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## “A stand-up comedy routine, until it’s not” *Brahman/i: a One-Hijra Stand-up Comedy Show*

In conversation with Aditi Brennan Kapil

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This paper is meant to be a consideration on the difference between – as Chiaro (2010) puts it – “laughing with” and “laughing at” someone, when humor is performed in and by a multi-cultural and *multi-gendered* setting. It will be conducted through an analysis of a stand-up comedy show/play: *Brahman/i: a one-Hijra stand-up comedy show*, followed by an interview with the playwright Aditi Brennan Kapil. In her work, Kapil puts together humor, post-colonialism, gender issues and the struggles that sometimes life can put people through. The research aims at highlighting the way in which verbally expressed humor becomes a means to represent an identity which not only does not conform to the binary and heteronormative definitions of gender as imposed by society, but is also situated in a cultural and geographical limbo.

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## Introduction

*This play is intended to be a stand-up comedy routine, until it's not, and that shift is indicated in the script. But for the overwhelming majority it is pure stand-up, which is a personality-based form. Sometimes the funny is in the line, but frequently the funny relies on the delivery of the performer, who should at all times remember that no matter the emotional content of the speech in question, a comic chooses getting the laugh over everything and anything else (Kapil 2013, 1).*

These instructions can be found at the very beginning of the Playwright's Note in Aditi Brennan Kapil's play, *Brahman/i: a one-Hijra stand-up comedy show*. The stand-up routine is the first act of a trilogy written by Kapil, starting from 2013, titled *Displaced Hindu Gods Trilogy*.

The main linguistic tool used by the author in her stand-up comedy routine is what was defined by Chiaro (1999) as "verbally expressed humor", a chancy path of representation when speaking about social groups recognized as minorities. Indeed, the so called minorities we are referring to here – people of Indian descent in the USA, the LGBTI community, and intersex people in this specific case – are by number not the smallest groups in society, however they are still fighting to be acknowledged as having the right to exist. These minorities, which by definition are subordinated to dominant groups in political, financial or social power, regardless of their actual number (see Dictionary n.d.), are an easy target for humor. As a matter of fact, the threshold of "laughing at" instead of "with" someone (Chiaro 2010) can be easily surpassed transforming humor in an offensive and denigrating activity. On the other hand, at the same time, humor can be used as a social weapon through which to inform the audience, and help reflect upon certain issues through the use of laughter, which, at times, can work as a real facilitator of diversity awareness:

[Humor] is a complex piece of equipment for living, a mode of attack and a line of defense, a method of raising questions and criticizing arguments, a protest against the inequality of the struggle to live, a way of atonement and reconciliation, a treaty with all that is willful, impaired, beyond our power to control. (Nash 1985, 1)

The quotation in the title: "It's a stand-up comedy routine, until it's not", summarizes these two opposing but similar functions of humor: the joke is not funny anymore when the thinking becomes serious. For instance, Brahman, the high school boy protagonist of the first part of the sketch, becomes Bra-man<sup>1</sup> in the blink of an eye. Thus, the protagonist goes from being the admired coach's assistant to the boy in middle school who is growing breasts, switching from the person who laughs at other people to the person other people laugh at. Humor, in this case, is built on the difference between "us" and "them".

As a matter of fact, society imposes specific stereotypes, which lead people to think that a person must have certain physical characteristics: if you do not adhere to those stereotypes, you are considered an outsider, someone, therefore, to be laughed *at* but certainly not *with*.

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<sup>1</sup> As in the feminine garment.

Looking at the other face of the coin, though, humor can be seen as a means to empower those groups in society that are still facing discrimination, such as members of the LGBTI community. Laughter can be used as a way to fight discrimination and as an engaging instrument to inform society and increase visibility and awareness. This last function is the one that Aditi Brennan Kapil seems to bear in mind when writing her stand-up comedy routine.

Thus, this paper attempts to describe the role humor can have in addressing specific substantial issues. It falls into the theoretical framework of humor studies combined with gender studies, in a post-colonial setting, within the field of linguistics. The methodology used for this study is a qualitative analysis of the script; following a close reading of the text the most relevant examples of humor were retrieved and analyzed in a later section of this article. The wide theoretical framework described above was essential due to the multi-faceted and heterogeneous text under investigation. In fact, not only is the play humorous, making the study fall under the category of humor studies, but it deals, as well, with topics such as intersexuality and post-colonialism, which have fields of study of their own.

The investigation will be carried out through the analysis of a case study, which will be a useful support to address the issues mentioned above. Specifically the case study concerns the play written by Aditi Brennan Kapil, focusing on the linguistic tools used to conceive such a brilliant and striking sketch.

### **Brahman/i: a one-Hijra stand-up comedy show**

Aditi Brennan Kapil, the author of the play under scrutiny in this study, is a playwright, actress, and director. She was raised in Sweden and currently lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota; she is of Bulgarian and Indian descent. She is a graduate of Macalester College with a B.A. in English and Dramatic Arts. The trilogy mentioned in the introduction is not her only production: among her works, *Love Person, a Four-part Love Story* (2006), *Agnes Under Big Top, a Tall Tale* (2009), and the 2013 trilogy. Kapil is currently working on a play, *Much Ado About Nothing*, commissioned by Yale Repertory Theatre, based on the Shakespearian character of Imogen.

*Displaced Hindu Gods Trilogy* is made up of *The Chronicles of Kalki*, *Shiv*, and *Brahman/i*. The source of inspiration for the creation of this work is the Hindu trinity of Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Protector, and Shiva the Destroyer. Shiva – defined in its representation as a post-colonial fantasy by the Asian America Press (2013) – is represented through Shiv, a girl in her journey to rebirth through the destruction of the past. Vishnu is embodied by the character of Kalki, a transfer student full of charisma, exploring the pain and pressures of being an adolescent. Brahma the genderless and omniscient, instead, inspires the intersex character of Brahman/i, which takes the audience through a journey in the world of gender fluidity. The idea behind these representations of deities is that they act in disguise among us hiding in the bodies of the most unexpected people, more precisely in the bodies of contemporary Indian-descent immigrants in the USA.

The key words that describe this three-layered creation are certainly identity, post-colonialism, in-betweenness. All three are a narration of how identity can be built and recognized when it does not conform to the surrounding society. The three protagonists are second generation Indian, a feature that collocates the plays in a post-colonial setting. They all fight to understand where to position themselves, first of all

as young adults, then as immigrants and finally as human beings. This constant search creates a status of in-betweenness, where the pursuit of clarity never ends.

*Brahman/i: a one-Hijra stand-up comedy show* premiered in 2013 at the Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, directed by Erin Merritt, starring actor Imran Sheikhs as Brahman/i and Mackenszie Drae as J, Brahman/i's back-up bass guitar player. The play was then performed in other cities and by other actors such as Fawzia Mirza, directed by Andrew Volkoff in Chicago (Time Out, 2014), or Sanjiv Jhaveri, directed by Shishir Kurup in Pittsburgh (Entertainment Central, 2015).

As mentioned above, the protagonist of this stand-up comedy is an East Indian intersex person, or *hijra*, as defined in India, forged from Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. Brahma is also known as the self-born and the Lord of Speech, and together with Vishnu and Shiva is considered part of the triad of the great Hindu gods. He is depicted with four heads or sitting on a lotus, from which some believe he was born (De Witt Griswold 1990; Fuller 2004; Zahner 1964).

Here Kapil introduces the concept of *Hijra*, which is, as already mentioned, an Indian term used to indicate a specific social actor in Indian's society. By definition, as Kira Hall mentions in her study, *hijras* are a "third gender", "widely known in India for troubling heteronormative assumptions regarding sex, procreation, and kinship" (2013, 364). *Hijras* are very controversial protagonists of Indian society as they are both venerated and scorned by Indian people. In fact, although Indian society ascribes their gender difference to a divine implication, their frivolous and rebellious conduct and the fact that Hijras do not conform to any social, religious or castal class relegate them in a liminal space in society.

The performance is divided into three main parts, in which, as Kapil says in the description of the character, "Brahman leans into a male gender identity in Part 1, Brahmani leans into a female gender identity in Part 2, Brahman/i lives comfortably in a dual gender identity in Part 3" (Kapil 2013, 1). The story of Brahman/i deals with dual identity: a cultural one and a gendered one. As a matter of fact, B, as the protagonist fights to be called during his teenage years, was born with both genital apparatuses and at one point in life was asked to choose between one of the two possible choices. B's answer to this question is quite mathematical:

I mean when you're gender-fluid as I am, there are a shit-load more options than two! I mean am I a straight man, a straight woman, a gay man, a gay woman, a straight, gay, or bi male transvestite, a straight, gay, or bi female transvestite... a bisexual man, a bisexual woman, I mean the options are... Twelve! Not two, Twelve.

Don't mess with an Indian with the Mathematics. We invented the zero. (Kapil 2013, 22)

"I have a penis and a vagina" (Kapil 2013, 60) that is how Brahman/i puts it. The play brilliantly navigates between Hindu tradition and the British colonization of India, never holding behind the question of gender while also giving voice to several other characters, like the beloved Auntie, Brahman/i's classmates and relatives.

The play retraces Brahman/i's life from the beginning. Since the day B came into this world, there was a problem: Auntie wanted to know. "What is it?" and she goes on "It's one or the other, pick a winner and let's go!" (Kapil 2013, 12). Obviously, the closest relative is anxious to find out if she has a nephew or a niece, but there is no answer, or better, no expected answer to this question. Brahman/i is neither a girl nor

a boy, they<sup>2</sup> does not fall into a specific already existing category, and the curiosity of Auntie is very hard to satisfy. Kapil wittingly takes a stand by defining the little cute child an “All-in-one”. The question was not satisfactorily answered, but poor mom was saved by the joy that fills everyone when a new human being arrives into this world.

Kapil plays with definitions throughout the script: “dude-girl...girl-dude”, “penis-slash-vagina”, “funny genitalia” just to point out some examples. Brahman/i narrates the struggle of adolescence, when asked to choose between being Brahman or Brahmani without even knowing the difference. A fine reconstruction through which B takes the audience in an adventure filled with colonial history, Indian culture and the struggles of being an intersex person. Explaining issues, like the reality of *hijras* in the Indian culture or the perplexities that gender fluidity might arouse in a teenager, just as any teen drama would do.

### Stand-up comedy: a form of humor

The various forms of humorous communication can be roughly divided into two large groups: performance and conversational humor. The latter is related to naturally occurring humor in everyday life conversation, while the first category includes humorous literature, sitcoms, comedy films, comic strips, and stand-up comedy (Martin 2014, 123).

As pointed out by Double (2014), the term “stand-up comedy” was used, in a written form, for the first time in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* in 1961 (Double 2014, 18). Stand-up comedy spread in the USA through a form of popular theatre known as *vaudeville*, in the late nineteenth century. With the emergence of cinema and radio, *vaudeville* slowly disappeared due to competition from other forms of entertainment. Despite the development of other means of amusement, the ancestor of stand-up comedy survived in the Borscht Belt,<sup>3</sup> where a form of stand-up monologue was performed, in the late thirties, in hotels and resorts, as a mean of entertainment for the guests.

Moreover, the performances in the Chitlin Circuit, a series of cabarets, nightclubs, and small theatres catering the black audience in cities like Chicago and Detroit, could also be defined as one of the first forms of stand-up comedy. This was the starting point for the industry of stand-up comedy, which started growing with the first comedy club opened in 1962 in New York, and kept evolving from there (Double 2015, 23-32).

Double defines stand-up comedy through the use of three terms that correspond to the three main characteristics a routine must have: personality, direct communication, and present tense. In order for the routine to be well constructed and cohesive these three features must come together at once. In fact, bearing in mind that stand-up comedy “puts a person on display in front of an audience” – as claimed by Double – first of all, there must be a direct communication between the comedian and the audience, moreover the dialogue must be happening here and now, meaning that

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<sup>2</sup> The author chose to use the gender-neutral pronoun “they” instead of “he/she” when the gender of the subject is not explicitly specified, therefore it will be used both for singular and plural subjects as some of the members of the LGBTI community prefer to be addressed.

<sup>3</sup> A popular location in upstate New York where people of Jewish origin used to go on vacation between the 1920s to the 1970s. Accessed March 29, 2016. <http://www.hvmag.com/Hudson-Valley-Magazine/August-2014/History-of-Borscht-Belt-Hotels-and-Bungalow-Colonies-in-the-Catskills/>.

the performer must be able to include the context in the performance: more specifically what is happening around him/her (Double 2015, 19-20).

The American comedian Judy Carter (1989) describes stand-up comedy as a form of self-expression; she points out that stand-up comedy is about sharing one's own personal issues, from talking about the body to relationships or habits, and must not be confused with joke telling, as that is a practice of the old school comedy (Carter 1989).

Although, so far, there is not yet a general definition of what humor is, the term originates from Latin and originally meant "fluid", and it is now described as an umbrella term, which includes all concepts, related to comedy, fun, the ridiculous, nonsense (Chiaro 2010a).

More specifically, Kapil's script seems to adhere perfectly to a category defined by Balirano (2007) as diasporic humor. In fact, the text responds to the four features Balirano (2007) identifies in order for a text to be recognized as diasporic. First of all, it highlights the "power differences" from one country to the other by introducing direct puns related to the British colonial period. It constructs a representation of the Other and the Self in contrast, comparing the life of a native USA teenager with that of Brahman/i, who struggles continuously with their family and their traditions. By doing so, the text also complies with the third condition, thus creating a mixed world where the American and the Indian cultures come together in an encounter/clash. Lastly, it is built on a series of culturally bound references by which most of the puns are triggered.

The features of Kapil's sketch lead the investigation on the same question asked by Vargo (2015) in his article about the show: do you need to be Indian or intersex to understand and appreciate this type of humor? The answer to this question can be found in a quote by Nash: "we share humour with those who have shared our history and who understand our way of interpreting experience" (1985, 9). As a matter of fact, Raskin (1985) maintains that a text can be considered humorous if it responds to two main characteristics: it must be compatible with two different semantic scripts and these must be opposite on a list of dichotomies. In this case, a semantic script is defined as a "mental model of representation", a sort of classification of the characteristics of a specific matter that helps the speaker identify whatever topic is being spoken about in specific categories (Attardo 2001, 1-2). In the case of *Brahman/i*, the possible dichotomies are infinite. Drawing from the list made by Attardo, the description of the protagonist already responds to the three main dichotomies, real/unreal, possible/impossible, and normal/abnormal. In fact, Brahman/i is neither a man nor a woman: to what degree can that be real/possible/normal? In line with the *Semantic Script Theory of Humor* (Attardo 1994), this stand-up comedy routine combines two different mental frames and constructs humor on them.

Considering all these factors, to answer the question that we began with, the audience must not be Indian neither intersex to appreciate this sketch. Although, according to the previously outlined theories on humor, the audience must be aware of the semantic meaning of the scripts to which *Indianness* and intersexuality belong to. The audience must be aware of colonization and what this historical event has meant for India and for the whole world and must be aware of what being an intersex person means.

Is humor a useful tool to speak about gender and ethnicity? As Chiaro and Baccolini state, “the relationship between humor and gender and how they are reciprocally anchored remains fluid and somewhat taxing to pigeonhole into watertight categories” (2014, 2). Extending the quote onto ethnicity as well, there is an important keyword in this concept which brings together humor, gender and ethnicity, and that is *fluid*. As a matter of fact, fluidity is undoubtedly a common feature of the three components, which come together in this stand-up comedy as well as the reason why they come together in such a brilliant and fitted way. The gender described in this play is fluid, crossing all existing categories and going beyond them, ethnicity is fluid as it is the product of all the cultural and geographical features coming together in one representation that floats from India to the United States and finally humor is fluid, as is suggested by the etymology of the word as well as by the its multifaceted components.

Following an overview of the literature on humor theory, there are many elements that this type of communication has in common with the main protagonist of this sketch, Brahman/i. For example, a humorous situation can be the result of the representation of an everyday life situation that has failed, a sort of parody of life. At the same time, according to the stereotypes on gender dictated by society, an intersex person is a parody of a man or woman, a human being that has failed to be either one. In line with Chiaro and Baccolini (2014), we could therefore affirm that “[...] on the one hand the notion of humor and gender can, at first sight, be completely polarized, on the other it can also become extremely blurred. Humor, it would appear, is a many gendered thing” (Chiaro and Baccolini, 2014: 3); and so is Brahman/i.

Studies on humor have widely focused on the connection between humor and gender, and the differences and similarities between the creation, performance and reception of humor from a gendered point of view. As claimed by Bouchetoux: “[R]ecent literature tends to underline differences in nature between male and female types of humor, sometimes for lack of cultural (that is, historical, geographical, linguistic) contextualization” (2014, 101). In the case of Kapil’s stand-up comedy, the question is more complicated due to the fact the protagonist, the humorous subject, is neither or maybe both. Many studies define male humor as more “hostile and sexual” compared to women’s humor, which is on the other hand seen as “inclusive, supportive and self-healing” (Bouchetoux 2014, 101-02). In this sense, it seems that also the production of humor follows the stereotyped categories imposed by society. In the case of Brahman/i, their intersexuality makes this binary categorization no longer applicable, suggesting the need for a more inclusive reformulation of the description of the production of humor from the point of view of gender.

### **Looking at the script**

A premise must be made before looking into some examples drawn from the text. As suggested by some scholars, such as Rutter (1997), who dedicated his research specifically to stand-up comedy, the text under scrutiny responds exactly to the main linguistic traits of the genre. As a matter of fact, a stand-up routine mainly features canned or narrative jokes. Humor that falls under this category, as opposed to conversational jokes, is a kind of rehearsed humor, that is, it is well studied and created by the narrator before telling. The tendency in stand-up comedy routines is for the narrator to start with an introduction, which is most of the times not humorous; to group the jokes thematically; to link the jokes to personal issues or to contextualize

the jokes according to location or audience (Attardo 2001, 62-63). The Brahman/i text taken into consideration here is divided into three parts; each part is then broken down into sub-sketches. Each sub-sketch has its own title and the text, as a whole, reconstructs B's life. In the first part, after the introduction, which is not related to the storyline from a temporal point of view, the story begins from the moment Brahman/i was born, through their childhood and teenage years to their adulthood. In "Part 1: Brahman", the protagonist tells about the part of their life in which they are raised as a boy. This part is divided into seven sub-sketches titled: "Opening riff", "B-cup and C-cup", "The making of India", "Auntie", "Syllogism and Khajuraho", "Dr. Hugh", "Odysseus". The second part of the play, "Part 2: Brahmani", focuses on the span of time in their life in which the protagonist experiences life as a female. This part is divided into six sub-sketches, titled: "The Sari", "Hijras have a proud lineage", "Stonehenge", "Rama", "Interlude" and "Stand-up". The third and final part of the play, "Part 3: Brahman/i", wraps up the routine by suggesting their decision about their gender after years of testing, and concludes with the choice of neither.

Starting from the title, Kapil's script is filled with interesting ways of using words. The first word play is in fact presented in the very first line: Brahman/i. We immediately understand that something is not clear, not defined about this character, due to the fact that their own name is definite. The Incongruity theory on humor is right away applied. How can one person be Brahman and Brahmani at the same time? The idea that we have of gender and the actual gender of the character are "gender incongruent", according to the binary dichotomy that society imposes. This confusion on the gender of Brahman/i is the first humorous reference the audience is faced with. As gender is nothing other than a performance as claimed by Judith Butler in 1990, "the humor produced by gender confusion is performative, meaning that it contributes to designing and refining gender categories" (Bouchetoux 2014, 119). Thus, this sketch is all about designing and refining the gender category that Brahman/i should or would want to be part of. The binary heteronormative categories that society uses to understand gender do not apply in this case, not in terms of identity nor as concerns the physical constitution of the protagonist. In fact, Brahman/i is an intersex person, meaning that at birth they had both male and female genitalia. As Butler (1990) argues, categories exist, but they are certainly not enough to describe what a person really is or feels, gender identity is something fluid that must not be enclosed in strict and restraining definitions.

The second thing that strikes the audience is perhaps the long list of original appellatives used by Kapil to address Brahman/i and their reproductive apparatus: *Penis slash vagina*, *Hermaphroditic junk*, *All-in-One*, *young dude-girl*, *girl-dude*, *gender-fluid*, *intersexual*, *un-ambiguously male*, *fucked up shit down there*, *funny genitalia*, *Hijra*, *option thirteen* (see Kapil 2014). These definitions or, rather, brief descriptions, can be seen as an attempt to give a name to something that clearly still has not got one.

The response of the audience to the use of these appellatives might generate the following series of thoughts: if it does not have a name, if we cannot define it, maybe it is not human, is it a thing? If it is not part of a category, maybe it is not real. According to Bergson, a person who recalls a fake, who gives the impression of being closer to the category of things rather than that of human "embodies the comic figure". Bergson continues by claiming that "this objectification is likely to look amusing, entertaining", therefore, "the logic of objectification draws on the assumption that we often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at because it terrifies us"



(quoted in Bouchtoux 2014, 118). The consequent, although strongly questionable, argument is: Brahman/i is an intersex person, intersex people are not human since humans are either male or female, the character of Brahman/i is not human, Brahman/i is objectified, thus a possible source of laughter. From the point of view of humor theory, this construction recalls what was defined as “contestive humor” by Janet Holmes (1998). This theory specifically refers to humor used in the workplace, where laughter is employed “to mask a subversive challenge to someone of higher status” (Hui 2014, 193). In the case of this sketch, humor is used to mask uncertainty towards what is being talked about: an unclear gender. To a certain extent, it is used to mask a subversive challenge - that of naming something new, something different - to someone of a different status, when being of a different gender directly classifies you as being of a different status.

A series of syllogisms is the same linguistic strategy used by B during one of the sub-sketches that compose the play, more specifically in the one titled “Syllogism and Khajuraho”, in part one. In this monologue, B questions himself<sup>4</sup> about language and how it is used or, rather, the results it produces when it is used in a specific way :

What is man and what is woman?  
 These are questions that a young intersex um ... dude-girl... girl-dude... agonizes over.  
 That and who’s the fucker who invented pronouns?  
 Cuz if I could just get my hands on that asshole. (Kapil 2013, 14)

In fact, as has happened in the present study as well, the use of pronouns is a peculiar matter when addressing gender non-conforming people, as the categories used so far are no longer representative of gender identity in all its nuances. In this sub-sketch, humor is created on the incongruence of gender status, and through the use of offensive language such as swear words.

Again, later in the same sub-sketch, B refers to a linguistic tool to get to his point. He presents a series of syllogism:

I submit to you a series of syllogisms created by yours truly:

Syllogism #1:  
 All girls have breasts  
 Brahman has breasts  
 Brahman is a woman

So, good right? Except that then there’s this one –

Syllogism #2  
 No women have penises  
 Brahman has a penis  
 Brahman is NOT a woman

But wait, it gets better –

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<sup>4</sup> In this case, a masculine pronoun is used since in this part of the play the character identifies as male.

Syllogism #3

All humans are male or female

Brahman is neither male nor female

God is neither male nor female

Brahman is God

(Kapil 2013, 14-15)

In this case, humor is conveyed through the use of relief theory. The situation is tense at this point due to the fact that Brahman is having trouble explaining his gender identity, first of all to himself. He thus relies on laughter to relieve tension by suggesting something that is not real, such as identifying as God. As a matter of fact, relief theory suggests that humor is used to overcome sociocultural barriers and mitigate fears by turning them into the butt of the joke (Balirano 2007, 8).

Generally speaking, the jokes in this play can be divided into two large groups, Group A referring to sex and, therefore, to their intersexuality; and Group B converging towards Brahman/i's *Indianness* and so their cultural heritage as a second generation American who constantly deals with their "mixed up" identity. In this second group the topic of *Indianness* is also very often used in combination with the question of colonization. As a consequence, the boundaries of in-betweenness are constantly at stake, being continuously reshaped and redefined. Some examples taken from the text are offered here:

GROUP A

- A. (Jenner) "Are you growing titties? I think Brah's growing titties! You need to get that looked at man! Or at least get a Bra!"  
Wild hyena laughter. Cruel laughter.  
Summon your own most humiliating middle school memory and insert here, I'll wait (Kapil 2013, 9-10).
- B. (Young B) I mean how do I know it's not you all who are malformed and missing half your genitalia? Got any proof of that one? That you're not the biological Oops? (Kapil 2013, 16).
- C. Aw shit. How about that?  
I put on girl clothes, and next thing you know I'm a pissed-off feminist.  
I'm so socially fucked (Kapil 2013, 47).
- D. Yeah. So the next day I'm home with two black eyes, and Auntie bursts in- (Auntie) "Brahman, how do you not defend yourself?! Are you a boy or a girl?!?" Yeah. That'd be the 5-Cror question (Kapil 2013, 48).
- E. (Mom) Then if my daughter remains fat and never finds a husband it will be on your head!  
Yeah, not that my penis would be the pitfall in my rosy path to heterosexual romance, clearly my weight was the bigger concern (Kapil 2013, 55).

## GROUP B

1. And if you piss me off, I'll expose myself, it's the way of my people.  
I'm kidding.  
No I'm not. (Kapil 2013, 5)
2. (Not a British actor) "Yeah I tried a bunch of accents, like Italian, Spanish, Greek, and in the end the British just sounded right."  
Hm. I wonder why.  
They didn't just colonize continents, they colonized the language centers of your Brains, people!  
And y'all don't even know it! (Kapil 2013, 23)
3. I like to do a British accent whenever I portray extreme bumbling stupidity.  
It's my passive aggressive way of sticking it to the man.  
The man who colonized my people for 89 years, 3 months, 2 days, and 3 hours.  
Not that we were counting or nuffin.  
The other thing about the British, they really like to name things! They walk round with stack of post-its all day long, just naming things. Ooh, look at that, isn't that lovely, so beautiful, so inspiring, let's name it! (Kapil 2013, 43)
4. (Auntie) If you have no choice? Britain or India?  
(Young B) But girls are really big assholes to me!  
(Auntie) Ah, that always happens! The oppressed turn against the oppressed!  
Look at India and Pakistan. Name me a post-colonial region where everyone gets along. That is why we moved to America (Kapil 2013, 49-50).

In all the examples presented in this paper, what is striking is that laughter is presented in all its forms, from sarcasm to puns, and through all the techniques explained in the three major theories on humor. In Group A, the body, and sexual references are the sources of mirth. For instance, in ex. A, there is a direct reference to a part of the body, in this case, the author chose not to use the formal or medical noun to refer to it, but rather a nickname or a more colloquial form such as "titties". Even though in this example the humorous part is actually the sarcasm with which Brahman/i concludes the line. In ex. B, Kapil once again plays on incongruity by suggesting that maybe it is not Brahman/i the one with the "wrong" genitalia. Irony is the cause of laughter in examples B and E, while the technique of the rhetorical question is used in ex. D to create humor.

In Group B, humor is related to India, to the cultural identity of the protagonist and to the depreciable acts of colonization. In this case, we can see examples of what has been defined by Hui as out-group humor (Hui 2014, 194). As a matter of fact, humor targets the colonizer, Britain, and "creates a division between 'us' and 'them', strengthening the sense of in-group solidarity" (Hui 2014, 194). In examples 2 and 3, Brahman/i openly makes fun of the colonizer by using as the butt of the joke the British accent and the practices the British Empire imposed upon India during colonization, such as the practice of renaming. In example 1, the reference is to Indian culture and to what are considered to be some peculiar features of being Indian. Finally in example 4, another chapter of Indian history is mentioned, Pakistan; once again directing humor toward an out-group.

The last category identified through this analysis, which will be defined as Group C, is that in which Group A and Group B come together and laughter is created through the merging of the two semantic scripts, as in the following examples:

GROUP C

- 1.a (Young B, choking) Ok. Delhi.  
 (Auntie) Delhi is a threshold between empires, between old and new, between poverty and wealth, nuclear war and... well, nuclear war, that one goes both ways. It's a bloody mess!  
 (Young B) Thanks  
 (Auntie) No point denying.  
 I told Anjali she should have snip snipped you in one direction or the other at birth. Now you're all confused with teenager hormones on top if it! Trapped on a threshold while hormonally stupid. You are Delhi (Kapil 2013, 51).
- 2.b (Auntie) So how is being a girl?  
 (Young B) Sucks.  
 (Auntie) Yah, yah. But it's like would you rather be the imperialist or the colony?  
 (Young B) Um. Neither (Kapil 2013, 49)

In the examples in Group C, 1.a and 2.b, the references to India are mixed with those related to the gender identity of Brahman/i. These examples take the analysis back to the initial hypothesis of this study: it's funny until it's not. The way B talks about these topics makes the audience smile, but at the same time it is a bitter smile, since it embodies the state of confusion and fear faced by the protagonist, and by every intersex person; responding to the functions of humor as an awareness facilitator.

**In conversation with Aditi Brennan Kapil<sup>5</sup>**

I accidentally stumbled upon a short video of the play about Brahman/i on the Internet, and I was astonished by the geniality of its approach to the topic as well as its innovation and uniqueness. Unfortunately, for as much as I expanded my search, I was not able to find the whole play. While I kept searching, I found the author's blog and decided to contact her. Aditi Brennan Kapil answered right away to my e-mail and was very kind to share the whole script of the play with me. I was then able to enjoy it fully, and this also allowed me to further expand my analysis of the play.

However, following my personal analysis of the text, in order to better understand the aim of this play, and the implication in the writing process, I have decided to ask the author, Aditi Brennan Kapil, to release an interview. My curiosity to understand where such a brilliant idea had stemmed from was the starting point of the interview. Kapil was once again willing to answer my questions, and through an extensive email exchange during the months of March and April 2016, the following interview was conducted:

Zottola: Ms. Kapil, I would like to focus, first of all, on your *Displaced Hindu Gods Trilogy*. In this work, you deal with several important topics through three characters

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<sup>5</sup> The interview was added to the present article with the consent of the playwright Aditi Brennan Kapil.

inspired by the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Where does the idea of writing the trilogy stem from? Why did you choose these specific gods, were you particularly interested in their features as gods? And why did you choose to represent them through the characters of Brahman, Shiv and Kalki? Do you think the peculiar characteristics each god has are the easiest to retrace in human beings?

*Kapil: When I first conceived the Displaced Hindu Gods Trilogy- 3 plays riffing on the 3 deities of the Hindu Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva - I was looking for my way into the Indian part of my heritage, as a woman, as a person of mixed race, as an immigrant twice over, as a person who lives amidst an amazing diaspora that flies in the face of any attempt at stereotyping. I believe that all immigrants engage in an act of re-mythologizing, we need stories to understand ourselves, both individually and in the context of society. So my Displaced Hindu Gods are a creative departure from traditional depictions. In "The Chronicles of Kalki", the final avatar of Vishnu (traditionally male) is a badass girl facing down the demons of high school and puberty. The Shiva character in "Shiv" is a woman caught between past and present and the necessary act of destruction that leads to re-birth.*

Z: More specifically, with reference to the first of the three plays, the Brahman/i sketch, is it the first time you have dealt with issues related to an intersex person within a post-colonial context? Gender related issues are very often spoken about in many creative fields, but you specifically choose to speak about an intersex person. This particularly struck me since among the LGBTI community the topic of intersexuality is usually less dealt with, while for example there are thousands of plays or films that have as main protagonists gay or lesbian people. Are there specific reasons, maybe related to religious or political matters, behind your choice?

*K: In taking on Brahma the Creator, I was drawn to the over-arching principle of Brahman, the cosmic spirit, genderless, omnipotent, omniscient, described as "neti neti" which translates roughly as "not this, not this". Some of the most powerful Hindu deities are depicted as being of both genders, and why wouldn't god be both male and female? "Neti neti." Our society habitually categorizes, by religion, by nationality, by color, and in our first few seconds of life-by gender. More and more, these categories and assumptions grow obsolete, but our brains resist, sorting and grouping is how we understand the world. For me, a lifetime of resisting categorization, as an Indian/Bulgarian/Swedish-American speaking multiple languages, code switching from country to country, being of ambiguous color and cultural background, emigrating, immigrating, experimenting, becoming, led to the creation of Brahman/i in "Brahman/i, a one-hijra stand-up comedy show," a person who doesn't and won't fit into any single category, ever. And who owns that space and power, that spotlight and that microphone. This play is by/about/for people who never fit in, and who no longer care. And the power that comes with that moment of self-creation.*

Z: What about Brahman/i's intersexuality? Were you able to interview an intersex person in order to be as faithful as possible to reality? In the first part of the play, the character identifies as a male, while in second part as a female, is there a specific reason why you picked this order? In the end, Brahman/i decides not to define themselves through neither of the binary heteronormative options we are used to, but to go for the "thirteenth" option, what was your aim when creating this "definition"?

*K: Brahman/i, as a play, is not about the intersex experience. I did do research, but I did not try to reflect that research by telling a true story or a realistic story. These plays are all fiction, the characters of Brahman/i, Kalki, and Shiv, are gods temporarily in human form, not humans.*

Z: In many cases humor is used to “laugh at” when related to LGBTI people or community, it seems to me that in your case it is used to “laugh with”, do you agree? Do you think your play has an informative aim as well? And to what extent was your aim informative/critical rather than simply entertaining? What kind of audience is your work mainly addressed to?

*K: And to address your question about whether I'm trying to inform or educate, I write fiction and as a fiction writer I try to inform/educate our souls, to expand our humanity through storytelling. But no, I do not aspire to educate an audience about Hinduism, immigration, the intersex experience, teen runaways, these plays would be extremely misleading were anyone to try to use them for factual education. There are other excellent sources for factual education, and it's very important to our minds and our souls that readers/audience not confuse fiction and reality, and that we not forget the crucial role of fiction in society by wanting it to be truth instead. Stories can expand souls and minds in a way that the news can't.*

## Conclusion

*Humor importantly reflects people's ways of thinking and living. Whether rehearsed and performed on stage or spontaneously occurring on the real “stage” of daily life [...] humor paves the way for thinking about and experiencing gender as a creative process. (Bouchetoux 2014, 100)*

What stands out from this study is the adaptability of humor, the way it can serve different functions in terms of communication. The array of social issues that can be discussed through humor is limitless and it is up to the speaker to decide which register or genre to use. As a matter of fact, through humor, the speaker can be aggressive or polite, can state or suggest something, create solidarity between different groups but at the same time allow them to become the butt of the joke. Humor generates tolerance, can be used to manipulate and dominate, to denigrate or to make someone feel at ease. With humor, stereotypes can be reinforced or dismantled, created or erased.

In her play, Aditi Brennan Kapil puts together all the “positive” functions that humor might have, producing a script that not only explains to the audience the tragedy of colonialism without the density that this topic sometimes has and at the same time introduces a topic, that of intersexuality – that is still a largely unexplored subject in society - creating a strong link to religion and spirituality. She narrates the struggles of a teenager dealing with their spiritual, cultural and gender identity. She deals with important topics, but with the smoothness and lightness that characterizes laughter. Creating the perfect space of encounter among the pathways of post-colonialism, gender identity and humor.

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