion, no matter how "right," is still the result of efficacious adornment because there is no other choice, no path to choose from that does not include the same procedures. In this context, jokes and laughter are sometimes feared as they threaten to unravel judgments of appropriateness or undercut pretensions about the controllability of meaning.

Conclusion

The thesis of this chapter is that contradiction is what lies at the heart of humor. Contradiction generates amusement. This chapter has framed and defined sophistic theory as useful for mapping out the scope and ubiquity of contradiction. Specifically, antilogic is a continuous process of "discovering or drawing attention to the presence of such an opposition in an *argument* or in a *thing* or *state of affairs*," such that logos opposes logos wherever logos is found (Kerferd 59). The thesis of this chapter also constitutes the heart of this dissertation and so, suitably, is wholly carried into the next chapter by arguing that disparagement is dependent on contradiction in order to generate amusement and qualify as humor.

Chapter Two: The Disparagement Theory, Self-Disparagement, and Offensive Humor

As part of a discussion concerning the disparagement theory of humor, John Morreall reports that among indigenous Greenlanders

> contests of ridicule were once their only judicial procedure, even for such
>
> offenses as murder. Someone who had a complaint against another challenged
>
> him to a contest before the clan or tribe in which they took turns ridiculing each
>
> other. There was no distinction made between defensible accusations and mere
>
> slander…All that counted was who got more laughs at his opponent's expense.
>
> That person was declared the winner by the assembly. (*TLS* 9)

Most pertinent is the idea that "All that counted" in such contests was getting "more laughs," a practice very similar to "doing the dozens," a type of verbal combat "popular in African American culture" where combatants "try to outdo one another in insults," laughter being the sole evidence of success or failure (Conley 87). Both scenarios raise the central question of this chapter, namely, what is the difference between insults and jokes that are insulting? Simply put, this chapter reiterates the last chapter—contradiction is always the source of amusement, even in the case of disparagement. In other words, insults are amusing to the extent that they draw out a contradiction. If there is no apparent contradiction, then the insult will preside. This is not to say that remarks which appear to be merely insults contain no contradiction, but that in such cases, it is obscured. At the other end of the spectrum, contradiction can all but nullify an insult.

Here are a few representative examples: Jimmy Carr starts off a joke by discussing the way kids cruelly mock one another by rhyming with each other's names in mean ways. He gives a few examples and then asks for a volunteer from the audience. A man in the front row says his name is Scott. Carr stands still for a moment, as though he is coming up with a creative and

mean rhyme. Finally, he points to Scott, "Fuck you Scott, you motherfucker! See," declares Carr, "it's not that hard at all!" On the *Comedy Central Roast* of James Franco, Andy Samberg, who spends his allotted roasting time roasting himself more than anyone else, introduces a fellow participant, "My good friend Aziz Ansari is here. Aziz's parents are from India and he's from South Carolina. 'Hey Aziz, what's it like to have a unique perspective on what it means to be American? You bag of shit!'" And finally, in a scene from *Through the Looking Glass*, the Red Queen asks Alice, "What's one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one?" "I don't know," replies Alice. "I lost count." "She can't do addition," concludes the Red Queen. In all of these examples, although there is undoubtedly ridicule present, it is problematized by contradiction. In these limit test examples, it is practically nullified. After all, in front of large groups of people, Carr calls Scott a motherfucker and Samberg calls Aziz a bag of shit and yet laughter predominates.

The general idea is the same as the under-handed compliment where apparent flattery is contradicted by a slap in the face such as "Hey Johnny, I finally had a chance to listen to your demo tape and guess what? It doesn't *totally* suck!" (It just mostly sucks). For example, during his opening monologue for the 88th Academy Awards ceremony, Chris Rock, addressing racism in Hollywood, tells an anecdote about attending a Hollywood fundraiser for President Obama where he had a few moments alone with the President. He recalls spending that time drawing the President's attention to the predominantly white writers, producers, and actors in attendance who constitute the Hollywood elite and telling the President that they are the "nicest white people on Earth." They also "don't hire black people." In other words, "Is Hollywood racist? You're damn right Hollywood's racist!" but it is filled with the nicest, sweetest, politest racists you will ever meet. Instead of burning crosses or demanding lemonade be fetched, they are working hard to

incorporate diversity, "You want diversity?" Rock asks as he introduces the night's first presenters, "We got diversity—please welcome Emily Blunt and, somebody whiter, Charlize Theron!"

In each of these cases above, if the contradiction was minimalized, or deemphasized, one would be left with mostly just an insult which, I contend, would not be very amusing. I say "deemphasized" because, in accordance with the last chapter, which suggested that contradiction is embedded in every attempt at communication, theoretically, there should be no such thing as a "pure" insult but rather cases in which the insult is emphasized over contradiction. A scene from the Adam Sandler movie *Happy Gilmore* provides a convenient illustration of this idea. When Sandler's character, Happy Gilmore, challenges the antagonist, Shooter McGavin, to a golfing contest, McGavin accepts. He then attempts to bully and insult Gilmore, "You're in big trouble though, pal. I eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast!" Gilmore, unfazed, laughs and responds in amazement, "You eat pieces of shit for breakfast?" McGavin, flustered and unsure of how to respond, can only yell out "No!"

The previous chapter recast the incongruity theory of humor by arguing that incongruity is only amusing to the extent that it relates to contradiction. In the same vein, this chapter argues that disparagement is always dependent on contradiction as its source of amusement. Not only is merely insulting someone not funny, it might actually be easier to do than crafting a joke. In order to craft disparagement into a joke, contradiction must be brought to the fore, framed, and presented in a compelling way. How well that is done will determine how the joke is received, or, alternatively, whether or not the statement is taken to be a joke at all. This is, perhaps, a way to understand Oring's observation, in the context of his chapter on disparagement humor, "The Humor of Hate," that "the more sophisticated a joke is, the more it will be tolerated. The greater

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the effort a hearer must expend in order to reconstruct an underlying thought, the more sophisticated a joke is thought to be…The greater the distance between what is actually said in the joke and what the hearer must understand, the more acceptable the joke will become in polite society" (42). This chapter argues that this "sophisticated distance" is a product of the contradiction incorporated in ridicule and insults.

This is not to deny the reality of the disparagement in such jokes but to suggest that the more a joke moves away from drawing out, or highlighting, contradiction and towards the theoretically pure insult, the less amusing it will be, the less it will be a joke at all. In brief, this chapter, by proposing that what is amusing about disparagement humor is contradiction and not disparagement, aims to rescue such discourse from the most diabolical implications of the superiority theory which hold that belittling others is inherently amusing. Although this dissertation does not, and cannot, claim that people never laugh at purely mean and vindictive speech meant only to denigrate, it does maintain that such laughter is undesirable and *not prompted by amusement*. This dissertation is not about that kind of laughter, whatever it may be.

However, at the same time, on a very basic level, an insult is an argument that makes a judgment or offers a critique. That is to say, just because a joke includes an insult does not mean that the insult has no value or is an altogether undesirable element of the joke. What is more, combining insults with contradiction can admit ambiguity and doubt into a critique such that, counterintuitively, jokes that are insulting may, in some cases, prove a more mitigated form of critique than outright denouncement. In other words, contradiction problematizes ridicule. For example, in the last of the three jokes above, the Red Queen's critique of Alice's addition skills is problematized because of the ambiguity as to whether or not keeping track of how many times she says "one," is a pertinent mathematical skill. Perhaps it is or perhaps the Red Queen does not

understand the fundaments of mental mathematics. This idea can also be illustrated, in retrospect, by the fact that many of the examples of contradiction in the last chapter also contain some degree of disparagement that was glossed over at the time because it was not the focus of the analysis.

Be that as it may, jokes that include insults are, to some extent, always still somehow *about* the insult. This necessitates that the laughter elicited is still somehow connected to the insults and ridicule. This is a troubling matter. However, although, as a species, we are capable of laughing *in* derision, we are also capable of laughing *at* derision as well as laughing in both ways simultaneously (i.e. "Are you laughing at me or with me?"). To the point, this study suggests, or maybe hopes, that laughter which is purely mean and derisive and that is prompted by the unadulterated belittlement of others is rarer than might be suspected. For some, this may seem little comfort. This troubling topic, sometimes referred to as "Problem of Ridicule," will be approached by considering that insults, as uncomfortable as it might be to consider, are an indispensable part of communication. This is the theme of *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, a recent work by Thomas Conley, which will be discussed below. Self-disparagement and offensive humor will also be discussed in this chapter as types of disparagement humor that may possess their own embodied contradictions. After all, why would anyone insult themselves or intentionally offend their listeners?

The Disparagement Theory of Humor

The disparagement theory of humor, also referred to as the superiority, aggression, and the hostility theory, has a basic premise with a long history. As Morreall sums it up, according to the "Superiority Theory, held by Plato and Aristotle…laughter is always directed at someone as

a kind of scorn" (*PLH* 3). As Casper points out "Plato distrusts laughter's uncontrollable nature, and he famously derides it as a kind of malice exhibited by 'the spiteful man [who] is pleased at his neighbor's misfortunes'" (*Philebus* 48b8-9) (347). Morreall points out that "Aristotle agreed with Plato that laughter is essentially derisive (or a form of derision) and that in being amused by someone we are finding that person inferior" or "in some way" find "their shortcomings funny" (*PLH* 14). Even "wit," according to Aristotle, is just "well-bred insolence" (*Rhetoric* 1389[b]).

The disparagement theory "got its start in Plato and Aristotle," was later "put into a stronger form by Hobbes," (Morreall, *PLH* 19) was then reiterated by Hegel, Bain, and Bergson, and most recently by Gruner (1978) and Billig (2005) who are widely recognized as its most prominent present-day supporters (Carrell 313). "In short," according to Willibald Ruch, the disparagement theory of humor suggests that

> The funniness of a joke depends on the identification of the recipient with the
> person (or group) that is being disparaging and with the victim of the
> disparagement. The theory proposes that humor appreciation varies inversely with
> the favorableness of the disposition toward the agent or the entity being
> disparaged, and varies directly with the favorableness of the disposition toward
> the agent or the entity disparaging it. (29)

Simply put, the idea is that the more one identifies with the target, the less humorous they find the joke, and the more they identify with the speaker, the more humorous they find it. As a result, "Laughter is thought to result from a sense of superiority derived from the disparagement of another person or of one's own past blunders or foolishness" (Ruch 30). Or, as Salvatore Attardo puts it, hostility theories essentially "claim that one finds humorous a feeling of superiority over something, of overcoming something, or aggressing a target" ("Primer," 103).

Ruch goes on to mention Gruner as "the most outspoken champion of this approach as for him *ridicule* is the basic component of all humorous material, and if one wants to understand a piece of humorous material it is necessary only to find out who is ridiculed, how, and why" (30). In other words, for Gruner, humorous material can be explicated by identifying the butt of the joke. Billig concurs, arguing that "humour is central to social life, but not in the way that we might wish for" (2). For Billig, "the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule" is what constitutes "the social core of humour" (2). Billig argues that "ridicule lies at the core of social life" because it is punitive, "the possibility of ridicule ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu" (2).

According to Morreall, "The superiority theory as presented by Plato and Aristotle was influential on subsequent thought about laughter, though little was added to the theory until the early modern period when Hobbes put it into a stronger form…Hobbes's account of laughter became the classic form of the superiority theory" (*TLS* 5-6). Hobbes considers the human race as a group of individuals in constant and fierce struggle for dominance, a "perpetual and restless desire of Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death" (*Leviathan* chap. 11). In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes explains laughter as "sudden glory arising from some conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (chapter six). Hobbes argues that disparagement, or ridicule, is the "passion which makes those grimaces called laughter" erupt when humans, who are in constant struggle with one another, suddenly achieve an advantage over another by way of "discovering and conveying to our minds some absurdity of another," at which point "they suddenly applaud themselves" (Morreall, *PLH* 19-20).

Arthur Dudden, while considering how American humor seems particularly rife with disparagement, suggests that "Another obstacle to any serious appreciation of American humor was that it could be barbed, disconcerting, intimidating, or even downright vicious" (xv). Dudden, while considering Christopher Morley's observation that "There has always been something sui generis in the American comic spirit," argues that it might be "A touch of brutality perhaps? Anger rather than humor?" or "some essential hardness or sharpness of spirit" (xv). He observes that "More often than not American humor was no casual laughing matter, considering its destructive features, say from Nasby to Lenny Bruce" noting that Malcolm Muggeridge, onetime editor of Punch, once remarked "By its nature humor is anarchistic" (xvii). Likewise, the aggressiveness of American stand-up comedy has led Lawrence Mintz to observe that "The essence of the art is creative distortion" ("Stand-Up" 201).

In defense of the theory, although not necessarily the actions being theorized, Morreall claims that it is "an obvious fact that people sometimes laugh in derision at other people. Perhaps we feel that no one *should* do so, but we must not confuse normative questions with factual ones. In point of fact, people often laugh at the misfortunes of others, and seem to have done so throughout recorded history" (*TLS* 8). He attributes some of the contemporary rejection of humor as a serious topic of study to "our relatively recent moral objections to the enjoyment of others' suffering" (*TLS* 9) and he attributes the "traditional neglect of humor as a philosophical topic" to the predominance of the superiority theory of humor which paints humor as a "nasty business" in which laughter is "always directed at someone as a kind of scorn" which keeps humor "ethically suspect" (*PLH* 3).

Billig lends support to Morreall's argument by suggesting that "In classical theories, ridicule did not pose the moral problem that it does today" (7). For Billig, "ridicule lies at the

heart of social life" (7). He takes umbrage with any theory of humor which claims something other than ridicule as the focus of humor labelling them "optimistic theories of ideological positivism" (8). As Billig argues, the involvement of ridicule in the superiority theory, combined with modern sensibilities, has led to a sense that superiority theorists are somehow "enemies of laughter" whose ideas are "out of tune with the mood of today" (6).

If indeed "moral objections to the enjoyment of others' suffering" are "relatively recent," as Morreall suggests, and for much of human history, "ridicule did not pose the moral problem that is does today," as Billig suggests, then it is entirely possible that the superiority theory was, for many years, simply considered sufficient to explain disparagement humor. This especially seems likely when one considers the intricate relationship between insults and jokes, which will be discussed below. In other words, it could be said that this dissertation is the result of contemporary discomfort with verbal denigration that has forced a closer look at disparagement humor and produced a more adequate and accurate theory.

This chapter suggests that saying the "funniness of a joke" depends on the listener identifying with a speaker or target of those jokes still begs the question, what made the insult a joke in the first place? (Ruch 29). Although identification certainly plays a role in how one may receive or reject contradiction, this chapter argues that amusement, or the funniness of a joke, is always dependent on how well the joke frames contradiction. That identification is not the source of amusement is illustrated by the fact one may fully identify with, or actually be, the butt of a joke and still find the joke amusing. A good example of this is a comedy roast where a group of individuals, somewhat like adolescent boys punching each other in the arms, take turns insulting each other simply for the sake of amusement even though it might still actually hurt. As Andy Samberg says at the end of his time on the *Comedy Central Roast* of James Franco, "Congrats to

all of us for being here tonight and being so mean to each other because it's tradition and we're all terrified."

Contradiction & the Problem of Ridicule

As pointed out in the previous chapter, Morreall observes that the incongruity theory is not only the "most popular current philosophical theory of humor" but also the one that, to some, "seems more promising than its two competitors, simply because it attempts to characterize the formal object of amusement. It tries to say just what something has to have in order for us to find it amusing" (*PLH* 6). Specifically, the incongruity theory "holds that the formal object of amusement is 'the incongruous'" which the previous chapter frames as a function of the contradiction that is always present when communication is attempted (6). This chapter will use the same thesis as a tool for recasting the disparagement theory.

It is held by many humor scholars that the superiority theory was developed first and that the incongruity theory grew out of, or was a reaction to, the superiority theory. For example, Billig suggests that, "Historically, the first of these theories is that of superiority, some of whose ideas can be traced back to ancient times" and that the incongruity theory was articulated as a direct response to Hobbes and his theory of superiority and "represented a gentlemanly reaction of taste and reason against Hobbes" (6). According to Billig, "Class, gender and the dreams of amiable reasonableness belong to the story" of the incongruity theory because "the issue of ridicule became a troubling one, foreshadowing modern theoretical dilemmas" (6). In other words, as Billig here frames it, the incongruity theory was a step towards reconsidering the superiority theory because of its uncomfortable implications. And yet, "However much the gentlemanly theorists kept trying to downgrade the importance of Hobbes's vision, back came

the problem of ridicule. Why do we have the faculty of ridicule and what purposes might it serve?" (6).

As outlined above, Plato and Aristotle certainly have some fairly explicit things to say about humor as a form of ridicule. For example, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that "The ridiculous," that which is, ostensibly, worthy of ridicule, "may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness" (1449ᵃ) and in book IV, chapter eight of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle asserts that "a joke is a kind of abuse (or mockery). There are some kinds of abuse which lawgivers forbid; perhaps they should have forbidden certain kinds of jokes." However, as a gesture towards there being something more to humor than mockery, Aristotle does attempt to differentiate between "vulgar buffoons" who "try to be funny at all costs," and "Those who joke in a tactful way." The aim of the former "is more to raise a laugh than to speak with propriety" or make an effort to "avoid giving pain to the butt of their jokes," while the latter "are called witty, which implies a quick versatility in their wits." Either way, both types point to "The ridiculous side of things" which "is always close at hand."

Unfortunately, the idea that Plato and Aristotle had little, if anything, to say about incongruity is so entrenched that some scholars, like Lisa Perks in "The Ancient Roots of Humor Theory," must expressly take on the task of showing otherwise. In this fashion, the previous chapter, by aligning incongruity with sophistic rhetorical theory that predates Plato and Aristotle, works implicitly to show that the roots of what is now known as the incongruity theory started growing first. Although the chronology of development and the order of discussion is less important than giving contradiction priority over both theories, having already discussed the relationship between incongruity and contradiction provides a context in which to address the concern of ridicule.

For example, it provides an answer to the question Elliott Oring asks in his *Engaging Humor,* "What is the chain of resemblances that binds incongruity and aggression in a concept of humor?" (11). Oring is asking this question in response to Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi's suggestion that because humor "cannot be defined in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient conditions and thus cannot be conceived in Aristotelian terms," one may, instead, turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of "*family resemblances*" as a more fitting way to theorize humor. For Ferro-Luzzi, a "concept of humor may be held together in the absence of any essential or constant feature that defines it. Just as the members of a family may be recognized on the basis of a number of resemblances rather than a single feature" (9).

Oring takes issue with her suggestion because, even after substituting this idea of family resemblances for "various humor theories…inadequate in accounting for humor," it still remains "difficult to find the connection between aggression and incongruity" (11). Contradiction can easily appear aggressive. This explains why jokes which are not outright insulting can still often feel aggressive. It is, perhaps, more difficult to explain disparagement in the context of contradiction than aggression. Simply put, this dissertation argues that contradiction is the "essential or constant feature that defines" humor, the common denominator between the two theories (Oring 9). Contradiction is the real source of amusement in jokes that appear to feature incongruity or disparagement. What this means for disparagement theories is very important. It provides a path out of the "troubling issue of ridicule" by arguing that the "funniness of a joke" does not depend on a particular quality of the disparagement, such as its viciousness or its degree of aggression, nor on "the identification of the recipient with the person (or group) that is being disparaging and with the victim of the disparagement," but rather, on how well, or to what extent, the disparagement works to help frame and strike a contradiction (Ruch 29). In other

words, as part of an effort to generate amusement, disparagement is subservient to the contradiction.

As an act of aggression, jokes readily overlap with the practice of praise and blame. As Kerferd points out, according to Eudoxus, "as an exercise" in the application of *dissoi logoi*, or counter argumentation, "Protagoras taught his pupils to praise and blame the same argument" (sometimes translated as "the same person") which was also linked to "The promise of Protagoras 'to make the weaker argument [logos] stronger'" (101). Bringing in contradiction, Wardy argues that unfortunately, "The bland reassurance that praise and blame must be apportioned to *deserving* subjects excludes the unnerving possibility that what makes something an exploitable topic for acclimation or denigration might be a matter to be decided by the orator, on the basis of whims and personal interest" (*BR* 30). This is "unnerving" because it draws attention to praise and blame as constructed moments rather than an occasion where an orator "discovers objective values in the world and faithfully matches his *logos* to them" (30).

That this leaves open the possibility of praise being part of a joke might moderate concern over ridicule's prominent role in humor. In other words, praise or approval could be just as much a part of joking as insults. For example, in *The Birth of Rhetoric*, Wardy suggest that Gorgias's best known work, the *Encomium of Helen*, can be taken as a joke. At the same time, it could be argued that the source of amusement (and contradiction) in adoration is often a simple irony, or mock praise, that can still be taken as a form of disparagement. However, this still does not necessarily mean that ridicule or insult is a kind of rhetorical anathema rather than a form of critique worthy of rhetorical analysis in its own right.

In *Toward a Rhetoric of Insult*, Conley attempts to examine all sorts of insults (not only as they constitute part of a joke) from a rhetorical perspective. He defines insult as an

"expression of a severely negative opinion of a person or group [given] in order to subvert their positive self-regard and esteem," that is usually seen as a "sign of fracture or fissures in social and political civility that give[s] rise to turmoil and conflict" (2). Despite the gravity of this definition, for Conley, expressing negative opinions can serve an important social function, fostering courtesy and good manners, by acting as "a powerful mode of truth-telling," that serves the vital function of deflating the ego and keeping self-regard in check (125). He concludes his study by suggesting that "If we see—if we'd care to notice—that insult is not simply a means of encouraging enmity and disdain, we'd be able to regard it as an interesting and important aspect of human relations as viewed from a rhetorical perspective, and not as a social or moral failing, as it is also commonly held to be" (125-6). The main take away of Conley's study is the suggestion that insult, as a form of critique, is not necessarily anathema to progressive culture.

Particular noteworthy is Conley's suggestion that "the fundamental condition for true civility to thrive is that people not take themselves too seriously" (124). This implies that having a sense of humor, or what can be understood as an appreciation of contrary but valid meanings, is vital for "true civility to thrive" (124). This implication takes center stage when Conley turns to explore "the intersections between jokes and insults" (68). For example, he cites this joke

> The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit planned, finally, to take a vacation, and were sitting around trying to decide where to go. "Mesopotamia," the Father volunteered. "It's a beautiful place, there between the Tigris and Euphrates. I haven't been there since I kicked Adam and Eve out of the Garden." "No, no," said the Son. "I think we should go to Bethlehem. I was too young to appreciate it when I left, and I'd like to see what it is like. After all, it is my place of birth."
>
> They both looked to the Holy Spirit.

"What do you say?" they asked in unison.

"Rome," the Holy Spirit replied. "I've never been there." (67)

Conley is interested in examining the insult in this joke as well as examining the "complicated matter" of "whether or not it is a good joke—indeed, just what the joke is" (68). He points out that "Clearly, in order to begin to get this joke, you need to be familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity in its conventional Father-Son-Holy Spirit form…It also helps to know where the Tigris and Euphrates are. There may be some readers who don't know these things, and so don't laugh" (67). It is "These things," namely, meanings that contradict each other, that make the joke a joke to begin with. In this case, it is knowing, as Conley mentions, a bit of theology (which not everyone will be familiar with) but also knowing how humans (as in non-Deities) interact with each other (which will be much more a matter of common knowledge).

Although the thesis of this chapter maintains that in order for an insult to qualify as a joke, it must somehow incorporate contradiction and that it is always contradiction that makes a joke a joke and never disparagement, which problematizes the insult as well as offers an explanation as to why, as Conley suggests, "Some insulting behavior is regarded as not serious, but entertaining," the fact remains that insults remain a vibrant aspect of such jokes (4). The result is often a Gordian knot of joke and insult that may appear resolvable but will often prove intractable. For example, in this case, the contradiction present is associated with what Conley identifies as a bit of "lighthearted anthropomorphism," established in "The joke's premise," which is "far from being theologically correct, as it posits not only the three persons of the godhead being in need of a vacation but disagreeing with one another" (68). This makes "The three persons of the Trinity seem more like Homeric gods than the God referred to in the Nicene

Creed" (68). It is probably not necessarily insulting to depict the Trinity as people, since that is what scripture does, and so there must be some departure in order for the story to be insulting.

In this case, the insult resides in what They happen to be doing as people and how They are doing it. In order to appreciate the insult one must understand that "the Catholic Church has long held itself and its pope to be inspired by the Holy Spirit, the ultimate source of the church's authority and the pope's infallibility" (68). In other words, if the Holy Spirit has never actually resided in Rome, then the Catholic Church, as an institution, is a sham. As Conley points out, "This is not a joke that could be characterized as pro-Roman Catholic or pro-pope…It is pretty clearly, a Protestant joke" (68). There is clearly an insult present in this joke. And where ever there is insult, there is always a genuine possibility of offense. Here, as Conley points out, the joke could insult a Catholic listener. A Protestant telling the joke to a devout Catholic may commit a "social gaffe", or a "faux pas…The Catholic might, indeed, find the joke insulting" (69).

There is a complex relationship between insults and jokes where, although always dependent on contradiction to be amusing, if the joke also includes an insult, it may appear that the joke is also dependent on the insult to be amusing. Conley approaches this tangle by considering different teller/listener possibilities

> If you are a devout Roman Catholic, you might think it not very funny and in rather bad taste if a Protestant, knowing that you are Catholic, told you this joke. On the other hand, if one Catholic told it to another Catholic, both might laugh, but more because of the incongruities in it—especially the incongruous Holy Spirit saying he'd never been to Rome. If a Catholic told it to a Protestant, the Protestant would laugh both because of the incongruities and because he never

100

thought the Holy Spirit had ever been in Rome. If a Protestant told it to another

Protestant, the joke would not only be funny, it would be an implicit way of

rejecting the authority of the Catholic Church. (68)

These four possibilities can be unpacked by hypothetically differentiating between the insult and

the joke thus: in the first scenario (Protestant to a Catholic), the insult is being focused on. In the

second (Catholic to another Catholic), the joke (what Conley refers to as the "incongruous Holy

Spirit") is being focused on. In the third (Catholic to a Protestant), the Catholic teller is focusing

on the joke while the Protestant listener is focused on both the insult and the joke. And finally, in

the fourth situation (Protestant to Protestant), the insult and the joke are both being focused on by

the teller and the listener. In other words, although in practice it will be very difficult if not

impossible to clearly delineate between joke and insult, the fallout of the collision between teller

and listener indicates the existence of both.

It is especially interesting to notice how, in the second and third set-ups, it is the joke that

is being focused on by players whose investment in the background information could lend them

to taking offense at the insult. Those three players had a "sense of contradiction" that allowed

them to consider the joke aside from the insult, what Conley refers to as the ability for "the

Catholic to transcend partisan theology and appreciate the joke for what it was intended to do

(get a laugh) and for the skill that went into its composition" (69). As Conley puts it, "Do you

have to agree with what the Holy Spirit says to think it funny?" (68). interestingly, if the answer

is "no" then such could be the case for a Catholic or a Protestant. In other words, just because a

Protestant is telling or laughing at this joke does not mean they are focusing on the insult either.

The problem with the hypothetical differentiation above is that it is not practical. In

many, if not most, disparaging jokes, the insult seems to be so inextricably tied to the joke that

one cannot imagine the joke without it. This remains troubling even if the insult is indeed

somehow "problematized" by contradiction. For example, in "What Jokes Can Tell Us about

Arguments," an earlier publication than *Toward a Rhetoric of Insults*, Conley explicates the

same joke but also takes the analysis a bit further by offering an altered version of the joke in

order to explore its argument

> Suppose we made up a counter-joke with the Father and Son saying just what they
>
> do in the version I told, but the Holy Spirit saying, "Well, I certainly hope we
>
> don't go to Rome because I've been there for almost 2,000 years." Not funny.
>
> Under any circumstances, I'd guess. Why not? Is there some "formal" reason that
>
> is independent of situations? (271)

Conley suggests that the modified joke fails because it violates "the arousal of expectations and

their fulfillment" (270) in that "The Father and the Son tell us where they want to go; the Holy

Spirit, in this version, where he does *not* want to go and never says where he does want to go,

leaving the hearer unsatisfied given the expectations aroused by the first two parts of the joke.

Under those circumstances, the last line falls flat" (271).

This is somewhat helpful but what seems more to the point is that the joke is no longer

funny because the insult has been removed. In other words, the Holy Spirit could give an answer

that violates expectations and yet is still amusing because it is also insulting such as if He said

that He does not want to go to Rome because it is "a tourist-trap," or "over-rated." Later in his

article Conley does suggest that the altered joke is not funny because it has lost its

"argumentative edge…By removing that edge, moreover, one ruins the joke" although he never

quite gets to the point of identifying the "argumentative edge" as an insult (271). Although this

suggests that some jokes are indeed dependent on insults to qualify as jokes, it is still the case

that any manner of insult in this joke is still dependent on contradiction to go from being a mere denouncement of Catholicism to being a joke which does the same.

So, what does all of this tell us? Simply put, theoretically, according to a spectrum of insult/joke, one may insult without joking and one may joke without insulting. Remarks which are predominantly insulting are usually not very funny. An insult must be extended from "My husband is ugly" to, as Moms Mabley did, in reference to the man her father forced her to marry at the age of 15, my husband is "so ugly he had to sneak up on a glass to get a drink of water" and "got a job at the doctor's office, standin' beside the door makin' people sick" (Tafoya 26). On the other hand, if one is "serious" about their intended insult, they must work to limit contradiction because it would admit some degree of doubt or ambiguity into the critique. As Haraway suggests about blasphemy, defamation has likewise "always seemed to require taking things very seriously" (291). In other words, insulting jokes are problematized disparagement.

Self-Disparagement & Ethos

Before we make love my husband takes a pain killer. – Joan Rivers

I refuse to join any club that would have me for a member. – Groucho Marx

You know you're old if they have discontinued your blood type. – Phyllis Diller

Walking on stage at a recent *Just for Laughs* event, Louis C. K. declared "Well first of all, this is kind of a weird situation, right? Why should you listen to me? I mean really, you don't know me. Why should you listen to anything I have to say?" As with any form of oratory, stand-up comedians must work to gain the attention and trust of an audience. In this example, Louis C. K. attempts to make a connection with his audience by drawing attention to the fact that he is

trying to make a connection with his audience. Why should an audience listen to any speaker? And how does a speaker go about gaining the attention and trust of the audience? Aristotle argued that creating a persuasive *ethos* through "the personal goodness," or character "revealed by the speaker…may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (1356ᵃ). In this section, the terms *character, ethos,* and *ethical proof* are used to refer to proofs that rely on community assessments of a comic's character or reputation.

Dave Attell begins a joke about casinos by confessing that he has a "serious gambling problem." Kevin Hart, on his album *I'm a Grown Little Man*, begins a series of jokes by announcing "I am a Liar. I lie all the time—Let me explain." And John Steinberg is fond of introducing himself by proclaiming "So... [Long pause so the audience has time to contemplate his appearance] as you can probably tell, I smoke a lot of pot." Although self-disparagement could be approached as an ethical proof based on humility, such an approach is problematized by the continual possibility that it is all made-up or at least exaggerated. Limon goes so far as to argue that "Comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial. (Are they themselves or acting? Are they in costume?)" (6). It is never known for sure because "They are neither acting nor conversing, neither in nor out of costume" (Limon 105).

Steinberg might never smoke marijuana, Hart might not have a proclivity for intentional deception, and Attell may have never seen the inside of a casino. In a recent local stand-up appearance, comedian Kyle Radke related his response to a concerned audience member who came up to him after an earlier show in order to offer some advice about the personal problems he expressed on stage, "You know I make most of this stuff up, right?" Jim Gaffigan markets himself as a comedian who is over-weight, out of shape, and entangled in a messy love/hate relationship with fast-food. Lately, he appears to be slimming down. Self-disparagement is the

embodiment of a contradiction where ethical appeal is built on the basis of the deplorable. This draws attention to the constructed nature of traditional high-moral-ground driven *ethos* at the same time that it strives to achieve unexpected credibility. After all, why would anyone *pretend* to be a liar, a pot-smoker, or to have a gambling problem?

Approached as examples of jokes that are insulting, self-disparagement provides comedians with a "safe" target for jokes that perhaps emphasize insult more than they do contradiction. Additionally, self-disparagement, rarely the main joke, is usually the prelude to a string of other jokes. This suggests that self-disparagement is, in the end, still being situated as a type of *ethical proof*. This creates a kind of reverberating contradiction (similar to Louis C.K.'s increasingly emphatic insistence that he is being serious in order to emphasize that he is telling jokes) where comics come up with more and more outlandish admissions and self-denouncements in order to make an ethical connection with their audiences. In other words, self-disparagement, considered as a highly constructed and outlandish form of ethical appeal, draws attention to the situated and contingent nature of *character*.

Put another way, this section addresses the last item on Kerferd's list of "problems formulated and discussed by the sophists in their teaching," that are have stayed relevant into modernity, namely "The shattering implications of the doctrine that virtue can be taught" which Kerferd describes as "only a way of expressing in language no longer fashionable what we mean if we say that people in their proper position in society can be changed by education" (2). For Kerferd, "This in turn raises in acute form the question what is to be taught, and by whom it is to be taught" (2). That is to say, if virtue can be taught then it is an assembled rhetorical situation in which self-disparagement proves amusing because it simultaneously mocks and demonstrates ethical persuasion.

Traditionally, persuasive *ethos* is accomplished by convincing an audience that the speaker is a model citizen that should be listened to. For example, Isocrates "preached that the whole man must be brought to bear in the persuasive process, and so it behooved the aspiring orator to be broadly trained in the liberal arts and securely grounded in good moral habits" (Corbett 597). Isocrates' view of *ethos* sums up the traditional view of high moral character-driven persuasion

> The man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honorable name among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man's life is more weight than that which is furnished by words? (*Antidosis,* 278)

Creating a persuasive *ethos* according to this view is a pain-staking labor, a type of "life-style evangelism" where the pressure is on the speaker to live out a particular kind of lifestyle since one's persuasive ability is directly dependent on their personal moral strength. In other words, when Aristotle observes that "It is a hard task to be good," it should not be overlooked that his *Nicomachean Ethics* is framing "being good" as a *task* or a construction (1109[a]).

Isocrates' view was later echoed by Quintilian. He founded and ran schools aimed at cultivating citizens of high moral virtue for the express purpose of growing speakers with the kind of moral compass and judgment that takes years to cultivate but would command respect and attention from an audience. Both Isocrates and Quintilian taught a direct relationship between moral character and ethical appeal which assumed high moral character was genuine and the position desired and sought after. Theoretically, then, people of low or unsavory

character should command very little persuasive influence over an audience. However, all of this rigor might obscure the fact that, even if taking decades to erect, such high moral standing is still being erected. This, in addition to the fact that the methods used for assessing character are constructed as well, implies that there are other options.

Aristotle's well-known definition of rhetoric, "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," allows room for pragmatic application (1355[b]). Likewise, his view of *ethos*, although focused on the idea that "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others," hints at a more practical reliance on appearances where "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us *think* him credible" which "should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of this character before he begins to speak" (1356[a]). As Hyde observes, this is Aristotle outlining an understanding of *ethos* as a construction by directing "our attention away from an understanding of *ethos* as a person's well-lived existence and toward an understanding of *ethos* as an artistic accomplishment" (xvi).

In his introduction to *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, Michael J. Hyde teaches a pragmatic view by arguing that "*ethos* takes form as a result of the orator's abilities to argue and to deliberate" such that "The practice of rhetoric constitutes an active construction of character" and that this is ultimately how an orator will "inspire trust in an audience" (xvi). For both Hyde and Eugene Garver, (whom he here cites),

> The *ethos* which the audience trusts...is the artificial [artistic or 'artful'] *ethos* identified with argument. It is not some real *ethos* the speaker may or may not possess. It is an *ethos* not necessarily tied to past experience of the speaker, not an

ethos acquired through performing similar actions in the past…but *ethos* as exercised in some particular argument. (xvi)

As a manifestation of contradiction, a stand-up comedian might attempt to inspire trust from an audience by convincing them that they are untrustworthy, deplorable, or, in some other manner, of low character.

John Limon, in *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, attempts to grasp the contradiction of self-disparagement by studying stand-up comedy as a means of broadcasting abjection. He argues that "What is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection" (4). For Limon, "The fascination of stand-up...has everything to do with its essential abjectness… A theory of stand-up is a theory of what to do with your abjection" (8). Where Limon defines abjection as "abasement, groveling prostration," a stand-up comedy stage hosts contradiction by standing up what is typically prostrate (4).

For example, Limon sees Ellen DeGeneres playing dumb and Paula Poundstone playing at being big and inert. He observes that, "Even a woman as publicly smart as Ellen DeGeneres will take up dumbness as a posture, represented as the incapacity for remembering her point" (108). He also observes how Poundstone denigrates "herself to pure mass" by suggesting to her audience that she has an unusually large physical frame

> What to do with her body is one theme of her HBO performance at Harvard, and part of its form as well. A running distraction is whether she will decide to get behind her stool—her only prop—or in front of it. In a bit about finding herself on a one-passenger flight, Poundstone claims that the crew asked her to move for ballast. (108)

For Limon, comics present abjection through what Norman O. Brown calls "excremental vision...a heroic willingness to look at the world's waste without flinching" since "of course everyone must acknowledge the world's waste in some way, but all the difference is in what you do with your knowledge" (Limon 89). The comic 'stands up' this knowledge by taking what is often prostrate and hidden and putting it on display center stage since "whenever abjectness is proudly performed, it is comic. It is comic because it should be prone but it is upright" (79). And the incongruity resonates.

However, Limon's attempt to make abjection the unifying principle of all stand-up comedy falls short because there are other forms of contradiction that have nothing to do with abjection. For example, in the context of *ethos*, it is just too easy to name comedians, such as Denis Leary, Daniel Tosh, and Louis Black for example, of whom it could never reasonably be said that abjection is a predominant theme of their comedy routines or on-stage personas. On the contrary, these comics perform a type of aggressive and caustic derision. In the case of Leary and Black, for example, they connect with an audience by yelling at them. The point is that contradiction, rather than abjection, is the unifying principle.

Offensive Humor

I don't want to offend anyone—I want to offend everyone. – Bob Saget

Offensiveness is well associated with humor. In fact, the impression that even the most benign or well-intentioned joke carries a risk of offense can itself be the butt of the joke. For example, in an episode of *Mr. D*, grade school teacher Simon Hunt, visibly upset upon arriving at work, discusses, with vice principle Cheeley, the very recent revelation of his Jewish heritage, "I'm Jewish now…Turns out my dad was Jewish and my mom converted before she had me

so…goodbye bacon, shrimp, and cheese omelets every Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday. Hello…what do Jewish people eat?" Mr. Cheeley answers, "Bagels." And then asks Simon if he would like to hear a joke, "Yes!" "Why are seagulls called seagulls? Because if they flew over the bay, they'd be bay-gulls." To which Simon quickly responds, in deadpan, "That's offensive."

In a discussion about "Bad taste in language," Aristotle brings up the "The sophist Bryson" whose "fallacious argument" asserts that "There is no such thing as foul language" (1405^b). According to Aristotle, Bryson felt his claim was justified "because in whatever words you put a given thing your meaning is the same" which Aristotle states is patently "untrue" (1405^b). Although Bryson was likely referring to the notion that language can be judged as *inherently* foul, Aristotle responds by bringing up the issue of taste, "Two different words will represent a thing in two different lights" either one of which may be "held fairer or fouler" than the other (1405^b). For Aristotle, "The materials" of language "must be beautiful to the ear, to the understanding, to the eye or some other physical sense" (1405^b). Although taste certainly plays a role in communication and there are various ways of judging taste, such categorization is a subjective and contingent project that also, importantly, imbues with power that which it castigates as foul or taboo.

Among forms of discourse carrying a risk of being offensive, stand-up comedy enjoys a particular reputation for foul language, risqué subject matter, and shocking imagery. Curiously, stand-up comedians seemingly embrace the opportunity to be repellant or at least make their audiences feel uncomfortable. Stand-up comedians such as Anthony Jeselnik, Jimmy Carr, and Patrice O'Neal discuss so many incendiary topics in provocative ways that it may seem they are on stage for the sole purpose of offending their audiences. This is a delicate issue and this section

seeks to briefly tread, respectfully but also confidently, through two particular kinds of offensive humor, racist joking and joking about the taboo.

Certainly there is overlap between these two somewhat artificial categories, other forms of these categories, as well as many other categories of offensive humor such as sexist jokes, 'sick' jokes, and 'dick' jokes. However, rather than differentiation and definition, the goal of this section is to take these two categories and provide an examination that will be widely applicable. Racist jokes will be approached by differentiating between racist statements and racist jokes. Amusement and offense will then be considered as responses which are much more closely related than it might at first seem. I argue that the similarity between amusement and offense problematizes stark divisions between apologetic and critical responses to racist humor and also provides one of the clearest illustrations of how contradiction is not only a source of amusement but also a source of consternation and, perhaps, even dread. Jokes about taboo subjects will be approached by focusing on the contingent rhetorical power of the taboo—the power of that which has been declared off limits.

In chapter one it was observed that "When you offer your joke," to an audience "you solicit their knowledge… and they find themselves contributing the background that will make the joke work" (Cohen 40). The word "background" here can be misleading since the information supplied by the audience could very much be foreground information, or some piece of information very much central to the joke. What is most important is the idea that what makes "good jokes" possible is "concision" and what "makes this concision possible…is that so much can go unsaid. And why can it go unsaid? *Because the audience already knows it*" (Cohen 25 his emphasis).

Cohen suggests that this background information could be false and yet offer "genuine truths" about how a thing is "thought of" (80). For example, here is a joke which clearly contains an insult, relies on missing information that must be filled in, but which could not be called a racist joke:

> You find yourself trapped in a locked room with a murderer, a rapist, and a lawyer. Your only hope is a revolver you have, with two bullets left. What do you do?
>
> Shoot the lawyer. Twice. (Cohen 74)

In this case, the background information, or genuine truth, is that perceptions exist about lawyers as somehow more dangerous than a murderer or a rapist. However, you do not need to hold that as a belief in order to get the joke and laugh. All you need to understand is that such is an existing perception of lawyers. Is it possible that someone might be offended by this joke? Absolutely. Imagine a lawyer who has spent years fighting against this perception. She might not find the joke funny at all. In fact, she might be so tired of fighting against this particular 'truth' that she is offended to hear it. That is her right. And no one can tell her otherwise. Alternatively, one could also imagine her hearing this joke (perhaps from a family member or close friend) and laughing greatly, almost as a type of catharsis, perhaps, and finding relief from her struggles. In other words, there is a sense of mystery and wonder about the fact that we can have such diametrically opposed reactions to the same thing. Notably, that hearing jokes from particular people may disarm them (or somehow allow them to be laughed at instead of otherwise) draws attention to the importance of the relationship between speaker and listener that was introduced above in connection to a joke about the Catholic Church.

In the case of racist jokes, the missing piece of information, the piece of information which the listener is required to provide in order to get the joke, is a racist attitude, opinion, or view. This is very different from a racist statement—in a racist joke, the key piece of racism has been left out. For example, Cohen offers this as a racist joke:

> How did a passerby stop a group of black men from committing a gang rape?
>
> He threw them a basketball. (77)

Much like the stereotype that lawyers are more dangerous than murderers and rapists, this joke is missing a key piece of information in circulation about black men. In this case, it is the racist stereotype that black men are "sexually violent" criminals who are also "mindlessly committed to playing basketball" (Cohen 78). Cohen argues that the joke above works "only because of some genuine truths—not truths about black men, but truths about how black men are thought of" (80).

Is this joke offensive? Yes. Absolutely. In fact, not only is it entirely appropriate to be offended by this joke, it could be suggested that this joke should at least *bother* everyone. However, it is important to note that the joke is offensive precisely because the crucial piece of missing information is 'true' in the sense Cohen puts forth, "I know all that, that these things are associations that go with young black men, and it is only because I know all that that I am able to respond to the joke" (81). Here is different example to consider. On stage, Paul Mooney declares:

> I have figured out the solution to racism –
>
> Kill all the white people.

Again, by leaving out a key piece of information that the listener is required to supply and which is 'true' in some cultural/perceptual sense, this joke functions in much the same way as the

basketball joke. In this case it is the opinion that all white people are intractably racist and there is no solution to racism.

An important difference between these two jokes is that, while the first is clearly racist, the second is largely *about* racism. The marked difference points to the positions of power and privilege which not only facilitate and generate racist jokes, but then use those jokes to perpetuate those positions of power and privilege. This is, in fact, the missing information at the heart of the joke—the idea that *whiteness* is inescapable—that Mooney is calling up. Contradictorily, although this pressing piece of information is at the heart of the joke, and something which Mooney, presumably, wants his listeners to know, and know that they know, it is left out of the joke. In other words, one may fairly speculate that he will be equally pleased to have his listeners laugh or take offense at it. Either way, it is being able to respond to the joke at all which is important because it acknowledges an understanding of the missing information.

If the missing piece of racism in a racist joke were not true in the sense discussed above, then there would be nothing to take offense at because that piece of information could not be found in circulation. For example, as a test, imagine a racist joke about Martians: "Two Martians went into a bar and…" or something to that effect, where the punchline requires knowledge of a stereotype about people from Mars. Not offensive. Why? Because there is no 'truth' to it in the sense of what people might know is *thought* about Martians even if they do not, themselves, profess to actually *believe* to be true about Martians.

Although this hypothetical joke about Martians could be turned into a kind of meta-joke about racist jokes, it is probably not very funny either. This brings up the question, are the above racist jokes amusing? Could they possibly be found to be amusing by anyone? Does the fact that they are offensive in some way require or demand that they never be found amusing? Are the

two responses mutually exclusive? To begin answering these questions, it is important to suggest that when one person takes offense at a racist joke and another person finds it amusing, they are both going through a very similar cognitive process by 'filling in a blank' with the same piece of missing racist information. In other words, in a very important way, both laughing at a racist joke and taking offense at it result when something very similar has taken place in terms of organizing and processing perceptions, opinions, and beliefs. I would like to suggest that this similarity justifies a congruent examination that may begin by giving both responses equal footing.

The next thing to consider, the most important question surrounding debates about offensive humor, is the nature of laughter. There is surely a great deal of consensus that to find something offensive is to have feelings of resentful displeasure. But what does it mean to find something amusing? What does laughter mean or indicate? Is it approval? A sign of belief? Approval of what? Belief in what? What would it mean to laugh at the jokes above? Would such laughter indicate unequivocal approval of the racist opinion that was used to fill in and make sense of the joke?

Laughter *could* indicate a kind of approval (the kind of laughter that this chapter disclaims to be about) but it could also indicate other things as well and, most importantly, it is entirely impossible to ever prove what a particular outburst of laughter means precisely or entirely. In fact, laughter could indicate multiple and contradictory things at once. The reason this is so, the reason laughter can be so ponderous and unruly, is because it is intimately tied up with contradiction. More specifically, as is the thesis of the inter-chapter that follows, laughter indicates that a contradiction has been perceived and appreciated. And contradiction (as is the thesis of the previous chapter) is defined as "the tension of holding incompatible things together

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because both or all are necessary and true" (Haraway 291). In the case of laughing at a racist joke, what might be some the contradictions, or tension, at play? Here are a couple suggestions.

Cohen makes the point that the missing information in jokes is not just solicited, but actually elicited, "in fact, virtually against their will…they are urged to supply it, virtually compelled to supply it automatically, without even considering whether they would like to be thus pulled in" (27). When the piece of information left out is racist, the listener finds herself in a kind of trap. To not 'get' the joke (either genuinely or intentionally) is to appear ignorant but to get the joke is to admit *understanding* a racist attitude, opinion, or view. In other words, both amusement and offense implicate something very important about the listener. In other words, racist jokes trap the listener in a dilemma where the options are to appear ignorant, morally suspect, or humorless. Although being backed into such a corner could surely contribute to feelings of resentful displeasure, finding one's self in such a pickle could prompt a kind of laughter that would not necessarily be morally questionable.

Here is another possibility. By framing amusement and offense as appropriate responses to a joke, I am suggesting that they might, perhaps, be two sides of the same coin. As Simon Weaver suggests, "Humour can be, paradoxically, both serious and humorous, and often its seriousness is what people find most funny" (8). If the "seriousness" of a racist joke is, at the same time, the source of its offensiveness and its amusement, then it stands to reason that one could both laugh and be offended at the same time. 'Getting' a racist joke could set up a contradiction between what we believe, or actually hold to be true, and the racist attitude, opinion, or view required and accessed in order to get the joke.

If such is the case, then here is the rub. Despite our higher intentions and beliefs, the joke might reveal, to ourselves, that the division between what we profess to believe, and a

contradictory attitude we admit to *knowing of*, might not be so clear cut. For example, Cohen admits that the basketball joke both amuses him and deeply bothers him, "Do I, perhaps, dislike it in myself that I know these things? And do I then dislike my own laughter at the joke? Is the joke…forcing me to acknowledge something I don't care for in myself?" (81). The tension between an inclination to laugh and a nervous apprehension as to why we are inclined to laugh, could set up a contradiction that fuels amusement—as well as possibly generate resentful displeasure. If such is indeed the case, it implies that taking offense does not necessarily absolve one from charges or suspicions of racism. Racist jokes not only force us to acknowledge that we have access to a racist opinion, they may force us, or our observers, to question just where that information was located to begin with.

Because so much is at stake, taking offense at a racist joke, in most cases and situations, is the prudent option. After all, how often is one accused of being morally suspect for feeling offended? However, if amusement and offense are indeed closely related in the way outlined above, then it is a kind of hypocritical gesture to take one's resentful displeasure and judge someone else's laughter as morally objectionable. Laughter could very well be morally objectionable, but how are we to ever know for sure? Or to what extant? At the same time, the most well-mannered response might be to feign ignorance, to pretend not to get the joke, even if such is not the case. After all, such would indicate true progress, when a racist joke, like the hypothetical joke above about Martians, no longer makes no sense to anyone, such that no one is, or can be, either amused or offended.

This implies that arguing that a joke is offensive or not offensive is as misguided as arguing that a joke is funny or not funny. Everyone has the right to consider any joke offensive (many will likely agree with this). However, and this is the difficult part, might it then also be the

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case that everyone also has the right to consider a joke amusing? Perhaps they should not laugh, or laugh in certain company, or on certain occasions, but it is certainly their right to find it amusing. By the same token, although everyone has a right to take offense, perhaps there are times and places where disapproval should not be put on display either.

Again, with so much at stake, and with whole volumes devoted to arguing that "racist humour is a form of racist rhetoric that supports serious racism" by "reinforcing racist ideology" and rhetorically supporting "racist truth claims," the question is begged, why bother with racist jokes at all? (Weaver 8). An attempt to answer this question would require a further drift into Moral Theory not appropriate here. However, for those inclined to tackle such a question, I would like to offer four things that would need to be taken into consideration while doing so. First, it would need to be considered to what extent jokes *teach* the missing information. Joke tellers are notoriously unenthusiastic about explaining their jokes. As Cohen ponders, if an audience is ill-equipped to receive a joke, "Why can't the joke-teller simply inform his audience in advance, tell them whatever they need to know in order to get his joke?" (24). The problem is that, "so encumbered, the joke seems labored, and even contrived" and "good jokes" must strive for "concision" (Cohen 25).

Second, although jokes will certainly on occasion teach, when they do teach, the difference would need to be taken into account between learning *about* a thing and inculcating or instilling belief. Third, if the conclusion were reached that all racist jokes should be banned, where would the line be drawn between jokes which are clearly racist and jokes which in some way reference racism? And finally, it would need to be taken into account that there are many racisms. Racist jokes cut in many different directions. If racist jokes were to be banned, everyone would need to lay down their jokes. It must also be noted that this discussion has focused on a

fairly straight forward and definable example of racist joking taking the form of a simple set-up and punchline format. More common than punchline jokes are complicated negotiations of race and racisms that would be much more difficult to govern than a straight forward racist joke. And such discussions are ensured to continue because obtuse racist attitudes and opinions continue to thrive in our society, even if below the surface.

For example, taking up the inescapability of *whiteness* at the heart of Mooney's joke, Patrice O'Neal, in his comedy special, *Elephant in the Room*, suggests that, paradoxically, although there might be less overt racism present today, the racism we are left with is worse precisely because it is concealed. As a result, right now, "black people don't like white people" because racists are harder to identify, and "white people don't like black people" because they resent hiding their racism, "White people used to be able to walk around and go 'I don't like niggers! I'm gonna hang one of you motherfuckers.'" Now, even though "We all agree there's racism," there are apparently no racists to be found anywhere, "Have you ever met a racist? I haven't!" Instead, O'Neal just often finds himself wondering "Is this motherfucker being racist? I don't know!"

Although discussing issues of race in certain places, or in certain ways, can certainly be taboo, what is taboo is not necessarily racist. However, although taboo subject matter can be discussed in ways that are not offensive, part of what it means to be taboo is to be easily offensive. There is a kind of Catch-22 involved in designating words or subject matters as off limits. It inevitably lends them contingent rhetorical power. The taboo is inevitably affective. Jokes employing that power embody the contradiction of the taboo.

In *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas offers a cross-cultural examination of uncleanliness and systematic rituals for cleansing

that frame "dirty" as a metaphor for such contingent power. She examines the idea of dirt as "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (35). Those elements, she explains, may be much more than physical matter, but any segregated part of a social system such that "Where there is dirt there is a system" (36). As soon as specific words, manners of speech, or lines of reasoning are deemed unacceptable, they acquire a power that might be irresistible to those aiming to provoke.

For example, Jimmy Carr seems to have very few jokes that do not reference a taboo, or outright offensive, subject. Using ambiguity to set up his audience, he states that is was tremendously "challenging" having a blind girlfriend. He the pauses long enough for his audience to make an assumption about how he is using the word "challenging," (as an understatement for struggling with a serious and difficult situation), and then explains that it was challenging "Because it was really hard getting my voice to sound just like her husband's." He repeatedly uses this pattern of ambiguity plus taboo subject matter equals joke to lead listeners down one path and then unexpectedly turn them down another. He relates how, when he was younger, he "couldn't talk to women" and then pauses in order to allow the audience to assume he is referring to something akin to adolescent nervousness. Then he explains that it was "because I was hiding in their wardrobes…masturbating. I would have totally given myself away." Or, similarly, he says he was surprised to read "Keep away from children" on a bottle of Viagra, "What kind of a man do they think I am?"

Certainly, part of what allows these remarks to function as jokes is the ambiguity, or contradiction, present in the key words or phrases such as "challenging" in a way reminiscent of Aristotle's complaint that "Words of ambiguous meaning are chiefly useful to enable the sophist to mislead his hearers." However, although it may seem like Carr is, in some sense, exploiting

taboo subject matter in order to add titillation to his jokes, it is also the case that the titillation is provided by tapping into the contradictory power of the taboo. At the same time, jokes such as these are troubling and easily offensive because, just as in the case of insults, no matter how much they rely on contradiction in order to amuse, they are still about exploiting disability, stalking, and pedophilia. In other words, as a branded condition within a system, "dirty" is, by definition, full of dirt. And just as in the case of insults, for many, this type of joking will ultimately prove unacceptable. There is, after all, a "clean" alternative in the form of comics like Jim Gaffigan and Brian Regan who market themselves as family friendly and find wide audiences.

Although this suggests that the inclusion of offensive words and topics is merely an optional and pragmatic effort to add titillation to jokes like Carr's, which may appear to be of little value, his jokes do consistently draw attention to the assumptions made about what words mean, assumptions that often go unnoticed. For some, such a suggestion will do little to increase their value especially since other comics use the taboo to at least try and make a point. For example, Stephen Colbert, as the satiric host of *The Colbert Report*, recently tweeted: "I am willing to show (#Asian Community) I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever." Clearly relishing the backlash, Colbert responded, "Who would have thought a means of communication limited to 140 characters would ever create misunderstandings?" Once it is understood that Colbert is a moderate liberal posing as a narrow conservative in order to criticize conservativism, one is left wondering if the backlash in question came from duped liberals incensed by Colbert's racial insensitivity or on-the-ball conservatives annoyed by being portrayed as ignorant racists. Either way, Colbert's use of a taboo racial slur is surrounded by two layers of contradiction since, firstly, his tweet

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announcing "sensitivity" is obviously insensitive and, secondly, Colbert himself is spoofing a character meant to be criticized as insensitive.

Still other comedians use the power of the taboo to confront the source of that power as well as test how it is navigated in different ways by people in different positions of power and privilege. In *Chewed Up*, Louis C.K. laments that there are some words that he can no longer use as he once did, "No words are bad but some people start using them a lot to hurt other people and then they become bad and they become hard to use. There are words that I love that I can't use because other people use them wrong—to hurt other people." For example, concerning the word "faggot" he explains,

> I miss that word, you know, I grew up saying that word and it never meant gay…
> You called someone a faggot because they were being a faggot, you know? Like,
> I would ever call a gay guy a faggot, unless he was being a faggot, but not
> because he's gay, you understand? [But only if he] started acting all faggy and
> saying annoying faggy things like, "you know, people from Phoenix are
> Phoenicians," or something like that I'd be like "Hey, shut up faggot!"

He goes on with a similar pseudoetymological lament about some other words and then explains that, considering their current connotations, he would never use them as insults.

Finally, he confesses that certain words offend him as well, "For me, I think the thing that offends me the most is every time I hear the n word—not 'nigger' by the way, I mean 'the n word' literally. Whenever a white lady with nice hair on CNN says 'the n word,' it's just white people getting away with saying 'nigger.'" The punchline comes when Louis, after working himself up over what he perceives to be an inexcusable synecdoche, turns on his audience by inveighing against the "white lady with nice hair on CNN" by using, as insults, all the words

previously discussed, "It's bullshit because when you say, 'the n word' you put the word 'nigger' in the listener's head…You say 'the n word' and I go, 'oh, she means "nigger."'" — You're making *me* say it in *my* head. Why don't *you* fucking say it instead and take responsibility for the shitty words you want to say. Just say it. Don't hide behind the first letter like a faggot."

During most of the bit, Louis works within one proposition as he questions the processes by which certain words become off-limits and then, unexpectedly, he switches to an opposing proposition by using those words in the disparaging sense he has been speaking against. Essentially advocating for both sides of a debate by embodying two contradictory propositions, he expresses a desire to reclaim some words that are not "bad" but have just been invested with particular meanings, and then demonstrates how deeply engrained and irresistibly invested they are with "bad" meaning by surrendering to such usage. Although this may give listeners more to chew on than a relatively simple joke from Carr, it may also implicate listeners as they, perhaps, register their own desire to reclaim or use certain words based on their own positions of power and privilege, and then must register their own inclination to laugh at the bit's punchline. This means that this bit could, perhaps, actually prove more offensive than a joke about the instructions on a bottle of Viagra. Although, just as was the case above as it concerned racist jokes, this would not preclude the bit from being amusing but could actually go hand-in-hand with its capacity to amuse.

Notions of spectrums could be used here to illustrate how some of the factors at play actually work against each other or in counterintuitive ways. For example, a taboo subject could be moved along a spectrum of varying amounts of contradiction, or, alternatively, taboo subject matters of varying degrees of offensiveness could be treated with similar amounts of contradiction. That the results will be unpredictable illustrates just how difficult it is to chart a

form of discourse like humor which is entirely dependent on contradiction for its effects. For example, at the end of one of his shows, Carr put on an encore by challenging his audience to a contest of "how much offense can you take," in which he slowly increases the level of offensiveness to see where, based on reactions from the audience, they will draw the line, "I often get asked after a show, 'what is the most offensive joke, what's the worst joke?'…I can't tell you what the most offensive joke is—but we could see—we could start gentle and work our way up and see at what stage, as an audience, you go, 'Aw, for fuck's sake!' Do you want to give it a go?"

Carr then proceeds through a few jokes that apparently offend few. His announcement of a contest seems to have taken some of the guile out of the barbs. A bit taken aback by the audience's overall approval, he declares that it is time "to take out the big guns" and moves on to a joke about Hitler and Pol Pot that is met with overall approval. A bit astonished, he declares, "If you're not even a little bit offended by that then you haven't really understood it." He then moves on to his final joke, what, in his mind, "should be the most offensive joke, not just in the show but in the world, ever," a joke about the Holocaust. When it is applauded he can only exclaim, "Really London? Really? A round of applause? …That's a joke about the worst thing that has ever happened, the Holocaust, six million lives taken by an industrialized killing machine, the Nazis. That's the worst thing in human history and it's a joke about that." Although he must admit that "it's in bad taste," he does suggest that "It's not really that offensive a joke, is it? It's not anti-Semitic; it's not racist; it doesn't hate anyone" but rather, it is "just a simple piece of word-play. It is a little turn on a common phrase. The joke isn't about what the joke is about, if you follow me, it's about the word-play."

Conclusion

In opposition to theories which suggest that disparagement is somehow inherently amusing, this chapter argues that disparagement, by itself, is not amusing. Contradiction transforms insults into insulting jokes. Self-disparagement, directing insults at one's self, has been approached as embodying contradiction in the sense that it is apparently counterproductive for making an ethical connection with an audience. Racist jokes and joking about taboo subjects, as forms of offensive humor, have also been approached as types of embodied contradiction in the sense that it seems counterintuitive to offend those whom one wishes to persuade. Taking the main arguments of the previous chapter into account, jokes may now be defined as a kind of accumulated contradiction that may also happen to surprise, insult, or offend a listener. The topic of the inter-chapter that follows is what happens when that listener, in addition to possibly being surprised, insulted, or offended, is also amused.

Inter-Chapter: The Importance of Laughter

> *Listen, you all clapped for dead kids with the nuts. For kids dying from nuts, you applauded. So you're in this with me now. You understand? You don't get to cherry pick. Those kids did nothing to you. – Louis C. K.*

> *When we laugh at the same thing, that is a very special occasion. It is already noteworthy that we laugh at all, at anything, and that we laugh all alone. That we do it together is the satisfaction of a deep human longing, the realization of a desperate hope. – Ted Cohen*

Recalling a bit by Lenny Bruce that was, on one occasion, followed by seventeen seconds of unanimous laughter, John Limon, in order to put this response in perspective, asks his readers to consider that "two seconds of laughter is respectable; four seconds greets the best joke of a standard *Tonight Show* monologue [but] to get a laugh up to six seconds—an extraordinary occasion—you generally need two distinct waves of laughter" (16). Responsible for this outburst was a joke from Bruce in the form of a warning that he was going to urinate on his audience. Limon goes on to relate how, when Bruce tried the same bit in Australia, "The audience could not see how to take the threat as a joke," and was subsequently "scandalized" such that "In Australia, at any rate, it was no joke" (15). Limon argues that, in the context of his Australian audience, "Bruce's joke is not bombing so much as not becoming a joke in the first place" (15). In other words, an audience's reaction to stand-up comedy is always an integral and rhetorical part of the performance. On this particular occasion in Australia, the audience was not amused.

The importance of laughter to stand-up comedy cannot be overstated. It is the chief aim, the undisputed goal, "the single end of stand-up" (Limon 12). Laughter can be commended or condemned, but there is no refuting it. There is an "unfalsifiability" to it such that, "Laughter has a strange intimacy with pain…laughter, like pain, is incorrigible: pain is the thing about which I cannot be wrong" (Limon 104-5). For Limon, "If you think something is funny, it is. You may

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be (collectively) puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it" (11).

Laughter holds tyrannical rule over stand-up comedy. It is the ultimate "test for and of jokes," that acts as a continuous check, or governor, on a comedian's speech (Galligan 3). This blisteringly unforgiving and automatic feedback gives comedians a gauge by which to develop their craft. Limon go so far as to assert that, by laughing, an audience turns a comic's "jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it" (13). In this way, to not laugh can be understood as just as important as laughing, "Stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value because joking is, essentially, a social phenomenon (no audience, no joke) …The particularities of the relationship of joke teller and audience do not make the joke seem more or less funny; they make the joke more or less funny" (Limon 12). This is why, as Limon goes on to suggest, "Comedians might, above all other artists and entertainers, hate their audiences…because they are not, as performers, entirely distinct from them. Audiences turn their jokes into jokes" (13).

If laughter is evidence of stand-up's success or failure, then the central question of this chapter is, success or failure at doing what? Simply put, this chapter argues that when an audience laughs they are registering the perception and appreciation of a contradiction, they are granting a comedian's presentation of *this* but also, simultaneously *that*. As Cohen puts it, laughing at "something not fully comprehensible" indicates "an acceptance of the thing in its incomprehensibility" (60), or even more to the point, it indicates "an acceptance of incomprehensibility" (50). In other words, what Wardy refers to as "the Gorgianic programme of pleasurable confusion" is a state in which contradictory meanings concurrently appear viable (*BR* 29).

The Release/Relief branch of Humor Studies mostly examines laughter as a biological process. As Morreall explains, "There are different versions of this theory, but they all have in common a more or less physiological point of view in which laughter is seen as a venting of nervous energy" (*TLS* 20). For the most part, the relief theory addresses only two main questions: "Why does laughter take the physical form it does, and what is its biological function?" (20). For example, relief theories offer definitions of laughter as a "combination of bodily events, including the spasmodic expulsion of air from the lungs, accompanying sounds, characteristic facial distortions, and in heavy laughter the shaking of the whole body" (Morreall, *PLH* 4). Physical and sensorial approaches to laughter can be traced back at least as far as Descartes who, in *The Passions of the Soul*, offers a similar but more detailed physical description

> Laughter consists in the fact that the blood, which proceeds from the right orifice in the heart by the arterial vein, inflating the lungs suddenly and repeatedly, causes the air which they contain to pass out from them with the impetus of the windpipe, where it forms an inarticulate and explosive utterance; and the lungs in expanding equally with the air as it rushes out, set in motion all the muscles of the diaphragm from the chest to the neck, by which means they cause motion in the facial muscles, which have a certain connection with them. And it is just this action of the face with this inarticulate and explosive voice that we call laughter. (Article 124)

Although laughter is certainly a physical process for which there are biological explanations, this chapter allows space for a certain sense of mystery concerning laughter's physiological nature. After all, something similar could be said about many forms of "body language" through which a

listener responds to speech, or even the act of speaking itself. The point is that the rhetorical significance of the act, what most release theories ignore, is the focus of this chapter.

Explicated as a rhetorical act, "Any attempt to proceed toward understanding by cataloging and classifying the varieties of laughter is bound to fail; the varieties and their gradations are inexhaustible" (Galligan 4). More significant than the fact that not everyone laughs the same way is the fact that "there is no such thing as a universally funny joke" (Galligan 11). To begin with, as a form of bodily response to discourse, this chapter challenges the view of laughter as a problem that needs to be solved by arguing that it is primarily a sign of successful persuasion. Laughter is defined as any visceral or audible reaction from the audience that indicates a state of pleasurable confusion in which contradictory meanings are simultaneously appreciated. In other words, laughter is not itself a problem but an indication that the problematic nature of meaning-making has been perceived.

Traditionally, when laughter is considered rhetorically, it is viewed as a source of trouble or a difficulty to overcome, an uncontrollable force that threatens to unravel serious inquiry. In "The Problem of Laughter," Casper observes that "Laughter has held a long and tangled position in rhetoric's historic conversation about persuasion" that developed "as rhetoricians have indicated both a concern for and a guarded appreciation of its powerful effects on the audience" (347). He suggests that "Rhetoric's complicated relationship with laughter as a persuasive tool seems born from a realization that, on some level, laughter's effects can always escape an orator's rational control and provoke unintended consequences…Ancient rhetoricians seem to accept that laughter produces effects that exceed the control of the orator" (347-8).

Much of the traditional ancient concern about laughter includes a conviction that amusement and laughter played no useful role in serious argumentation. For example, "Plato

distrusts laughter's uncontrollable nature," and, as discussed in the last chapter, "he derides it as a kind of malice exhibited by 'the spiteful man [who] is *pleased* at his neighbor's misfortune (Philebus 48b8-9)'" (Casper 347). Such concerns have carried over to contemporary theories of rhetoric. For example, in "The *Phaedrus* and the Nature of Rhetoric," Richard Weaver echoes some of Plato's concerns

> There is an exaggeration which is mere wantonness, and with this the true
> rhetorician has nothing to do. Such exaggeration is purely impressionistic in aim.
> Like caricature, whose only object is to amuse, it seizes upon any trait or aspect
> which could produce titillation and exploits this without conscience. If all rhetoric
> were like this, we should have to grant that rhetoricians are persons of very low
> responsibility and their art a disreputable one. But the [true] rhetorician is not
> interested in sensationalism. (1062)

It is interesting to notice how denigrating humor like this often includes a type of mud-slinging by throwing out terms like "exaggeration" and "wantonness" as well as "titillation" and "exploitation" and refers to humor and laughter ("whose only object is to amuse") as though it is a relatively easy rhetorical effect to accomplish.

In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, discuss "The Ridiculous and its role in Argumentation" by considering laughter as a means of identifying and eradicating exaggeration and sensationalism, "The ridiculous is what deserves to be greeted by laughter…Exclusive laughter is the response to the breaking of an accepted rule, a way of condemning eccentric behavior which is not deemed sufficiently important or dangerous to be repressed by more violent means" (205). From their neo-Aristotelian stand-point, simultaneously considering contradictory meanings violates Aristotle's notion of *antithesis*, also known as the

law of non-contradiction, which stipulates that "It is by putting two opposing conclusions side by side that you prove one of them false" (1410ᵃ).

For those who abide by the law of non-contradiction, two contradictory propositions about the same subject cannot both be true at the same time in the same way. In such cases, one of those propositions must be false. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, "Ridicule [in the form of laughter] is a powerful weapon…that must be used against those who take it into their heads to hold and persist in holding two incompatible points of view without trying to remove the incompatibility" (206). In other words, they situate laughter as a social corrective for keeping boundaries in place that parallel Aristotle's guidelines for the proper use of the means of persuasion. On the contrary, I am arguing that laughter breaks the law of non-contradiction—in the sense that when we laugh we are admitting that, at least at the moment of laughter, that the law of non-contradiction has not held. In other words, no matter how strongly one may affirm the law of non-contradiction, laughter betrays the laugher. In that way, laughter could be said to constitute a kind of violation—perhaps even Freudian.

As many have summarized, Freud views laughter as an expression of repressed desires that violate societal restrictions against the unacceptable or unspeakable. For Freud, a "joke can only be funny as a revelation of what an audience secretly desires" (Limon 16). In an interesting twist, Limon goes so far as to argue that the implications of Freud are that laughter may indicate the opposite of amusement, "On Freud's account, we never know exactly why we laugh because we cannot estimate how much of our laughter disguises satisfactions that are distinctly unfunny" (14). In other words, there is a flip side to this dissertation, a different project, which would pursue the notion that contradiction, in addition to being a source of amusement and laughter, is

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also at the heart of our deepest fears and anxieties. As Cohen puts it, "An incomprehensible thing is unsettling. It can [even] be terrifying" (50).

More recently, Casper has argued that "laughter is not something we control with reason," but a force that violates, or "interrupts rationality and provides us momentary escapes from our traditional tendency to privilege meaning above all else" (357). Casper supports this by arguing that, as a "persuasive tool," laughter "Does not exclusively use a system of signs to communicate meaning, it does not function in the same way as a signifying language. Rather, it produces effects by means of an asignifying force, one that exceeds signification and rational control" (347). For Casper, the "asignifying force of laughter moves simultaneously within and beyond traditional conceptual boundaries that continue to define the discipline and produces endless differential effects along the way, effects that repeatedly call into question the certainty of the conceptual boundaries themselves" (348). This means, then, that "to experience laughter is to experience a certain loss of control, to surrender to effects that are beyond reason and beyond the control the traditional communication model presumes" (347).

Although it might appear, or *feel*, as though laughter bypasses reason and erupts spontaneously from nowhere in particular, the fact that, as is certainly the case in stand-up comedy, comedians are deliberately laboring to produce laughter, makes it problematic to consider laughter as causal. In other words, as will be illustrated below by a close look at Diane Davis's anecdotal account of her spontaneous laughter in church, this chapter argues that there is always a persuasive process taking place before laughter occurs. Laughter is a gesture that "demonstrates a recognition" that "a traditional tendency to privilege," not "meaning," but a *single* meaning, "above all else," has been breached (Casper 357).

(Un) Holy Laughter

To illustrate his argument, Casper cites a personal anecdote from Diane Davis in which she recalls a time when she lost control of herself to laughter in church. In *Breaking Up [at] Totality: A Rhetoric of Laughter*, Diane Davis offers a "third sophistics" approach to laughter that proposes how "laughter operates as a trope for disruption or breaking up," or "a joyfully destructive shattering of our confined conceptual frameworks" offered in the context of the "renewed interest in sophistic countertraditions, as seen in the work of such 'postphilosophers' as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Helene Cixous and of such rhetoricians as Susan Jarratt and Steven Mailloux" (back cover). As an entry in the *Rhetorical Philosophy and Theory Series*, a series which "aims to extend the subject of rhetoric beyond its traditional and historical bounds," Davis's study is well situated within the "rhetorical turn" where "rhetoric has become an epistemology in its own right, one marked by heightened consciousness of the symbolic act as always already contextual and ideological" (xi).

Davis's concern is to examine how laughter unsettles the 'either/or' binaries of dialectic and how "our bodies are capable of being overtaken by the force of this laughter, capable of being possessed, seized by this illogical rhythm that cannot be contained or repressed" (29). She explains that her work was inspired in part by how Foucault describes "laughter as an explosion of the border zones of thought" (2). Correspondingly, she points out that in his preface to *The Order of Things*, Foucault claims that his study "arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the 'laughter that shattered all the familiar landmarks of [his] thought'" (1). She focuses on laughter as what makes possible a departure from "the limitation of our own…system of thought" and openness to the "charm of another" despite feeling the "impossibility of thinking *that*" (1). She

argues that laughter functions to overcome "Our categorical boundaries [that] operate as artificial guardrails" and prevent us from participating in Nietzsche's "great sweep of life" (2).

Her preeminent example is an experience she calls "one of the most traumatic experiences" of her "young life" that occurred when she tried, and failed, to hold back laughter during a church worship service

> My body feels overwhelmed, intoxicated by an inexplicable force; I feel weak, out of control; something else has hold of me—I wonder if it's God. Despite my willpower, despite my squirming and my clenched teeth, I hear myself beginning to *lose it*; "I" am beginning to crack up…I feel harsh eyes boring into me from all sides, and I fight desperately for control. But to no avail. My body has been *possessed* by the force of laughter: Despite my reason and my will, laughter bursts out. The battle is over: "I" have been conquered (22).

Certainly, laughter is a physiological occurrence that often seems to grab hold or come upon us and is also, biologically, hard to explain. However, although a cause might be elusive, it does not necessitate that laughter is precursory. In other words, rather than a force that "moves simultaneously within and beyond traditional conceptual boundaries," laughter is always a result of the crossing of boundaries or categories provided by contradictions that imply those boundaries are convention and artifice (Casper 348).

This can be seen upon a closer look at Davis's example. She explains how, prior to this loss of control, she is "sitting in church, watching a tuft of hair—a twig—at the back of the minister's head bounce up and down as he speaks that seems "to have a being of its own. The more animated the minister becomes, the more that twig comes to life, and the more I become

amused" (21). Whatever is amusing her is the source of the laughter. But what is it? She continues

> He obviously believes himself in complete control of his person, but *I recognize* that this twig is demanding its independence. *I see*, too, that it's exactly at the back of his head, just out of a frontal view in a morning mirror-check, and *I realize* that it has no doubt been precisely that mirror-check that has created his illusion of self-mastery in the first place. It's in this instant that my *mind grasps* the comical; it grasps the *distance* between that rebellious twig and the minister's illusion of self-unity (21 my emphasis).

The amusement Davis was experiencing before the onset of laughter was the result of perceiving a contradiction, what Davis refers to as the "distance," between the "minister's illusion" and the "rebellious twig" (21). It is the contradiction between the projection from the pulpit of an omnipotent God and the very human minister, acting as His mouthpiece, who is unable to maintain "control of his person" (21). Observing and appreciating this contradiction causes Davis to be amused.

A source of confusion has to do with *when* her mind came to *recognize*, *see*, *realize*, and *grasp* these things? Was it at that moment just prior to "cracking up" or was it in retrospect that she credits herself? Although it is unlikely that she consciously *recognized*, *saw*, *realized*, and *grasped* all of the above before she started laughing, that is how she relates the story because, in retrospect, appropriately, that is how one pieces the process together. At the moment it is happening it *feels* like laughter comes in upon us and is in control. However, as her own account shows, the experience of laughter she had in church that day was not an external force moving

her to transgress categorical boundaries but rather the pleasurable and exuberant manifestation of such transgression—even if only understood after the fact.

A failure to immediately understand why we are laughing does not mean that there is no reason. We do not always immediately *understand* what it is we *perceive*. When we laugh, something has been understood although not necessarily in a "straight" logical manner in which we have been taught to understand *understanding*. This bypassing of normative reasoning is part of the *fun* of comedy—akin to magic tricks that we "see" but cannot explain although we are sure there must be some rational explanation. And this is why explaining a joke could possibly "kill" it—the mystery has been removed. Incidentally, in this particular case, what is happening with the priest's hair is not intentional although such incongruity could be intentional such as when Steve Martin comes out on stage wearing an immaculate white suit but also sporting an arrow through his head.

At the same time, once present, if the laughter itself somehow presents or implies a contradiction then the amusement can self-perpetuate. For example, in the bit by Lenny Bruce mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the audience continued to find amusing (and laugh) the fact that they found Bruce's threat amusing. Like Homer Simpson and Montgomery Burns continuously alternating between suspicious glares and bursts of laughter while stranded in a cabin under an avalanche (season eight, episode twelve), this created a kind of resonating wave of perpetual laughter. What Davis describes as the "instability of irrepressible laughter" that is "an affront to our humanist sensibilities" means that, as any grade-school teacher knows, once the class has started laughing, the "damage" has been done (3). This is why, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates tries to prevent Hippocrates from seeing Protagoras. He is afraid of losing control, or dominion, over his student's reasoning practices, anxious to keep Hippocrates under rule of the

law of non-contradiction. Ironically, the scramble for control over laughter often only adds to its production.

Tickling produces a kind of pleasurable confusion. Through tickling, children are "initiated in a distinctive way into the helplessness and disarray of a certain primitive kind of pleasure" (Phillips 10). We cannot tickle ourselves but are often tolerant of ticklers because they act in the name of a kind of fun that is confusion and pleasure mixed together, a type of safe invasion. In other words, tickling is type of corporeal assault which elicits a visceral response that is then "dependent on the adult to hold and not to exploit" and requires that they "stop at the blurred point, so acutely felt in tickling, at which pleasure becomes pain, and the child experiences an intensely anguished confusion" (Limon 62). The laughter that results from tickling symbolizes an assault coming in the form of a contradiction which challenges the impetus towards singular meaning but also provides a type of cognitive pleasure. Once laughter is present, the assault has already been successful.

That laughter is persuasion can be a very troubling notion. This is a sentiment invoked by Louis C. K. in the epigraph. After joking about nut allergies, he goes on to his next and more provocative topic only to be met with a collective groan of discomfort from his audience. However, Louis is not about to let his audience off the hook. He holds them accountable for their earlier laughter, "Listen, you all clapped for dead kids with the nuts. For kids dying from nuts, you applauded. So you're in this with me now. You understand? You don't get to cherry pick. Those kids did nothing to you." He holds his audience down and forces them to face the meaning of their laughter.

That meaning is this: laughter is the evidence that a cognitive transition has taken place from thinking one way to thinking two contradictory ways at once. It can be a surprise to the one

laughing but, like a marksman surprised by his shot after slowly pulling the trigger, surprise does not mean there is not a traceable cause. Part of the reason there is an inclination to view laughter as somehow precursory is because audiences are not always laughing at punchlines, they are laughing at the pursuit of meaning, at meaning-making itself. This is why jokes are not always intentional—such as when one responds to a speaker (in conversation) by saying, "That's funny!" while the speaker remains unclear as to what the joke is. For example, such was the premise of Art Linkletter's *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. Because laughter can occur in the absence of a clear punchline, it can appear as though the laughter occurred first.

Laughing at Punchlines and Laughing at Meaning-Making

In the simplest terms, comedians get on stage intending to persuade an audience that something is amusing. In the *Gorgias*, Gorgias affirms to Socrates that persuasion is the "chief end" or the "main substance" of rhetoric. In the case of stand-up comedy, laughter is the sure sign of that persuasion. In order to explicate humor, it is only natural to begin by focusing on the punchline since that is apparently what an audience is laughing at. However, although punchlines should never be dismissed, it is a mistake to give them exclusive attention. In other words, in some ways, punchlines can be red herrings that distract from the more general presence of contradiction that pervades communicative acts.

A punchline can be viewed as a blatant way to facilitate what Morreall identifies as the "cognitive shift" that takes place when we are amused (*CR* 50-2). This shift is the incorporation of multiple points of view, or what Limon identifies as the liminality of humor, "The appeal of comedy may be traced to its imposition of geometrical perfectionism on compounded liminality. The funniest jokes are metajokes...formal considerations when they are exclusive are always an

evasion" (31). Instead, one must employ a type of "pseudogeometry" (32). For Limon, "It was a revelation that the approach to and retreat from jokes could be funnier than punch lines" such as in the stand-up routines of Brooks and Reiner which, at the time, "fit none of the paradigms erected by joke analysts" (28-9).

Like a nudge or a jab, punchlines punctuate discourse and draw attention to the contradiction running through all forms and modes of persuasive effort. In other words, the source of amusement of a punchline is the discourse it refers back to. This is illustrated by the various relationships comedians have with punchlines. Some embrace and rely on them heavily while others regard them as necessary but somewhat contemptable and try to use them sparingly. Put another way, in addition to being red herrings for analysis, punchlines can also be safety nets for comedians. The risk versus reward nature of punchlines (nudge too much and risk the label of hack – nudge too little and risk losing your audience) means comedians who rely heavily on punchlines and one-liners are sometimes held in disregard by other comedians.

At the other end of the spectrum are comedians like Andy Kaufman whose stand-up routines are more like performance art that will rarely, if ever, provide a clear punchline. For example, on the premier episode of *Saturday Night Live*, when Kaufman was given a time-slot to perform, he stood in front of a live studio audience and put on a record of the Mighty Mouse theme song from Paul Terry's Barker Bill TV show. He then stood awkwardly listening to the music until every time the chorus came on at which point he would lip-sync, with flamboyant bravado, the words "Here I come, to save the day!" The audience was left to figure out for themselves why it was funny—a fact that producer Lorne Michaels was reportedly very uneasy about. When a comic attempts to amuse without the use of overt punchlines, they are suggesting that there is something inherently amusing about communication in general.

Somewhere in the middle are a majority of comics who deliver punchlines but who also look down on a heavy reliance on them and often shy away from the notion that they are in the business of "telling jokes." For example, Steve Harvey, in an interview after one of his shows, explains

> If somebody can come back [from a show] and tell your jokes, you only just told jokes. I make you go back home, and you can't even tell what I told. You gotta see me...You can't go home and tell my jokes and get laughs off of them…If you write my jokes on a piece of paper and read them, they're not funny because I don't write jokes. I tell stories. I take you on a ride. And that's why, if you write jokes you ain't gonna last. (YouTube clip)

Harvey's obvious self-contradiction (He claims that he does not "write jokes" but then hypothetically considers someone writing down his "jokes on a piece of paper") highlights an intuitive conviction many comics share about what constitutes humor and where the source of amusement is located. They certainly and regularly use the word "joke" to describe their material but then they also claim to not be in the "joke business." Although this could be attributed to a scarcity of terms, Harvey's peculiar description gestures towards a conception of his work as more than just a series of punchlines. This is a framework certainly not limited to Harvey. Steve Martin, for example, also addresses the topic.

In "Being Funny" for *Smithsonian Magazine*, Steve Martin recounts how he developed his style of comedy. He begins by lamenting what he refers to as "conventional joke telling" which includes "a moment when the comedian delivers the punchline, and the audience knows it's the punchline, and their response ranges from polite to uproarious." Using Bob Hope (verbal cues) and Jack E. Leonard (hand gestures) as examples, he describes how a "skillful comedian

could coax a laugh with tiny indicators…Leonard used to punctuate jokes by slapping his

stomach with his hand." For Martin, what perturbed him about this "formula" was "the nature of

the laugh it inspired, a vocal acknowledgment that a joke had been told, like automatic applause

at the end of a song." He recalls a time when "One night, watching him [Leonard] on the tonight

show, I noticed that several of his punchlines had been unintelligible, and the audience had

laughed at nothing but the cue of his hand slap." Martin goes on to recall

> These notions stayed with me until they formed an idea that revolutionized my
>
> comic direction: what if there were no punchlines? What if there were no
>
> indicators? What if I created tension and never released it? What if I headed for a
>
> climax, but all I delivered was an anticlimax? What would the audience do with
>
> all that tension? Theoretically, it would have to come out sometime. But if I kept
>
> denying them the formality of a punchline, the audience would eventually pick
>
> their own place to laugh…This type of laugh seemed stronger to me, as they
>
> would be laughing at something they chose, rather than being told exactly when to
>
> laugh. (Smithsonian magazine, on-line)

Although it seems a bit of a conceit for him to claim that he is not providing his audiences *any*

punchlines, it is the fact that he is trying to do so that is telling. Martin offers no explanation as to

how the audience will choose a place to laugh but goes on to declare, "My goal was to make the

audience laugh but leave them unable to describe what is was that had made them laugh" which

is essentially a way of having the audience laugh, not at a punchline, but at his discourse in a

more general sense.

The conviction of Harvey and Martin that their acts consist of more than a series of

repeatable jokes indicates their intuitive sense that punchlines can be subtle, even obtuse and

difficult to locate, blending into the discourse that inspired them. A punchline could be the absence of what one expects or, as Martin mentions, an anticlimax. Laughter indicates that the audience has, on some cognitive level, recognized and appreciated the contradictions, or the jokes, that are always already there, embedded in every attempt to communicate. For example, Jack Leonard's strategic use of a hand slap on his stomach to elicit laughter and applause could itself become the target of a punchline. Fred Armisen did something to this effect by playing the character of a hack comedian on *SNL* who would hit a drum and cymbal and belt out a catch phrase in order to indicate that a punchline had been delivered.

Conclusion

> *Because what is truth? Truth is that thing which makes what we want to happen happen…that thing which helps us win. – George Saunders, "*Pastoralia.*"*

The *Rhetoric* claims a distinction between "real" and "apparent" persuasion and suggests that a function of rhetoric is to discern between the two "just as it is the function of dialectic to discern the real and the apparent syllogism" (1355^b). The one sentence theory of this inter-chapter is that amusing an audience to the point of laughter never constitutes a type of "apparent" persuasion. Where there is laughter there is persuasion. Laughter should never be taken for granted. It always indicates that something significant has taken place, even if uncomfortably so. Discomfort stems in part from the possibility that we sometimes (perhaps?) laugh at jokes that contain an argument with which we disagree or even find offensive. Is there some 'truth' in the joke that is uncomfortable to confront? This can be illustrated through a simple thought experiment/exercise in which one is asked to construct an argument that is as persuasive as it is

fallacious. This might be a troubling prospect but it also provides a way to view comic discourse as simultaneously engaging in and critiquing argumentation.

In a kind of circular reasoning, Plato instructed his students to discard persuasive speech that does not fall in line with truth. In other words, arguments are labeled logical/illogical, agreeable/disagreeable, or real/apparent based on whether or not the argument is agreed with. i.e. since we "know" the conclusion to be false, there must be an error somewhere in the argument. In a similar way, Aristotle suggested that discerning the difference between real and apparent persuasion should include an understanding or presupposition that it is the 'sophist' who authors 'apparent' arguments and "what makes a man a 'sophist' is not his faculty, but his moral purpose…a man is a 'sophist' because he has a certain kind of moral purpose" (1355^b).

When comics pursue laughter regardless of soundness of argument, when they embrace the possibility of getting the argument 'wrong,' but then succeed in generating laughter, it calls attention to the provisional nature of all argumentation because the laughter generated is real and undeniable. It has persuaded the audience of something. In other words, if, as Wills has suggested, all rhetorical efforts are a "running hither and thither," then, not only is arguing "straight" an agreed upon state, laughter indicates an expansion of those multi-directional movements and possibilities (25). Laughter indicates an expansion of 'truth' or potential truths. Reality is *this* but it is also somehow simultaneously *that*.

This dissertation makes the claim that contradiction generates amusement. This inter-chapter examines the rhetorical implications of laughing at amusement. Admittedly, as was mentioned in chapter two, there are other kinds of laughter. Amusement is not the only thing that may prompt it. Unfortunately, this study does not offer an explanation for such things as mean, cruel, and vindictive laughter. Chapter two deals with this by making a distinction between

contradiction and disparagement and arguing that it is contradiction, not disparagement, that generates amusement. Unfortunately, this dissertation cannot make the claim that people never laugh at purely mean and vindictive speech meant only to denigrate but maintains that such laughter is not prompted by amusement but something else. Such laughter is undesirable and this dissertation is not about it, whatever it may be.

As it is framed in this inter-chapter, laughter is an indication that contradiction, a fundamental and inevitable aspect of all communication, has been perceived and appreciated enough to provoke an exuberant visceral response. In other words, if, as Ted Cohen suggests, "telling a joke," might actually represent "a way of getting serious" about an issue or topic, then laughing could be the way to get serious about a joke (70). The difficult nature of humor and the tricky task of finding a source of amusement has helped keep laughter cast as a sign of "apparent" or superficial persuasion. In fact, the reality faced by every stand-up comedian is that laughter is extremely difficult to elicit and sustain.

Chapter Three: Implications: The Troubling Pragmatics of Stand-Up Comedy

Another law for mortals: nothing is always seemly or always disgraceful, but the right occasion takes the same things and makes them disgraceful and then alters them and makes them seemly. Everything done at the right time is seemly and everything done at the wrong time is disgraceful…the same things are both disgraceful and seemly. – Dissoi Logoi

How do you know you love somebody? That's a good question. You know you love somebody when you share your inner most secret racism with them. That's when you really know—when you finally come out and say, "you know, there's this black guy at work and, uh, actually, both black guys at work…" – Louis C. K.

As the reconsideration of sophistic rhetoric continues to move it from the periphery back towards the center of rhetorical theory, concerns about "its indissoluable link to the realm of politics," and "the practical applications of the art" are stern (Corbett 603). As Mailloux outlines in *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*, once it is understood how theoretically pervasive and far-reaching would be the influence of such an art into every realm of contemporary society, such as "critical theory, political philosophy, and educational policy," "what has become central" for those concerned "are the questions of whether there are any necessary political consequences to rhetoric or pragmatism or sophistry" (16). Specifically, some are concerned that letting loose "rhetorical pragmatism" upon "cultural politics" might generate "any specific ideological content" (16).

Over the centuries, rhetoric has been brought up on charges of ideological manipulation many times. Indeed, as Mailloux reminds us, "rhetoric can hardly be viewed as neutral…it is always in the service of an ideological position," but he also adds that "Rhetoric does not self-evidently stand condemned because it is always partisan *if*, as a postmodern sophist might argue, such partisanship is in fact unavoidable in philosophy or any other language game" (19-20). This

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hypothetical postmodern sophist might also argue that the "language game" is primary, that rhetoric might generate as much as it serves ideology, or that ideologies can only become known through the work of rhetoric to make them so known. As humorous expression gets increasingly picked up as a language game useful for troubling established positions and advocating for unpopular opinions, such is often done without adequately considering that it is form of discourse that engages Protagoras's rhetorical exercise of simultaneously expressing and defending contrary views. In other words, as a rhetorical weapon, humor is often picked up and wielded without appreciation for its powerful recoil.

For example, in recent years, issues of race and gender have increasingly been addressed through humor. Unfortunately, as Zwagerman argues, much of the academic study focusing on the interplay between gender and humor, while acknowledging that "Comedy is dangerous," and that "Humor is a weapon," also "overstates humor's subversive action…studies of women's humor often assume that women's humor is always subversive—of serious language, of the status quo, and of patriarchy—and always effective" (4). For example, Zwagerman takes issue with the work of Regina Barreca where she "Describes the subversiveness of woman's humor in terms that make it sound automatic and inevitable: 'Comedy by women is about de-centering, dis-locating and de-stabilizing the world…Comedy is a way women writers can reflect the absurdity of the dominant ideology" (5). However, as Zwagerman points out, Barreca's statements "have no unique applicability to *women's* humor" (5). And much like Hutcheon's position on irony, Zwagerman goes on to argue that "The ideology of a humorous utterance— and this holds true for women's humor, too—can just as easily be conservative and stabilizing as radical and 'decentering'" (6).

Zwagerman asserts that "What Linda Hutcheon says of irony is true of humor in general: it is 'transideological' and 'has often been used to reinforce rather than to question established attitudes'" (5). It is a claim Hutcheon makes in *Irony's Edge*, an examination of how, because of this trait, "irony can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests" (10) She contends that "There is nothing *intrinsically* [her emphasis] subversive about ironic skepticism…there is no *necessary* [her emphasis] relationship between irony and radical politics or even radical formal innovation" (10). Hutcheon's concern is to show how "the transideological nature of irony" means that "irony can be provocative when its politics are conservative or authoritarian as easily as when its politics are oppositional and subversive: it depends on who is using/attributing it and at whose expense it is seen to be" (15).

Mailloux's conclusions about pragmatism (published a year after *Irony*) strike a similar note, "rhetorical pragmatism claims no necessary, logical connection to any particular political ideology" (21). This is troubling to many because of the possibility, as it may seem, that "rhetoric could serve undemocratic interests," be misused and abused for nefarious ends, or, more to the point, be used to serve an ideology that one does not subscribe to themselves (10). As Mailloux points out, this fear can be heard in the words of Sim who proclaims that "Not everyone will misuse rhetoric, but some will, some always do" (Mailloux 20). According to Sim, "Foundationalism was devised" in order to fight against and "exercise…the spectre of clever, and possibly unscrupulous, language-game theorists (the sophists are always with us) exploiting the innocent and unwary" (Mailloux 20). Understandably then, in his turn, Mailloux describes these words from Sim as a contemporary manifestation of "the traditional conflict between Philosophy and Rhetoric, between Plato and the Sophists" (20).

On the contrary, Mailloux warns that a return to foundationalism cannot be counted on to bring about the desired results, "Just as fanatic absolutists can argue for murder or for love and self-proclaimed relativists can be altruistically tolerant or irresponsibly indifferent, foundationalism and anti-foundationalism guarantee no specific political consequences" (21). In other words, to be consistent, Sim should be equally suspicious of all persuasive speech since all ideological positions, including foundationalism, are situated using the same universally available rhetorical resources.

"But still," Mailloux is optimistic that the complex "tropes," "arguments," and "narratives" of "sophistic rhetorical pragmatism can promote and be promoted by democratic forms of political organization" and therefore may yet prove "the only way to establish truth" by enhancing "the effectiveness of progressive political activity in and outside our academic institutions" (21-2). This is a sudden turn for Mailloux to take considering that the bulk of his discussion defends the view that sophistic rhetorical pragmatism enhances the effectiveness of *any* political activity not just those deemed "progressive."

Hutcheon also seems prone to optimism as she attempts to explain why anyone should "bother" to use irony if, "in the ironic discourse," as Paul de Man has suggested, "every position undercuts itself, thus leaving the politically engaged writer in a position where her ironic discourse might just come to deconstruct her own politics" (16). Hutcheon responds by arguing that she still considers "the indirection and critical edge of irony" to be a possible (even if inherently problematic) "model for oppositionality whenever one is implicated in a system that one finds oppressive" if only a distinction is first made "between irony that might function constructively to articulate a new oppositional position, and irony that would work in a more negative and negativizing way" (16). This begs the question: who will be judging and labeling

irony as either positive constructivism or negative negativizing? A debate about how to properly use irony could be read in much the same way Mailloux reads Sim's fears about the possible "misuse" of rhetoric, as a contemporary manifestation of the squabble between Plato and the Sophists or Philosophy and Rhetoric over the difference between propositions and communicating propositions.

Zwagerman also has an optimistic response to skepticism like de Man's. He maintains that "neither the meaning nor the serious intent of an utterance conveyed through humor is necessarily undercut by that humor" (3). For Zwagerman, this means that humor can therefore be used "to attempt the full range of serious (in the sense of purposeful and sincere) performatives" (3). However, such a position presupposes that content and form are divorceable, that meaning precedes speech, that "meanings" and "serious intents" exist independently of utterances. In other words, that content is given form. Zwagerman and Hutcheon are both arguing that humorous and ironic forms will not necessarily sabotage important content. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter, these are presuppositions that are hotly contested by various "friends" of rhetoric who argue that because form and content are inseparable there is therefore no such thing as a fully independent content to disrupt. Fish, in fact, by reaching back to an old debate, offers a counter skepticism about foundationalism that strikes a note similar in pitch to Mailloux's response to Sim, "Indeed, another word for anti-foundationalism *is* rhetoric, and one could say without too much exaggeration that modern anti-foundationalism is old sophism" (*Doing What Comes Naturally* 347). Skepticism like Fish's takes aim at the fervent search for efficacious discourse that will remain untroublesome and governable.

Troubling Pragmatics

> *As to jests. These are supposed to be of some service in controversy. Gorgias said that you should kill your opponents' earnestness with jesting and their jesting with earnestness.*
> *– Aristotle*

As a standard operating procedure, stand-up comedy will trouble, or counter-act, normative pragmatic rules, a pragmatic many will find troubling. In other words, the word troubling in the title of this chapter and section can be taken, to equal effect, as either a verb or an adjective. In her *Introduction to Pragmatics*, Betty Birner introduces her students to the theoretical boundary between semantics and pragmatics by defining pragmatics as "the study of language use in context" and semantics as "the study of literal meaning independent of context" (2). This can give the impression that "semantic meaning is a matter of competence, while pragmatic meaning is a matter of performance" (2). However, even as a performance, "our knowledge of pragmatics, like all of our linguistic knowledge," means that pragmatic performances are still "rule-governed" (Birner 3). Accordingly, the bulk of an introductory manual like Bruner's is dedicated to "describing [and making explicit] some of the principles we follow in producing and interpreting language in light of the context, our intentions, and our beliefs about our interlocutors and their intentions," or, in other words, to making "explicit the implicit knowledge that guides us in selecting interpretations" (3).

By way of explicit guidance, Bruner's manual attempts to lay out rules that allow for consistency and coherence since "speakers within a language community" will "share these pragmatic principles" (3). Such pragmatic knowledge educates participants and becomes "part of our [their] knowledge of how to use language appropriately" within a particular language community. However, no matter how much labor is put into erecting explicit frameworks and

principles, they cannot keep up with interpretive paths that are continuously changing due to the permeable boundary between semantics and pragmatics and the mutable rules written to govern it. Words, phrases, and figures of speech may "shift from pragmatic meaning to semantic meaning" and vice versa and it is "impossible to say precisely" when these shifts occur because it happens along a "continuum rather than a point" (Bruner 3).

As a result, any formal consideration of pragmatics has more to do with navigating "slippery" meanings that "vary from context to context" rather than what might be "found in dictionaries" to the extent that "The same utterance will mean different things in different contexts, and will even mean different things to different people" (Bruner 4). The pragmatics of stand-up comedy adopt a formal policy of running counter to the rule books and encouraging the "slip" by looking for and isolating rules and guidelines for the sole purpose of somehow violating or side-stepping them. In Birner's terms, comedians are actively searching out the opening in language that will lead "'down the garden path' toward an incorrect interpretation" (2).

For example, Birner approaches the semantic/pragmatic boundary by considering the statement "my day has been a nightmare" which, of course, is not intended to be taken literally but metaphorically, "In this case the semantic meaning of 'nightmare' (a bad dream) differs from its pragmatic meaning—that is, the meaning I intended in the context of my utterance" (2). However, since "Nightmares have [at least] both properties," knowing the difference is largely an intuitive process based on rules that are implicit and internalized such that "it would be difficult for most people to explain how they know that *My day was a nightmare* means that my day (like a nightmare) was very unpleasant, and not, for example, that I slept through it" (3). In other words, although nightmares are certainly unpleasant, they also generally occur when

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someone is sleeping. The fact that most people will use the statement to communicate that their day was unpleasant provides an opportunity to surprise listeners by using a different, but also valid, meaning of the statement.

The multiple meanings of the word *nightmare* combined with the fact that the listener is primed to take a particular one sets up a kind of trap. Where some may celebrate well-worn paths and set up warning signs to avoid pit-falls, a comic welcomes the opportunity to steer a listener off the "normal" path and directly into the trap. For example, in the hypothetical joke above, the punchline could be some kind of self-deprecating story about a night of intoxicated revelry that is followed by a prolonged day-time nightmare-laden sleep. In any case, comedians seek opportunity for unexpected deviation. What a comic views as a rhetorical opportunity, others call exploitation or deception. In Birner's terms, discourse that takes advantage of such opportunities could serve as an example of poor semantic "competence" as well as a poor pragmatic "performance" (2).

For example, the well-known Abbott and Costello baseball routine could be taken as an example of semantic and pragmatic incompetence. From the perspective of basic pragmatics, the routine is actually quite simple. Costello does not understand because Abbott does not communicate appropriately. Costello fails to understand that Abbott is using some words, such as the word "who," as proper subject nouns instead of subject pronouns and Abbott never adequately explains what he is doing. The results are fairly well-known. What is striking is the fact that, although the routine could certainly be used as an example of "poor" semantic competence and pragmatic performance, it is also highly successful as comedy. In fact, the routine was so successful that by 1944 it was copyrighted and by 1999 *Time* magazine voted it

the Best Comedy Sketch of the twentieth-century. In other words, such brilliantly performed incompetence demands a peculiar spot along the formal Semantics/Pragmatics Boundary.

The pair, and their relationship, could also be viewed as personifying the conflict between pragmatics and semantics (respectively). In the parlance of 1930s American vaudeville, Abbott is the "straight man" of the pair who acts as foil to "funnyman" Costello, although, at the time, these two stock roles were sometimes viewed as interchangeable. The pair could also be viewed as personifying the conflict between sophistic rhetoric and something else much more Aristotelian. Abbott's cunning and sophistic word play is making a fool out of an overwhelmed Costello who, because of his semantic rule-following, cannot keep up with the twisting and the turning. Perhaps Abbott understands what is going on but exploits Costello's misunderstanding in order to amuse himself. In any case, Costello, confined to a set of rules for understanding language which he is unable or unwilling to break away from, remains utterly befuddled. Is it fair to label this as deception? If Abbott is deceiving Costello, he is also working to expose the fact that well-worn paths become well-worn from repeated use that constitutes its own kind of deception. Well-worn paths are deceptive in the sense that as they become expected they are held as steadfast. Deviation is not just frowned on, but considered unruly or even unattainable.

The debate about what constitutes "deception" is very important in the conflict between semantics and pragmatics as well as rhetoric and philosophy or persuasion versus communication. Interestingly, how rhetoricians frame persuasion versus communication often goes hand in hand with how they frame the legacy of the historical Sophists. Until just recently, the pervasive arrangement was that the Sophists were deceitful, or persuasive as opposed to communicative. In fact, as recently as 1971, Edward Corbett could just briefly mention the Sophists in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* by painting them as "charlatans" who

were "attracted into the teaching profession" by the lure of easy money, "it was men like these who eventually gave Sophists an unsavory reputation and made 'sophistry' a synonym for deceitful reasoning" (596). In contrast, he describes Isocrates as "highly ethical, with noble ideals and unimpeachable standards of intellectual integrity…He took the rather artificial style of Gorgias, tempered it, refined it, and made it an elegant vehicle for both written and spoken discourse" (597).

Are the pragmatics of humor a type of deceptive reasoning threatening assault like the attacks of a con-man? As Limon points out, Kant found it remarkable that "the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving" which works initially just "for a moment" while the mind is being fooled and then, "when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again" and is jerked back and forth and "put in a state of oscillation" as the "deception" is processed (54). For Morreall, humor does utilize a kind of trickery that can feel like dishonesty. When this occurs "we experience a sudden change of mental state—a cognitive shift" he calls it, "that would be disturbing under normal conditions, that is, if we took it seriously. Disengaged from ordinary concerns, however, we take it playfully and enjoy it" (*CR* xii). I would like to suggest that differentiation between taking a cognitive shift playfully and taking it seriously is largely arbitrary. Although it can be amusing, any deliberate and "careful attention to words, their meanings, and their uses" which results in a "cognitive shift," or alteration of "mental state" must, to some extent, by any reckoning, also be considered "serious" (128).

For example, Morreall, in opposition to the "whole tradition of philosophy of humor [which] hardly acknowledges, much less explains, the value of humor" (*CR* 26), argues that "from the beginning of philosophy, its practitioners should have appreciated the value of humor, since most of its benefits are benefits of philosophy too" (*CR* 126). He observes how "both

comics and philosophers think critically" by using a kind of trickery that will "play with our heads" which leads him to lightheartedly consider if Socrates might not have been the first stand-up comedian (126).

In *The Birth of Rhetoric*, Wardy gives Gorgias, the man "to whom we believe the craft of the sophists is to be traced back as it were to its father," similar treatment by considering both the *Encomium of Helen* and *On What Is Not* as two "Gorgianic jokes" hailing the birth of Western rhetoric and offering insight into the difference between deception and persuasion (6). For example, a "running theme" of the *Encomium* is how "the force and attractions of deceit" may or may not dictate lines between persuasion, deception, and physical forces (28). As it relates to Paris's verbal seduction of Helen, Wardy examines the idea that "The standard polar opposition between force and persuasion entails that succumbing to a merely verbal seduction is altogether blameworthy" such that, in order to exonerate Helen, "one therefore anticipates an argument that she did *not* yield to persuasion" for that would leave her culpable (35). Instead, as Wardy sees it, the *Encomium* "unnervingly collapses" this polarity by "simply juxtaposing 'persuasion' and 'deception,'" as if any persuasion "'takes in' its victims" as much as a physical force does (35).

Even in the face of fiercely contested rhetorical perspectives on deception, some theorists remain optimistic about the possibility that communication can be free of persuasion. For example, Richard Rorty argues that forces of persuasion include a state of flux "between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred" that allows knowledge to be conceived of as a "relation to propositions" where preferred knowledge is understood as having a privileged relation "to the objects those propositions are about" (*Mirror of Nature* 159). Echoing the optimism of Mailloux, Hutcheon, and Zwagerman discussed above, Rorty, in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, readily considers the possibility that

contingency can progress through complex stages of irony in order to finally arrive at solidarity. If, however, this process is looked at dispassionately, its reversibility must be noted. Like string spooled-out through a labyrinth, there is always a path back to contingency. The fact that a path back is always present means that, contrarily, any "solidarity" must always coexist with contingency. In other words, any state of solidarity is still a provisional construction that can be altered.

Threats of arbitrary solidarity raise concerns about privileged access to sites of assembly as well as notions of relativism. Mailloux recalls Fish addressing such concerns in a way that is practical but also avoids a certain sense of optimism

> Does might make right? In a sense the answer I must give is yes, since…in the (certain) event that some characterization will prevail (at least for a time) over its rivals, it will do so because some interested assertion of principle has managed to *forcefully* dislodge other (equally interested) assertions of principle. It is in this sense that force is the sole determinant of outcomes. (17)

Fish argues that "the sting is removed from this conclusion" when force is understood as the opportunity to "urge" that is available to other interested parties (18). This force is *kairos*, or the power of opportunity and possibility, which becomes available as arguments are articulated.

In this way, the word "might," in the context of stand-up comedy, can be read as an auxiliary verb instead of a noun. The pragmatics of stand-up comedy prompt speakers to look for arguments that have been made possible by other arguments. Comics continually consider what arguments might be said, what propositions might be put forth, what perspective or characterization might be gained. In other words, the pragmatics of stand-up comedy renegotiate solidarity by using irony (or some other form of contradiction) to trouble and redirect discourse

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back towards the contingent. This could be unnerving and it must be no accident that Dinesh D'Souza, speaking about what sophistic rhetoric could be capable of, turns to images of the comic

> Mastery of this sort of stuff would by no means lead to increased knowledge of how things are, but only to the ability to play games with people, tripping them up and flooring them with different senses of words, just like those who derive pleasure and amusement from pulling stools from under people when they are about to sit down, and from seeing someone floundering on his back (Mailloux 18).

D'Souza's indictment, as well as Sim's and Kimball's above, are contemporary examples of the Platonic denigration of Sophistry that grew, and continues to live, out of fear over rhetoric's *epistemic* potential. As Galligan has observed, such fears are also generated by humor because "Comedy trusts play as a way of *knowing* and as a way of doing—which is why it is so liable to strike respectable people as irresponsible, or even subversive" (37). In other words, as the next two sections address, communication is always a function of a human capacity for generating counter arguments that will always remain, to some extent, ludic.

Man is the Measure of Dissoi Logoi

> *Logic, n. The art of thinking and reasoning in strict accordance with the limitations and incapacities of the human misunderstanding.*
>
> *The basic of logic is the syllogism*
> *Consisting of a major and a minor premise and a conclusion—thus:*
> *Major Premise: Sixty men can do a piece of work sixty times as quickly as one man.*
> *Minor Premise: One man can dig a post-hole in sixty seconds; therefore—*
> *Conclusion: Sixty me can dig a post-hole in one second.*
> *– Ambrose Bierce,* The Devil's Dictionary

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As was introduced in chapter one, the sophistic practice of counter argumentation is one of the engines that turns humorous discourse into troublesome and ungovernable terrain. As an artifact, the *Dissoi Logoi* stresses the situational nature of discourse and stands as the primary sophistic document illustrating the practice of systematically setting out the "antithetic or opposing arguments" inherent in any topic (Kerferd 85). That any particular point can be countered is not an aspect of argumentation original to the *Dissoi Logoi* or invented by the Sophists. As Kerferd remarks, "Of course there has always been opposing arguments as long as the human race had indulged in argument" (84). However, the legacy of the *Dissoi Logoi* is a "way of looking at things" which embraces the contradiction that pervades every rhetorical situation (Kerferd 85). As a practice, *dissoi logoi* troubles the boundary between an argument and its counter such that it is doubtful comic discourse can be used very well to advocate univocally. In fact, it could be argued that the more discourse aligns with particular ideology the less it can be considered either sophistic or comic.

For example, on a recent episode of *Saturday Night Live*, Louis C.K. professes, in the opening monologue, that, although he is not "religious," as it concerns the existence of God, the most he can say is "I don't know if there's a God. That's all I can say honestly is I don't know." The reasoning behind this agnosticism counters atheistic arguments and also, incidentally, channels Protagoras's oft repeated remarks about the gods: "Concerning the gods I am not in a position to know either that (or how) they are or that (or how) they are not, or what they are like in appearance; for there are many things that are preventing knowledge, the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life" (Diels 80).

Some people think that they know that there isn't. That's a weird thing to think
you can know, "Yeah, there's no God." Are you sure? "Yeah. There's no God."
How do you know? "Cause I didn't see Him." There's a vast universe out there—
you can see for about a hundred yards when there's not a building in the way.
How could you possibly know? Did you look everywhere? Did you look in the
downstairs bathroom? Where have you looked so far? I haven't seen *12 Years a
Slave* yet. That doesn't mean it doesn't exist. (*SNL* 2015)

Interestingly, this public expression of agnosticism attracted the attention of some religious
groups who admired its opposition to atheism. In other words, the bit became, for believers, a
tempting piece of rhetoric to pick up as it appears to advocate their world-view. In a 2011
interview on NPR, Louis explained what happened when some pastors did just that

I heard that a lot of pastors would play it before their services. So a lot of people
that saw it would go to my website and be horrified by everything else that I say.
So I got a lot of emails from people saying, "Why can't you just keep it clean?
Now I am shut off from your act by the horrible things you said, and that's such a
shame." In my head I said, well, you're the one putting the limit there, not me. I'm
saying a bunch of stuff, and you're the one saying I should only say one facet of it.

In his 2013 *Rolling Stone* interview, he explains that "What comes out, if you just show
everything, all sides, is that everything is sad and happy and hilarious and depressing." As a
pragmatic, *dissoi logoi* epitomizes the exploration of multiple and opposing facets. This limits
the practical use of comic discourse for any singular purpose because all of these different
"facets" are connected. As one is picked-up, others cling to it.

The *Dissoi Logoi* links some counter arguments together simultaneously in something like one-liners that could, incidentally, pass as something from Woody Allen or perhaps Mitch Hedberg such as "Death is bad for the dying but good for the undertakers and gravediggers," and "The capture of Ilium was good for the Achaeans but bad for the Trojans" (Sprague 279). As is clearer in the second example above, this is a pattern, or technique, that could be used to probe power and privilege. For example, in his 2008 comedy special, *Chewed Up*, Louis articulates whiteness theory by explaining, in an "untutored way" through "personal observations," as Peggy McIntosh demonstrates in "White Privilege and Male Privilege (1988), "what it is like to have white privilege"

> I'm a lucky guy. I've got a lot going for me. I'm healthy, I'm relatively young, I'm white, which—thank God for that shit boy—that is a huge leg up, are you kidding me? Oh God, I love being white. I really do. Seriously, if you're not white you're missing out because this shit is thoroughly good.
>
> But let me be clear by the way—I 'm not saying that white people are better. I'm saying that *being* white is *clearly* better. Who can even argue?

He gives a number of examples finally concluding that "If you're white and you don't admit that it's great, you're an asshole." These can be shocking admissions since, as McIntosh suggests, "Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging" the disadvantages of others "to acknowledging that [white] men have unearned advantage" (1). Here Louis takes his own white privilege and turns it on white privilege. In other words, with nowhere to run, he takes the "invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks," loads it up with lead weights, and drops it in the lap of his audience (McIntosh 1).

Chris Rock, in a bit about marriage, argues that, although certainly for "some people life is short," depending on the "choices you make," for others "life is long." In other words, life is short for those to whom it seems short and long for those to whom it seems long. It is both. The difference, as a matter of individual perspective, evokes Protagoras's assertion that "Man is the measure of all things, of things that are as to how they are, and of things that are not as to how they are not," an assertion that Kerferd argues is intimately associated with the practice of *dissoi logoi* (85).

Standard illustrations from antiquity offer differing sense perceptions which provide contrary opinions about such things as honey and the wind, "If honey *seems* sweet to some and bitter to others, then it *is* sweet to those to whom it seems sweet, and bitter to those to whom it seems bitter" (Kerferd 86). Similarly, a blowing wind can simultaneously feel cold to one person and warm to another. As Plato summarizes in the *Theaetetus*, "In such cases Protagoras would say that the wind *is* cold to the one who feels cold, and is not cold to the other [in sum] each group of things is to me as it appears to me, and is to you such as it appears to you" (Kerferd 86). Philosophical debates about individual relativism aside for a moment, the important take away here is that contradiction, be it about marriage or honey or the wind, is a path to amusement. As a result, all available means of drawing out contradiction are valuable to comedians as well as the ancient sophistic rhetors.

At the same time, as Kerferd reminds us, interpreting exactly what this one short sentence means has been a "matter of discussion from the time of Plato right down to the present day" and will not be entirely cleared up here (86). Although there are enough "controversial questions" surrounding Protagoras's statement for Kerferd to claim that "the correct understanding of its meaning will take us directly to the heart of the whole of the fifth-century sophistic movement,"

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perhaps the most pertinent point to stress here is that, although it has often been taken as a boast, it is probably more advisable to take Protagoras's statement as a kind of lament (85). In other words, if we cannot even agree as to whether or not the honey is sweet, how do we go about finding common ground in regards to larger or more pressing issues? In such a light, drawing out and laughing at the contradiction inevitably surrounding all human experience must incorporate a degree of humility. Although it is probably going too far to say that humor constitutes a type of meekness or modesty, humor is anti-arrogance.

For example, the historical Sophists found that some kind of check must be applied to "accepted canons of good behavior" up for debate as a result of the "widening of horizons" and the increasing contact with other people-groups because of war and colonization (Guthrie 21). Although "contact between Greeks and barbarians was no new thing," as Guthrie observes, the growing contact with others was making it "increasingly obvious that customs and standards of behavior which had earlier been accepted as absolute and universal, and of divine institution, were in fact local and relative" (16). This led to shocking revelations concerning taboo subjects, "Habits that to the Greeks were wicked and disgusting, like marriage between brother and sister, might among the Egyptians or elsewhere be regarded as normal and even enjoined by religion" (16).

The reality of such socio-cultural relativism counters the arrogance implied in Herodotus's claim that "If all men were asked to name the best laws and customs, each would choose his own" (Guthrie 16). Herodotus illustrates this assertion with the story of Darius the king who "summoned some Greeks and Indians to his court" to discover that the Greeks would, under no circumstances, consider eating their dead fathers instead of burning them and that, on the contrary, the Indians would, under no circumstances, consider burning their dead fathers

instead of eating them (Guthrie 16). As Guthrie points out, both actions constitute a way of showing honor and so agree on a "fundamental moral principle" even though the practical application of that principle is very different indeed (16).

Ludic Logoi: On What Is Not

> *Speech is a powerful ruler. Its substance is minute and invisible, but its achievements are superhuman…I have removed by my speech a woman's infamy…as an amusement for myself. – Gorgias*, Encomium of Helen

At the beginning of *The Semiotic Challenge*, Roland Barthes offers six practices that, taken together, constitute rhetoric as a "discourse on discourse" that has been "simultaneously or successively present" from the "fifth century B.C. to the nineteenth century A.D" (14). Barthes lists rhetoric as a *technique*, a *teaching*, a *science*, an *ethic*, a *social practice*, and also

> A *ludic practice*: since all these [above listed] practices constituted a formidable ("repressive," we now say) institutional system, it was only natural that a mockery of rhetoric should develop, a "black" rhetoric (suspicions, contempt, ironies): games, parodies, erotic or obscene allusions, classroom jokes, a whole schoolboy practice (which still remains to be explored, moreover, and to be constituted as a cultural code). (14)

As to the first five practices, Barthes suggests how each might function as authoritarian and oppressive: As a technique, rhetoric often consists of "a body of rules and recipes whose implementation makes" persuasion possible; as a teaching it imparts "the essential matter…transformed into material for examination (exercises, lessons, tests);" as a science it subjects the art of rhetoric to strictures of pseudo-objective "observation" and "classification" of

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phenomena; as an ethic it enacts a "a system of 'rules'…it is at once a manual of recipes…and a Code, a body of ethical prescriptions whose role is to supervise (i.e., to permit and to limit) the 'deviations' of emotive language;" and, finally, as a social practice "Rhetoric is that privileged technique (since one must pay in order to acquire it) which permits the ruling classes to gain *ownership of speech*" which they endeavor to do, "Language being a power," and power being the assurance of privilege (14).

As the long history of denigration against sophistic shows, fears have always existed, and persist, that rhetoric as a ludic practice could undermine and, if left unchecked, could overwhelm "serious" discourse. Taxonomies can work to stem such fears by keeping sophistic in check and differentiated from "serious' discourse. For example, Barthes, here himself contributing to efforts to purify communication, brands ludic practice as "black" and a "mockery" of legitimate speech that should be "coded" and segregated. What Gaonkar calls the "manifest history of rhetoric" is a continuous attempt to arrive at pure communication that has cast out the impure. Accordingly, such "manifest history" has traditionally viewed "ironies, games, parodies, erotic or obscene allusions, classroom jokes, a whole schoolboy practices" as aberrations in need of policing and eradication. Such prejudice keeps comedy and humor cast as a dark manifestation of rhetorical practice that deserves to be handed a dunce's cap and sent to the corner.

At the same time, it is striking that Barthes mentions mockery as "only natural." If it is natural but unseemly, could it make up part of rhetoric's "hidden history," its natural but unsightly coexisting reality, rhetoric's underbelly? (Gaonkar 167). Play is an aspect of persuasion that cannot be eradicated because it is as unavoidable as it is essential. No matter how tightly rhetors grip the first five practices, this "black" rhetoric seeps through, because it was always already there to begin with.

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In other words, from this perspective, practicing rhetoric as a *technique*, a *teaching*, a *science*, an *ethic*, or a *social practice*, is no less ludic, or rooted in language play than what Barthes labels a *ludic* practice. All communication is persuasive and all persuasion is, in some sense, playing a game. However, to make such a claim is not to say that communication can never be, in any sense, "serious" but that, as will be tested out below in regards to *On What Is Not*, it can be both at the same time. In much the same way that Haraway suggests irony is simultaneously "about humour and serious play," the boundary between seriousness and playfulness, much like the semantics/pragmatics boundary, is theoretical at best (291). Weaver suggests that the "serious existence" of contradictory discourses "need not be threatened" by a "humorous event" but rather "both discourses may exist without 'seriously' challenging each other" (21). As Muckelbauer expresses it, "the practices of explanation are no less performative or demonstrative than a performance or a demonstration," or, in Fish's words, "seriousness is just another style, not the state of having escaped style" such that "serious man is himself a supremely fictional achievement" (208).

According to Wardy, "To learn about Gorgias is to learn about what continues to matter in rhetoric" in part because Gorgias not only initiated "the great rhetoric debate" but also "gave unequalled expression to some of its most vital components," (*BR* 3). *On What is Not* is a treatise of Gorgias that survives only in summary. Its argument can be taken in three parts: "(a) nothing is; (b) even if it is, it is incomprehensible to man; (c) even if it is comprehensible, it is incommunicable to the next man" (MacDowell 11). Although "The interpretation of what Gorgias is saying is difficult," and even its general meaning is far from agreed upon, Kerferd argues that, "Its importance can hardly be overestimated…Its treatment by scholarship in many ways epitomizes the problem of the scholarly approach to the sophistic movement as a whole"

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because "It is, after all, probably the nearest we have or will ever have to a complete technical presentation of an articulated sophistic argument from the fifth century B.C." (93).

Although "It is both more technical and more organized than the *Dissoi Logoi*," Kerferd finds the two artifacts otherwise comparable in that Gorgias builds his argument out of "inferred contradictions and opposing logoi" which, as was discussed in chapter one, is also the essential feature of antilogic, solidly establishing the "antilogic character of the treatise" (95). While the view has long been held that "it was not meant seriously, but that it was composed simply as a parody or joke against philosophers," there have also been others who argue that it should be taken as a serious piece of philosophy (Kerferd 93).

I would like to suggest that the deliberate antilogic character of the treatise is directly responsible for its ludic tagging as well as the consequent long-standing debates as to whether or not it should be taken seriously or as a joke. It is a sophistic artifact that not only supports the idea that contradiction lies at the heart of amusement, but also calls into question divisions between rhetoric and philosophy as well as comic and serious discourse. If antilogic is indeed a means of drawing out and framing contradiction, and contradiction, as argued in chapter one, is indeed at the heart of amusement, then it should come as no surprise that the document could be taken as a joke. Should this, however, preclude the possibility that it can be taken, in some sense, seriously?

Illustrating this mixed response, Guthrie, in his *History of Greek Philosophy*, is somewhat dismissive saying, "It is all, of course, engaging nonsense" (197), while D. M. MacDowell, in his analysis, identifies three ways the text may be taken: (1) as a mere joke (2) as a piece of parody that "can have a serious purpose too" and (3) as a piece of serious philosophy coming from a "serious philosopher" (11). Considering these possibilities, MacDowell muses,

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"Was it a serious contribution to philosophy, or merely a display of skill at argument…a piece of fun…It certainly appears at first sight to be ludicrous to argue at length that what does not exist does not exist, and that what exists does not exist, and then (as if that were not enough) that what exists and what does not exist do not both exist (11). As Isocrates exclaimed, "How could one outdo Gorgias who dared to say that of existing things none exists?" (Sprague 42).

In *The Birth of Rhetoric*, Wardy argues that Gorgias's "greatest originality" was "deliberately *subverting* generic *expectations*: not only in confusing one type of rhetorical discourse with another, but also in eroding the distinction between rhetoric and philosophy itself" (9). For Wardy, this was accomplished because Gorgias "dislocated philosophy by obstinately hovering between 'serious' and 'playful' intentions" (51). Likewise, the objective here is not to take a side in this debate but to celebrate the resultant taxonomic ambiguity that has been the result of very similar questions being asked by multiple people in much the same way. As Wardy puts it, a reading of *On What Is Not* "will reveal that this difficulty in classifying Gorgias, so far from being a mere taxonomic side-issue, goes to the heart of his unparalleled contribution to the history of rhetoric" (8).

In the treatise, Gorgias draws out and presents "self-contradictory statements or propositions" through paradox, or "literally 'what opposes opinion,'" (Wardy, *BR* 7). As Wardy observes, *Paradoxologia* "embraces both paradoxical thought and paradoxical expression" and is an indispensable aspect of the work (6) the title of which could be where "we confront our first paradox" and which might also "preserve a significant Gorgianic joke" (15). The disjunctive title mirrors *On Nature or On What Is*, the disjunctive title of a work by Melissus, such that it is "tempting to read Gorgias as setting out to shock philosophical expectations by inverting Melissus" and "blithely equating nature—what really is—with nothing" (15). In any case, for

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Wardy, "there is no doubt that Gorgias is flying in the philosopher's face, and wants us to recognize that he is" (16). As Fish puts it, this is an "outrageous assertion that flies in the face of common sense" and yet, while working to grab one's attention, might also obscure a serious point (209).

In this case, the "primary message," or the "hallmark of the entire work," is the "arrested or self-destructive communication" that Gorgias expresses by identifying *logos* as the paradoxical tool through which "we attempt to convey our thoughts to one another" (Wardy, *BR* 15, 24)

> 'When a person does not have something in his thought, how will he acquire it
> from another through *logos* or some sign different from the thing, if not, when it
> is a colour, by seeing, when it is a noise, by hearing? For to begin with, the
> speaker says neither noise nor colour, but *logos*; so it is not possible to have either
> colour or noise in thought, only to see the one, hear the other' (980^b 3-8). (18-9)

Gorgias problematizes communication in general by framing it as a dubious concept, "How will the listener have the same thing in mind? For it is not possible that the same thing be simultaneously in a number of things which are separate, since then the one thing would be two' (980^b 9-11)" (20). In other words, "given Gorgias' presumptions about communication," such a model would effectively communicate that "communication is impossible: which," according to Wardy, "is precisely the desired conclusion" (20-1). Obviously, however, "the mere act of hearing or reading and understanding *what Gorgias says* is enough to show that this cannot be true" (19). The solution to this riddle is that "successfully *saying* that communication cannot occur must lead to self-contradiction and paradox…the most obvious consequence of Gorgias's *paradoxologia*: his message refutes itself" (21). In other words, this joke suggests that the only

communication available to anyone is a kind of efficacious miscommunication, in which the *logos* the listener receives never entirely matches up with the *logos* the speaker delivers.

In "The Philosophy of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Philosophy," Wardy, addressing whether or not *On What Is Not* is "serious philosophical nihilism," or simply "light relief from Parmenides?" asks, "Can he be serious?" and even more importantly, "How do we gauge seriousness?" (47). Directly echoing MacDowell's three options for how to take the work listed above, Wardy offers three ways to read *On What Is Not*, (1) "One might be inclined to favor a 'straight' reading" in the sense that "Gorgias is working critically within the philosophical tradition, albeit indirectly" (2) "On the other hand, one might be attracted by a 'parodic' reading" and (3) "Finally, we might consider a 'ludic' reading: *On What Is Not* is a sort of joke" (*BR* 22-3). Self-deprecatingly, he even considers the possibility that the joke is one him,

> But is it philosophy? Or is it merely a cerebral joke? A joke of which I am the butt, for having just acted the part of a dismally dull philosopher breaking a 'sophistical' butterfly on the wheel. One might have thought that nothing would be easier than telling apart real (and thus serious) philosophy from jokes of any kind. (*BR* 22)

Debate about how to classify the treatise not only highlights the difficulty of delineating between serious and comic discourse, it also indicates what might very well be an essential problem with such divisions, a problem that will not be cleared up with more elaborate divisions. In other words, asking whether or not a text like *On What Is Not* is a joke could be a trick question in which the trap and temptation is to give a definitive answer.

Alternatively, this text is sometimes discussed as being both serious and comic in a way that still attempts to maintain essential distinctions between the two categories. For example,

although MacDowell admits that the title of the work "seems like a comic parody of Parmenides and others who wrote books entitled On Nature, or On What Is" he also argues that "parody can have a serious purpose too" (11). In this case, as MacDowell points out, some scholars take the position that Gorgias pursued the legitimate objective of refuting the philosophical views of Parmenides "by reducing them to absurdity" (11). In a similar manner, Wardy suggests that "*On What Is Not* might well work most seriously and effectively against philosophical pretentions in the very act of appearing to collapse into a philosophical joke" (*BR* 29). Such positions seem to imply that joking can pass as acceptable if it is done for a "serious" purpose. In other words, to argue that comic material can, in some sense, be serious might miss the mark about as much as arguing that serious discourse can occasionally strike as comic.

To give, or decline to give, a definite answer about *On What is Not* could be taken as a way to identify one as part of what Fish calls "serious man" or, respectively, as "rhetorical man," hypothetical groups that are roughly equivalent to what Richard Lanham calls *homo seriosus* and *homo rhetoricus*. These two groups look at communication from different perspectives such that from the perspective of the former groups serious premises "all rhetorical language is suspect" while from a "rhetorical point of view, transparent language seems dishonest, false to the world" (Fish 208). The major difference is that *Homo seriosus* calls for distinction between essence and the contingent, while "for rhetorical man the distinctions (between form and content, periphery and core, ephemeral and abiding) invoked by serious man are nothing more than the scaffolding of the theatre of seriousness, are themselves instances of what they oppose" (Fish 208). Accordingly, then, "What serious man fears" is "what rhetorical man celebrates and incarnates," namely, the infiltration of this easily penetrable framework or "fortress of essence" by "the contingent, the protean and the unpredictable" that exposes it as a façade (Fish 208).

What has resulted is a continuous battle, or at least a continuous "tension," between serious man and rhetorical man that is framed by a hope, on the side of *homo seriosus*, "that unadorned right reason will necessarily, if only eventually, prevail, and a besetting anxiety lest false yet efficacious persuasion subvert the truth" (Wardy, "PRRP" 49). This, for Wardy, is the context, already fully articulated in fifth century B.C. Greece, which facilitated "the opportunity for Gorgias' joke" (49). And just as the original context is still familiar territory, Gorgias' response still resonates such that "This joke was to become," and remains, "rhetoric's riposte to the arrogant pretension of philosophy—according to the rhetoricians; and rhetoric's not so funny menace to philosophy's vital separation of licit from illicit attempts to persuade—according to the philosophers" (49).

Wardy also suggests that Gorgias's best known work, the *Encomium of Helen*, can be taken as a joke, a suggestion seemingly justified by the closing lines of the document in which Gorgias disclaims serious intent but that he wrote the document "as an amusement" for himself (*BR* 51). Taking the document as a simple amusement is a tempting option given its main theme is the "force and attractions of deceit" (28) to the extent that the document "fingers itself as a perfect specimen of underhanded persuasion" (50). However, as Wardy points out, this parting shot from Gorgias provides a way out that is perhaps too easy, a shelter in which to "take refuge from Gorgias" by chalking the whole thing up to "a harmless joke" instead of confronting the idea that "persuasion is manipulation" when we "are made to pity Helen and execrate Paris" (5).

Just as any good joke should, by providing laughter to be mulled over, the *Encomium* allows the reader to "enjoy the deception with which Gorgias amuses us" and then, "as we discern it…we feel in our own souls the seduction of rhetoric" (Wardy, *BR* 51). Although it is tempting to let Gorgias' disclaimer mean the *Encomium* is not important because it is not serious,

Wardy warns that, much like what "we have already learnt [about] *On What Is Not*...it would be quite unwise to infer that if the *Encomium* is (in some respects) not serious, it therefore is not an important text" (29). In much the same way as epideictic, jokes are often taken as not serious because they are considered a "showing off, an act of display" that "suggests frivolity rather than weight" (28). In sum, Wardy germanely paints Gorgias as a comic orator whose "Gorgianic programme" was one of "pleasurable confusion" which brought about the birth of rhetoric tongue in cheek with two jokes (29).

Play, Indeterminacy, and the Ouroboros

Derrida suggests that "the *problem of language* has never been simply one problem among others" but *the* problem to the extent that "all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play" (6). This is because

> The signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signified in general, affects them always already, the moment they *enter the game*. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. (7)

In this Derridian sense then, all persuasion, all communication, is ludic since all language practices are inevitably involved in play between the signifier and the signified. As a practice, comedy embraces this play as it pragmatically goes about recapturing "all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language" and situating it back within the context of the imprecise and uncertain (6). This means that comedy, far from being something to discount, is a complex, even if confounding, language game that has much to tell us. However, as Galligan observes,

"Obvious as it is, comedy's image of play has been a problem for theorists of comedy and for the most part they have treated it only in passing" (37). On the contrary, the main task of this dissertation is to examine how stand-up comedians engage indeterminacy in a way that frames comedy as a way to navigate language theory.

For example, although Ellen DeGeneres sometimes starts a show with "one obligatory gay reference," she does not repeat a singular message about diversity because that would ignore the rhythms of language play incorporating contradiction, it would work against doing comedy, "I have to say something gay otherwise people might leave here tonight thinking 'she didn't do anything gay. She's not our leader. What happened to our leader?'" However, even her one "gay reference" is more indeterminate word-play than straight-forward shout-out. She comes on stage and, referencing her audience, exclaims: "what's great about this is you have a room full of people and everybody is so different and we're all here for different reasons. Everybody has a different story." She goes on to narrate a few hypothetical examples. Finally, she concludes: "The point is…we're all here. And with all of our differences there's one thing we all have in common—we're all gay." With duplicitous fun, DeGeneres makes what must be, to any heterosexual audience member, an ironic statement, but what also may strike, to her LGBT audience, as an empowering call to solidarity. By blurring distinctions between irony and hyperbole she manages to craft a statement that is neither expressly unifying nor discordant but concurrently both.

By addressing her audience this way, DeGeneres moves away from what John Muckelbauer calls "negative movement pointing" and towards what he advocates as an "affirmative sense of change" (xi). In his introduction to *The Future of Invention*, Muckelbauer explains that his project is to "problematize the dialectical image of change" as "always and

everywhere the effect of overcoming and negation" that he sees this taking place every time "a new concept, a different social structure, a divergent form of subjectivity, a fresh reading, or an innovative technology" struggles to emerge only by "somehow overcoming or negating particular others—outdated concepts, oppressive social structures, limited models of subjectivity" (x). Instead, he advocates engagement with an "affirmative sense of invention" through the expression of "imprecision" in different ways and in different styles to the extent that imprecision can come to be seen as "perfectly precise" (xii).

In *The Future of Invention*, Muckelbauer attempts to explicate some of this precise imprecision by charting the difference between what he terms *signification* and *asignification* which he roughly aligns with the theoretical difference between communication and persuasion. Muckelbauer holds persuasion as "not identical to practices that emphasize the central role of understanding, practices that we might generally refer to as 'communicative'" so that it becomes "important to accent" the "distinctiveness" between acts of "communication" and acts of "persuasion" (17). For Muckelbauer, "Communication and persuasion have undoubtedly both served as supplements to the proposition" which means that both have "traditionally been assigned the task of transmitting" and "reproducing" propositions (17). However, Muckelbauer sees important distinctions in the "dynamics" through which these functions are effected and uses the terms *signifying* and *asignifying* to distinguish the differences (17).

For Muckelbauer, a *signifying operation* can be thought of as an act of communication that attempts "to transmit its proposition through understanding" by reproducing "as accurately as possible, the proposition in the mind of its audience" (17). It is a view of rhetorical practices that privileges meaning by envisioning propositions as "preexisting" and "identifiable" that a communicative model then "responds to" by signifying a message in a reproducible way (17).

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On the other hand, an *asignifying* operation endeavors to make the proposition "compelling" by applying a "force" or inducing "particular responses" in the audience as opposed to "attempting to identically reproduce…the proposition's meaning or content" in their minds (17). He identifies an *asignifying* force of language as the "dimension of language that is irreducible to questions of meaning and understanding" (13). He points out that "because of rhetoric's traditional concern for persuasion (rather than communication), it has been intimately involved with questions of force rather than questions of signification or meaning" (13).

In sum, for Muckelbauer, "If communication is fundamentally a signifying operation, then it makes sense to say that persuasion is fundamentally an *asignifying* operation, interested in provoking the proposition's effects rather than facilitating its understanding" (18). As though reliable and consistent differentiations can be made between "being" and "doing," Muckelbauer argues that acts of persuasion are mainly interested in what a proposition *does*, in terms of "the responses it provokes and the effects it engenders," while acts of communication remain primarily interested in what the proposition *is*, in terms of principle meanings and understandings (18).

While insisting that signification and asignification operations are not "coextensive," he does concede that "this asignifying orientation of rhetoric is never simply separate from the operations of signification" either (13). If this concession also works in reverse, if the signifying orientations of communication are likewise never simply separate from asignification, then the implication is that language is never merely a matter of meaning and understanding. What emerges is a signification/asignification or a communication/persuasion boundary that is as hypothetical as the semantics/pragmatics boundary discussed above, mainly useful as a location from which to start asking questions and employing theory.

A peculiar quality of projects, like Muckelbauer's, that seek to investigate aspects of sophistic rhetoric is that if the process is successful it will uncover booby-traps, or what Eric White refers to as a "slipknot," which may threaten to unravel the objectives of the study (161). In other words, just when it is thought that something has been nailed down, or captured, the curtain is pulled back to reveal that a "vanishing act" has taken place (White 161). Ironically, this does not indicate an oversight in the study or a weakness of method but rather indicates that something important has been hit upon. The following are three quick examples which elucidate the complexities and celebrate the challenges of such studies.

For example, Muckelbauer, in the project of his outlined above, is confident that "at the level of a proposition" his argument is "pretty straightforward," but he must admit that "what makes the situation a bit more complicated" is that his argument also opens up the possibility that

> propositions and arguments (including the one I just outlined) are not the most
> important aspects of scholarship. That is, as I pursued this affirmative sense of
> change I realized that it challenged my conventional understanding of scholarly
> inquiry, particularly concerning how one reads, composes, and writes about texts.
> As a result, the very practices of inquiry in which I was engaged seemed to be at
> stake through the pursuit (x).

In other words, by allowing admittance to implications his study that may undercut, Muckelbauer is calling attention to the idea that consumption and creation are co-actions.

In a similarly way, Jay Dolmage, in *Disability Rhetoric*, finds that investigating the sophistic rhetorical strategy of mêtis, or "cunning intelligence" must include a confrontation with the "contradiction or doubleness at the heart of mêtis" that "disallows strict schematizations" of

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the trope (162). For Dolmage, "It is impossible to argue that any individual can fully control or master mêtis, or ever fully evade the control and mastery of others," which suggests that there is a direct, albeit paradoxical, relationship between embracing or gripping mêtis as a rhetorical tool and letting go of rhetorical control (162). The possibility of such a relation means that it is probably not possible to comfortably "pin down mêtis" with a definition and also, he admits, "offers an interesting warning to someone like me—the author of a book about mêtis" (164). Although living with such a rhetorical paradox might prove unnerving, Dolmage makes it clear that any "discomfort is certainly essential to the power of the concept" (164).

Finally, Eric White prefaces *Kaironomia*, his formal praise, or "encomium" of the "will-to-invent," by warning readers that his essay should only "be read and enjoyed as dismissable speculation" since, after candid analysis, he must admit that his work can claim "no conclusive preeminence" nor offer "theoretical resolution or closure" on a process that "must constantly be renewed" and thrives on "plural orchestration" (9). White finds, in retrospect, that his efforts to "promote a practice of speculative thought alert to its own occasion," has been continually "undermined by a contrary impulse which would transcend history in order to achieve a conclusive, enduring form" (161)

Alternatively, he hopes his efforts will stimulate further invention and therefore "prove by its own example that inventiveness depends" on a kind of "flexibility" that can bend back in upon, and threaten to consume itself (9) since "the will-to-invent can renew itself only by withdrawing assent from its latest production" (161). He concludes by suggesting that his "provisional and revocable" essay has performed a "vanishing act…like that of a slipknot" such that his readers are left in place where a new perspective has been imperceptivity slipping over and consuming the initial perspective (161).

The ancient symbol of a serpent eating its tail, what in Greek is called the *Ouroboros*, has been used for many purposes and has acquired many meanings. Most commonly used to symbolize the metaphysical principle of eternal recurrence, in the context of this dissertation, it is used to symbolize the rhetorical process of consumption and recreation, or death and renewal, of discourse in a constant cycle which generates, and is fueled by, the sophistic principle of perpetual rhetorical contradiction. In other words, the *Ouroboros* symbolizes what is done with contradiction, or the "work" of persuasion, as a hunting and devouring of available meanings in order to continually generate new meanings. Not only does all persuasion consume other acts of persuasion, but every act of persuasion prompts the cycle to continue. It is a primordial force that cannot be stopped or halted and rejects death by virtue of continuous feeding. The following are two examples, specifically, an iteration of the Abbott and Costello baseball routine and *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*, which illustrate the complex dynamic of the *Ouroboros* consuming and creating, the slip-knot forming and slipping, invention prompting a vanishing act.

Who's On First?

Since becoming popular in the 1930s, the Abbott and Costello baseball routine has been reiterated many times and in many different ways. For example, on *The Tonight Show*, Johnny Carson performed a version by playing Ronald Regan getting confused by Hu, Watt, and Yassir. In an episode of *The Simpsons*, superintendent Chalmers gets on stage at a school assembly and attempts to entertain the students by performing the routine with Principal Seymour Skinner, "Well Seymour, it seems we've put together a baseball team and I was wondering, who's on first?" Seymour then promptly ruins the fun by replying, "Yes, not the pronoun but rather a player with the unlikely name of 'Who,' is on first." "Well that's just great, Seymour, we've

been out here six seconds and you've already managed to blow the routine!" And finally, Jay Leibowitz and David Foubert, members of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, wrote and occasionally perform *Who Doth Inhabit the Primary Position?* Written entirely in iambic pentameter, their script lends the routine a lighthearted Elizabethan twist. Although all of these iterations certainly incorporate the original gag, they also create new jokes in ways that illustrate what the *Ouroboros* symbolizes.

Danielle Deveau, in her 2012 dissertation on Canadian stand-up comedy, cites an anecdote by Mark Peterson in which the routine makes an appearance: The scene is a baseball field somewhere in Midwestern Pennsylvania. A group of fathers, the author (Peterson) among them, are waiting to pick up their daughters at the end of their first softball practice

> The coach is playing a game with the girls to test their knowledge of baseball rules, asking questions and tossing them candies when they answer correctly. The parents, mostly fathers, stand awkwardly in a circle watching. We are waiting to collect our daughters and take them home. We do not know one another yet. The coach runs out of questions. She still has two girls who have not earned a candy and she does not want them to go home empty handed. She looks up at the parents, hopefully. "Can anybody think of another question?" "Who's on first?" says one of the fathers. Several of us grin. "What's on second?" asks another. "I don't know," says the first man. "Third base!" I offer. Two other men say it simultaneously with me. We are all grinning at each other now. The ice has been broken. We still do not know one another, yet some kind of connection has been made. The coach rolls her eyes. Our children gaze at us in perplexity. (Deveau 16)

Deveau argues that even though Peterson's intent, by including the story, is "merely to illustrate the way in which intertextual knowledge of mass media is used to form social bonds," it is also important to notice that this was not "merely an intertextual reference to mass media, but a *humorous* reference" (15 her emphasis). For Deveau, this is important because the "humorous and playful nature of the intertextual exchange allowed the participants to enter into a social relationship" which, additionally, also happens to be a "heavily gendered" connection made among men (16). Although she grants Peterson benefit of the doubt about possible "coincidental" gender divides, it should be noted, in support of Deveau's observation, how clearly Peterson marks gender into the story. Although it may have been difficult to remain gender neutral in regards to the coach, he surely did not need to mention the fact that a majority of the parents were fathers. There is clearly a gender issue at stake as well as intertextual humor at play.

Deveau stresses that "The softball dads did not simply use intertextuality to produce a social bond. They used intertextual humour," which, she argues, is more effective at creating social bonds than "merely the performance of a shared cultural knowledge" (16). Placing social bonds aside for a moment, if an attempt is made to pin down what is humorous about this "intertextual humour" and check it against the "cultural knowledge" that they are sharing, it becomes clear that the softball dads did not simply "use humour" in the sense of taking a joke, as a prepackaged unit, and reiterate it in a new context. On the contrary, by referencing the baseball routine at an opportune moment, the softball dads created a new and unique joke that also happens to be at the expense of the girls and the coach. This is why the manner in which gender plays out in the anecdote is important and why Deveau's insights about the gendered nature of those exchanges are germane.

Deveau argues that "The male spectators enjoy a joke, while the female coach responds humorlessly, perhaps even with passive annoyance" because the fathers "produce a social bond by creating an in-group who participated in the joke, and two distinct out-groups who did not" (16). In other words, it is important to note that the fathers are laughing at Abbott and Costello but they are also laughing at the coach and the girls. Additionally, Deveau observes that "While the coach may well have understood the reference, in the given context she does not choose to participate in the shared performance of referential humour. It is unlikely that she was an intended participant to begin with" (17). If this observation is correct, it means that the fathers have put the coach in a difficult position. She must decide to align herself with the fathers (and laugh at the girls) or align herself with the girls and be laughed at.

By making a cultural reference that baffles the girls and consternates the coach, the fathers align themselves with Abbott and place the coach and the girls in the position of Costello—a bumbling fool who wears his hat incorrectly and hits himself in the back of his head with the baseball bat. In sum, the fathers have consumed the original Abbott and Costello text and recreated it to form a new joke that subtly disparages the coach and the girls. After all, the main targets aggressed by the original joke were the jokesters themselves (but certainly not this particular coach or her girls). In other words, if it can be shown that there is a new target, then there must be a new joke. This distinction, even if slight, is vital. If Deveau's analysis of the gendered nature of the relationship between the fathers is correct, then the joke that she credits with its construction is at once a retelling and a first telling.

If the three branches of traditional Humor Studies were used to approach Peterson's anecdote, the incongruity theory could be used to focus on the juxtaposition of the "serious" questions of the coach and the tongue-in-cheek responses of the fathers while the disparagement

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theory could stress the ridicule the fathers are placing on the coach and girls. Lastly, the release/relief theory could be used to explain the men's laughter as a release of tension brought on by psychological discomfort they may have been experiencing from "a collective boredom with softball spectatorship" or the inherent role reversal present between coach and parents. From that perspective, the men could even be viewed as laughing at themselves in a type of self-disparagement.

From the perspective of this dissertation, the Abbott and Costello text emerges and occupies new meaning because the *kairos* of that moment provides just the right time and place for it to do so. For example, the coach's request for help gave the first speaker the opportunity to make a remark that, in all likelihood, would not have worked very well—or become a joke at all—without the invitation for assistance. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the others fathers then joined in and helped create something new and inseparable from its context. As was discussed in chapter one, amusement is generated by the juxtaposition of different but valid meanings that the *kairos* of that moment made possible. The disparagement against the coach and girls, as was discussed in chapter two, is problematized by the fact that the fathers are not merely being insulting but also referencing the Abbott and Costello routine. This new joke is about both. That is what makes it a joke. Additionally, the coach's role in the exchange, specifically, her lack of laughter, highlights the participatory nature of humor that was discussed in the inter-chapter. The essential nature of laughter gained traction in that chapter when consideration was given to Limon's suggestion that laughter is what actually turns "jokes into jokes" (13).

Certainly then, a humorous text has a "knack for extending beyond its intended context" (Deveau 17). What is more, as will be discussed in the next section, a serious text can be

consumed and recreated as something humorous, and vice versa. In other words, instead of bring

up the baseball routine, the fathers could very well have used some other shared cultural

knowledge that, in an earlier context, was no joke at all. For example, many of Dennis Miller's

jokes depend on cultural knowledge that is not only "serious" but also happens to be,

unfortunately, often so obscure that many people find his jokes impenetrable. They do not

recognize the earlier cultural contexts of his references and so the new forms he puts them in are

incomprehensible. Miller's jokes, which rely on uncommon references, have then sometimes

become the target of jokes from other comedians. In other words, the *Ouroboros* symbolizes the

relationship between form and context. Form changes context at the same time that every new

context carries potential new form.

The Lenny Bruce Performance Film

In "The Asignifying Force of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*," Kevin Casper takes

Muckelbauer's terms and investigates some of the "imprecision" between communication and

persuasion in *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*. For Casper, imprecision in the film can be

examined by tracing the "constant liminal movements between the conceptual dichotomies

serious/non-serious, context/acontextual, performative/constantive and force/meaning" that take

place during Bruce's on-stage performance (361). The result, Casper argues, is a piece of work

that should be "considered in concert with a small but growing body of work within rhetoric

calling for an increased focus on asignification" (360).

Although, by framing his analysis this way, Casper appears to be working to further

conflate what Muckelbauer views as the already murky divide between communication and

persuasion, by the end of his examination, he instead reaffirms Muckelbauer's argument that

"the fact that these two dimensions exist in close proximity does not indicate that they are the same" (360). Casper makes it clear that he is joining with other contemporary rhetoricians who are interested in asignifying operations but who are also not looking "to replace the traditional communication model" by privileging "language's role in provoking responses and effects above language's role at creating meaning and understanding" because that "would simply be replacing one system with another" (360-1). However, Casper's own analysis of *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* lays out how it "deconstructs…theoretical dichotomies" and "illustrates how the division between serious and non-serious contexts will not hold" in a way that suggests these systems lack the sort of internal integrity that would allow them to remain distinct and be swapped out (357-9). This carries heavy implications for any conceptual dichotomy which attempts to keep a system of persuasion ("responses and effects") apart from a system of communication ("meaning and understanding") (360).

The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* is a recording of Bruce's penultimate show filmed in a single shot by John Magnuson in August 1965. A distinctive feature of this performance is that Bruce spends a considerable amount of his time on stage reading verbatim from copies of court transcripts of his then recent obscenity case dated April 3, 1964, *People of New York versus Lenny Bruce and Howard Solomon*. Throughout, Bruce reads from the documents, responds by explaining and justifying his material, attempts to re-perform some of the bits under scrutiny, and narrates some of the actions taken by police officers and members of the court. In other words, for all intents and purposes, the film documents Bruce "performing his own defense before the nightclub audience who pose as the grand jury" (360). In so doing, Casper envisions Bruce performing "a contemporary version of the ancient orator," or Socrates like figure, on trial for corrupting the young which, as it so happens, fits in directly with a conceit, discussed in the

introduction, that some ancient orators, if alive today, would be drawn to the rhetoric of stand-up comedy (344). In this case, Casper sees Bruce as "a public speaker whose efforts to provoke laughter in his audience produce some of the very unintentional and uncontrollable effects that have caused rhetoricians anxiety for centuries" (344).

Casper uses *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film* to illustrate how "humorous appeals in the form of jokes," are "reinscribed and reinvented in multiple contexts that produce a wide array of effects" such that a humorous appeal is "always already interrupted by its future instantiations and can never fully be restricted to a given context" (343). For Casper, this "wide array of effects" includes the troubling of boundaries between numerous theoretical dichotomies such as: "the performative as a specific type of speech act and performativity as a type of performance;" Austin's "performatives" and "constatives;" his ordinary and unordinary "circumstances;" his contextual and acontextual inscriptions; and between his "serious" and "non-serious" contexts; and finally, between the "intentional subject" and "differential effects…that exceed the intentions of the speaker" (356). Casper, following the work of Diane Davis, situates laughter as a "force" that "produces endless differential effects" by "lubricating" these liminal movements between the "traditional conceptual boundaries that continue to define the discipline" thereby calling "into question the certainty of the conceptual boundaries themselves" (348).

However, as was discussed in the inter-chapter, this project takes a different approach to laughter. In brief, laughter was considered as a playful and exuberant outburst that results when contradiction is observed and appreciated. The contradiction on display in this section is observable when theoretical boundaries are disregarded as part of the cyclical consumption and recreation of texts. In other words, laughter is a reaction to the discovery that such boundaries,

although formal and often formidable, were always already contingent and constructed and can be transgressed. Simply put, jokes and laughter do not facilitate this process; they constitute it.

Importantly then, Casper's study is problematized by a vital distinction that must be made between the idea that the film is a recording of Bruce reciting his comedy act and what Casper identifies as the film's "most humorous moments," which, he argues, "rely on the disparity between what 'they say' Bruce said and what 'Bruce says' Bruce said" (344). Such moments of disparity are examples of Bruce generating new jokes that are entirely dependent on new contexts. This troubles Casper's suggestion that jokes are units of meaning that can be lifted intact from one context and then dropped in another in a way that troubles these conceptual boundaries. Strangely, at one point, Casper even suggests that Bruce's "retellings" can be "taken on good faith to be more accurate representations of his earlier performances than the transcriptions made by the police officers in his audience" (344). On the contrary, it could be argued that no matter how accurately Bruce may have been able to remember his material, any subsequent performance of it will be surrounded by a unique context that transforms it into a new text.

Bruce actually spends a minimal amount of time in the film attempting to accurately recite material that had been discussed by the court and when he does he "often stumbles and stammers when trying to recollect his own bits" sometimes even struggling to remember what the original joke was about

> "St Paul giving up fucking." Ok, now, what I said there, that's how the bit is
> reported, what I said…I forget, it's been so long since I did the bit, I said, ah…oh,
> it's a celibate, I said, it, it…how the hell'd I do that? How celibacy was
> introduced? See, I forget the bit. Um…uh…It's weird, cause I didn't know that

was a bit, they, they put that form there, and then I forget where it started. (Casper 356)

Although this forgetfulness could be derided as a weak defense, or flawed performance, of his material, it could also be considered an entirely new performance, a new bit, which Bruce has created out of his old joke about St Paul's celibacy and the court's scrutiny of it. In other words, Bruce does less to retell the joke and much more to create a new joke in the process of trying to remember the old one. As Casper rightly points out, "Bruce's forgetting of his initial bit in this retelling…is precisely what inspires the [new] bit's laughter" (357).

On the whole, rather than reiterating old material, Bruce spends much of his time narrating actions of the court in a way that mocks the justice system. For example, Bruce explains to his audience why he was so frequently arrested

> I figured out after four years why I got arrested so many times. You see what happens…it's been a comedy of errors. Here's how it happens. I do my act at, perhaps, 11 o'clock at night. Little do I know that at 11 a.m. the next morning, before the grand jury somewhere, there's another guy [a police officer] doing my act who's introduced as Lenny Bruce, in substance. "Here he is, Lenny Bruce, in substance!" A peace officer…does the act. The grand jury watches him work and they go, "That stinks!" But *I* get busted! And the irony is I have to go to court and defend *his* act! (Casper 349)

This "comedy of errors" (as Bruce so rightly calls it), can be described in terms of the multiple consumptions and recreations that Bruce relates. First, Bruce performs his act in a comedy club while a police officer transcribes it and takes it to court where he frames it, not as a laughing matter at all, but as a serious problem in need of attention. Meanwhile, Bruce takes a

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transcription of that interaction between the judge and some police officers back to the comedy club where he reads it to his audience and reframes it as something comic

> "Alright officer…"
>
> "I don't remember the whole act, your honor, but I made these notes…Let's see now, uh, uh, Catholic, asshole, shit, uh let's see, and uh, in the park, and tits and shit and Catholics and Jews and shit. That's about all I remember, that's about the general tenor of the act."
>
> "Those are the words that he used, did he, is that all of it?"
>
> "No, your honor, it's, you know…"
>
> "But he used those words?"
>
> "Yeah, yeah, he said shit a lot of times."

According to Casper, this moment is one of the "comedic highlights" of the film and yet, it is not an occasion where a "humorous appeal in the form of a joke" has been taken from one context and placed in another but rather an instance of a new text emerging after passing through, shaping and being shaped by, multiple contexts. The *Ouroboros* unifies, through one central movement, many of the liminal actions that Casper describes as though he were describing the symbol itself.

For example, Casper argues that "the differential effects of language always already pierce the conceptual boundary between the serious and the non-serious before they are even uttered" because every text will inevitably fold "in upon itself in multiple ways" (356 344). He also describes the "asignifying force" of language as "a movement, a dynamic repetition that is always being created again and again" (347) and for which there exists an "ontological inability…to ever end" (357). The implication of this endless movement, demonstrated by the

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film, is that "no context can ever fully saturate a text" since "at the moment of inscription…language was (and is) already breaking from context and becoming part of a larger, endless citational chain" (357).

Texts are constantly being transforming into something new because all texts are in motion becoming food for, and feeding off of, other texts. This means that all utterances, not just a jokes, are unable to "resist reinscriptions" or "remain confined within the marginalia" of the dichotomies that Casper has been listing (355). In Derridian terms, every utterance, whether in speech, writing, or gesture, is a force and a departure, a "break in presence" (Signature 5). This force "breaks with its context, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription" and can "always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning" to the effect that such a force is always already movement as much as it is location (Signature 9).

This means that serious texts can be consumed and recreated as jokes and jokes can be consumed and recreated as serious texts. This was illustrated above where both the court and Bruce are attempting to reframe texts as, respectively, serious and comic. The court takes Bruce's transcribed material and recreates it as a serious obscenity case. Bruce responds by taking the court documents and reframing it as something comic. However, what direction this whirligig is moving in is a matter of interpretation, or a matter of "responses and effects" at least as much as a matter of "meanings and understandings." For example, a member of the court present at Bruce's show might not find anything humorous about the contents of the court documents and, alternatively, one of Bruce's fans present at the court proceedings might view the entire series of events as something like a comic "kangaroo court."

Finally, the *Ouroboros* symbolizes why "reading the 'edges'" of the film might bring into relief the theoretical dichotomies that the film problematizes (Casper 357). Specifically, Casper makes a connection between how the film ends and a rhetorical technique in Derrida's essays that Barbara Johnson calls a "fading in and out" such that "The beginnings and the endings of these essays are often the most mystifying part" (357). As the film nears its end, Bruce abruptly moves to a side door of the comedy club to walk out onto Broadway Street. However, before he departs, he spends a few minutes standing at the threshold, microphone still in hand, talking to some passersby and playing "at the edges of the tenuous boundary between the stage and the real world, a theoretically illusory boundary" (358). Such a "strange coda to an already unusual performance" not only highlights many of the critical questions about theoretical boundaries under discussion but also fits with the inexplicable idea of a serpent eating its own tail that represents the mysterious way that endings are connected to beginnings, insides are connected to outsides. In other words, "does Bruce's dalliance at the nightclub's threshold emphasize that—in Derridian terms—the outside is the inside?" (Casper 358).

In a way, it is opportune for this chapter that Casper chose a film about stand-up comedy in order to illustrate his ideas when he could have, perhaps, used artifacts not necessarily connected to humor to do so. However, examining what he claims are the most humorous moments in the film suggests that those jokes were produced as a direct result of the processes he claims the jokes facilitate. Counter to Casper's claim that the humor in the film (and the resultant laughter) helps question theoretical boundaries and facilitate their transgression, I would like to suggest that transgressing boundaries is a part of joking that holds such boundaries to be artificial, or artful, and may be breached at any time. And there are boundary lines between many dichotomies such as: point and counterpoint; semantics and pragmatics; acts of communication

and acts of persuasion, *signifying* and *asignifying* operations, or constative and performative utterances; ordinary and unordinary situations or serious or non-serious contexts; and deceptive and communicative (or good and bad) speech.

As it connects to the main argument of this dissertation, it is the inescapable contradiction inherent in every attempt at meaning which finds results falling, with indifference, on different sides of various boundaries. The *Ouroboros* symbolizes the manifestation of those numerous meanings in a constant cycle. In a way, that Casper's primary text is comic could be more inevitable than serendipitous in the sense that, much like White's "slip-knot," or "vanishing act," instead of an investigation of what jokes can bring about, more has been revealed about how to bring about jokes. If any text can be consumed and recreated into something comic, then the specific text chosen to illustrate the process becomes less significant.

Embracing (Cookery) Sophistic Rhetoric: "The Art of Contradiction Making" (Plato)

> *The speech I love is a simple, natural speech, the same on paper as in the mouth; a speech succulent and sinewy, brief and compressed, not so much dainty and well-combed as vehement and brusque. – Montaigne*

Muckelbauer differentiates persuasion and communication by calling persuasion an "*art of communication*" that is "not principally" about "understanding and meaning" but rather about "provoking responses and effects" (19). Poulakos, in "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," suggests that all rhetorical efforts are artistic by arguing that "the whole enterprise of symbolic expression falls within the region of art," an art which "moves beyond the domain of logic and, satisfied with probability, lends itself to the flexibility of the contingent" (56-7). However, for Poulakos, it is also important to "place the controversy between Plato and the

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Sophists in the right light" such that rhetoric is understood as "the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is appropriate" (56-7). Specifically

> Rhetoric as art does not admit criteria appropriate to strictly epistemological or axiological matters; nor does it call for the same considerations which rhetoric as argument does. Thus, some of the well-known Platonic charges against rhetoric become inapplicable. In distinction to *episteme*, rhetoric does not strive for cognitive certitude, the affirmation of logic, or the articulation of universals. (57)

In other words, the "right light" is still roughly equivalent to Muckelbauer's separation of persuasion from communication. In this way, Muckelbauer and Poulakos are both participating in the not uncommon tendency to question, but then reaffirm, theoretical boundaries between art and argument, or communication and persuasion. This chapter has been framing jokes, and the resultant laughter, as a "bit of fun" which nevertheless constitutes evidence, often hiding in plain sight, of conflation between these boundaries that makes their reaffirmation problematic. Jokes, when they are admitted, support the idea that every rhetorical effort is the product of an *art*—albeit in a non-pejorative sense.

Put another way, if, as an art, rhetoric cannot be counted on to "strive for cognitive certitude, the affirmation of logic, or the articulation of universals," then what will? Is rhetoric the best we have? Wayne Booth responds to this quandary by arguing that "Once we give up the limiting notions of language and knowledge willed to us by scientism, we can no longer consider adequate any notion of 'language as a means of communication'" (1974). And well before Booth, Nietzsche argued that "There is obviously no unrhetorical 'naturalness' of language to which one could appeal; language itself is the result of purely rhetorical arts" (*Rhetoric and Language* 1873). If rhetorical arts are the only path to knowledge, then the contingency which

always accompanies forms of art, including humor, must bear down on epistemology. As Zwagerman boldly suggests, "humor is not only a way of using words but an epistemology" (4). Discomfort with the idea that the pursuit of knowledge could be vulnerable to probability and subject to the "flexibility of the contingent" prompts attempts to set up rules and guidelines for the use of rhetorical tools. This keeps the art of rhetoric in check and helps maintain the illusion that there can be a reliable distinction between rhetoric and "cognitive certitude, the affirmation of logic, or the articulation of universals" (Poulakos 57).

It therefore becomes revealing to take special notice of what rhetoricians insist should *not* be utilized as a means of persuasion, or rhetorical tools and tactics that are labeled "inappropriate." Restriction can be prescriptive. This is why it is easier to incorporate Aristotle into a sophistic stance than vice versa. For example, could not Aristotle's dictum that "we must neither speak casually about weighty matters, nor solemnly about trivial ones…or the effect will be comic" (1408[a]) be taken as directive? Something similar can be seen in *The New Rhetoric* where, on a number of occasions, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca warn that pushing a certain trope or figure too far is done at the risk of creating a comic effect.

In fact, there are so many examples of restriction in the *Rhetoric* that it is fair to say the document is as much a list of rules and guidelines for identifying what could be called the "unavailable" means of persuasion as it is an exploration of the "available…in any given case" (1355[b]). If "available" is read as a statement of propriety, then Aristotle's famous definition of rhetoric becomes more a statement of exclusion than inclusion. A similar thing could be said about Poulakos's definition of rhetoric above, "the art which seeks to capture…that which is appropriate," where his use of the word "appropriate" instead of "available" is even more to the point (56). The flip side of this coin, like any warning against infractions which do as much to

inform the ignorant and innocent as they do to warn the tempted, is that everything Aristotle

proclaims should not be considered "available" can be picked up as a tactic that may be added to

one's rhetorical tool bag.

For example, the entire third chapter of book three of the *Rhetoric* consists of a list of

"four forms" that "bad taste in language may take," followed, no less, by accused offenders, all

of which are Sophists. He attributes "The misuse of compound words" to Gorgias, Lycophron

and Alcidamas; he holds Lycophron and Alcidamas guilty of the "employment of strange

words;" he claims that the "long" and "unseasonable" epithets of Alcidamas are "tasteless"

because, "He does not use them as the seasoning of the meat, but as the meat itself." And lastly,

he claims that bad taste may be shown in metaphor, "Metaphors like other things may be

inappropriate. Some are so because they are ridiculous; they are indeed used by comic as well as

tragic poets" (173).

Charges like these contributed to a legacy of denigration against the Sophists that painted

them as preoccupied with form and style and carefree about substance. However, even the most

ardent anti-sophistic must admit, perhaps reluctantly, that style can never be entirely separated

from content but a rhetorical reality that must be dealt with. Aristotle conceded that "It is not

enough to know *what* we ought to say; we must also say it *as* we ought" (1403^b). In a similar

way, Poulakos allows that "however small its value, style is an inescapable reality of speech, one

which must be attended to necessarily," but he finds aesthetics to be the way to limit that

attention, "to the extent that style is allowed to be seen primarily as an aesthetical issue, the

question of its superiority or inferiority to content…becomes secondary" (57-8). In other words,

Poulakos attempts to evade the issue of style by situating the dilemma where he sees it causing

the least distress, in this case, as a matter of personality "If it is agreed that what is said must be

said somehow, and that the how is a matter of the speaker's choice, then style betrays the speaker's unique grasp of language and becomes the peculiar expression of his personality. If this is so, the Sophists need no longer be misunderstood" (59).

Here, Mailloux's seemingly mild observation about the relationship between propositions and personality becomes leading. If "truth-claims are relative to persons" such that individuals engage with form uniquely and so might "understandably make different arguments about the same topic" then the unpredictability accompanying the appearance of individuals on a stand-up comedy stage (erected under the guise of giving attention to individual perspectives) simply enriches the generative possibilities of style (12). In other words, shifting the blame to personality does not clear away the concern but rather adds another factor to an incredibly complex issue.

From a sophistic perspective, far from being secondary, style and content are not only inseparable, they are indistinguishable. How a thing is said is what is said. As Fish argues in *How to Write a Sentence*

> Without form, content cannot emerge. When it comes to formulating a proposition, form comes first; forms are generative not of specific meanings, but the very possibility of meaning. Despite the familiar proverb, it is not the thought that counts. Form, form, form, and only form is the road to what the classical theorists called "invention," the art of coming up with something to say. (27)

If style is generative, then sophistic rhetoric cannot be defined by lists of tools (restricted or otherwise), but can be measured against the absence of restriction. Much like how Poulakos describes the Sophists, stand-up comedians are bound only by the limits of what *can* be said, completely "free to experiment playfully with form and style" putting words together in the

manner best suited to accomplish their goals, even if counterintuitive. For example, students are usually instructed that they should strive to write "clearly" and taught that ambiguity is an enemy of successful communication. However, those who wish to eschew obfuscation and keep to paths of disambiguation find themselves beleaguered by the rhetorical reality that language is inherently ambiguous, unruly, and prone to misunderstanding. Alternate meanings lurk around the edges of every statement.

To believe otherwise is to abide by what I. A. Richards calls, in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, the "Proper Meaning Superstition. That is, the common belief—encouraged officially by what lingers on in the school manuals as Rhetoric—that a word has a meaning of its own (ideally, only one) independent of and controlling its use and the purpose for which it should be uttered" (11). Indeed, if single words contain uncertainty, then stringing them together ad infinitum, should, like diabolical synergy, increase ambiguity exponentially; the confusion of the whole will be greater than the sum of all smaller confusions. Appropriately, Richards famously urged that rhetoric "should be a study of misunderstanding" (3).

From a sophistic perspective, words are not just ambiguous, they are practically without referential meaning. As was discussed above, this is Gorgias's central complaint in *On Nature* where he argues that words are in no way connected to "reality" since "even if things are, they cannot be known thought or grasped by human beings," and "even if they could be apprehended, they still could not be communicated to another person" (Kerferd 80). As Kerferd observes, this is because the speech or logos that we use to communicate "is not and can never be the externally subsisting objects that actually are" (80). Communications are never real "actual things, but only a logos which is always other than the things themselves" (80). As Kerferd reads Gorgias, "Once such a gulf is appreciated we can understand quite easily the sense in which

every logos involves a falsification of the thing to which it has reference" (81). The implication, for Kerferd, is that "to the extent it [logos] claims faithfully to reproduce reality it is no more than deception. Yet this is a claim which all logos appears to make. So all logos is to that extent Deception" (81).

What is more, ambiguity is not only unavoidable but can be embraced as a useful rhetorical tool. Comedians seek out and embrace ambiguity as one of many valuable rhetorical resources. They intentionally draw out alternate meanings and enliven incongruities between intents and actions. Such methods were roundly condemned by Aristotle who accused the Sophists of having nefarious motives, "Words of ambiguous meaning are chiefly useful to enable the sophist to mislead his hearers" (1404[b]). As Kerferd reflects, the "extreme modern form" of what was happening in Athens in the second half of the fifth century B.C. is "the doctrine that there are no facts and no truth, only ideologies and conceptual models and the choice between these is an individual matter" (78). As Wardy observes, fears and concerns about end states always linger because they continue to be fed by tensions "between the conviction that unadorned right reason will necessarily, if only eventually, prevail, and a besetting anxiety lest false yet efficacious persuasion subvert the truth" ("PRRP" 49).

Such apprehensions have worked to keep sophistic maligned and humor stigmatized. Indeed, if both sophistic rhetors and comics alike fashion their words in order to best accomplish their goals, it is pertinent to know what those goals are. Simply put, the end state for sophistic rhetors and comics alike is practical success. For example, in regards to the Sophists, Poulakos sees practical success reflected in how well shown are "the manifold points of view existing in a thing" (56). As was introduced in chapter one, this is also the key structure of stand-up comedy texts. Furthermore, both comics and sophistic rhetors are successful when they animate the

"special dimension of the possible" that "is afforded by the novel, the unusual" or the "unprecedented" such that their audiences will be stirred from "the vicissitudes of custom and habit" and taken "into a new place where new discoveries and new conquests can be made" (Poulakos 62).

To push boundaries by puzzling, troubling, and even confusing an audience is a legacy of the Sophists that stand-up comedians continually pick up. And it is this aspect of language games that Poulakos evokes at the end of his essay "As a group, the Sophists are known to have been the first to say or do a number of things...New thoughts, new insights, and new ideas always attract our attention not only because we have not encountered them before but also because they offer us new ways to perceive ourselves and the world" (64). As Kerferd asserts, "virtually every point in Plato's thought has its starting point in his reflection upon problems raised by the sophists" (173). However, as was discussed in the inter-chapter, in the case of stand-up comedy, there always exists one grand constraint, one unavoidable litmus test continually used against all innovation—the practical success of stand-up comedy is always measured by laughter.

Conclusion

      This dissertation studies the manner in which stand-up comedians generate amusement by presenting divergent yet pressingly applicable perspectives on topics in ways that are provocative and challenging. By considering contemporary stand-up comedy as the embodiment of a sophisticated way of thinking about how opposing views interact and coexist, this dissertation makes two main moves: First, it offers an elegant yet complex and testable theory of humor which suggests that contradiction is what lies at the heart of amusement. Second, it offers a way of framing and approaching sophistic rhetoric in a way that has not been done before. By suggesting that a central idea of sophistic rhetoric is the notion that every movement towards, or attempt at, meaning inevitably generates divergent meanings, this dissertation argues that amusement is the result when those conflicting meanings are pulled back together and presented in a captivating way. In other words, stand-up comedians are attempting to persuade their listeners to consider how apparently "incompatible things…both or all are necessary and true" (Haraway 291). Although comedians may certainly lean one way or the other by arguing *this* to the exclusion of *that*, or vice versa, this dissertation argues that amusement is most successfully generated when both *this* and *that* are somehow presented and argued for simultaneously.

      The central idea of this dissertation is that amusement is produced when apparently incompatible views are juxtaposed in a jarring but thought-provoking way. Although others have certainly noticed and commented on the connection between contradiction and humor, no one has situated contradiction as the centerpiece of a theory—cast it as the engine that generates amusement. Theorizing humor in the context of sophistic rhetoric provides a justification and guide for staying focused on contradiction because sophistic rhetoric, as I have framed it, is a practice that takes up the task of mapping out the scope and ubiquity of contradiction.

Importantly, framing sophistic rhetoric this way constitutes an escorting claim that contradiction is a hallmark of sophistic rhetoric as well. By tying the two together, and showing how they support each other, I have not only offered a way to approach humor but also a unique way to approach sophistic rhetoric.

Theories are valuable in proportion to their usefulness. Focusing on contradiction in order to examine humor has proven abundantly useful. Chapter one singles out antilogic and *dissoi logoi* as sophistic practices which demonstrate the pervasiveness of contradiction by continuously discovering and drawing "attention to the presence of such an opposition in an *argument* or in a *thing* or *state of affairs*" (Kerferd 59). Contradiction is used to offer a solution to the very "old problem" with the incongruity theory, namely, the fact that "Not all types of incongruity are humorous," by suggesting that "one type of incongruity might be humorous and another not" because some are more clearly rooted in, or reflective of, a comprehensible incomprehensibility than others (Weaver 24). The difference is that "The humor does not reside" in the incongruity, "but rather in the experience of the subject making sense of them"—or attempting to make sense of them—but with neither complete success nor complete failure (Parkin 4). In other words, in order to be amusing, incongruous elements must feature connections which present an irresistible puzzle. The nature of that puzzle is this: the more complex and yet apparently solvable—the more enticing; the more elusive and yet potentially significant the solution—the more captivating.

As the movement is made from incongruity to the seemingly incompatible theory of disparagement, contradiction provides an essential feature of humor, which is the constant Oring seeks to "bind incongruity and aggression in a concept of humor" (11). Chapter two uses the thesis of chapter one to rescue disparagement humor from the most diabolical claims of

disparagement theories which claim that disparagement is somehow inherently amusing. I argue that disparagement, by itself, is not amusing. Contradiction transforms an insult into an insulting joke and affords a source of amusement. This is true even when the disparagement in question is seemingly inextricably tied up with the joke such that to lose the disparagement would be to lose the joke. Chapter two also includes sections which apply this idea to an analysis of self-disparagement and two categories of offensive humor, racist jokes and joking about the taboo, by suggesting that all three embody contradiction in various ways. Self-disparagement seems counterproductive for establishing an ethical connection with an audience; offending an audience seems counterproductive to persuading them.

The inter-chapter offers a rhetorical interpretation of laughter as evidence of persuasion—an indication that a contradiction has been perceived and appreciated enough to provoke an exuberant visceral response. This interpretation of laughter problematizes blunt divisions between notions of 'real' and 'apparent' persuasion when the jokes in question are presenting a 'false' yet amusing argument. In other words, laughter should never be taken for granted. It always indicates that something significant, even if uncomfortable, has taken place. Discomfort stems in part from the possibility that we sometimes (perhaps?) laugh at jokes that contain an argument with which we disagree or even find offensive. Is there some 'truth' in the joke that is uncomfortable to confront? This offers a way to view comic discourse as simultaneously engaging in and, more importantly, critiquing models of argumentation.

As comedians strive to bring about laughter, their challenge is to get the audience to consider, even if just for a moment, at least two seemingly irreconcilable ideas as somehow in force. Laughter is the sign of success, even if fleeting, in doing something that cannot be exactly undone. Laughter accuses the audience of admitting, or at least wrestling with, both sides of a

contradiction. Laughter is pleasurable. Amusement is enjoyable. An interesting aspect of comedy is that it is a pleasurable way of wrestling with contradiction. There are other ways to contend with, and react to, opposing propositions including fear, perhaps even terror, as troubling assertions take on unsettling potential.

Finally, in chapter three, I answer the big 'So what?' by arguing that contradiction has far-reaching consequences and implications. By exploring the contingency and indeterminacy running through all texts, as they are regurgitated and consumed in endless cycles, the line is blurred between many dichotomies, including the distinction between serious and un-serious discourses. In other words, what does it mean that something could simultaneously be *this* and *that*? Boldly put, the implications of contradiction, as a fundamental and inevitable aspect of all communication, stretch to every realm of human knowledge and understanding. The lingering, and perhaps disconcerting, idea of chapter three is that epistemology is an endless recirculating and recycling process that cannot, and will not, ever cease, and in which we are all inextricably enmeshed. Refreshingly, startlingly, and even joyfully, this dissertation suggests that amusement is a sincere reaction, and a legitimate option, when faced with the uncertainty that defines our existence.

As mentioned in the opening sentences of this study, humor is notoriously resistant to explication. This dissertation has made a general association between humor and sophistic rhetoric in order to provide a way to approach and wrestle with "Humor's use of multiple meanings, of indirection and implication, its play with language and conventions—in a word, its shiftiness" (Zwagerman 1). This broad association has rested on a relatively singular claim about how sophisticated contradiction generates amusement. There are other characteristics of

sophistic rhetoric and principles of its practice not considered here. Those features stand to be studied and applied to these claims in order to judge how they support or detract from them.

At the same time, the claim that contradiction generates amusement stands ready to be tested against many other forms of humorous discourse which simply could not be covered in this study such as sketch parody, improvisation, other forms of performance art, as well as forms of satire. What is more, it must not be forgotten that amusement is a nearly universal phenomenon. There are probably as many ways to approach amusement as there are cultures where people can be found enjoying the experience of being amused. The arguments of this study also stand ready to be tested against multi-cultural displays of humorous genres and modes.

The main ideas of this study are applicable and teachable outside of humor studies. As it has been suggested numerous times throughout this dissertation, contradiction, in addition to being amusing, can be unsettling. It can certainly be uncomfortable to consider how both sides of a serious debate have valid points. The idea that every attempt to communicate inevitably generates divergent and conflicting meanings suggests that heated controversy over those meanings might also be an inevitable result. Legitimacy of the differing meanings will lead to conviction over their respective 'truths' which will add heat to the debate. The main ideas in this dissertation provide a justification for claiming, and a guide for understanding how, at least two differing views could be perfectly reasonable in a way that does not detract from their respective validness.

One could also experiment with various ways of joking to test how jokes can function to draw out and put the contradiction in a debate on display. Some of these hypothetical attempts at humor might be considered offensive depending on how the contradiction is framed. Or, being

offensive might be intentional. Some attempts might simply fail as humor because they do not work to bring the divergent views together very well. For example, memes are deceptively simple. It is actually quite difficult to write a funny meme. A classroom meme writing exercise could engage students, challenge their writing skills, and provide a way to flesh out the main points of a debate. In sum, there are many ways to build on and use the main ideas of this dissertation in various classrooms.

Although Parkin is "convinced that humour depends on incongruity," and laments that he has "no certainty what needs to be added to the incongruity in order that it become comic," he remains optimistic that "Perhaps one day the philosopher's stone will be found by whose agency incongruity can unerringly be converted to humour. Thus far I have not found it, nor has any other theorist with whom I am acquainted" (3). Incongruity is not lacking. It is everywhere. Incongruity is amusing when it is rooted in, reflective of, or draws out a contradiction. Like the legendary substance, the most sought-after goal in alchemy, contradiction takes incongruous things, common in their incongruousness, holds them together in a state of pressing and insistent tension because "both or all are necessary and true," and converts them into something brilliant and alluring (Haraway 291).

In an episode of *Seinfeld*, Kenny Bania, a hack comedian and foil to Jerry, laments to Jerry that his girlfriend has dumped him because she finally saw his act, "Maybe she's right. Maybe I am a complete hack." Jerry, uncommonly sympathetic, responds, "Well it's just that you have so many things with the milk. You got that Bosco bit, then you got your Nestlé's Quick bit—by the time you get to Ovaltine…" Kenny takes this as an invitation, "You think you can give me a hand with my material?" Later, after graciously deciding to help him, Jerry hands Kenny a notepad with some ideas that, as a kind of meta-joke, are poking fun at Jerry's off-show

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reputation for stand-up acts full of mildly amusing yet somewhat irrelevant cultural observations.

Kenny reads: "Why do they call it Ovaltine? The mug is round. The jar is round. They should call it 'Round-tine.'" Kenny sits there for a moment, soaking this in. Finally, looking up, his response simultaneously proclaims and attains — "That's gold, Jerry, gold!"

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