

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: 'WORKING THE CROWD': ENACTING
CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP THROUGH
CHARGED HUMOR

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Like many cultural practices, comic performance is 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. This dissertation examines contemporary jesters opting to use humor to develop community, instruct and mobilize audience members, and lobby for political and cultural inclusion. It is a kind of humor that illumines one's position in a specific socio-political, historical matrix; it is humor that creates community and conversely demonstrates the ways in which one does not belong. An examination of the economy—the production, exchange, and consumption—of this humor reveals how and why comics produce charged humor or humor that illumines one's status as second-class citizen and how this kind of humor is consumed in the US. I employ a mixed-methods qualitative approach using ethnography, archival research, and critical discourse analysis to investigate comic performances: stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, and one-woman shows. Throughout, I draw from dozens of

contemporary comics performing in the US, but take as case studies: Robin Tyler, a Jewish lesbian comic and activist who is currently spearheading the marriage equality movement in California; Micia Mosely, a Brooklyn-based, Black, queer woman whose one-woman show, *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, is touring the country; and a group of young people (eighteen and under) participating in Comedy Academy programs (a non-profit arts education organization in Maryland), allowing them to author and perform sketch comedy. My sources for this project include popular culture ephemera such as print and electronic media, public commentary, documentaries about stand-up comedy, interviews with comics and industry entrepreneurs, performance and program evaluations, comic material (jokes), and performance texts. Drawing from nation and citizenship theories, cultural studies, performance studies, and a number of identity-based disciplines, I argue 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.

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CHARGED HUMOR**

By

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Dedication

To all the comics that do.

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To my chair, Mary Corbin Sies, your incisive feedback and comments throughout this process have been invaluable. Given your focus on material culture and candid admission that you are seldom amused, we were certainly an unlikely pair. I hope this project was amusing in some fashion, if only in my dogged refusal to acknowledge that Homi K. Bhabha is *not* a woman. My committee members have all informed and shaped this project and process in important ways. I hope you can see this throughout. Thank you to Nancy Struna, Ronit Eisenbach, Martha Nell Smith, Jeffrey McCune, and Faedra Carpenter. I am eternally grateful to Sharon Harley and the faculty and staff in the African American Studies Department who have supported me in many ways while earning this degree. Thanks to the participants who graciously volunteered hours of their time, enduring interviews, follow-up meetings, e-mails, and phone calls for the last several years: Harry Bagdasian, Robbie McEwen, Micia Mosely, Robin Tyler, Lisa Levin Itté, Pat Harrison, Dave Greene, Kenneth Winiecki, Moira Cutler, Shalonda Ingram, Austen Villemez, and Mary-Beth Waits. I am wildly grateful to the students, parents, and public school teachers and staff involved in Comedy Academy programs; most especially to Harry Bagdasian and Robbie McEwen who championed me throughout, and who are, as it turns out, two of my champions. There were many dedicated readers who commented on my work throughout the process and without whom, this process may have been untenable: Amelia Wong, Mark Sgambattera, Jill Dolan, Laurie Frederick Meer, Patrick Grzanka, Marcus Krefting, and Teresa Cross. I have to acknowledge my grandmother, Margaret Krefting—who recently asked that I refer to her as the

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Introduction: American Humor and Its Discontents

You want to know what's going on in our community? Watch our comedy.
—Sommore¹

According to Sommore, comedy is revealing. It shows you something. It can illumine salient issues, experiences, concerns and particular histories, making visible what we are up to, how we make sense of the world and how we belong in various communities—be they organized around sexuality, race/ethnicity, region, age, religion, ability, or nationality. This project claims for its central premise that the ways we experience cultural inclusion and exclusion in our daily lives and how we belong in the national imaginary affects the ways humor is produced as well as how it is consumed. Treating this as axiomatic, this begs the simple rejoinder: How? In other words, this project asks: In what ways does one's experience of national belonging or citizenship affect the economy of humor? I define the economy of humor as the production, exchange, and consumption of humor.²

To address this question, I begin by examining the production of a kind of American humor, the jokes intended to shed light on one's experience of cultural exclusion and inclusion. It is a kind of humor produced to develop community, educate, and lobby for civil rights and acknowledgement. Drawing from draft concept papers that theorize “cultural citizenship,” written by early members of the Latino Cultural Studies Working Group, I will call this kind of humor: charged humor. It is

¹ *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, DVD. Directed by Robert Townsend (Code Black Entertainment, 2009).

² I do not use economy in the fiscal sense of the term; rather, from a cultural perspective that approaches the production of humor by examining how and why comics opt to produce certain kinds of humor; that engages with the exchange between audience and performer by documenting visible and audible audience response; and that addresses cultural explanations for the consumption of charged humor.

the kind of humor enacting cultural citizenship.³ Charged humor asks viewers to not only think critically, it locates the humorist in the national imaginary and shows us where there is trouble. It is humor that intends to ‘do’ something, that reveals one’s experience of second-class citizenship and gives us proactive means of addressing inequality. It can reveal how a person belongs and conversely how they do not belong, showing us how we fit into the national body politic. I use the metaphor ‘charged’ to signal the active quality and loaded potential of humor enacting cultural citizenship. Science teaches us that in order for an atom to be charged there must be some sort of disturbance or shift causing the removal or addition of electrons or protons. Similarly, charged humor is produced when a performer foregrounds their marginality in order to call into question and disrupt the terms of their subordination. This disturbance can be welcome and resonate with audience members, particularly to those sharing similar experiences of marginalization, but it can also elicit feelings of distancing, alienation, apathy, or anger. Charged humor is intended to be self-situating—clearly locating the performer in the national imaginary—and a call for viewers to refigure dominant beliefs and stereotypes about minoritarian individuals and their respective communities; moreover, it is not simply resistant, it can unite, edify, and rally on behalf of minoritarian communities.

In order to investigate how one’s belonging informs the economy of humor, I turn to theories of citizenship and nation and to sources elucidating how and why comics produce humor enacting cultural citizenship. These sources include comic material,

³ In 1988, the Inter University Program for Latino Research facilitated a working group resulting in a draft concept paper on cultural citizenship. Members of that working group included: Rina Benmayor, Richard Chabran, Richard Flores, William Flores, Ray Rocco, Renato Rosaldo, Pedro Pedraza, Blanca Silvestrini, and Rosa Torruellas. Copies of these draft concept papers are located in the archives at Hunter College.

interviews with comic practitioners, and scholarship on humor arising from
minoritarian communities.⁴ Next, in order to examine how and why comics produce
charged humor enacting cultural citizenship, I turn to the consumption of humor,
noting that current consumption patterns favor male comics and also tend not to favor
comics using humor to demonstrate how they feel alienated. In this instance,
correlation indicates causation, i.e., people consume more male humor and humor
enacting cultural citizenship is not as marketable as observational or “safe” comedy;
therefore, in general, men (especially White, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied
men) are less likely to perform this kind of oppositional humor. This does not mean
they cannot or will not perform humor enacting cultural citizenship (see: George
Carlin, Lewis Black, Patton Oswalt and Jimmy Dore), it just means that such humor
from White, heterosexual, able-bodied men is rare, in main because people not
experiencing oppression or exclusion have little cause to produce this kind of humor.
Being female and/or marginalized by virtue of race/ethnicity, sexuality, creed, ability,
age, or class all contribute to the likelihood of creating humor enacting cultural
citizenship. That women’s humor and humor enacting cultural citizenship is less
popular or profitable is neither coincidental nor unrelated.

The exploration of the consumption of humor begins with the gender debate in
stand-up comedy by focusing on the question: Why are men perceived to be funnier

⁴ Jose Esteban Muñoz, in his monograph *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* uses the term minoritarian subject and minoritarian community to reference queers of color and I use that term herein to include any persons occupying a subordinated identity category—by virtue of race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, ability, age, class, creed, or nation of origin. I prefer Muñoz’s minoritarian subject or minoritarian communities to the term marginalized subjects because it resists the urge to use the language of the victim to classify groups and alludes to both a demographic minority and power differentials at play. For instance, women are not a demographic minority but they are subject to oppression making them minoritarian subjects. Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 7.

than women? I examine a number of cultural explanations for men's perceived superiority in the realm of humorous discourse, countering arguments founded in biological or psychological deficiencies as some pundits, like Christopher Hitchens, have speculated. Scientific studies of humor investigate the positive emotional response associated with laughter (they ask: can humor heal) and some examine how men and women respond (differently) to humorous stimuli. While there is considerable public speculation on the matter, there is no scholarship proffering cultural arguments for this widely acknowledged differential in the consumption of male versus female humor. Popular discourses about who is best suited for humor production indicate myriad explanations, nearly all of which, once unpacked and examined, can be distilled to culture. I argue that comedic success relies on identification and in the economy of humor this exchange favors men because male opinions and views bear the greatest cultural cachet. While the initial focus here is gender, I broaden the argument to include minoritarian comics (some men) whose humor enacting cultural citizenship struggles alongside women's comedy for economic viability.

Three case studies allow for a discussion of these ideas, offering concrete illustrations and adding complexity to our understanding of how jokesters deploy cultural citizenship for certain ends. These case studies reveal how comics can use humor to enact cultural citizenship to negotiate social positioning, enfranchisement, and raise cultural awareness for themselves and for their communities. My concern is reading cultural citizenship as it plays out in humorous discourses by bodies

marginalized by the nation—be they marked by race, sexuality, gender, ability, class, or age.

Part of the value of this investigation lies in its social justice agenda. To that effect, some goals for this project include bringing greater visibility to comics with whom many are unfamiliar, filming interviews and performances in order to build an archive of work for each case study, aiding in the development and growth of an innovative theater arts program, creating performance opportunities for project participants, and focusing on tactics and strategies that minoritarian communities can employ in order to gain full incorporation, culturally and legally, in the US.

To be clear, I approach this project from a number of angles and wearing a number of proverbial hats—as a performer, an investigator, and as an advocate for humor lobbying for social change. Furthermore, as a lesbian I am invested in the struggle for gay civil rights and recognize that I will benefit from cultural and legal interventions awarding civil rights to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons (I explore comic interventions on behalf of the gay civil rights movement at length in chapter four). As a female comic, I will benefit from a shift in consumption patterns of humor that currently privilege men. More importantly, I believe that everyone stands to benefit when all members of the polity are granted cultural and legal inclusion and when efforts aimed at fostering diversity do so without suggesting that cultural differences be muted. Identity disciplines like Latino studies and Women’s studies use their scholarship to address issues of social justice and like them, I am not on the fence about whether all humans should be afforded equal rights and treated with dignity and respect. It is tragic and distressing that US

citizenship is lauded as the paragon of equality, because it is not true and certainly not indicative of the experiences of many residing in the US and its territories. Humor reveals these national contradictions. My intervention here is gathering, analyzing, and presenting a compendium of ludic possibilities for restructuring citizenship that accomplishes what it already claims to do—make everyone equal.

Methods

Humor is subjective and shifting; that is why we have a “sense” of humor. Everyone, of course, experiences senses differently. Judy Gold puts it aptly: “it’s called a *sense* of humor. It’s a sense, like smell. Like some people like pizza, some people don’t. Some people think some things are funny, some people don’t.”⁵ How you deploy humor and how you respond to others’ comic interventions—be they staged, deadpan, parodic, raunchy, physical, shocking, ironic, or satirical—is what you can own as your *sense of humor*. It is unique to your experience as well as intersects with shared experiences, locally, nationally, and transnationally. I am not defining or charting an “American” sense of humor (a question that begins and ends with the contested terrain of who counts as American and far too many gross generalizations); instead, I propose to look at some of the motives for producing humor enacting cultural citizenship and the consumption of this humor, particularly via the cultural practices of stand-up comedy, sketch comedy, and performance art

⁵ Judy Gold is a Jewish lesbian comic who began performing stand-up comedy in the 1980s and is now touring her latest one-woman show *Mommie Queerest*. Judy Gold in *Voices on Antisemitism—A Podcast Series*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, February 4, 2010: <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/focus/antisemitism/voices/transcript/?content=20100204>

intended to be humorous.⁶ I am interested in the popular discourses circulating about humor because they directly inform its production (how comics develop comic material) and consumption (the kind of humor most popular and therefore profitable) in the US. I use a mixed-methods qualitative approach using archival research,⁷ ethnography, and critical discourse analysis in order to analyze comic material and performances. My sources include print and electronic media, documentaries about stand-up comedy, interviews with comic performers and industry entrepreneurs, and the material and performances themselves.

My approach here privileges the performances, the substance of humor and the voices producing humor that enacts cultural citizenship. Therefore, I use ethnography, which is a method employing interviews and participant observation in order to understand how an individual, group or communities “perceive themselves and their world.”⁸ Ethnography unites investigators and subjects in the quest to explore and understand cultural traditions. Victor Turner argues that ethnographers occupy the unique role of co-performing with their participants and that this dynamic colors the research, forcing scholars to reconcile the body with word, the experience with text.⁹ It is a method well-suited for engaging with multiple theoretical camps and

⁶ While my focus and the evidence supplied derive mainly from the stand-up comedy industry, I include as evidence in my case studies, the sketch comedy written by young people and a comedic one-woman show. While the means of presentation are different, what unites these forms are their intentions to be humorous and that they are self-authored.

⁷ I use archival research but not to the exclusion of other types of knowledge or primary sources including comic performances, popular print media and ethnographic data, all sources of knowledge which Anjali Arondekar argues “have fractured traditional definitions of the archive (and for the better).” See: “Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, Nos.1/2 (January/April 2005): 10-27.

⁸ John Caughey, *Negotiating Cultures and Identities: Life History Issues, Methods, and Readings* (Lincoln, Nebraska: U of Nebraska P, 2006), 7.

⁹ Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 28-29. Quoted in Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison & Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 359.

interdisciplinary work, though John Caughey also advises that ethnographers remain “skeptical of what existing schools have to offer.”¹⁰ Indeed, ethnography’s self-reflexivity troubles notions of objectivity and ethnographic methods de-center privileged epistemologies and cast a sinister light on textocentrism. The rewards of ethnographic fieldwork include offering a window into other cultures, the possibility of self-transformation, and access to new and different knowledges, like performance.¹¹ Effective ethnography takes on the project of creating dialogue in the interstices between the textual and non-textual, particularly dialogue that does not privilege the archive over the repertoire or embodied memory over the textual—it “not only studies performance...it is a kind of performance.”¹²

Ethnography is used as a methodological tool in many disciplines including cultural studies, women’s studies, and American studies, all of which work to unmask the power relations in society in order to understand the deployment and complexity of power and manipulation. This can be an effective means for developing interventionist projects that support social justice. For instance, an ethnographic study of prostitutes may illuminate the way we develop policy and law to control deviant sexual activity, in turn pointing to ways of protecting prostitutes from these epicenters appropriating control and ignominy.

Another useful method for interdisciplinary work, critical discourse analysis, recognizes that language—both written and performed—reproduces power and social

¹⁰ John Caughey, “The Ethnography of Everyday Life: Theories and Methods for American Culture,” *AQ* 34, no.3 (1982): 230.

¹¹ Dwight Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison & Judith Hamera (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2006), 359.

¹² Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), 75.

inequality.¹³ Reading discourses for the way they replicate and reify existing hierarchies (like that men are better than women at being funny), I engage here with performances and with texts circulating about who is best suited for humor production in American culture, which inform the economy of humor. I use ‘culture’ to signal a system of meaning, “a specific field in which symbols, ideas, knowledge, images and sounds are produced, exchanged and consumed.”¹⁴ A central feature of culture that continues to arise in conversations in American studies, is that it is “understood as the locus in which signification has a material life;” in other words, culture is tied to the economy and people’s experience of culture is contingent on access to resources and capital.¹⁵ I join Americanists and cultural studies scholars in their efforts to understand the ways materiality, institutions, and ideologies shape the everyday lives of folks.

Cultural studies began as a movement generated by Leftist intellectuals seeking to politicize theory, to effect change based on their theorizing; in fact, this feature of making intellectual work political not only distinguishes cultural studies from more apolitical academic pursuits but inspired emerging and established disciplines, including American studies, in the humanities to do likewise. One of the key outcomes of the institutionalization of cultural studies is the continued effort on the part of scholars to recuperate a history of the working class and other voices on the margins. Feminist and critical race studies work similarly to bring the history of

¹³ Norman Fairclough is credited with defining the parameters and practice of critical discourse analysis, which, among other things, helps “determine what part discourse has in the inception, development and consolidation of social change” (197). See: *Language and Power* (London & New York: Longman Group UK Limited, 1989).

¹⁴ Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, *Citizenship & Identity* (London & Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 123.

¹⁵ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), 19.

minoritarian communities to the forefront. And, American studies, what Michael Denning calls “the original identity discipline,” continues to explore the interconnectedness of nation, race, sexuality, creed, empire, ability, age, etc.¹⁶ All of these disciplines advocate uniting theory with activism, scholarship with praxis. Eschewing Enlightenment ideals of objectivity and the impartial and isolated scientist, scholars in these disciplines recognize that it is one thing to study members or groups belonging to minoritarian communities, and another to use that study to make lasting change in the community.

To examine the influence of culture on the economy of charged humor, I look to popular magazine articles (several from *Vanity Fair*) and the responses readers post, interviews with humor practitioners, and performance texts. Drawing from Lauren Berlant’s rationale for analyzing pop cultural ephemera, I take her cue and argue that we need to:

...rea[d] the waste materials of everyday communication in the national public sphere as pivotal documents in the construction, experience, and rhetoric of quotidian citizenship in the United States...Its very popularity, its effects on the law and on everyday life, makes it important. Its very ordinariness requires an intensified critical engagement with what had been merely undramatically explicit.¹⁷

Berlant examines cultural discourses about national identity or “pseudopolitical citizenship rhetoric” by turning to short stories, film, *Time* magazine, a Michael Jackson song, and an episode of *The Simpsons*.¹⁸

Widely disseminated and broadly consumed cultural effluvia do their work to situate us in the national imaginary and shape identity formation. Stuart Hall argues

¹⁶ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London & New York: Verso, 2004), 89.

¹⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

that “[t]he ‘subject’ is differently placed or *positioned* by different discourses and practices.”¹⁹ Likewise, the cultural discourses circulating about humor treat subjects differently like the belief (or myth) that women are not as funny as men. For women comics, Kathleen Madigan describes this positioning as “walking up on stage in a total hole” and Kathy Griffin says she “enjoy[s] dispelling the myth.”²⁰ Those producing humor, such as stand-up comics, solo performance artists, and those belonging to improv and sketch comedy troupes and theater collectives, are influenced by their subject position and its relationship to the environment around them—culturally, politically, and economically. Examining popular discourses, the manifold voices reacting to the idea that men are inherently funnier than women, reveals that such a belief is culturally derived and contingent.

While I emphasize authorial intent—asking: what are the comic’s intentions for her/his comedy—I recognize that audience interpretations may not coincide with those intentions. At times I “read” audience reception looking for audible and physical cues, such as laughter, applause, booing, hissing, heckling, head-shaking, and, in some instances, body convulsions.²¹ Post-performance evaluations contribute to an analysis of Micia Mosely’s one-woman show, *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, providing useful demographic data and feedback about the show. However, when examining televised comedy, segments online and live

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 120.

²⁰ *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, DVD. Directed by Dave Greene (New York, New York: AETN, 2008).

²¹ As I use examples of comic material throughout, I intentionally include audience response in italics. In this way, readers have a window into the exchange of humor between performer and audience. I try to limit deriving any conclusions from these exchanges unless I was present for the performance, acquired data from audience members via surveys or talk-backs, or the performer commented directly on the material in question.

performances, these tools are not always practical or possible. This poses limitations on the claims I or anyone can make as to the efficacy of performances; a central claim here, though, is not that humor enacting cultural citizenship is efficacious, rather that its progenitor intends it to be and therefore it *could* function in this way. For example, analysis of audience feedback and evaluations of Mosely's one-woman show allows me to gauge whether Mosely's objectives were made clear to audience members.

Scholars attend to gender, race, and sexuality in the production of humor (usually to the exclusion of the other), but less so to a jokester's national origin or the way issues of citizenship and nation inform and influence the humor produced. In most cases, self-authored humor is autobiographical and observational (read: assessed from one's standpoint). Thus, audiences are offered a window into the lives of these performers. As will be demonstrated, using nation as a focal point will still bring to bear other identity categories. Analyzing humor as part of the project of cultural citizenship allows for an intersectional analysis that accounts for multiple subject positions.

Literature Review

We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack, to get a tricky subject on the table, to warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies and the hateful acts of friends and family, to camouflage sensitivity, to tease, to compliment, to berate, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change.

—Daryl Cucumber Dance²²

Humor touches all of our lives and pervades every cultural form, which is perhaps why humor studies scholars hail from a host of fields and disciplines. Scholars laud

²² Daryl Cucumber Dance (ed.), "Introduction," in *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), xxii.

humor for its potential to subvert and resist, as a means of creating community, and a way to instruct, edify, and exact change. One concrete mode of social interaction through which to analyze humor is stand-up comedy. Focusing on humor and nation necessitates exploration of citizenship studies, cultural and popular cultural studies, performance studies, queer theory, studies in race/ethnicity, and feminist theory. I will provide a literature review specific to the theory of cultural citizenship in chapter two.

Philosophers, pundits, and scientists have all taken a crack at the study of humor. For the purposes of this investigation, I draw mainly from scholars working in the humanities and whose work influences my own research, beginning with theorists in the humanities whose scholarship on play, laughter, and jokes informs this discussion. Feminist studies of humorous performance and literature help situate women's position as producers of humor in the US and inform the discussion of any minoritarian subject seeking to do the same. Performance studies theorists examining intersections of performance and national identity provide useful illustrations for how performance can reveal a nation to itself.

Performance that Plays

The concepts of play and laughter have been theorized by anthropologists, performance and cultural studies scholars. Seminal theorists like Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Austin Turner, and Clifford Geertz have all engaged with humor production in some way, be it the structure of jokes, the politics of laughter or the role of playing in culture. Clifford Geertz challenges the ways of knowing preferred by social science departments and offers three modes of knowing that influence how life

or people's behaviors and practices are studied: life is a stage (pace Victor Turner); life is a game (pace Erving Goffman); and life is a text (pace linguistic scholars like J.L. Austin and his protégé John Searle).²³ Theories of play proffered by scholars such as Turner and Geertz suggest that there is a way of knowing ourselves and our world vis-à-vis the playing that connects us. Humor is a form of play.

Michel Foucault cites laughter as one of the three passions working to keep knowledge at bay, helping people cope with unpleasant truths, and also a creative force in knowledge production. Thus, Foucault may say that laughter, derived from humor, is not only disruptive, fueled by contempt for _____ (e.g., status quo, rules, gender inequality, difference, economic disparities, politicking, etc.), but it is also *productive*.²⁴ He offers a unique argument, making a case for knowledge production stemming directly from play or an attempt to satirize and parody; in doing so he expands the possibilities of that struggle. While Foucault's scholarship lays some groundwork for understanding and complicating comic performance, we need additional scholarship on these topics to move from a realm of theory into one that concretely identifies the tactics, strategies, and information embedded in comic performances. Laughter may be productive but *of what?* Comedy can reveal new knowledges, but *what are they?*

Twentieth century philosophers George Meredith, Henri Bergson, and Wylie Sypher explored the difference between the comic and humor and the qualities of the comic, while others like Sigmund Freud focused on the anatomy of jokes and more

²³ Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Reconfiguration of Social Thought," *American Scholar* 49.2 (1980): 165-179.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Judicial Forms," *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* Vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 2000).

importantly, established a classifying term for politically charged jokes. All these thinkers turn to the comic material itself as evidence for their arguments, rather than also focusing, as I will, on the comics producing the humorous material. Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, classifies jokes as tendentious and non-tendentious—the former having a purpose and the latter being innocent—acknowledging the potential for humor to subvert and transgress. In true psychoanalytic fashion, he gave us the psychic release theory of laughter, which argues that laughter is the product of tension being released, a tension that mounts as the joke is told and breaks with the dispensing of the punch line. Pleasure results from seeing purposes stand opposed, whether by external or internal obstacles, and then seeing that opposition removed, thereby avoiding the establishing of a new inhibition or savoring the relief that comes from being liberated from an already existing inhibition; he dubs this “economy in expenditure on inhibition or suppression,” in other words, the relief that follows transgressive humor.²⁵ Freud offered the possibility of transgression in the joke; other scholars have found it elsewhere.

Considered a seminal voice in theorizing the transgressive, Mikhail Bakhtin focuses on the carnival as a site of public celebration and possible subversion.²⁶ He argues that these ritual celebrations offer temporary freedom from the prevailing truth and established order. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White find it troublesome to claim that the fair opposes official order, when in fact it serves as an economic unit that strengthens capitalism and official ideology and is authorized and sanctioned by the

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. James Stachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1960), 119.

²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

established order.²⁷ Umberto Eco in “Frames of Comic Freedom” also argues that the carnival, while offering temporary respite from the order of the day, does not result in “*actual* liberation.”²⁸ Stallybrass, White and Eco all move the focus from the physical site of revelry to the bodies producing revelry.

Umberto Eco insightfully argues that comic effect depends on mutually understood cultural references, shared comic frames that when broken, disrupted, and realigned, result in laughter and enjoyment. He says, “What remains compulsory, in order to produce a comic effect, is the prohibition of spelling out the norm. It must be presupposed both by the utterer and by the audience. If the speaker spells it out, he is a fool, or a jerk; if the audience does not know it, there is no comic effect.”²⁹ Stand-up comedy draws from one’s personal repertoire of experiences and response to the world. It reflects a shared national culture, which is why comics can travel across the country telling the same jokes, but it just as often reflects other cultural traditions, shaped by categories of identity like race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, age, religion, ability, and gender. Lawrence Mintz identifies the comic as “cultural spokes[person], as a mediator, an ‘articulator’ of our culture,” though he does not comment on nor question *whose* culture is being referenced and whose is not.³⁰ Jokesters hailing from minoritarian communities draw from cultural references and comic frames that mainstream folks do not necessarily share or understand, other than vis-à-vis widely disseminated stereotypes. This may be one explanation why the demographics of

²⁷ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 1986), 34-35.

²⁸ Umberto Eco, “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” in *Carnival!*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton, 1984), 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁰ Lawrence E. Mintz, “Standup Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation,” in *American Humor*, ed. A.P. Dudden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 197.

successful comics do not reflect the larger racial/ethnic and gender demographics in the US. It will be difficult to be received as funny if your jokes draw from comic frames to which viewers have seldom been exposed. Twentieth century theories on comedy and laughter chart a science of jokes and play that draw from and assume a male jokester and naturalize status quo humor (read: male). Part of my intervention here is to offer cultural explanations for the economic viability of specific comic frames (read: why certain identities are more marketable).

Feminist Humor Studies Scholarship

Despite theoretical shortcomings and its androcentrism, early theories about comedy demonstrate the way laughter relies on shared cultural knowledge and the transgressive potential of humor. Feminist scholars, recuperating these arguments, also claim that women's humor is transgressive. Indeed, Suzanne Juhasz, Crisianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith suggest that feminist scholars are drawn to the study of humor because "comedy is aligned with subversive and disruptive modes that offer alternative perspectives on culture."³¹ Methods of transgression or the benefits of performing resistant comedy include that women are allowed the opportunity to assert their own subjectivity; to subvert gender norms via masquerade, satire, or mockery; to counter the tradition of misogynistic humor; to develop comedy that serves to affirm the experiences of women; and to take advantage of comedy's freedom because it is self-authored and is not necessarily restricted to a narrative. For evidence, scholars look to the history of funny ladies in various literary and entertainment forms like vaudeville, minstrelsy, literature, poetry, variety shows, film, television, stand-up

³¹ Suzanne Juhasz, Crisianne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith (eds.), "Comedy and Audience in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," in *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1993), 1.

comedy, theater, and performance art.³² Using the comic material produced by comic performers, scholars work to define women's humor, lesbian humor, and feminist humor, while others elaborate on specific historical usages and methods for humor in minoritarian communities, e.g., the roots of African American humor.³³ How and why comics produce charged humor or humor enacting cultural citizenship makes the latter scholarship an important one for this project. Performance studies scholars, such as Jose Esteban Muñoz, May Joseph, Alicia Arrizon, Peggy Phelan, Carrie Sandahl, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, and Diana Taylor, offers useful models for how performance can illumine the struggles and experiences salient to various minoritarian communities.³⁴

³² Regina Barreca and Nancy Walker have both published extensively in the field of women's humor. In particular see: Regina Barreca (ed.), *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988); Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988). Alison Oddey interviews dozens of UK funny women in the comedy industry (ed.), *Performing Women: Stand-ups, Strumpets, and Itinerants* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Pamela Robertson looks at campy female icons in US popular entertainment in *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1996).

³³ The following scholarship examines the history of women's humor and its practitioners: Zita Dresner, "Women's Humor," in *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*, ed. Lawrence E. Mintz (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 137-160; Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Women in Comedy: The Funny Ladies from the Turn of the Century to the Present* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1986); Gail Finney (ed.), "Unity in Difference? An Introduction," in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 1-14.

The following texts seek to define and illumine the scope and functions of women's humor and feminist humor: Lizabeth Goodman, "Comic Subversions: Comedy as Strategy in Feminist Theatre," in *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*, eds. Frances Bonner, Lizabeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Janes & Catherine King (UK: Polity Press assoc. with the Open University, 1992), 257-277; Lisa Merrill, "Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming," in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988). Janet Bing and Dana Heller examine lesbian humorists and chart contemporary lesbian humor in "How Many Lesbians Does it Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?" *Humor* 16, 2 (2003): 157-182.

³⁴ Scholarship by Muñoz, Joseph, Sandahl and Taylor is cited throughout. The following publications by Peggy Phelan and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano are useful for situating and understanding performance and performativity, specifically women's performance (Phelan) and Latina performance (Yarbro-Bejarano): Peggy Phelan, *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P), 1993; Peggy Phelan, *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York & London: New York UP), 1998; Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "The Female Subject in Chicano Theatre: Sexuality, "Race," and Class," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue Ellen Case (Baltimore & London: John Hopkins UP), 1990. 131-149.

I turn now to the scholars who focus specifically on women's humor production and comic performance.³⁵ Scholarship examining gender and humor concludes that male humor has long been lauded as superior. This has its origin in the traditional relegation of women to the private or domestic sphere where they were expected to act demure and passive. We were to be supportive laughers but certainly not joke-tellers. Brazen though she may have been in the 20th century—the lady telling a joke at a party—to pursue a career in performing comedy was unthinkable and socially unacceptable. It was a man's domain. At the turn of the 20th century, during the height of vaudeville entertainment, women performers, and especially women comic performers were considered immoral stage strumpets, little better than harlots or prostitutes.³⁶ A century later, female comic entertainers are no longer considered

³⁵ The bedrock of my claims rests on the accumulated scholarship about women's and otherwise minoritarian humor. For qualitative studies of women's stand-up comedy, see Allison Fraiberg, "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-Up Comedy," in *Studies in Humor and Gender, Vol. 1*, ed. Gail Finney (USA: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1994), 315-334; Jennifer Reed, "Lily Tomlin's *Appearing Nitely*: Performing Difference before Difference was Cool," *Journal of Popular Culture* 37:3 (2004):436-451; Linda Pershing, "There's a Joker in the Menstrual Hut: A Performance Analysis of Comedian Kate Clinton," in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991), 193-236; Philip Auslander, "'Brought to you by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism on Postmodernism* (Routledge: London & New York, 1997), 108-126; Danielle Russell, "Self-deprecatory Humor and the Female Comic: Self Destruction or Comedic Construction?" *thirdspace* 2,1 (Nov. 2002): 1-16; Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, ed. Jerome Nadelhaft (New York & London: Routledge, 2004); Susan Horowitz, *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (Amsterdam: Gordon & Breach Publishers, 1997); Michelle R. Douma, "Self-Definition, Subversion and Parody in Recent Lesbian Comedy," (Unpublished dissertation, University of Oregon, 1997); Anne Hole, "Performing Identity: Dawn French and the Funny Fat Female Body," *Feminist Media Studies* 3,3 (November 2003):315-329; Sian Mile, "Roseanne Barr: Canned Laughter-Containing the Subject," in *Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Series in Studies in Gender and Culture, Volume 5 ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon & Breach, 1992), 39-46. Alicia Arrizon and Lillian Manzor (eds.) examine Latina performance artists many of whom are cross-over comics like Marga Gomez and Monica Palacios in *Latinas on Stage* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2000).

³⁶ Susan Glenn and Alison Kibler have written books on the careers and experiences of women vaudevillians and actresses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. See: Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge & London: Harvard UP, 2000); M. Alison Kibler, *Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville* (Chapel Hill & London: U of North Carolina P, 1999). Henry Jenkins examines the roles of women in early sound comedies during the same time period in the chapter "'Don't Become Too Intimate with That Terrible

morally suspect; yet, men are still considered the superior progenitors of humor in every way—as playwrights, authors, stand-up comics, television, film actors, and even as conversationalists.³⁷

Feminists have long criticized androcentrism in philosophy, biological studies, literature, and history. One of the primary objectives of feminist theory and criticism, according to Susan Bordo, should be to create institutions and build communities that do not allow “*some* groups to make determinations about everyone else’s reality.”³⁸ Women are taught to be conversant with a male point of view, which is held to be superior commercially and culturally. For instance, movies with a female lead or having more than one strong female role are dismissed and reduced to “chick flicks,” “girl movies,” or “sentimental films,” but men and women alike are expected to be conversant with male dominated genres of film like: action or adventure, drama, thriller, war, crime, etc. But, the same expectation is not made regarding feminized genres of film such as the romantic comedy or melodrama.³⁹ The same argument can be made for comic performances, particularly stand-up comedy and performance art.⁴⁰ Male humor stands in as the norm for what is humorous about the lives of both

Woman!’ Unruly Wives, Female Performance, and Gendered Laughter in Early Sound Comedy,” in *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992); Eric Lott explores blackface minstrelsy in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993) as does John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You. Blackface, Whiteface, Insult and Imitation in American Popular Culture* (New York, New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2006).

³⁷ Mary Crawford, “Just Kidding: Gender and Conversational Humor,” in *Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Series in Studies in Gender and Culture, Volume 5, ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 23-37.

³⁸ Susan Bordo, “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 142.

³⁹ Feminist film theorist Kathleen Rowe maintains this argument in a chapter titled “Narrative, Comedy, and Melodrama” in her monograph *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995), 95-115.

⁴⁰ Jeanie Forte, “Women’s Performance Art: Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Ed. Sue Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1990), 258.

men *and* women, despite its obviously skewed perception or outright obfuscation of women's lived experiences.

Male humor functions as the standard for humor; we are taught through repeated exposure to identify with the humor generated by men. This identification offers a sort of cultural currency by allowing audience members to learn from and identify with members of the dominant culture regardless if they belong. It simultaneously hinders the likelihood of women and members of minoritarian communities achieving success as comic performers and subsequently offers fewer opportunities for the public to grapple with human differences. L.H. Stallings speaks to this in *Mutha' is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, stating that the mainstream has the "propensity to make incomprehensible Black female subjectivity," which makes it difficult for opportunities to arise for mainstream identification with the "Other."⁴¹ Identification is gauged by comic success. If the individual grins, laughs, claps, nods her head in affirmation, or any other culturally acceptable positive response, identification is achieved. The subtext is: I hear what you are saying and (momentarily) agree with you. To be clear, I am not claiming that a nod or a whistle means that the audience member permanently supports that idea, thought, or premise but that some point of

⁴¹ L.H. Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2007), 117. For additional scholarship on African American humor traditions see: DoVeanna Fulton, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes," *Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 117,463 (Winter 2004): 81-96; Carol Allen, "'Shaking That Thing' and All Its Wonders: African American Female Comedy," *Studies in American Humor* 3,12 (2005): 97-120; Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers UP, 2007); Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006); Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995); Daryl Cucumber Dance (ed.), *Honey Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

connection or identification has been made, if only temporarily with a limited number of people. Late comic Benjamin Stuart, a White, wheelchair-bound little person stated in an interview for the documentary *Able to Laugh*: “It’s a step by step thing but at least it’s 250 people that understand a little bit better.”⁴² For him, stage time was pivotal in providing an opportunity to educate, relate, and demystify his different abilities, albeit limited to small audiences.

The marginalization of women stand-up comics is represented by the fact that they are not frequently the topic of an entire book, rather myriad articles and essays published in edited collections and journals. There are a few exceptions like Joanne Gilbert’s *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique*. She argues that some comics opt to perform marginality, deliberately calling attention to a category of difference one occupies, while others do not (for various reasons). My being a woman may appear obvious to audience members but I do not have to tell jokes that call attention to my woman-ness, sticking instead to current affairs, observational humor, and other gender-neutral topics. Comics make choices about whether to highlight certain aspects of their identity; performing marginality, as Gilbert argues, may affect one’s ability to break into the mainstream comedy club circuit. Gilbert’s work is particularly useful because while she draws heavily from feminist scholarship on women’s humor and focuses primarily on women stand-up comics, her arguments apply to all minoritarian subjects. Similarly, this project is not just about women’s humor production, it is about a *kind* of humor (charged) anyone can produce on their or others’ behalf that is instructive, edifying, and mobilizing, a kind of humor that I argue enacts cultural citizenship and as a result is a kind of

⁴² *Able to Laugh*, VHS. Directed by Michael J. Dougan (Boston, MA: Fanlight Productions, 1993).

humor that lacks economic viability in the marketplace...and not because it is not funny.

Performance and National Identity

Henri Bergson wrote a treatise on laughter in 1900 making some astute observations about humor that provide axioms for my project such as “laughter is always the laughter of a group.”⁴³ He goes on, “laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.”⁴⁴ Such a view allows me to argue we exist in a national imaginary connected by the knowledge of our mutual existence.

The nation is a defining and influential concept in intellectual circles and the broader polis. Homi K. Bhabha proposes that the concept of nation is “a system of cultural signification.”⁴⁵ By this he means that a network of cultural forms or practices works to signify or construct symbolic meanings of our ideas of nation and nation-ness. Benedict Anderson, in the oft-cited *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, identifies such cultural forms and social changes influencing the development and codification of the term “nation” in the popular imagination—what he calls the “imagined political community” and what I will call the national imaginary, a psychic phenomenon uniting a nation’s inhabitants.⁴⁶ In Anderson’s words, nation “is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the

⁴³ Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” in *Comedy*, ed. W. Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), 64.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴⁵ Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), “Introduction: narrating the nation,” in *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), 1.

⁴⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York & London: Verso, 1983), 6.

members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁴⁷ Importantly, this imaginary community does not exist in any sort of true or objective state; instead, “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁴⁸ The important elements here are that it is imagined as: limited (bounded by geography); sovereign (free from divinely inspired monarchies); and, as community “because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁴⁹

Benedict Anderson contextualizes the development of nationalism (as does Homi Bhabha) “by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being.”⁵⁰ Specific cultural forms enabled the imagining of nation such as print capitalism, including the novel and the newspaper, which “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation.”⁵¹ The lynchpin of this imagined national community is a grasp of simultaneity, for while all the people that share an imagined community will never know each other, they must have “complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity.”⁵² The routine of reading the newspaper is an example of how people become aware that they participate in an activity shared by many (most of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 25.

⁵² Ibid., 26.

whom they do not know); this routine is a reminder to readers that “the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations.”⁵³ Consumption of such a nationally recognized artifact reinforces that we imagine a national community; as such, stand-up comedy and comic performances offer widely circulated cultural practices that also rely on shared cultural knowledge.

The production of humor draws from one’s personal and communal history, social protocol, learned behavior, social environments, and cultural effluvia. It is an artistic and creative response recapitulating shared cultural knowledge and reflecting one’s social positioning. Consuming comedy involves recognition or identification (understanding the comic frames and how they fit into our cultural schemas, i.e., they make “sense”) and affirmation or assent (we agree to participate, even if this participation looks different for different consumers). This process—production, exchange, and consumption of humor—relies to some degree on the ability to imagine one’s community, though a comic performer may invoke this to signal national, religious, sexual, and/or racial/ethnic communities. Since we occupy various categories of difference, comics draw from and reference multiple communities, revealing not only how they see themselves belonging in the national imaginary but also how they negotiate belonging in smaller communities centered on race, sexuality, ability, age, creed, class, and gender. Producing humor that solely references narrow cultural frames can undermine the comic material’s economic viability in a mainstream market. Commercial success relies on the comic’s ability to paint a picture of belonging to the national imaginary. We laugh at comedy portraying

⁵³ Ibid., 35-36.

experiences we either share or imagine sharing based on collective cultural understandings and mutual belonging in the national imaginary. Benedict Anderson's theorizing of imagined communities is particularly useful because if we can imagine a community, we can re-imagine or "imagine otherwise."⁵⁴ Cultural practices that engage consumers, creating dialogue and edifying viewers can intervene and begin to challenge and change the way we imagine communities (we may or may not belong to) and the larger national imaginary. It is a theory that leaves space for praxis.

Connecting the development of a national imaginary with the growth of capitalism, as Benedict Anderson does, suggests that some cultural forms are direct by-products of capitalism. I would also extend this to (tele)visual media and live performance. It makes sense that these cultural forms springing from capitalism and giving rise to a sense of nation-ness, deal directly with the implications of being a part of a national imaginary. Indeed, performance studies scholars argue that performance "is enmeshed in what it means to be a U.S. citizen."⁵⁵ Both Andy Medhurst and May Joseph distinguish themselves in the field of performance studies by being among the few scholars acknowledging the significant role of nation in the production of cultural forms, in this case certain kinds of performances.⁵⁶ By using performance to gauge

⁵⁴ I borrow this term from Kandice Chuh. Her monograph, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*, uses Asian American literatures and legal texts to explore what we can know about America through them, arguing that communities (even those bounded by nation or region) are marked by difference and heterogeneity. Just as she asks her readers to "imagine otherwise," or to rethink the field of Asian American Studies, I suggest that humor has the potential to prompt listeners to imagine otherwise, to see political and social issues in a different light and refigure the conditions of belonging to be more inclusive. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003), 29.

⁵⁵ Soyini D. Madison and Judith Hamera (eds.), "Performance Studies at the Intersections," in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), xx.

⁵⁶ Another notable contributor in the field is Karen Shimakawa's *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2002). I will discuss her work in more detail in chapter two.

expressions of and public opinions about citizenship, they place national culture and performance at the center of the debate.

May Joseph examines the work of Black British women playwrights “as an evocative site of citizenship,” because their work engaged with issues and “concerns around forging new kinds of multicultural citizenship.”⁵⁷ In *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship*, she explores the ways citizenship is expressed vis-à-vis cultural forms in migrant and itinerant racial/ethnic communities, arguing that “citizenship is not organic but must be acquired through public and psychic participation.”⁵⁸ Citizenship is amorphous, ambiguous, and dynamic and best understood within a given historical moment, reflecting the instability of its subject—the citizen. She demonstrates that these are legal, political, and cultural positions that can be conveyed through fine and performing arts. Her focus lies:

...on the expressive domains inhabited by citizens reinventing themselves according to prevalent notions of authentic citizenship, either popularly or officially defined, whether in the way one holds one’s body, the music one consumes, or the kind of theater one produces. Consequently, the expressive enactments of citizenship explored here reiterate the notion that the lifeworld of citizenship entails a network of performed affiliations—private and public, formal and informal—through which the neurons of the state are activated with ideas of a polity.⁵⁹

Joseph found that women’s cultural status as marginalized citizens shapes cultural production. She argues that Black women’s playwriting in Britain “cumulatively destabilized earlier narratives of women as structured absence, filling the invisible histories of Black women as active agents within British struggles for cultural and

⁵⁷ May Joseph, “Bodies outside the State: Black British Women Playwrights and the Limits of Citizenship,” in *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York & London: New York UP, 1998), 197 & 199.

⁵⁸ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 3.

⁵⁹ Joseph, *Nomadic Identities*, 4.

legal citizenship.”⁶⁰ Joseph demonstrates the way performance illumines experiences of national inclusion and exclusion but I would add that performance is an expressive domain revealing who and what criteria constitutes ideal citizenry. When a performer gestures to how they do not belong, viewers will populate another field with who *does* belong.

Like other artistic pursuits, comic performance is a cultural form produced and consumed according to an individual’s relation to the national polity. Minoritarian stand-up comics will find an empathic audience among others situated similarly. For instance, *The Queens of Comedy* tour, featuring African American comics Laura Hayes, Mo’Nique Hicks, and Sommore, was very successful with middle-class African Americans. However, the appeal and success of minoritarian comics—compared to those located within the dominant culture, whose status as accepted citizen, legally and culturally, is continually assured—may vary and in some cases be rejected altogether.

May Joseph’s scholarship produces readings of various cultural sites that “reveal the invisible economies that inform popular assumptions about cultural citizenship” and illumine the network of forces that inform and construct our ideas about citizenship.⁶¹ Andy Medhurst takes on a similar project, arguing that the cultural practice of comedy “contributes significantly to how English culture has imagined its Englishness.”⁶² These expressions of communal and national identity pervade everyday life. As Medhurst puts it, “[t]he imagined nation does not, of course, stay in the realm of conceptual speculation. It takes concrete form in the politics and

⁶⁰ Joseph, “Bodies Outside the State,” 198.

⁶¹ Joseph, *Nomadic Identities*, 5.

⁶² Medhurst, *A National Joke*, 1.

institutions of the nation state, it is visualized and dramatized in symbol and ritual. To inhabit a nation state is to live among countless, daily, unavoidable images of that nation's ideas of itself."⁶³ Where Medhurst looks to popular comedy—the comic material achieving national recognition—found in music halls, on stage, in film, and elsewhere to examine how comedy reveals a nation's idea of itself, I am looking at the same thing, but specifically among comics whose production of humor reveals a nation's idea of itself with the intention to challenge that idea and instead secure a sense of civic, political, and cultural equality. I value Medhurst's work here because he effectively demonstrates that comic performance reflects our national affiliation and a sense of nation-ness but I would go further and argue that it also reflects *how we belong* in the national imaginary. This works both ways as the comic situates himself or herself in the national imaginary and the audience situates themselves in relation to the comic in the national imaginary. Medhurst's selection of subjects granted him a specific (perhaps narrow) view of Englishness, a view that may very well look different given different entertainers.

Performance studies scholars and Americanists agree that cultural forms are sites for political struggle and some turn towards performance as a site where these struggles play out. Diana Taylor, in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War,"* interrogates performance as loci for political action and community building, focusing on cultural, performative, and artistic reactions during and after Argentina's Dirty War (1976-83). Lisa Lowe advances an argument in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* that lends primacy to the site of cultural struggle, drawing from literature, performances,

⁶³ Ibid., 27.

and geographic sites that disrupt, revise, and alter the way Asian American communities are imagined, in effect, pointing towards the possibilities for future re-imaginings. As Lowe writes, “[i]t is likewise in culture that individuals and collectivities struggle and remember and, in that difficult remembering, imagine and practice both subject and community differently.”⁶⁴ Charged humor re-imagines one’s community and reveals the terms of struggle germane to one’s identity.

To be clear, this is not a dissertation about women’s humor, though women are represented throughout, nor is it a dissertation about queer comedy or any other single category of difference. In fact, it quickly became apparent that comics producing humor enacting cultural citizenship hail from every community, some despite the privilege concomitant with their social status. I include the voices and material of comics (popular to obscure) who use humor to enact cultural citizenship, irrespective of their social locations. As such, this project draws from and taps into nearly every community in the US and is not exclusive to any creed, gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, class, or ability. It is, therefore, both intersectional and transdisciplinary. In this way, it departs from previous scholarship on stand-up comedy that either takes White male jokesters as the subject, throwing in a token female or African American or that focuses exclusively on a single axis of difference such as gender or race or sexuality. Part of my argument throughout is that this humor says something; it is not humor for humor’s sake. My intervention here is to grapple with what this humor is saying so we can understand the various ways people feel culturally alienated and so we can work to remedy the situation.

Stuart Hall believes that a strength of cultural studies, a strength that holds true

⁶⁴ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 3.

for most identity-based disciplines, is the way they attend to the “development of conscious struggle and organization as a necessary element in the analysis of history, ideology and consciousness.”⁶⁵ These struggles play out in dimly lit bars and pizzerias, in high-school auditoriums, in world-class performance venues, and in comedy clubs across the nation. T.J. Jackson Lears opines: “And that is part of our task as well, to listen to those voices (however dissonant and confused) and try to reconstruct the human experience of history.”⁶⁶ I lay my own ear to the tracks, listening for the comic engines roaring by.

Project Overview

What follows are two theory chapters, one which situates humor production intended to enact cultural citizenship, and one which examines cultural patterns in consumption of humor, focusing on why male comics are more successful than their female counterparts. Each subsequent case study focuses on a comic performer or group of comic performers, each of whom I argue produces humor enacting cultural citizenship, calling attention to their second-class status and offering tactics for acquisition of whatever rights, liberties, protections, or visibility are desired by the individual performer. The case studies include: Robin Tyler, a Jewish lesbian comic and activist who is currently spearheading the marriage equality movement in California; Micia Mosely, a Brooklyn-based, Black queer woman whose one-woman show, *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, is touring the

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), 535.

⁶⁶ T.J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985): 593.

country; and a group of young people (eighteen and under) participating in Comedy Academy programs (a non-profit arts education organization in Maryland), allowing them to author and perform sketch comedy.

Chapter two investigates the production of charged humor or the humor that seeks to motivate and mobilize. Turning to the performances and interviews with comics, I will examine the field of cultural citizenship as it relates specifically to the cultural practice of comic performance. In other words, how do comics enact cultural citizenship—what exactly does that mean and what does that look like? The study and application of cultural citizenship is about exploring “what motivates people to action, what gets them moving and inspires mobilization and under what circumstances;” I argue that comic performance does this.⁶⁷ Comedy is a cultural practice that can promote social change through community empowerment and affirmation, which is fundamental to the use of cultural citizenship as a theoretical tool. Like other projects of cultural citizenship, the comedic interpretations of “[e]veryday life practices, cultural traditions and individual/collective discourses express peoples’ values and perceptions of their world,” which is “key to understanding the relationship between larger social forces and peoples’ daily lives and consciousness.”⁶⁸ Comic performance functions as a popular culture form expressing ideas, experiences, and values about our environment, culture, and everyday activities and in some instances is intended to shift consciousness, educate, and challenge White heteronormativity. They explore the everyday lives and practices of the polis. This chapter explores the range of goals, tactics, and strategies

⁶⁷ IUP Cultural Studies Working Group, “Draft Concept Paper on Cultural Citizenship,” Unpublished working concept paper no. 2 (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos, Hunter College, 1989), 9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

implemented by comics from various communities. The matter of protest is unique to a community's history as is why and what comics reference and critique in their comedy. Though the impetus for enacting cultural citizenship may vary between communities, this kind of humor is united in its effort to affirm and develop one's identity and community, used as a coping mechanism for cultural exclusion and oppression, and to mock social conventions, particularly conventions excluding them or reifying a bigoted system. I examine comic performances as a part of the project of cultural citizenship and concomitantly the way ones' relationship to the national polity informs the production of humor.

Chapter three focuses on the consumption of humor enacting cultural citizenship. I suggest that production of this kind of humor may adversely affect its consumption, looking specifically at the gender debate in popular culture discourse, namely that men are funnier than women. Contemporary laugh-makers hail from diverse backgrounds, cultures, nationalities, and race/ethnicities. They are able-bodied and differently-abled; they are men and women; they are heterosexual and queer. Yet, national notoriety and success as a comic favors able-bodied, heterosexual men. Certainly there are examples of female breakthrough comics like Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, and Kathy Griffin, and lesbian comics as with Ellen Degeneres, Wanda Sykes, or Rosie O'Donnell. But when it comes to long-term success as a headliner in comedy clubs, booking concert venues, and opportunities in television and film, men—Black, Latino, White, Asian, Arab, etc.—have historically been its greatest recipients.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Consider the following well-known actors whose careers began performing stand-up comedy and were plucked from the comedy club circuit by talent scouts and placed in television sitcoms and films:

Women continue to take up the mic and try their hand in a field where the odds of commercial success are slim; there simply are not as many opportunities for women to strut their comic stuff in women-driven sitcoms and a lack of strong female characters in television overall. Comic success may look different for women comics who find themselves hitting the “laugh ceiling” in professional stand-up.⁷⁰ For women comics, the pinnacle of success looks more like small cameos or witty best buds in blockbuster films and the ability to headline comedy clubs or larger performance venues; whereas, successful men in this industry command lead roles in blockbuster films and many use their comic material to star in autobiographical sitcoms.⁷¹ This male driven economy of comedy reveals itself in a number of ways, not the least of which is a host of people who perceive men to be funnier than women,

Andy Griffith, Buddy Hackett, Bill Cosby, George Carlin, Red Foxx, Bob Hope, Richard Pryor, David Letterman, Andy Kaufmann, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, Jay Leno, Dane Cook, Jon Stuart, Woody Allen, Bobcat Goldthwait, Rodney Dangerfield, Eddie Murphy, Jeff Foxworthy, Bernie Mac, Ray Romano, Jerry Seinfeld, Carlos Mencia, Jim Carrey, Bill Hicks, Ron White, Larry the Cable Guy, Tim Allen, Jaime Foxx, Bill Engvall, Bob Saget, Leo Anthony Gallagher, Steve Harvey, Eddie Izzard, Steve Carell, Dennis Miller, D.L. Hughley, Gilbert Gottfried, David Alan Grier, Jim Gaffigan, Dana Carvey, Doug Benson, Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Dave Attell, Chris Tucker, Colin Quinn, Conan O’Brien, Rob Corddry, Keenen Ivory Wayans, Craig Ferguson, Dennis Leary, Lewis Black, Martin Lawrence, and I could go on.

⁷⁰ Russell Peterson, author of *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke*, includes a brief discussion of women’s limited roles in late-night talk shows, a section he titles “The Laugh Ceiling.” (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 108.

⁷¹ Of the many women currently pursuing a transition from stage to screen, Kathy Griffin, a White forty-something who reports celebrity gossip and news, managed to turn her performance career into an Emmy winning reality television series called *Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D List*. Wanda Sykes, a Black lesbian, was not so fortunate with her own television sitcom *Wanda at Large*. While Sykes is offered film roles delivering comic relief as side-kick and BFF to the main protagonist (she currently plays the role of Barb, Julia Louis-Dreyfus’s buddy in *The New Adventures of Old Christine*), she has yet to play a lead role in a film despite being wildly successful and well-known throughout the country. Her latest venture, *The Wanda Sykes Show*, has her hosting a talk-show Saturday nights on Fox television but there is no word as to whether the show will be renewed for next season. Currently, Sarah Silverman (*The Sarah Silverman Program*), Kathy Griffin, Chelsea Handler (*Chelsea Lately*), Molly Shannon and Selma Blair (*Kath & Kim*), Edie Falco (*Nurse Jackie*), Toni Collette (*The United States of Tara*), and Julia Louis-Dreyfus (*The New Adventures of Old Christine*) are some of the only women who star in their own television sitcom or show (*Nurse Jackie* and *The United States of Tara* are both Showtime original series). This compared to the multitudes of male comic-turned-actor touting successful long-term careers as television show hosts, starring in their own sitcoms and playing lead male protagonists in movies.

a phenomenon that is hardly surprising when popular discourse augments and perpetuates this belief and when each subsequent generation is exposed to humor and comic devices generated by men, but marketed to men and women alike. I situate this popular debate using print media, in particular a series of articles printed in *Vanity Fair*, along with interviews with comedians and the jokes they author, documentaries about stand-up comedy, and public commentary. Examining cultural explanations for an economy of humor that favors male humor production, I conclude that there is little to no incentive for identifying with or buying into the humor produced by women or anyone performing charged humor.

Chapter four is the first of three case studies. Drawing from recorded performances, archival evidence, and Shane Phelan's analysis of queer citizenship in *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, I argue that Robin Tyler's career as comic performer and activist illustrates a queer(ful) intersectional politics that lobbies for recognition of LGBTQ folks as full citizens. For all practical purposes, LGBTQ persons are citizens. They can vote, serve on a jury, pay taxes, receive unemployment, and social security, etc. They have many of the same legal rights as any individual adult citizen. To understand the way LGBTQ persons can have these rights but still feel like second-class citizens, Phelan suggests that factoring in acknowledgement reveals the ways LGBTQ persons feel excluded. Her lengthy examination of acknowledgement piggybacks and expands on some of the same ideas Latino Cultural Studies Working Group members include in early draft concept papers about cultural citizenship, such as their emphasis on "the link between

power, rights and culture.”⁷² Without this understanding, we cannot devise the tactics and strategies to refigure the terms of belonging, for LGBTQ persons and any other community combating a history of exclusion, whether culturally, politically, or economically. Using Robin Tyler’s life as illustration, I suggest that tactics aimed at changing public opinion, such as performance and education initiatives, and tactics seeking policy changes, as in grassroots initiatives and legal reform, are best deployed in tandem with one another. In other words, full inclusion for LGBTQ folks requires interventions on cultural and legal fronts.

While all of the case studies provide models of persons producing charged humor, the next case study picks up arguments made in chapter three about humor consumption and offers an illustration for the potential comic performance has to shift current trends in humor consumption. Chapter five examines a one-woman show—*Where My Girls At: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*—authored and performed by Micia Mosely. In a culture bereft of dynamic representation of Black lesbians, Jose Esteban Muñoz’s disidentification theory in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* describes the strategy minoritarian subjects use to combat cultural invisibility. While he reads Latina women’s comic performances for the ways they illustrate their own practice of disidentification, I focus on the value of Mosely’s performance as a rare opportunity for underrepresented groups to identify with rich and diverse representations of Black lesbians—a moment when disidentification need not be implemented. My sources include the performance text, several iterations of the performance, audience evaluations, and a series of interviews with Mosely and the producer of the show, Shalonda Ingram. I offer her work as an example of how one

⁷² IUP, “Draft Concept Paper,” 12.

woman's comic performance serves to complicate images of Black lesbians and expand the ability of non-Black lesbians to identify with Black lesbian subjectivities. Put differently, I argue that charged humor can shift the dominant pattern of humor consumption by forging a connection between the audience and the many Black lesbians Mosely portrays in the show.

Chapter six focuses on young people participating in a comic theater arts program that has students author comedic sketches, which are then performed for fellow students, faculty, families, and friends. Young people occupy a liminal space of being citizens-in-training. While they are considered minors and parents function as legal guardians, it is understood that in due time they will become fully functioning adult citizens. How do young people use humor to enact cultural citizenship and what does their humor reveal—about the world, about belonging, about their struggles to negotiate identity? Drawing from six years of participant observation as co-director of the Comedy Club, along with interviews, post-program surveys, and the sketches written by students, I argue that the Comedy Club offers a creative space for young people to challenge cultural assumptions and national contradictions. Self-authored comedy allows young people to express an alternative vision of community and belonging illustrating that their criteria for inclusion are based on character traits and values and not on the categories of difference we occupy. I conclude this project by revisiting each case study, providing updates and using each one to focus on future possibilities, scholarship, and action.

Conclusion

The critical work of American studies continues to be the intellectual engagement with “how American national identity has been produced precisely in opposition to, and therefore in relationship with, that which it excludes or subordinates.”⁷³ As such, American studies scholars emphasize transdisciplinary dialogue in order to understand and theorize difference and identity. Mary Helen Washington identifies the contemporary challenge of American studies as working “to institutionalize inter-ethnic, inter-racial, multi-cultural paradigms; our challenge is to do whatever is necessary to make [American Studies Association] a liberated and liberating institutional space.”⁷⁴ When confronted with communities experiencing economic, political, and cultural disenfranchisement, it becomes all the more imperative for scholarship to work for and not just write about victims of cultural invisibility and economic and political disenfranchisement. As members of the Latino Cultural Working Studies Group posit, “[t]he issues of cultural survival and political empowerment must be studied in the context of the socio-historical situation of the subject population,” which for them would be Chicano/a and Latino/a populations but in this project includes other minoritarian communities like young people, racial and sexual minorities, and persons with disabilities.⁷⁵ Citizenship has long promised inclusiveness while remaining hierarchical in practice. An examination of the production and consumption of comedy through the lens of cultural citizenship offers

⁷³ Janice Radway, “What’s in a Name?” *AQ* 51 (March 1999): 10.

⁷⁴ Mary Helen Washington, “Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?” (Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 29, 1997), *AQ*, 50 (March 1998): 22.

⁷⁵ IUP, “Draft Concept Paper,” 3.

a pro-active means of identifying those on the fringes of the national imaginary and the methods they employ to feel truly incorporated.

Understanding the role of the national imaginary, its capacity to inform and reinforce the choices we make and actions we take, is essential to any claims made about how humor is produced and consumed relative to one's position in the national imaginary. Humor production is just one cultural form of many having the capacity to reveal the nation to itself.

But [Black writers and film-makers] insist that others recognize that what they have to say comes out of particular histories and cultures and that everyone speaks from positions within the global distribution of power... This insistence on 'positioning' provides people with co-ordinates, which are specially important in face of the enormous globalization and transnational character of many of the processes which now shape their lives. The new times seem to have gone 'global' and 'local' at the same moment. And the question of ethnicity reminds us that everybody comes from some place—even if it is only an 'imagined community'—and needs some sense of identification and belonging. A politics which neglects that moment of identity and identification—without, of course, thinking of it as something permanent, fixed or essential—is not likely to be able to command the new times.⁷⁶

And so, I conclude here with Stuart Hall, echoing his call for a politics recognizing every person's need to connect, identify, and belong even when based on ethereal identification and imagined connection. The ensuing arguments are predicated on the notion of identification: how people consume the material of comics they identify with and the resulting economic consequences; and how the cultural economy facilitates identification with certain comics further capitulating certain identities as ideal and desirable, i.e., male, wealthy, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, adult, etc.

⁷⁶ Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 133.

I grew up listening to Bill Cosby, Louie Anderson, Ellen Degeneres, Bob Newhart, and Sinbad. They are still some of my favorite comics and I love how their comedy makes me laugh at human foibles, awkward interactions, and family drama—the mundane stuff of life made funny. Their humor unifies listeners and makes for great entertainment, but in most cases does not politicize or enact cultural citizenship. You have to be true to yourself when you go on stage as a comic performer and I hold no judgment against comics opting to perform this kind of safe comedy. There is nothing wrong with this kind of humor and many comics have made successful careers from this family friendly, apolitical comedy. In fact, comics tend to be more marketable the more their comedy fits this bill because they appeal to a wider demographic (why that is, is the subject of chapter three). Because I focus on the comics who produce charged humor, the outcome is talent that ranges wildly in success in this industry. Some great comics who enact cultural citizenship break through to the mainstream like Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, Maria Bamford, Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, and Kathy Griffin, but many struggle at the regional level, travel the national circuit of comedy clubs as a feature comic, or are making a living cobbling together corporate, cruise line, and college gigs along with special performances for human rights organizations, freelance writing work, and online web projects. The comics featured herein range from household names to recognizable among a base of loyal fans, to young people performing in relative obscurity in Montgomery County, Maryland. Their level of fame or ability aside, my focus is on the content of their humor, namely how do they reveal their position in the national imaginary to us and what can we learn and know from them.

The comic performances included in here are charged with intentions to edify, to reveal social inequality and to prompt listeners to imagine otherwise. I examine the motives minoritarian comics have for producing charged humor and the economic viability of this kind of humor. Charged performances are costly; the type of humor produced and the cunning jester behind the curtain often determines one's marketability. Charged humor has less wide-spread appeal, in part because it reminds viewers of the illusion of equality and the fragility of freedom in the US. As this project will illustrate, the comics performing charged humor do so for a variety of reasons, though they do have one thing in common...they are all 'working the crowd.'

Chapter Two: Cultural Citizenship: What's Humor Got To Do With It?

One of my main contentions is that any analytical consideration of how ideologies of belonging are forged and sustained through cultural forms needs to give comedy a prominent place, since laughing together is one of the most swift, charged and effective routes to a feeling of belonging together. Comedy is a short cut to community.

—Andy Medhurst¹

Inhabitants of the US, regardless of legal status as citizens, are cultural citizens. We belong, if only on the periphery; we share land and resources, even if we seldom get a fair share; we lobby for inclusion, visibility, and legal rights, even when these struggles are distorted and muted in the media. Clearly stated, acknowledging one's "[c]ultural citizenship is about becoming active producers of meaning and representation and knowledgeable consumers under advanced capitalism."² An intellectual working group contemplating Latinos/as' continued experience of social and cultural exclusion and marginalization in the US, developed the theory of "cultural citizenship." What began as the Latino Cultural Studies Working Group (LCSWG) in 1987 eventually yielded the edited collection, *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Beacon Press, 1997). Prior to this, the group generated draft concept papers.³ The scholars participating in the original working group found themselves frustrated with existing theoretical concepts and

¹ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007), 21.

² Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, *Citizenship & Identity* (London & Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 152.

³ I will draw from the second and arguably the most evolved version of the draft concept papers. Working group members generated this draft in 1988, though it was not complete until 1989. While Richard Flores did make revisions to this draft in 1991, the 1989 version reflects the latest collaborative effort to explore cultural citizenship by original working group members. IUP Cultural Studies Working Group, "Draft Concept Paper on Cultural Citizenship," Unpublished working concept paper no. 2. (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos, Hunter College, 1989).

models in citizenship studies, seeking instead theoretical tools linking cultural struggle to empowerment. Exercising cultural citizenship regardless of one's legal standing as US citizen or social exclusion from certain legal rights and protections is a means of locating oneself within a specific social, cultural, and political matrix. This chapter will present evidence of how comedians use humor to inform and instruct audiences about citizenship, politics, the law, and social interaction from the perspective of minoritarian communities.

Certain comics' production of humor challenges our conception of citizenship as national "membership." Stuart Hall and David Held write that "[t]his issue around membership – who does and who does not belong – is where the politics of citizenship begins."⁴ This chapter explores the term "cultural citizenship," a theoretical tool emerging from oppositional cultural practices seeking to empower communities, raise cultural awareness, and celebrate a common history. Cultural citizenship recognizes that while some inhabitants of the US and US territories are not legal citizens they are in fact, cultural citizens existing in the national imaginary as a part of the whole. Additionally, there are legal citizens who have not been granted full rights as citizens based on age, sexuality, race, and ability (historically and currently). Cultural citizenship is about actively participating in the process of being acknowledged and enfranchised by one's government and dominant culture. The questions central to this chapter are how and to what ends do comic performers activate cultural citizenship through humor production and how do issues central to cultural citizenship affect the production of humor? I will address these research

⁴ Stuart Hall and David Held, "Citizens and Citizenship," in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 175.

questions first by providing a literature review of cultural citizenship—its definition, application and usefulness, specifically as it relates to humor production. In order to understand why members of minoritarian communities take on the role of comic cultural spokesperson, I highlight group concerns, struggles, and approaches to humor production. I examine charged humor, turning to interviews with comics and the comic material of jokesters using the stage as humorous platform to affirm their identities, combat their exclusion, and advocate for theirs’ and others’ enfranchisement. This humor does two things at once. First, it garners chuckles and second, it reflects the imposition of second-class citizenship for individuals and their communities.

Cultural Citizenship: Not Just a Noun

A community, for our purposes, is not restricted to geographic location or even national homogeneity but rather consists of collective formations of individuals tied together through common bonds of interests and solidarity.

—LCSWG Members⁵

As the quote above indicates, citizenship is about the struggle to determine membership in a community and what that membership means; put another way: “[w]ho belongs and what does *belonging* mean in practice?”⁶ Citizenship is understood, articulated, and experienced in a variety of ways. As this project involves young people it is imperative to make any operational definition of citizenship specific to them and inclusive of the range of activities that advance their values and beliefs particular to their location in the national imaginary. Randy Martin in his introduction to the collection of essays, *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts*, defines

⁵ IUP Cultural Studies Working Group, “Draft Concept Paper on Cultural Citizenship,” Unpublished working concept paper no. 2. (New York: Centro de Estudios Puertorriquenos, Hunter College, 1989), 8.

⁶ Hall and Held, “Citizens and Citizenship,” 175.

“artistic citizenship” as the “refusal of the divide—but not the distinction—between creating work and creating a public, between art-making and the assembly of a civically engaged capacity to evaluate represented ideas about the world around us.”⁷ Artistic citizenship, as Martin defines it, recognizes that the production of art assists in the creation of a community or a public, while it also functions to situate the artist within that community. As an art form, comedy “creates in-groups and out-groups by mocking aberrations from the norm or the norm itself.”⁸ The production of art, specifically the comedic arts, lends itself to developing group cohesion. However, the problem here is that Martin’s definition of artistic citizenship assumes the artist has access to all the rights and freedoms of a citizen and can fulfill the obligations and duties of a citizen. This is not necessarily the case when, for example, an artist is under the age of eighteen. Young people have a tenuous relationship with citizenship, which is defined by law as the age of majority. Prior to reaching legal adulthood, parents serve as authorized agents to protect the rights of young people in their custody.

Early theorizing on citizenship suggests that citizenship can work to equalize and re-characterize the inequalities inherent in capitalism. In 1950, T. H. Marshall published “Citizenship and Social Class,” in which he discussed trade unions at length, presenting what he believes to be the paradox of capitalism and citizenship—political action taken to redistribute wealth or compensate workers adequately is a

⁷ Part of why I am drawn to Randy Martin’s discussion of citizenship is for his useful synthesis and development of ideas about citizenship drawn from Martha Nussbaum’s *For the Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (Beacon Press, 1996); John Cogan’s (ed.) *Citizenship for the 21st Century: An International Perspective on Citizenship* (Kogan Page LTD, 1998); Eamonn Callan’s *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Clarendon Press, 1997); and Bonnie Honig’s *Democracy and the Foreigner* (Princeton UP, 2001). Randy Martin, “Artistic Citizenship: Introduction,” in *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts*, eds. Mary Schmidt Campbell & Randy Martin (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 14.

⁸ Gail Finney, “Unity in Difference? An Introduction,” in *Look Who’s Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 6-7.

right guaranteed by citizenship but one antithetical to class structure.⁹ Accordingly, we must recognize that citizenship as it is practiced and exercised perpetuates inequality, granting only some full access to rights, and we must theorize how the class system colludes with citizenship to deny or prevent some from having equal rights and access. An example of this is the process of applying for citizenship as an immigrant, wherein class status is one of the factors considered in granting citizenship.¹⁰ Writing forty years later, Tom Bottomore examines Marshall's arguments at length and opts to borrow a definition of citizenship distinguishing "between *formal* and *substantive* citizenship. The former can be defined as legal recognition as member of the nation-state and the latter, as an array of civil, political, and especially social rights, involving also some kind of participation in the business of government."¹¹ Citing Rogers Brubaker's monograph, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*, Bottomore supports Brubaker's division between formal and substantive citizenship: "one can possess formal state-membership yet be excluded (in law or in fact) from certain political, civil, or social rights or from effective participation in the business of rule in a variety of settings'."¹² This definition of citizenship clearly distinguishes between membership and rights conferred; though, the term substantive citizenship does not have the same generative, pro-active, and mobilizing qualities as cultural citizenship.

As citizenship is both a legal and a cultural byproduct, I prefer to use the

⁹ T.H. Marshall, "Citizenship and Social Class," in *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950) (London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1992), 20-21.

¹⁰ Louis DeSipio and Rodolfo O. de la Garza, *Making Americans, Remaking America: Immigration and Immigrant Policy* (US: Westview Press, 1998), 5.

¹¹ Tom Bottomore "Citizenship and Social Class, Forty Years On," in *Citizenship and Social Class* (London, United Kingdom: Pluto Press, 1992), 66.

¹² Rogers W. Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992), 36. Cited in Bottomore, "Citizenship and Social Class," 66.

theoretical framework of cultural citizenship developed by Latino Cultural Studies Working Group (LCSWG) members. Using cultural citizenship as a tool to frame this discussion illuminates the process by which subordinated groups like minors develop community, acquire rights, and build identity, i.e., experience a sense of shared cultural belonging. Minors experience a kind of second-class citizenship that while temporary, eventually inducts them into the ranks of first-class citizenship when they reach a certain age. I am not arguing that a minor feels oppressed in the same way a Jewish lesbian or a Korean American with muscular dystrophy may feel oppressed. This is not about placing oppression into a hierarchy—a common critique of intersectional analyses and a pitfall I work to avoid—rather, an argument that recognizes the myriad ways young people experience powerlessness, manipulation, exploitation, and political and cultural invisibility.

Members of LCSWG (focusing specifically on the Latino/a community in the US) sought to document the myriad cultural activities and “forms of expression that not only keep identity and heritage alive but significantly enrich the cultural whole of the country.”¹³ Original members of the working group define the term as:

...a process manifested in particular types of cultural practices that embody symbols, discourses, practices, values and identities by which a subordinate community establishes a social and cultural space within which to affirm its collective sense of identity, solidarity, common historical experience and struggle to reclaim their rights. The term cultural citizenship recognizes and affirms both the legitimacy of a dominated people’s culture, their resistance and their innate rights which have often been ignored in the legal canon [sic] of a society...Rather, cultural citizenship identifies the claims of social, human and cultural rights made by communities which do not hold state power and which are denied basic rights by those who do.¹⁴

¹³ William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor (eds.), “Introduction: Constructing Cultural Citizenship,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 2.

¹⁴ IUP, “Draft Concept Paper,” 7.

In addition to documenting those forces working to curtail collective action, they expressed their agenda as the desire to examine how cultural practices could mobilize constituents and combat inequitable conditions.¹⁵ Central to their claims is the belief that cultural differences should be treated as a “resource, not as a threat;” and that the nation is made richer and stronger due to diversity. For the group, difference is seen as productive, yielding new cultural forms that in turn would shape America in obvious and important ways. “The United States,” they argue, “has thrived not because of its efforts at cultural homogenization, but despite them.”¹⁶

Understanding that the juxtaposition of terms such as ‘culture’ and ‘citizenship’ can be somewhat paradoxical, William Flores and Rina Benmayor, in their introduction to *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, write that such a pairing:

...cautions us against assuming that either culture or citizenship is all-encompassing and urges us, instead, to look at how and to what extent these concepts act upon each other. Culture interprets and constructs citizenship, just as the activity of being citizens, in the broad sense of claiming membership in the society, affects how we view ourselves, even in communities that have been branded second-class or ‘illegal.’¹⁷

Separating cultural from legal citizenship allows that many people could be legal citizens though they feel like cultural outsiders, while conversely there may be many non-legal residents of the US who remain active in their communities and are participating as cultural citizens. And yet, cultural citizenship is understood by many as a byproduct of cultural homogenization wherein to be a citizen is to be fully versed and vested in mainstream culture. People do “move back and forth from cultural

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.

¹⁶ Flores and Benmayor, “Introduction,” 5.

¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

citizenship to legal citizenship and from one identity to the other. Although for them this process does not necessarily represent a contradiction, the world in which they have to claim their rights does not accept this fluid state of identity.”¹⁸ Many members of minoritarian communities profess a desire to maintain both full citizenship and a strong and proud cultural heritage distinguishing them as different. To that end, Blanca Silvestrini writes that “[u]nder the assumptions of the melting-pot theory, people from different backgrounds have to erase these differences to enjoy full participation, because homogeneity is assumed to be the basis for political stability and economic growth.”¹⁹ The key here is to refrain from placing cultural and legal citizenship into a binary, where we can only defer to one, being loyal to our nation at the expense of our culture or loyal to our culture at the expense of our nation.²⁰ Unlike other terms offered up as tools for theorizing cultural difference, “cultural citizenship allows for the potential of opposition, of restructuring and reordering society.”²¹ We cannot afford to negate or dismiss *the potential cultural citizenship has as theoretical tool to account for oppositional cultural practices, to allow for cultural differences while still asserting unity—communal or national.*

Indeed, the value of the term cultural citizenship lies in its allowance that there are those living and working in the US and US territories who participate in and are indeed part of the national imaginary and yet are not legal citizens; instead, they are cultural citizens, participating in the production of cultural practices and forms that

¹⁸ Blanca G. Silvestrini, “‘The World We Enter When Claiming Rights’: Latinos and Their Quest for Culture,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

²¹ Flores & Benmayor, “Introduction,” 15.

shape the US, despite their legal status excluding them from political decision making. On the other hand, there are legal citizens who do not have civil rights equivalent to peer citizens such as the ability to marry the person of your choosing. William Flores clearly articulates this, writing that “being a citizen guarantees neither full membership in society nor equal rights. To be a full citizen one must be welcome and accepted as a full member of the society with all its rights.”²² His colleague Renato Rosaldo agrees that “[c]ultural citizenship operates in an uneven field of structural inequalities where the dominant claims of universal citizenship assume a propertied white male subject and usually blind themselves to their exclusions and marginalizations of people who differ in gender, race, sexuality and age.”²³ While the research questions posed by members of the working group consider how cultural practices are political as well as the role of culture and its influence on social movements and vice versa, my own research focuses on how one’s status as cultural citizen affects the production of a specific cultural practice—comic performance and how humor enacting cultural citizenship is consumed.

Agency, affirmation, and empowerment are critical components of cultural citizenship and the reason other definitions of citizenship such as Roger Brubaker’s substantive citizenship are not as optimal. These qualities inherent in the definition of cultural citizenship are the impetus and the result of asserting one’s rights, rights that

²² William V. Flores, “Citizens vs. Citizenry: Undocumented Immigrants and Latino Cultural Citizenship,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William V. Flores & Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 255.

²³ Renato Rosaldo, “Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William V. Flores & Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 37.

become markers of identity and collective practices, which serve as expressions of cultural citizenship.²⁴

Defined this way, cultural citizenship is an oppositional practice because it seeks to alter the existing relations of power. Because this is necessarily a challenge to the dominant structure, this can be a major element leading to a community's empowerment... Thus we identify those practices, symbols and identities which promote empowerment as cultural citizenship.²⁵

Accordingly, acts of cultural citizenship are another way of "using cultural expression to claim public rights and recognition."²⁶ Thus, cultural citizenship "offers us an alternative perspective to better comprehend cultural processes that result in community building and in political claims raised by marginalized groups on the broader society."²⁷ Cultural citizenship, then, takes as its object of study, minoritarian communities and the cultural expressions and practices they employ to empower themselves and their communities.

It is important that theories grounded in the historical, cultural, and political experiences specific to a community are not unquestioningly applied to other marginalized populations. While the theory of cultural citizenship originated from the need to make Latinos/as the subjects of analysis, working group members are clear that the theory is not unique to or applicable only to Hispanic communities. Rather, they argue "that analysts need to anchor their studies in the aspirations and perceptions of people who occupy subordinate social positions," which would include other minoritarian communities in the US.²⁸ The goal is to build upon their scholarship by applying it to a larger swath of the US public sharing experiences of

²⁴ Flores & Benmayor, "Introduction," 12.

²⁵ IUP, "Draft Concept Paper," 7.

²⁶ Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship," 36.

²⁷ Flores & Benmayor, "Introduction," 15.

²⁸ Rosaldo, "Cultural Citizenship," 38.

marginalization without neglecting the material and epistemic conditions of oppression unique to Latino/a communities and giving rise to this theorizing. While working group members have analyzed performance as part of the project of cultural citizenship, my innovation here is the focus on humorous performance such as stand-up comedy and other comic performances.²⁹ To that end, compared to other marginalized groups such as women and African Americans, there is a noticeable absence of scholarship on Latino/a stand-up comedy (as well as Asian Americans, Arab Americans, LGBTQ folks, young people, and differently abled persons using comic performance to advocate on behalf of themselves and the communities to which they belong). This project seeks to acknowledge and address an intellectual lacuna; however, it is beyond the scope of this project to remedy all such absences or to do so thoroughly for each minoritarian community. There is a need for additional scholarship about minoritarian comics and performances (especially for those groups mentioned above) using humorous expression to illumine political, cultural, and historical co-ordinates specific to their experiences of occlusion, persecution, and forced assimilation.

Perhaps dismissed as merely an innocuous form of entertainment, the production of humor is actually one of the most common and effective means of communicating messages and ideas. The influx of infotainment, or news shows using humor to impart information, such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* attests to the public's desire to consume political and social satire. Though, as Russell Peterson reminds us, not all comedy is satirical and much of comedy performed by late-night television

²⁹ See Richard Flores, "Aesthetic Process and Cultural Citizenship: The Membering of a Social Body in San Antonio," in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights*, eds. William V. Flores & Rina Benmayor (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 124-151.

talk show hosts (excluding the hosts of the shows just mentioned) is more aptly defined as pseudo-satirical, rather, a brand of humor targeting celebrities and well-known political figures, turning them into caricatures without actually being critical or taking a stand on any salient issues.³⁰ To that end, not all comic performances are critical or crafted with the intention to effect social change or instill shifts in social consciousness.

One of the dilemmas faced when examining comic performance is the difficulty in assessing its efficacy, i.e., a change in one's opinion, being motivated to become more active in one's community, understanding and applying information being disseminated by performers. Real social change is difficult to quantify in any case, but more so with performance. I do not attempt to offer quantitative analysis of the efficacy of comedy intending to satirize; rather, to illumine how and why comic performers opt to create charged humor. To establish parameters for recognizing the kinds of humor productive of cultural citizenship, working group members specified that "[w]hile there may be forms of cultural practice in certain communities that challenge the dominant cultural forms, we reserve the term cultural citizenship for those that emerge within communities with a historical experience structured by their domination by a hegemonic power."³¹ When I refer to charged humor or humor enacting cultural citizenship, I mean humor that seeks to represent the underrepresented, to empower and affirm marginalized communities, and to edify and mobilize their audiences.

³⁰ Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers UP, 2008).

³¹ IUP, "Introduction," 12.

Not all comic performance can be characterized in this way—as subversive, oppositional, or mobilizing. Male sexist humor (for examples of this you can look to the performances of Brian Posehn, Robert Schimmel, Andrew Dice Clay, Ron White, Rodney Dangerfield, Jay Mohr, Adam Carolla, Doug Benson, Patrice O’Neal, etc.) assumes women’s inferiority and availability as a passive sexual object and works to reinforce sexist beliefs and social practices founded on those beliefs. The same can be said of racist, homophobic, ableist, and ageist humor. Important, here, is comic intentionality. I reserve the designation of charged humor to the material of jokesters whose counter-hegemonic material aligns with their artistic objectives. In this way, I attempt to avoid specious recuperations or readings for resistance of comic material that does not intend to be resistant. For example, Sarah Silverman and Lisa Lampanelli are both controversial shock comics; however, Lampanelli’s interviews and moments in her performances reveal that while her comic persona hinges on being politically incorrect, she is aware of social inequality and intends to subvert through her comedy. Sarah Silverman, on the other hand, is as obtuse offstage as she is onstage and has repeatedly reported and demonstrated that her comedy is strictly about shocking her audience. When confronted by angry members of the public whom she offends in her routines, she shrugs off their complaints and accuses them of not being able to take a joke.³² Self-disclosure of a principled approach to stand-up comedy is absent onstage and off. This is not humor enacting cultural citizenship. A

³² In an interview with Andi Ziesler (an editor of *Bitch* magazine), fellow comic Kate Rigg comments on Silverman’s comedy: “A lot of women comics out here in L.A. are angry at Sarah Silverman because she androgynizes herself to the point that she can...pass. It’s like doing blackface—she’s doing dickface...As a comedian, I don’t give a shit. But as a feminist, I care, because I’m aware that she’s set up to erase her perspective as a woman in order to pass.” Kate Rigg quoted in Andi Zeisler, “A Good Offense,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Issue 41 (fall 08): 40.

minoritarian subject does not have to produce this kind of humor and we should not assume that they do; likewise, there are comics hailing from privileged and dominant categories of difference who advocate on behalf of the subordinate.

The 1987 working group clearly expresses the need to differentiate between the practices that do and do not “transcend and change conflicting or unequal relations.”³³ Comic performance provides instances of both as there are many heavily consumed comics whose comedy cannot be categorized as radical, oppositional, or resistant, just as there are many whose comedy intends to mobilize, educate, and increase cultural visibility. While scholars may be moved to generate different terms to understand and theorize nation and citizenship, they are all recognizing and responding to the obvious bifurcations and inequalities in the construction and experience of national belonging. Likewise, comics are using their comedy to reveal these national contradictions. How they do this, how they produce charged humor and why, is where I turn next. Focusing on a number of identity-based minoritarian communities, I explore the range of different goals and strategies employed to enact cultural citizenship through humor.

Humor Enacting Cultural Citizenship

I believe in the power of laughter in a democracy. Cause what it does, is it takes the tyranny of the things we are given and it just blows them apart. So, and you can do it to. The next time you're talking to somebody who's telling you the biggest line of crap you've ever heard...be a faith-based comedian and just go like this [*mimes a prolonged ingratiating guffaw*]: 'Good one! [*said as if the person were joking only to realize that they were not*] Oh my god, you mean it!' [*crowd laughs*] *And they will never say those things*

³³ Ibid., 10.

*again with any degree of confidence. It's time to bring 'em down. God told me. She did [whistles, cheers and applause] (emphasis hers).*³⁴

I'm all about power to the people, really, totally power to the people. We need to use our rights while we still have them. Like we have the right to bear arms so the next time somebody says something stupid to you, just shoot 'em. Just fucking shoot 'em while you can. *Because you can't get an abortion but you can still shoot an idiot.* Just shoot 'em [*laughter and cheers*]... I'm a Buddhist, I just wanted to declare that off the bat (emphasis hers).³⁵

Kate Clinton and Karen Williams are both lesbian comics and political satirists who started performing in the early 1980s. It is their position as lesbians (for Williams this is further compounded by her being African American) that reminds them daily of the importance of their comic locutions in a social location that is not protected in the workplace or in the streets, nor legally recognized in the US. Clinton and Williams not only demonstrate agency as performer and mouthpiece opposing right-wing conservatism; they also offer the audience tools for becoming active cultural citizens in their own quest for cultural citizenship by offering instruction—though Clinton's advice is more productive and plausible—for responding to ignorant comments, using humor to instruct the audience in ways of contending with bigotry, hearsay, and moral platitudes. I take this as the jumping off point for this research, examining some of those producers of meaning vis-à-vis the cultural practice of comic performance and in later chapters, the way these performances can affect the consumption of humor.

Kate Kendall, Executive Director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, who introduces comic Kate Clinton at the launch party for her 25th anniversary tour, says: “If

³⁴ Both excerpts are taken from twenty-five year anniversary specials performed by Kate Clinton and Karen Williams. *Kate Clinton: The 25th Anniversary Tour*, DVD. Directed by Andrea Meyerson (USA: All Out Films, 2007).

³⁵ *Karen Williams: I Need a Snack!*, DVD. Directed by Andrea Meyerson (USA: All Out Films, 2008).

you can laugh about difficult and scary times, there's hope in that laughter. And that is what [Kate Clinton] is able to do. And make us think. And make us laugh. And make us commit. And make us feel this sense of community."³⁶ Some stand-up comedy affirms and mobilizes one's community to redress inequities, to compel viewers to work for social justice. For example, Karen Williams sees her comedy "as an expression of political activism because our voices just aren't heard." Rene Hicks, also a Black, lesbian, veteran comic, states: "There were two things that I said to myself about comedy. One, I had to get to the point where I was as funny onstage as I was off-stage. And two, I had to become the activist onstage that I was offstage. Those were my two goals."³⁷ For them, comedy offers a forum to express their activist sensibility, a way to coax members of the audience to engage with social and political issues germane to their own lives as Black, lesbian, and female. Consider this example in Hicks' performance where she works to de-stigmatize the word "nigger:"

A negative word can be turned into a positive if you attach it to something everybody loves. And that's one word, [nigger] I had to find something and I did, I'm a genius. Know what I came up with? Snack foods. Think about it. We love Cheetos, Doritos, Pringles...why not niggers? Does that not sound like a snack food? That way we could get the racists to eat their words. [*hearty applause and cheers*] Because lets get real, they're not going to be able to resist cheese niggers, sour cream and onion niggers, nacho niggers. But um, there's not going to be any barbecue niggers. I don't like the way that sounds.³⁸

Her playful attempt to refigure this racial pejorative now reduced to the euphemism:

"N-word," seeks to expand the use of the term in a positive manner instead of

³⁶ Kate Kendall, Executive Director of National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) offers these words as introduction for Kate Clinton at the advent of her 25th anniversary tour, sponsored by NCLR. *Kate Clinton: The 25th Anniversary Tour*, op.cit.

³⁷ Karen Williams, "Healing Humor," *Metroweekly*, April 24, 2008, 34; Rene Hicks in *Laughing Matters...More!*, DVD. Directed and produced by Andrea Meyerson (USA: All Out Films, 2006).

³⁸ Rene Hicks in *Laughing Matters...More!*, ibid.

imposing a syntactical change that does not alter the original meaning of the word. By making this comic proposition, she is able to communicate other important information: that racism is an issue we should proactively address; and that language shifts over time and collectively we can transform words formerly imbued with negative meanings.

Engin Isin and Patricia Wood, in *Citizenship and Identity*, “establish cultural citizenship as a field in which the rights to access to production, distribution and consumption of culture become a field of struggle and conflict.”³⁹ Part of the project of cultural citizenship is to negotiate increased access to the means of production, distribution, and consumption of cultural practices. We see such a disparity in the cultural practice of comic performance, simply by looking at which comics achieve success and the ways this success hinges upon one’s access, be that material resources or cultural capital, to this cultural practice. Maria Bamford, a White heterosexual female comic, is self-reflexive about her success and its relationship to her satisfaction with her country. In a live performance at the El Ray Theater in Los Angeles, CA, she says: “I love my country. Maybe that’s because I’m White and rich [laughter]. Things are really working out for me...I’m not technically rich but I do have a lot of shit that I don’t need that I refuse to share with anyone and that feels solid somehow.”⁴⁰ She attributes her own attachment to her country as favorable *because* of her race and class, and not ironically either. The laughter elicited yields to the following explanation: “It’s funny because it’s true.” But then she goes on to say she is not actually rich, merely suffering from material excess as a result of her

³⁹ Isin & Wood, *Citizenship and Identity*, 123.

⁴⁰ Maria Bamford in *The Comedians of Comedy: Live at the El Ray*, DVD. Directed by Michael Blieden (U.S.A.: Red Envelope Entertainment, Netflix Co. 2006).

selfishness, which she has in a true new age fashion, reconciled within her spirit. This kind of movement between and qualifying of terms, i.e., rich and not rich, is the bedrock of Bamford's narrative style, which is adroitly accompanied by an infinite cast of characters, both real and imagined. She is continually demonstrating a higher social consciousness in her comedy (e.g., jokes about sweatshops, gender inequalities, institutionalized racism, homophobia, and the like) and yet terrifically fails to live up to many of the liberal social ideals she waxes on about. This becomes a source of amusement for audience members who can see themselves in similar arrangements, if not before then certainly now because Bamford's comedy works simultaneously to inform you of the social and political issues she deems important. Even if she herself cannot live up to them, your exposure to new information and issues challenges you to try to do the same.

Uniquely situated by one's local and national history and one's social locations, while many comics use humor enacting cultural citizenship, they may do so for very different reasons and to accomplish different ends. There are currently a handful of Arab American comics performing in the US including Dean Obeidallah, Ahmed Ahmed, Maysoon Zayid, Maz Jobrani, Aron Kader, Nick Youssef, and Wonho Chung (whose parents are South Korean and Vietnamese but who was raised in Amman, Jordan), all of whom, in varying degrees, produce charged humor, using their stand-up comedy to address concerns germane to being Arab American and at times being Muslim in the US.⁴¹ For example, Egyptian American comic Ahmed Ahmed teaches

⁴¹ Unlike discussions of other minoritarian communities and the comics in them enacting cultural citizenship, this was the only group for which I found every Arab American comic to be proactive in using their comedy to edify, instruct, illumine and re-imagine. Among the other communities, there

his audience not to assume Muslims are always Arabs: “People don’t realize that there’s a big difference between Arabs and Muslims. I’m sure most of you know the difference. You would be surprised how many people do not know the difference. Most Arabs are Muslims, most Muslims are not Arab.” He disrupts the misguided notion that Arab = Muslim and repopulates Muslims in the national imaginary, expanding membership beyond the countries and regions in the Middle East. Comic material is developed to criticize stereotypes and the lack of positive representations of Arabs in US visual culture, as when Dean Obeidallah discusses common depictions of Arabs:

Look at the news stories about Arabs. You’ve got the bad ones; we’re described as gunmen, militant, or terrorists. Then there’s the good ones; we’re described as “alleged” gunmen, militant, or terrorists. I wish there were fun things in the media that would show a fun side. Maybe a fun story about an Arab Muslim family, like a sitcom called *Everybody Loves Ramadan* on CBS. It’d be a big hit.⁴²

Arab Americans offer a unique view of how one’s experience of inclusion and belonging is subject to change...over night. Stand-up comedy provides a non-threatening forum for Arab American comics to educate and entertain audience members and depict their own experience as an Arab (and in some cases as a Muslim) living in the US. Cynthia Willet, in her monograph *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom*, writes that “[w]hen non-Middle Easterners in audiences laugh with (and not at) the Islamic American humorists, the

were and are many comics I purposely do not include because I do not believe they are producing humor that calls upon and into question their status as citizens—culturally, politically or otherwise.
⁴² Dean Obeidallah in *The Arab American Comedy Tour*, DVD. Videography by Oscar Films (Seattle and Dearborn, Michigan: Arab Film Distribution, 2006).

laughter humanizes the ‘enemy’ ...the laughter disables power, stymies arrogance, and strikes a blow against the pretend manliness that dominates the political field.”⁴³

Arab Americans were made all too aware of their tenuous status as citizens, following the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. It is not as if Arab Americans had not already been subject to exclusion from citizenship or had their rights as US citizens infringed upon. As recently as 1994, President Bill Clinton’s counterterrorism bill targeted Arabs in the US by calling for the “deportation of non-citizens based on evidence known only to the government.”⁴⁴ Arabs have had a conflicted relationship with the US for centuries, the outcome of which are wild oscillations between being White and becoming racialized and depicted as evil, exotic, and/or threatening. Arabs and Arab Americans have a unique relationship with the US reflecting the constant state of flux between the US and countries in Southwest Asia and Northern Africa. Not only does this “racial” ascription or designation as an Arab homogenize what is a widely diverse group of nationalities and cultures, since 9/11 it has seriously compromised the freedoms and liberties guaranteed Arab American citizens (and anyone “looking like” Arabs), regardless of national origin. Arab American comics enact cultural citizenship through their performances, discussing racial profiling, unfavorable public scrutiny, government surveillance, and cultural stereotyping.

⁴³ Cynthia Willet, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2008), 13.

⁴⁴ Nadine Naber investigates the socio-cultural history of Arab Americans arguing convincingly that “state discourses have transformed ‘the Arab’ over time, from proximity to whiteness to a position of heightened Otherness” (39). Nadine Naber, “Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations,” in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11: From Invisible Citizens to Invisible Subjects*, eds. Amaney Jamal & Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2008), 37.

Dean Obeidallah, a comic and the co-founder and co-executive producer of the New York Arab American Comedy Festival, described the period following 9/11 during one of his performances:

For the people who aren't Arab I can just tell you this. I hope you never come to a time where you feel self-conscious or uncomfortable in your own country. And that's been the weird thing about a post 9/11 world for me...People ask me. They go, well has your life changed since 9/11? It has changed in a couple ways...If you're of Arab heritage, the difference is, for those of you who were here before, you're not White anymore because White people aren't subject to racial profiling, ever. And if you are White you should feel lucky about that. You never suffer as a group for the sins of a few. Like Oklahoma City, remember Timothy McVeigh and his redneck buddies. There was no "Operation Hillbilly" after that. And think about the bad things that White people have done: presidential assassinations, corporate scandals, country music...someone should be in jail.⁴⁵

Other comics use irony to depict the fragility of national belonging for Arab-Americans, like Maysoun Zayid, a Palestinian Muslim with cerebral palsy, who responds to the re-election of George Bush Jr. in 2004 by joking, "...great, I'll be the funniest chick in the internment camp." We need strong and visible members of all minoritarian communities to produce humor illuminating their history, politics, and cultural beliefs and activities. Like Arab Americans, other minoritarian groups in the US have seen such fluctuations in status and similarly produce humor documenting their precarious relationship with their nation.

As in the Arab American community, acknowledging diversity within communities is particularly important for differently abled persons who find themselves stigmatized by virtue of disability, but who do not necessarily share the same disability or the same experience of disenfranchisement, e.g., life for a paraplegic poses different challenges than for someone who is blind, deaf, or

⁴⁵ *The Arab American Comedy Tour*, op.cit.

disfigured. According to Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, having a disability constitutes its own identity category in the same way that we are marked by race, nationality, sexuality, and gender. They posit that disabilities are “something one *does* rather than something one *is*,” implying that disabilities like other identity categories are performed.⁴⁶ For differently abled persons, acknowledging that disability is performed offers them the freedom to perform their disability in ways inconsistent with dominant notions of the disabled body, challenging stereotypes and cultural assumptions. As Sandahl and Auslander aver, the “self-conscious performer” works to be an active agent of meaning, “[m]anipulating and transforming stereotypes...since the available ‘scripts’ of disability—both in daily life and in representation—are frustratingly limited and deeply entrenched in the cultural imagination.”⁴⁷ These tactics are used by differently abled performance artists like Mary Duffy, Carrie Sandahl, David Roche, and Marie Wade as well as differently abled comic performers like Kathy Buckley, Josh Blue, Benjamin Stuart, J.D. England, Alexis McGuire, Chris Fonseca, Greg Walloch, Alex Valdez, Geri Jewell, Kenneth Littleton Crow, and Brett Leake. Alexis McGuire, a White dyslexic performer and teacher said of her experience performing comedy: “When people laugh, they are not laughing at us, they are laughing with us, in recognition of what’s happening in their own lives. None of us make fun of ourselves; we make fun of our

⁴⁶ Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (eds.), “Introduction: Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies,” in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. See also the chapter in *Bodies in Commotion...* by Rosemarie Garland Thomson: “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring,” which focuses on the performances and careers of Marie Wade, Mary Duffy and Carrie Sandahl.

situation.”⁴⁸

The material and psychic issues for persons with disabilities include discrimination in employment and hiring, the difficulty in acquiring monies for disability, and a medical system that seeks to "normalize" differently abled bodies, which conveys a message of deficiency or being substandard. Many disabled performers work specifically to dispel the myths surrounding disabilities like being asexual or non-sexual and being used as a dramaturgical device in films and TV, often sacrificed in the end or fulfilling some narrative of hope. Differently abled performance artists ask their audience to grapple with the issues relevant to disabled bodies—what assumptions are made about these bodies; what are the medical discourses that circulate to regulate and normalize disabled bodies; what does the goal of normalizing disabled bodies assume (i.e., that disabled persons want to be corrected or made “normal”) and relatedly why might some persons with disabilities not opt for corrective medical measures (e.g., cochlear implants for the hearing impaired, prosthetic limbs, or plastic surgery for a cleft palate, or highly visible scars). Comics cite various reasons for producing humor and though they may not say they are enacting cultural citizenship, many do express motives to edify audiences, to define themselves and by pointing to their similarities, encourage audience members to incorporate them culturally, politically, and legally in a way that allows for acceptance of diversity rather than a muting of it. For Brett Leake, a White headlining comic who has muscular dystrophy, “[b]eing on stage, being able to tell jokes about my disability allows me an opportunity to define my own terms” and Chris Fonseca, a Latino with cerebral palsy, reported in an interview that his intentions with comedy

⁴⁸ *Able to Laugh*, VHS. Directed by Michael J. Dougan (Boston, MA: Fanlight Productions, 1993).

are to relate to the audience so they can see that he is “one of them.”⁴⁹ Differently abled comics seldom achieve national acclaim because booking agents do not believe the public wants to purchase tickets to see someone on stage with a disability, especially if it might make audience members uneasy or depressed. In *Look Who’s Laughing*, a documentary focusing on differently abled comics, Bob Fisher, a comedy club owner, admits that when “booking someone with a disability” he has concerns as to whether the audience will be able to overcome their own discomfort.⁵⁰ John Cooney, the comedy club owner who booked Chris Fonseca admitted to judging Fonseca at first and being legitimately surprised at how funny he was. Paraplegic comic J.D. England proffered that the owners are not the one taking the risk, it is the performer who has to win everyone over and deaf comic Kathy Buckley said: “I think Club owners take a risk when they don’t put people with disabilities on the stage.”⁵¹ As with other marginalized groups, differently abled comics do not have the same economic viability that a heterosexual able-bodied man has in this particular cultural form and entertainment industry.

Gerri Jewell—a White woman with cerebral palsy and the first person with a disability to have a regular role in a television sitcom (*The Facts of Life*)—articulates her objectives for comedy in an interview: “I do believe that I have the responsibility to educate.”⁵² Bridget McManus, a White lesbian twenty-something comic relatively new to the scene, says of her intentions for comic performance: “If I could make anyone think ‘Wow, we’re all the same’...cause we *are* all the same. I want to bring

⁴⁹ *Look Who’s Laughing*, VHS. Directed by Salvatore Baldomar Jr. (Cicero, NY: Program Development Associates, 2004).

⁵⁰ *Able to Laugh*, op.cit.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Gerri Jewell in *Look Who’s Laughing*, op.cit.

people together with my comedy if I can” (emphasis hers).⁵³ Jewell wants to instruct and McManus clearly wants her audience to identify with her and her life. As a differently abled woman, Jewell uses comedy to teach her audience about disabilities and ableist attitudes and behavior, while McManus calls attention to similarities across the sexual spectrum, versus differences. Sabrina Matthews, also a White lesbian, expresses sentiments similar to McManus, saying she is “[v]ery proud of [her]self for how many straight people [she’s] stood up in front of and made them realize that they have something in common with [her].”⁵⁴ Alex Valdez, a blind White man and the first disabled comic to work the professional comic circuit, speaks at length in an interview about the opportunity comedy affords him to show people a little bit of his world, who he is and what he is about.⁵⁵ Recognition of our similarities, our shared humanity makes it more difficult to justify social and political inequality, which is one possible social outcome of comedy that unites its audience members despite social, economic, and political differences. It will be easier to support legislative efforts aimed at ending discrimination, if people can imagine themselves in similar circumstances.

Audience identification—indicated by laughter, cheers, smiles, whistles, and applause—relies on shared activities and experiences (i.e., raising children, being a son or daughter, going to work, being in a relationship, cultural treatment of racial and sexual minorities, etc.) and mutual feelings and ideas (i.e., social irritants, acquiescence to or the shirking of behavioral protocol and ideas of civility, political

⁵³ Bridget McManus in *Laughing Matters...Next Gen*, DVD. Directed by Andrea Meyerson (U.S.A.: All Out Films, 2009).

⁵⁴ Sabrina Matthews in *Laughing Matters...More!*, op.cit.

⁵⁵ Alex Valdez in *Look Who’s Laughing*, op.cit.

beliefs, etc.) and in general signals success to the comic. Just moments before he performs at the Renenburg Theater in Los Angeles, Edison Apple, a gay American Indian, turns to the camera filming him backstage and says of performing comedy: “...it’s the hardest form. You know if you can sing it’s one thing. If you have a script it’s another thing. But to go out there and you know give these people your ideas and your thoughts and your heart and your life—you hope that they connect...as long as you can get to the first laugh, you’re all set.”⁵⁶ Here laughter is a product of human connection; it does, of course, rely on the set-up, language and delivery of the joke, but in this cultural practice, laughter is a non-verbal but very audible response signaling identification and confirming appreciation for the comic script being performed.

Because how any group is perceived in the national imaginary dictates and determines the level of incorporation—whether cultural, political, or legal—for that group in society, LGBTQ performers utilize performance as a means to solicit acceptance and civil liberties not yet afforded our community. Janet Bing and Dana Heller argue that—much like other minoritarian communities—lesbian communities have a different set of cultural beliefs and practices than mainstream America, which are expressed in their humor. These jokes “constitute an imagined cultural community based in resistance, transformation, and survival” in order to create a sense of belonging traditionally missed by minority viewers consuming warped and homogenous representations of one’s community.⁵⁷

Like Arab, Latino/a, Black, and Asian humor, lesbian and queer humor draws

⁵⁶ Edison Apple in *Laughing Matters...Next Gen*, op.cit.

⁵⁷ Janet Bing and Dana Heller, “How Many Lesbians Does it Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?” *Humor* 16, 2 (2003): 158.

from “lesbian scripts” and experience, e.g., quotidian behaviors, activities, and beliefs and tends to challenge the dominant stereotypes and conceptions of LGBTQ persons.⁵⁸ Take for example a bit performed by Margaret Cho, a vocal Korean American ally of the LGBTQ community who is frustrated and confused why homophobia is still so prevalent despite the visibility and seeming acceptance of LGBTQ culture in the mainstream—a troubling paradox revealing that gay culture can be commercially co-opted even while under attack and that there can be cultural visibility even as LGBTQ persons do not have any rights at the federal level. She directs her attention and some of the blame towards public castigations of LGBTQ persons and lifestyles by religious figures such as the Pope: “And he [the Pope] is always saying, ‘Oh it’s abnormal. Gays are abnormal.’ It’s like, oh yeah you a real good judge of normal with your gold dress and matching gold hat...livin’ up in the Vatican with your 500 mens...surrounded by the finest antiques in the world...Queen, please! You live like Versace did.”⁵⁹ Her stand-up normalizes LGBTQ persons as compared to the outlandish garb and bizarre lifestyle the Pope leads. This kind of humorous contextualization illustrates the absurdity of the Pope’s vitriolic comments and makes him the object of ridicule instead of “fags,” “dykes,” and “trannies” commonly made the butt of homophobic humor. This reversal of fortune is fairly standard in queer comedy. Suzanne Westenhoefer (White lesbian comic) often concludes her shows saying: “We don’t choose to be gay. We’re chosen,” flipping the heteronormative script positioning her and other LGBTQ persons as deviant and instead lauding them as special, important, or the (religiously

⁵⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁵⁹ Margaret Cho in *The Outlaugh Festival on Wisecrack*, DVD. Directed by Michael Dempsey (Hollywood, CA: Logo Entertainment, Viacom International Inc., 2006).

imbued) “chosen” ones.⁶⁰ Westenhofer is one of many LGBTQ comics using the stage to enact cultural citizenship, including Lily Tomlin, Kate Clinton, Judy Gold, Rosie O’Donnell, Paula Poundstone, Tig Notaro, Lea Delaria, Sabrina Matthews, Vicki Shaw, Elvira Kurt, Julie Goldman, Amy Tee, Bridget McManus, Karen Ripley, Jen Slusser, Stephanie Howard, Robin Tyler, Page Hurwitz, Eddie Izzard, and Jerry Calumn. As with some differently abled comics, many LGBTQ comics belong to more than one minoritarian community like Kate Rigg, Karen Williams, Micia Mosely, Edison Apple, Rene Hicks, Gloria Bigelow, Wanda Sykes, and Marga Gomez.

Even while social and cultural tactics for building cohesion and community among the oppressed tend to emphasize sameness, most of the same movements also recognize the imperative of celebrating difference and diversity within the groups. A lesbian/feminist theory of performance must deal adequately with both gender *and* sexuality. To that end, Hilary Harris argues that a workable lesbian (or queer)/feminist theory of performance must first reject the “ontological base of gender,” and should work to avoid the danger of being subsumed by queer theory, rendering lesbians invisible (again).⁶¹ It is important to remember that the positing of lesbian humor or a lesbian theory of performance is not an effort to limit or compartmentalize its practitioners and their messages. Lesbian jokes “challenge the very idea of ‘lesbian’ as a discreet identity and ‘lesbian community’ as a coherent social formation.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Suzanne Westenhofer in *The Outlaugh Festival on Wisecrack*, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Hilary Harris, “Toward a Lesbian Theory of Performance: Refunctioning Gender,” in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart & Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993), 274.

⁶² Bing & Heller, “How Many Lesbians,” 164.

Like other cultural practices connected to the study of cultural citizenship (e.g., protests, strikes, rallies, voting initiatives, cultural traditions, etc.), comedy can affirm our social activities, political leanings, consumer choices, and identity. Elvira Kurt, the Canadian daughter of Jewish Hungarian parents, has a joke about the lesbian “uniform” that she sports on stage (e.g., jeans and a t-shirt), illustrating a simple but good example of how jokes confirm for insiders (read: fellow lesbians) that they are or are not doing what they should be doing for their subject positioning.⁶³ Cultural citizenship is about “identifying those types of cultural practices that have been or can be the basis of a community’s claiming and affirming the political and cultural space that challenges the dominant culture’s interpretation of them, their history and the norms and practices that reproduce their subordinate status.”⁶⁴ Therefore, comics exercising their positions as cultural citizens will opt to use their comic material to negotiate a respected space for themselves and their community in the national imaginary. They do this by identifying the cultural attitudes and beliefs contributing to their subordinated status. African American comic Gloria Bigelow uses her comedy to unveil the heterosexism inherent in the social expectation that LGBTQ persons reveal their sexual identity to others.

I recently came out at my job, you know. Thank you. Thank you [*applause and whistles*]. Yes, I’m what you call a preemptive gay. I drop big gay bombs whenever I get the chance. ‘I’m gay!’ [*makes sound of bomb dropping*]. You gotta do it because otherwise if you don’t tell heteros that you’re gay and they find out... [*her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper*] ...they feel violated. [*loud laughter*] Imagine that. I have no rights, but they feel violated [*laughter and applause*].⁶⁵

⁶³ Elvira Kurt in *Laughing Matters...More!*, op.cit.

⁶⁴ IUP, “Draft Concept Paper,” 12.

⁶⁵ Gloria Bigelow in *Laughing Matters...Next Gen*, op.cit.

Heterosexual folks are not required or expected to make some sort of official announcement to friends and family regarding their sexual desires and proclivities. The “coming out” narrative is specific to LGBTQ persons, feeding into this culture’s preoccupation with sexual taboos and deviance and assuming the necessity of disclosure so loved ones can cope with this knowledge—implicit here is the real threat of ostracism and alienation caused by such a disclosure. Equally troubling is the idea that any sexual orientation other than heterosexual merits coping. In an interview, Bigelow explains that she feels compelled to share that she is a lesbian because people assume she is straight because she is Black, which they also do of Bridget McManus because she performs “femme” on stage. Unlike racial minorities in the US, sexual minorities can opt to “pass” as heterosexual by presenting themselves as appropriately feminine or masculine or as Bigelow, asserts, just by virtue of being a racial minority in a culture representing LGBTQ persons as predominantly White. Rene Hicks, born and raised in San Francisco, CA discusses the number of people who are still not comfortable coming out, even as tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQ communities has increased. She believes this is especially true for queer Black folks whose experience of coming out is very different than the celebrations her White counterparts appear to have upon coming out to friends and family. This is the subject of one of her jokes, which cleverly reveals the way one’s experience is compounded by multiple oppressed subject positions: “Black people have sorta like a revolving door on their closet. Sometime we in, sometime we out. See because we already have one burden to deal with, sometimes it’s hard to deal with two. I mean we’re already openly Black [*laughter*].”⁶⁶ Again, we see an allusion

⁶⁶ Rene Hicks in *Laughing Matters...More!*, op.cit.

to the choices available to White sexual minorities, which are unavailable to racial minorities.

Queers of color must navigate a different set of waters, as they contend with being both a racial and sexual minority as well as those experiences affected by one's biological sex. Gloria Bigelow frames this dilemma in comedic terms: "It's tricky being Black and being gay because Black folks, we, we're homophobic [*laughter*] you know, cause we've been oppressed so we know how to oppress. You know what I mean? It's like we were in the slave quarters taking notes. [*feigns pensive deliberation over a writing tablet and then to herself*] 'Use religion! Don't forget the Bible!' [*laughter*]." ⁶⁷ Facing potential exclusion in racial/ethnic communities due to their sexuality and in queer communities due to their race, queers of color often find themselves in social and political quandaries forcing them to choose between queer or race loyalty. As evidenced by Bigelow's humor (and many others) comic performance provides an opportunity—albeit limited in scope depending on the success and notoriety of the comic in question—to give voice to these dilemmas, making clear the effect this exclusion has on the individual and pointing toward various technologies of oppression, e.g., Bigelow cites the role of religion in oppressing racial *and sexual minorities*.

LGBTQ comics opting not to pass as heterosexual—such as veteran comic Sabrina Matthews, a White butch lesbian born in Baltimore, MD and raised in Rye, NY—use their appearance to call attention to the stereotypes that people harbor about other groups. On one hand, this functions as a tactic to identify stereotypes as a reductionary and generalizing fiction, while also identifying which beliefs and

⁶⁷ Gloria Bigelow in *Laughing Matters...Next Gen*, op.cit.

assumptions constitute stereotypes. On the other hand, stereotypes can be used to confirm one's cultural belonging while also useful as a comic device since it capitalizes on shared comic frames or existing beliefs and knowledge sets people have about various communities. For example, during her performance, Matthews confesses: "Yes I have a truck and a cat. I know the surprises just keep on coming [*laughter*]. This is like the only shirt I own that's not flannel."⁶⁸ The enjoyment of that joke derives, indeed relies, on the shared set of cultural beliefs about lesbians. Lesbians and heterosexuals alike can chuckle at their mutual knowledge (regardless of its veracity) of the cultural construction of lesbians in the US. Since stereotypes about various groups and communities will vary across cultures, the joke is successful because knowledge of the stereotypes affirms a "we," a cultural belonging less associated with categories of difference and more a signal of national belonging. In an interview, Matthews acknowledges that she capitalizes on these stereotypes: "In front of a straight crowd it's a lot of fun to do stereotypical jokes like that because, one thing, it hits on the things that they're expecting to laugh at. I bet it sometimes surprises a lot of straight people that we might have a sense of humor about our own stereotypes. I certainly have a sense of humor about my own stereotypes."⁶⁹ Combating the cultural axiom that feminists and lesbians do not have a sense of humor or that they cannot laugh *at* themselves, Matthews purposefully destabilizes this stereotype even while joking about other stereotypes that are, in her case, accurate.

⁶⁸ Sabrina Matthews in *Laughing Matters...More!*, op.cit.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Being visibly marked by alterity presents struggles unique to one's social, political and historical position. In *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African Comedic Tradition*, Elsie Williams examines the scope and features of African American humor in the US and the impact of social and historical experiences on the production of humor. The experience of being wrested unwillingly from their homeland directly impacted African American humor, "rooting the group's humor in an inversion of experience of a dislocated and stolen people."⁷⁰ Four major features/typologies of African American humor emerged over the course of the last 150 years: "the plantation survivalist, accommodationist, in-group social satirist, and integrationist of the sixties and seventies as the precursor of the contemporary comedian of the eighties and nineties."⁷¹ Each form of humor reflects the time period in which it was exercised, pointing towards the epochal social, cultural, and political limitations placed on African Americans. Black comics draw from collective experiences of enslavement, disenfranchisement, and institutionalized racism, though Black men do not suffer from the same difficulties posed to Black women seeking careers in comedy and in general "have traditionally achieved rights before women in the U.S."⁷² This does not mean, however, that Black men do not produce charged humor; on the contrary, some who are most adept at using comedy to point towards cultural and national contradictions have been African American male comics such as Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, and Dave Chappelle. However, Black comediennes continually have to negotiate a distinctive voice and

⁷⁰ Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁷² Aimee Dowd, "L in a Handbasket: Kate Clinton's politics of funny," *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 30 (fall 05): 39.

performance aesthetic, in part because they are repeatedly occluded as subjects of analysis by virtue of sex when studying comics (read: male) and by virtue of race when studying female comics (read: White).

As both Black and female, comedian Paula Jai Parker reports: “[e]very time I’ve experienced sexism I wondered if there was a little racism attached to it. I don’t know. It all goes hand in hand to me. I experience them daily.”⁷³ Due to these intersecting oppressions, Carol Allen found that “African American female comedy tends to be critical and deconstructive, recoding both white supremacist and masculinist ideologies” and “plays with and against the atrocity of slavery and the ensuing packaging and sale of all things Negro.”⁷⁴ African American women comics must combat an untiring legacy of misrepresentation construing Black women as lascivious or hypersexual and unapologetically aggressive, characteristics that fly in the face of ideologies of true womanhood. Consequently, Black comedienne use their position as cultural soothsayers to undermine the validity of these dominant images and to inflect these perceptions with positive associations and attributes. Thus, where dominant culture paints the picture of Black female dominance, a Black comedienne may respond by qualifying this as a necessary strength deployed to battle infidelity or protect loved ones from domestic abuse. DoVeanna Fulton argues that Black women comics focus on corporeal issues, sexual and personal relationships, “and racial and gender authenticity” as a way to attend to the misrepresentations

⁷³ Paula Jai Parker in Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 292.

⁷⁴ Carol Allen, “‘Shaking That Thing’ and All Its Wonders: African American Female Comedy,” *Studies in American Humor* 3,12 (2005): 99.

pervasive in dominant culture.⁷⁵ Their comedy reflects the social and historical restraints placed upon them as they contend with presenting themselves authentically while trying to circumvent the trappings of essentializing Black womanhood. Thus, their humor is pivotal to “contemporary Black women’s self-definition and struggle.”⁷⁶

Black women comics achieve a wider audience willing to listen, relate, and even adopt their views when they present themselves as non-threatening and socially engaging on stage, which in a subversive turn, allows them the freedom to be more direct, honest, and even political, displaying behaviors traditionally considered unladylike. Contemporary Black women comics enacting cultural citizenship include Whoopi Goldberg, Loni Love, Aisha Tyler, Sommore, Mo’Nique Hicks, Rene Hicks, Adele Givens, Laura Hayes, Sheryl Underwood, Gloria Bigelow, Paula Jai Parker, Micia Mosely, Wanda Sykes, B-Phlat, and Karen Williams. Using comedy that is proactively anti-racist and anti-sexist and seldom employs self-deprecating humor often results in a celebration of Black womanhood and contests the terms by which they are defined by the dominant culture.⁷⁷

The number of successful Latino/a comics is small relative to the Latino/a population in the US. George Lopez, Cheech Marin, Carlos Mencia, Gabriel Iglesias, and Pablo Francisco are perhaps the most successful and nationally recognized Latino comics. While there are a handful of Latinas performing in amateur and professional

⁷⁵ DoVeanna S. Fulton, “Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes,” *Journal of American Folklore* 117,463 (2004): 82.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 85. L.H. Stallings makes this point her central concern in *Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (2007) wherein she argues for the potential and possibilities that Black female culture offers for the discovery, celebration and dissemination of radical Black female subjectivities.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

circuits, none has the name recognition achieved by these men. Latinas desiring to use performance as a vehicle for change frequently opt to work out of a genre of performance particular to Chicano/a culture. Departing from the first Chicano theater movement (most popularly El Teatro Campesino) arising in the 1960s, which was largely spurred by the Civil Rights and United Farm Workers movements, Chicana performance art, which is often humorous, seeks to foreground the politics of a specifically female Chicana identity versus a working male Chicano identity. Chicana theater has its own genre of performance termed “teatropoesia” that “reflects their ethnic and historical position. The form is a fusion of poetry and theatre,” stemming from the Chicano/a community’s interest in poetry whether print, spoken word, song, or performance.⁷⁸ Teatropoesia uses poetic form to make the personal public and developed in response to social barriers and reflected ethnically infused goals for theater production. Contemporary Latino/a comic performers like Sandra Valls, Marga Gomez, Lisa Alvaredo, Gabriel Iglesias, Marilyn Martinez, Sara Contreras, Chris Fonseca, Monique Marvez, Eva Morales, Jesusa Rodriguez, Monica Palacios, Diana Raznovich, Astrid Hadad, Ela Troyana, and Carmelita Tropicana all use charged humor in teatropoesia, performance art, and/or stand-up comedy.

These Latina jokesters continue the tradition of politicized Chicana performance, using humor as a satirical device and a way to entertain while instructing audiences. Diana Taylor and Roselyn Constantino in “Unimagined Communities” argue that Latina performances, many of them comical, demonstrate the diversity of Latinas as well as the complex history of colonization and its effects. One of the Latina divas of

⁷⁸ Sue Ellen Case, “Women of Colour and Theatre,” in *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen Inc., 1988), 107.

comedy, Marilyn Martinez, passed away November 3, 2007 at the age of fifty-three. In a video tribute to her comedy, complete with interviews and clips from performances, Marilyn Martinez states, “I think it’s hard when you’re a woman and especially now that I’m a Latin woman.”⁷⁹ All Latino/a comic performers must choose whether they will perform marginality and do so in a way enacting cultural citizenship. This humor would educate about a history of colonization, genocide, and forced assimilation and combat stereotypes and misrepresentations like that anyone looking “brown” is here illegally or that Latinas are tempestuous and hypersexual. For example, Lisa Alvaredo jokes, “I’m not the typical Latina because I got pregnant in my *late* teens” (emphasis hers), which references early teen pregnancy, a stereotype held about Latinas.⁸⁰ Her belonging is in question because her life does not fully comply with the stereotype and the joke is made funny because audience members recognize the joke as both a stereotype constitutive of communal identity and an aberration from the stereotype, albeit it minimal. Performance in any culture can be understood as a window into one’s culture; therefore, Latino/a comic performances allow us to witness the negotiation of subjectivities in a specific political, economic, and cultural matrix.⁸¹

Like other race/ethnic based minoritarian communities, the Asian American cultural tradition of performance varies based on country of origin, region of relocation, and proximity to urban centers. Asian American comics like Dat Phan, Vijai Nathan, Margaret Cho, Ali Wong, Edwin San Juan, and Kate Rigg have used

⁷⁹ Marilyn Martinez in “Latin Diva of Comedy Tribute,” Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViVgyyzBVhk>

⁸⁰ Lisa Alvaredo in “America’s Funniest Mom.” Youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IzPCVocHFc>

⁸¹ Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino (eds), *Holy Terrors* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), 3.

comedy onstage to voice dissatisfaction with stereotypes, and where the women are concerned, particularly the objectification and hypersexualization of Asian women. Lisa Lowe in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* documents Asian Americans and their particular history of exploitation and exclusion, arguing that culture is a possible if not advantageous site for constructing new subjectivities, undermining the nation's desire for docile immigrant bodies, and "question[ing] those modes of government."⁸² Also placing importance on the struggles occurring on the cultural front, Karen Shimakawa, author of *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage*, considers how Asian-ness functions in performance; more specifically, she examines the paradox of living as an Asian American, as both an outsider and "at some fundamental level, an undifferentiable part of the whole."⁸³ The dominant culture or "the whole" relies on the practice of "othering" Asian Americans and this othering constitutes the whole. They are known by what they are not; "Read as abject, Asian-Americanness thus occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation—but it does not result in the formation of an Asian-American subject or even an Asian-American object."⁸⁴ In this exchange, Asian Americans do not come out with any sort of subjectivity intact. While their relationship to dominant culture helps to constitute the whole, it does not return the favor to the group being otherized. Asian American comics are raising funny voices, stepping up to counter their perceived impotence and cultural invisibility.

⁸² Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), 22.

⁸³ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2002), 2.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

Kate Rigg, an Asian American queer comic performer who wants to “redress the balance,” uses her stand-up comedy to challenge phallocentrism and reconstitute her subjectivity, in part by negating common fallacies about Asian women.⁸⁵

I am so happy actually to be part of this show for real because I mean, well I’m a very naughty delicate oriental lotus petal first of all. And I get to talk about my pussy for the whole fucking set which I’m really, really excited about...Because you know it’s not just to like gratuitously flap my pink bits on the stage at you, you know what I mean? I’m not trying to take us all on a trip to tuna town you know and to be vulva, I mean vulgar. There’s a point to it, okay. There’s a point because in our culture we are penetrated by penis references you know all the time you know, in comedy clubs man. If you go to comedy clubs all night long, I swear to God it’s like: dick, dick, dick, smack my internet, whacking off, porn, perineum, scrot, jizz load, cumshot, long duck dong, right?... As a woman in comedy, you know, I feel like it’s my duty to, you know, redress the balance, you know, kind of take back the night, like vaginally feng shui every room that I go into, you know like [*her voice switches to what is considered an Asian accent*]: “Take a candle shaped like clitoris; place in northeast corner of room”...I know about feng shui of course because I’m Asian [*she emits a fake laugh*] and some of you now are probably waiting for me to shoot some ping pong balls out of my cooch, but that’s not going to happen! No, because ping-pong balls are Saigon 1997, I prefer the cherry stem.⁸⁶

On and offstage, Rigg desires to be “winningly subversive” and on her album *Kate’s Chink-O-Rama*, she identifies herself as a “cultural terrorist.”⁸⁷ In her comedy, she takes popular music and re-writes the lyrics to make the song meaningful to her and/or Asian American culture. For every song, she performs a different character—such as a Canadian Inuit considering moving to the US, a Vietnamese woman dismayed at the return of the GI who knocked her up years ago, a lesbian librarian visiting New York City from the United Kingdom, and a Chinese chef—demonstrating the vast cultural differences and concerns within Asian American

⁸⁵ “Kate Rigg,” *The Naughty Show: Bad Girls of Comedy*, DVD. Directed by Skye Blue (USA: Eagle Rock Entertainment, 2004).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Kate Rigg quoted in Zeisler, “A Good Offense,” 41; Kate Rigg, *Kate’s Chink-O-Rama*, CD. 2002. [Promotional Copy]

communities. It is difficult not to enjoy the catchy reworking of popular songs—like “Super Freak” to “Super Chink,” “Wok This Way” instead of “Walk This Way,” or “Ice, Ice Baby” to “Rice, Rice Baby”—with Rigg as she works on the “deconstruction and reconstruction of language.”⁸⁸ As Riggs demonstrates in her stand-up comedy and as Karen Shimakawa and Lisa Lowe argue, performance provides opportunities for Asian Americans to negotiate their abject status, to assert the Asian American subject and transform national subject formation in the national imaginary.

As is evident, I am drawing from a pool of dozens of comics who each represent a unique perspective about how they belong and their diverse tactics for illuminating this humorously on stage. The production of humor enacting cultural citizenship reflects the individual and communal effects of the burden imposed by second-class status in the US. It is important to examine how comics produce this kind of humor and why it is they seek to do so. These comics translate political and social issues in their production of humor enacting cultural citizenship. While hailing from disparate communities whose struggles are unique to their culture or nation’s history with the US, these humorous voices on the fringes are united in their quest to enact cultural citizenship vis-à-vis comedy.

Conclusion

From the beginning, entire populations of persons were excluded from the national promise which, because it was a promise, was held out paradoxically: falsely, as a democratic reality, and legitimately, as a promise, the promise that the democratic citizenship form makes to people caught in history. The populations who were and are managed by the discipline of the promise—women, African Americans, Native

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Americans, immigrants, homosexuals—have long experienced simultaneously the wish to be full citizens and the violence of their partial citizenship.
—Lauren Berlant⁸⁹

Cultural citizenship is method and means, a noun and a verb. The terms of citizenship hinge upon civic reciprocity. You are granted rights as a citizen and in exchange you need to conduct yourself in a certain way. Stuart Hall calls membership “two-sided, reciprocal: rights in, but also responsibilities towards, the community” and cultural citizenship is about stepping up to those responsibilities to the community.⁹⁰ For comics hailing from minoritarian communities desiring to produce charged humor this may manifest as jokes addressing social inequalities, national contradictions, and negative representations or it could be calling attention to racist language, power relations, and cultural grievances. All of these tactics re-imagine a community, disrupting how we imagine various communities and relatedly how they are positioned in the national imaginary. In this way, humor enacting cultural citizenship can mobilize by offering a comedic mental colonic. Effective comedy relies on identification and the more opportunities we all have to identify with members of minoritarian communities—be they ours or others—the more likely we are to humanize movements for social justice.

The end goals are the same for comics producing this kind of humor. Sommore says “I just want people to know that I gave it my best and I intend to make a difference” and Chris Rock says it is his job as a comic to “examin[e] the human

⁸⁹ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 18-19.

⁹⁰ Hall & Held, “Citizens and Citizenship,” 175.

condition and brin[g] light to it.”⁹¹ Their motives for being comic performers and the content of their performances coincide in an effort to enact cultural citizenship. In doing so, they draw attention to the ways they do not feel included or acknowledged in the national imaginary. This humor will not change material conditions or reverse discrimination per se, but it can indicate where and how to start. It is up to each of us to make the next move and the next and the next.

⁹¹ Sommore in Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, 35 and Chris Rock in *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, DVD. Directed by Robert Townsend (Code Black Entertainment, 2009).

Chapter 3: Laughter in the Final Instance: The Consumption of Charged Humor (or why women aren't perceived to be as funny as men)¹

I have suggested that citizenship is a status whose definitions are always in process. It is continually being produced out of political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as 'the people' and how social membership will be measured and valued.

—Lauren Berlant²

In *Vanity Fair* (January 2007), Christopher Hitchens published the controversial piece, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” giving voice to a general cultural perception that men are funnier than women. Humor, on his terms, is best pursued by men, is understood most clearly by men, and should include only those issues pertaining to men. His insight into the gender divide in humor production is as follows: “Male humor prefers the laugh to be at someone’s expense, and understands that life is quite possibly a joke to begin with—and often a joke in extremely poor taste... Whereas women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is.”³ Hitchens’ essay articulates an argument that upon closer inspection quickly unravels. He is correct in saying that women are *perceived* as less funny, but he offers (sexist) biologicistic and otherwise deterministic arguments to explain a cultural and economic phenomenon. In doing so, he reduces audiences’ reception to and consumption of humor to something natural, innate, predetermined, and therefore moot, which for him is ideal because it leaves him and

¹ An earlier and rather condensed version of this chapter is currently slated for publication under the title: “Laughter in the Final Instance: The Cultural Economy of Humor (or why women aren’t perceived to be as funny as men) in the edited collection *The Laughing Stalk*, edited by Judith Batalion (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press), 2010.

² Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 20.

³ Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, no. 557 (January 2007), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>.

every other swinging dick with the upper hand, the “equipment” necessary to incite laughter and the arbiter of precisely what should elicit laughter.

Christopher Hitchens’ article sparked public discussions both on-line and in print, introducing arguments from the biological and sociological to cultural and psychological explanations for public perceptions of women’s inadequacy in the realm of humor production. What Hitchens overlooks and what the current public/print investigation of mixed audiences favoring male humor over female humor indicates, however, are cultural explanations of the economy of humor or the way consumption of humor is shaped by the cultural economy, the material incentives shaping popular cultural forms in the US. How we belong shapes our identity and its material accessories, e.g., shoes, musicians, jewelry, cars, and yes, even comics. To that effect, the author of the quote opening this chapter, Lauren Berlant, writes that “[i]dentity is marketed in national capitalism as a property. It is something you can purchase, or purchase a relation to. Or it is something you already own that you can express.”⁴ Stuart Hall agrees that a “greater and greater number of people (men and women) – with however little money – play the game of using things to signify who they are.”⁵ Just as we can buy or obtain an image by wearing certain clothes and listening to certain music, we can also shape that image by identifying with and supporting certain comics. This consumption is irrevocably wedded to and props up our ideas of who we are, including our national affiliations and where we see

⁴ Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington*, 17.

⁵ Stuart Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 131.

ourselves fitting into the national imaginary. I argue that mainstream⁶ audiences—which I identify as middle-class or having purchasing power—tend to affirm the perspectives and identify with (read: invest in and economically support; laugh or otherwise respond favorably) comics whose categories of identity correspond to ideal citizens, i.e., White male heterosexual Christian able-bodied comics.⁷

Since the project of cultural citizenship focuses on the ways minoritarian subjects expose the psychic and material effects of their exclusion from the national imaginary, ideal citizens have little cause to produce humor enacting cultural citizenship. Female comics will be more likely than men to produce this kind of humor, just as differently abled comics (male or female) will be more likely than able-bodied men to produce this kind of humor. There is a causal relationship between the public belief that women are not as funny as men and the tendency for women to perform charged humor. Comics, especially female comics, using stand-up comedy as a forum for revealing their second-class status, will struggle to achieve success equivalent to men. As a stand-up comic myself, I occasionally insert personal experiences illustrative of these arguments.

⁶ To clarify further, I situate “mainstream” in economic terms because booking agents, producers, and industry entrepreneurs make hiring and casting decisions based on the marketability of a comic, which is determined by their proven ability to appeal to a wide consumer base. While there are minoritarian communities that do not necessarily consume mainstream White male comics, they do, however, still support male comics more so than female comics also performing in the same niche market. For example, members of the African American middle-class exercise buying power in the market and though they may not be tuning in to watch or buy tickets to see Jim Gaffigan or Greg Proops, they are showing up to support D.L. Hughley. Though I say this with caution, the only minoritarian community where investment in male experience and points of view does not appear to be a foregone conclusion is within the LGBTQ community.

⁷ My argument will attend more exclusively to parsing out the debate about public preferences for male comics over female comics; however, I include these other categories of difference like heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, and White to reference and recognize the multiple dimensions of power and privilege operating in society and to paint a complete portrait of other privileged categories of identity in the US.

This connection of nation and cultural economy to audience preferences for male comics is conspicuously absent from public and academic discourses on the matter. Contemporary humor scholarship in the humanities addressing gender differences largely focuses on differences between male and female comics such as content and stylistic differences, and still does nothing to address the fundamental question of why female comics fail to meet with success equal to their male counterparts. What are the cultural explanations for the belief that men are funnier than women and how does this affect humor consumption, particularly charged humor? What are the rewards—material, social, or otherwise—for engagement with or identification with comics and how does this influence the consumption of this kind of humor? I turn to interviews with and articles about stand-up comics, print media, public commentary, and the documentary *The History of the Joke with Lewis Black* to map out the debate that men are funnier than women, paying particular attention to the various cultural explanations advanced to explain this perception. Drawing from and analyzing the popular discourses circulating about men's higher aptitude for comedy, I argue that audiences' lack of enthusiasm for women comic performers is symptomatic of power differentials, that there is no economic or cultural incentive for buying into women's perspectives, particularly when they draw attention to their status as marginalized by producing humor enacting cultural citizenship. Moreover, I suggest that the same factors influence and inform the public's hesitancy to consume charged humor at rates equivalent to other kinds of humor. Because many of the comics producing charged humor are women, examining why women are not perceived to be as funny

as men is one way of beginning to understand why humor enacting cultural citizenship struggles for the same economic viability as other kinds of humor.

The Question...

Do women and men laugh at the same jokes? Will a hermaphrodite meet you half way? I can't answer that but I can tell you that female comics have a harder job than male comics. It's that simple.

—Lewis Black⁸

Emily Wilson, journalist and freelance writer for the liberal online news source *Alternet*, published the piece “Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?” on September 4, 2007. I was interviewed for this article along with Jewish comic Judy Gold, *Bitch* co-founder and editor Andi Zeisler, and women’s humor scholar Regina Barreca. Each person interviewed affirmed that women struggle to achieve similar popularity and success performing comedy in the US. There are many reasons contributing to this, but Andi Zeisler provided what I believe to be the primary reason for this disparity: “we need to look at *who* is defining what is funny” (italics mine).⁹ This means we need to pay attention to the prognostications of folks like Christopher Hitchens or other widely read writers as they define what is funny and identify the *ideal* candidates for humor production (hint: for him that would be men).

It also means we should look to the public for their thoughts on this debate. Is Christopher Hitchens reinforcing existing beliefs or does he ring hollow with his public? Emily Wilson’s article, which discussed the power dynamics and fear behind the acceptance of female comics, elicited a great deal of comment from its readers

⁸ *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, DVD. Directed by Dave Greene (New York, New York: AETN, 2008).

⁹ Andi Zeisler quoted in Emily Wilson, “Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?” *Alternet* (4 September 2007), <http://www.alternet.org/story/61102/>.

that offer insight into the range of opinions the public has about women's capacity for humor and whether said humor constitutes a threat. Some readers leaving comments seemed to agree with Hitchens' position that women are not as funny as men for a variety of reasons, though not necessarily for the same reasons posited by Hitchens.¹⁰ An overview of the 198 comments reveals that those who believe women are not funny or are not as funny as men cite the following reasons: lack of interesting subject matters—"...there seems to be a glut of bad female comics who are obsessed with relationships, and think rambling on about them is funny" or "I'll be very happy when female comedians drop the subjects of shoes, purses, shopping, dieting, urinary incontinence, and PMS..."—and gender expectations, i.e., women are not supposed to be aggressive. One individual commented, saying:

As a culture we (men AND women) are uncomfortable being put in that position by a woman...OR, to quote Brett Butler, when she described rednecks squinting at her from the audience and what was clearly written across their sour faces: 'You wouldn't be talkin' that trash if someone had taught you how to make biscuits.'¹¹

Few of those commenting chalked it up to biology and those that did offered little in the way of scientific evidence: "[T]here are funny women of course but just fewer. [M]en are better than women at 3 things, stronger, funnier, and math..." or "It is an anomaly to be funny and female, just like it's an anomaly to be an NFL linebacker and female."¹² One of the lengthier responses argued that women are biologically unsuited or less suited than men for humor production and attributed this to the

¹⁰ One comment referenced Christopher Hitchens' article in *Vanity Fair*, but did so disparagingly and a subsequent response pokes fun that Hitchens' argument was even offered as evidence in the discussion: "Did you honestly just try to make a point about female male relations by using Christopher Hitchens?", <http://www.alternet.org/story/61102#comments>.

¹¹ The comments are still available on a read-only basis. See: Emily Wilson, "Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?" *Alternet* (4 September 2007), <http://www.alternet.org/story/61102/>.

¹² Comments to "Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?", *Ibid*.

aggressive nature of comedy, which he argued men are better equipped to handle and went on to write that the women who are funny, are lesbians, “further adding weight to the argument that perhaps testosterone levels contribute to humour.”¹³ Other comments express indignation that such a debate even exists.

We know we’re funny...The question is why so many men have such a hard time acknowledging that what women (including feminists) find funny really is funny, even if the guys aren’t laughing. The reason this is important is that the same question can be asked about any other damn thing: ‘Why do so many men have such a hard time acknowledging that what women (including feminists) find important really is important, even if the guys don’t take it seriously.’¹⁴

This comment clearly echoes Andi Zeisler’s suggestion that we look to *who* is defining what constitutes humor or what counts as funny.

For the most part the lengthy discussion threads indicate a thoughtful and conscientious debate over the merit of the article’s contents and whether the public agrees that female comics are threatening and why. A handful of those commenting discuss the power dynamics and impact of culture on audience reception of humor. In response to the individual positing that favorable reception of male humor versus female humor was a biological given, one person wrote:

...to ignore or refuse to acknowledge the impact and contribution of sociali[z]ation and interaction and culture on human attitudes and behavior is to miss half the picture. And it is the social/cultural aspects of human life that we can actively change...No comedian is objectively more or less funny than the other, regardless of race, cultural, gender, sexual orientation or disability differences. It is the subjective experience of the audience that determines whether they think the comedian is funny or not. You personally think men are funnier overall than women. Fair enough, that’s your opinion, but be aware it is YOUR subjective opinion, not fact.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

These comments reflect the ongoing debate and the variety of reasons women are perceived not to be as funny as men. This debate turns up in print media, film and television, and among those making a career of stand-up comedy.

This debate is addressed in *The History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, a documentary on stand-up comedy produced by the History Channel, and a host of comics comment on the issue, echoing similarly wide-ranging responses. First, viewers hear from Dr. Richard Wiseman of the University of Hertfordshire who discusses gender differences in humor citing research showing that 71% of women laugh when men tell a joke (based on recorded conversations at parties) and 39% of men laugh when a woman tells a joke. Lewis Black counters this by saying that if men were smart they would laugh at women's jokes so they could get laid. For Black, though he jests, women should be perceived as funny as a means to a nuptial end. Another veteran comic, George Carlin says, “[s]pecific and individual women are as funny as any specific and individual man. The difference is in the acculturation and conditioning that people go through and for a long time there weren't many female stand-ups because it was somehow too masculine a job, too aggressive a job.”¹⁶ A seventeen year White veteran of stand-up comedy, D.C. Benny haltingly testifies that a higher percentage of male comics make him laugh than female comics, wondering aloud whether he is biased. Marina Franklin, a Black woman and comic for six years, sitting next to him mouths the word: “chauvinistic.” Popular ventriloquist Jeff Dunham uses his puppet (Walter) to say that he does not think women are funny. During a joint interview with Robert Kelly (comic of 16 years) and Lynne Koplitz (comic of 17 years), Kelly shares his exasperation at the complaints women have

¹⁶ *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, op.cit.

about not being accepted or as validated as male comics. Kelly thinks Koplitz is funny when she talks about her own experiences but when she comes from a female perspective or starts lambasting men (performing charged humor), he does not think she is as funny: “When you talk about your own experiences, you’re not being a woman, you’re actually just being Lynne.”¹⁷ The problem with this logic is that she *is* a woman and her life is shaped by this gender assignment. The underlying request seems to be to strip from her comic material one of the fundamental social positions contributing to how she experiences the world. You can be a woman telling jokes, just do not call attention to your woman-ness or any other category of difference that might force listeners out of their comfort zone, because that forces them to learn from another perspective or identify with someone unlike them. Male humor is humor genera and humor arising from any other position becomes “other” humor, topical, or special interest.

Female comics take umbrage that they are always already up against popular cultural beliefs that women are not funny or if they are, that it is an anomaly. Kathleen Madigan, an Irish American comic headlining clubs all over the country, shares with Lewis Black: “I did not know that half of the population thinks women aren’t funny. I was not given this information. I had no idea. The more successful I become, the more people come up to me after the show and go: ‘Usually I hate women comics, but you were hilarious!’ And I’m like, really? So, all these years I’ve been walking up on stage in a total hole?!”¹⁸ Sara Benincasa, an up-and-coming White comic, is equally troubled by such statements.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

To tell me that most people with the same genitalia as me aren't funny, but I'm the exception is just bullshit. In our culture, men are still socialized to only find one another amusing. I'm not sure why that is, but part of me thinks it's because the person who makes you laugh has some degree of power over you...So if you're laughing at someone, you're in some way subservient to them. For so many reasons, some men—and some women—don't necessarily want to give control to women.¹⁹

To some it has become a tired and outmoded debate, particularly when evidence to the contrary abounds. As Kathy Griffin cheekily states, “The notion that chicks aren't as funny is ridiculous and comes from men who aren't as funny. But I enjoy dispelling the myth and I hope that I do and I try to and it's one of my favorite things to hear: ‘Hey, you're funny and you have that vagina.’”²⁰ This debate informed the production of *The History of the Joke with Lewis Black*. Co-executive producer, co-writer, and director of the documentary Dave Greene fought to keep some of the women's comedic material in the documentary because his colleagues (men) did not find it amusing. In an e-mail exchange with me, he writes: “The most interesting fights were my insistence on keeping female comedians in the show. Some male staffers just didn't think they were funny, and I had to make an argument to keep them in. I used a demographic, rather than a comic rationale to explain my decision; some of the bits I didn't find funny, either—but someone might.”²¹ Greene wisely capitalized on the argument that humor is subjective, gently reminding his colleagues that their opinions about what constitutes funny cannot be generalized to the populous.

¹⁹ Sara Benincasa quoted in Danna Williams, “Ladies are Funny Festival Interview: Sara Benincasa,” *Austin AV Club* (May 6 2009), <http://www.avclub.com/austin/articles/ladies-are-funny-festival-interview-sara-benincasa,27555/>.

²⁰ *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, op.cit.

²¹ The comments made herein by Green do not in any way reflect the opinions or experience of the History Channel, AETN, or Triage Entertainment. Dave Greene, e-mail message to author, February 19, 2010.

There is evidence that society finds men more facile in the realm of humor production (pace Hitchens) in part because it is considered inappropriate or out of line for women to not only demand attention and visibility, but to even speak about or reference certain sensitive topics like sex (they could laugh at men) or gender roles (they could expose the performance of gender) or politics (they could be smarter than men in the audience or hold controversial opinions). Julie Goldman, a lesbian Jewish comic and cast member of LOGO's *The Big Gay Sketch Show* interviewed by Andi Ziesler in *Bitch* says that "[i]n comedy, [that] translates into this weird [situation where] women can only talk about certain things. The men can talk about anything they want, but when women start talking about [the same] stuff, somehow it becomes offensive. There's a double standard and I'm tired of it."²² Robin Tyler, a long-time comic, producer, director, and activist, comments on the current social climate for women comic performers saying: "You have women comics, but at the same time because it's such a reactionary period and non-feminist period, you have the sexism that has reared its ugly head. And if you go to the comedy clubs again, you'll see the SM [sadoomasochism] jokes, and you'll see the denigration of women."²³ Young White comic Jen Kirkman reports that she has been booed for telling jokes about female masturbation, experiences she now incorporates into her jokes. In an endearing way, she mocks the antiquated or conservative viewer who finds women's sexuality threatening, frightening, or lacking in gentility saying, "I feel like I am going to turn around and someone is going to be inventing the wheel behind me. I'm like how long do women have to live on earth before they can talk about the same

²² Julie Goldman quoted in Andi Zeisler, "A Good Offense," *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Issue 41 (fall 08): 39.

²³ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

things dudes talk about.”²⁴ Women who broach sensitive or offensive subject matter or attempting to counter sexism in the industry may find themselves in a struggle to garner positive reception from their audience and as these examples show, audience members may have difficulty identifying with her point of view. Women will have difficulty competing with men in a genre of performance that makes certain (masculine) topics off limits while at the same time discouraging and devaluing the humor produced from a woman’s standpoint, like when Robert Kelly told Lynn Koplitz that she was funny when she did not talk about being a woman.

Women comics must work to counteract the belief that women are not funny onstage with audience members and backstage with skeptical booking agents. Sommore, African American host of *Comic View* and stand-up comic for nearly twenty years recalls: “Well, when we did *The Queens of Comedy* we came together and we knew that we were trying to prove a point. First of all it was stated that all-women shows do not sell. So we wanted to prove them wrong with that and then we wanted to prove that women can be funny.”²⁵ As a result, Darryl Littleton, producer of the documentary *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*, notes that “*The Queens of Comedy* put a spotlight on female comediennes and showed their viability. So despite comments from comedy icons such as Jerry Lewis that females weren’t funny... lady comics were making headway, but just how far was another question.”²⁶ Similarly, one person commenting online relayed the following story: Janeane Garofalo challenged Bill Maher on his show *Politically Incorrect* when he

²⁴ Jen Kirkman, “Stand-up- Female Masturbation,” *Effinfunny*.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxOR2GHJDoM>.

²⁵ Sommore quoted in Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 286.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

“posited that the dearth of female comedy writers on TV had less to do with sexism and the ‘old boy’ club than the ‘fact’ that women ‘just aren’t as good at that kind of comedy.’ Janeane Garofalo shot back, ‘Yeah, I watch TV written by men, and I’m not laughing my ass off.’ To his eternal credit, Maher fell over laughing, and told her she was right.”²⁷ Garofalo chides Maher for forgetting that not everyone appreciates or shares the same experiences with male humorists and comics. He may have forgotten; after all this is humor de rigueur. According to Dave Greene:

...the only real debate that my fellow comedy writers and producers tend to have is the ‘are women funny’ one, but it’s always circular. Of course women can be funny. But men find male comedians funny in the same way they find male rock stars awesome: Complaining that not enough men laugh at Wanda Sykes is like complaining that not enough of them listen to Melissa Etheridge.²⁸

Beneath this comparison is the genuinely troubling question that even if men are capable of admiring and looking up to women entertainers, why would they? What incentive do they have other than perhaps Lewis Black’s earlier point that you might have more opportunities to “get lucky” if you laugh at women’s jokes.

The sum of this ongoing popular discourse constitutes the debate as to whether women are as funny as men and the various reasons people think they are not. This debate holds sway in the public informing consumption trends and as the testimony from Dave Greene indicates, it can determine whether viewers even have access to consume certain kinds of humor in the first place. Online comments and discussion in response to online articles dealing with this debate expressed a range of opinions varying in intensity, were comprised mainly of US and UK readers, and included a number of posts by those self-identifying as comics. Interestingly, every comment

²⁷ Comments to “Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?”, op.cit.

²⁸ Dave Greene, e-mail message to author, February 19, 2010.

posted by someone identifying himself or herself as a comic agreed that the industry is sexist, that women have a difficult time achieving equal success in stand-up comedy and that this is mainly due to cultural values assigned to gender in most Western nations. Print and film media sources corroborate the pervasiveness and strength of this popular discourse about women's aptitude for humor production and interviews with comics in the industry do the same.

Nearly a year after the publication of Emily Wilson's piece, I received a lengthy e-mail from a cordial engineer living in Maryland who read the *Alternet* article, located me through the university and e-mailed me with questions about why women are not as funny as men. In his e-mail, Kenneth Winiecki shared that he finds women comics to be irritating or at least more so than most male comics and was earnestly "trying to figure out why [he] find[s] a significantly higher proportion of female than male comedians unfunny."²⁹ The tone was apologetic but firm; many women comics are annoying and he thought my research would lend some insight to the matter. From the *Alternet* article he became acquainted with one of the leading arguments for why women are more likely to be perceived as not funny, namely that women who are funny are seen as potentially threatening. He found the argument to be less than thorough in addressing his antipathy towards women comics and countered the hypothesis saying: "Usually when I am threatened I think I feel fear and/or defensiveness, but my negative responses to comedians usually seem to include boredom and/or irritation, which don't seem to me much like a threat response."³⁰ I considered his queries seriously and placed them in the context of my own work,

²⁹ Kenneth Winiecki Jr., e-mail message to author, May 9, 2008.

³⁰ Ibid.

which among other objectives seeks to look beyond the very useful and oft employed discussion of women's comedy as resistant.³¹ It is resistant and we can gain much from these thorough and insightful analyses of what women are resisting. The tenor and quality of that resistance gives visibility to how these resistant practices can lead to social change. Performances intending to resist often enact cultural citizenship but simply reading for resistance shows us how and why individuals produce humor, not how the nation consumes humor and why consumption patterns favor men or comics opting not to produce charged humor. Simply elaborating this argument would never address the real question which was publicly framed by Christopher Hitchens, echoed in Kenneth Winiecki's email, and now the subject of this investigation: Why are men (perceived to be) funnier than women?

The Answer

To address this query that resounds in various ways in public and private discourses, I would defer first to Andi Ziesler and her question of who is defining

³¹ Scholars have published extensively on the subject of women's resistance vis-à-vis humor. Some of those I find most useful to understanding the functions and goals of women's comic performance are: Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (U of Minnesota P, 1988); DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes." *Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 117,463 (Winter 2004), 81-96; Allison Fraiberg "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-Up Comedy," *Studies in Humor and Gender, Vol. 1*, ed. Gail Finney (Gordon & Breach Science Publishers: USA, 1994), 315-334. (see also Fraiberg's unpublished dissertation: "Beyond Indiscretion: Agency, Comedy, and Contemporary American Women's Writing and Performance" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1993)); Suzanne Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance*, ed. Jerome Nadelhaft (New York & London: Routledge, 2004); Philip Auslander, "'Brought to you by Fem-Rage: Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender,'" in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 108-126; Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995); Carol Allen, "'Shaking That Thing' and All Its Wonders: African American Female Comedy," *Studies in American Humor* 3,12 (2005): 97-120; Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers UP, 2007); Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino (eds), *Holy Terrors* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003); Laurie Stone, *Laughing In the Dark: A Decade of Subversive Comedy* (New Jersey: The ECO Press, 1997).

what is funny, and second to cultural explanations for the current economy of humor or the way culture influences the economy of humor. I define the economy of humor as the production, exchange, and consumption of humor. Joanne Gilbert elaborates on this definition.

When a stand-up comic performs for a paying audience, money is exchanged for laughter, social criticism is embedded in the material eliciting the laughter, the comic/social critic gets paid, the comedy club makes money, an economic symbiosis has been achieved. Perhaps it is not surprising that a comic's jokes are called 'material,' for, within the commodification of cultural performance, jokes are exactly that—the material of capitalist currency. The economic dimension of humor illuminates the various exchanges—aesthetic, monetary, sociopolitical—that occur in the context of stand-up comic performance.³²

In this case, the product is a brand of humor, an identity, or lifestyle you can relate to by attending live shows or simply by setting TiVo to record the latest material by your favorite comic. The product here is a human, and as Stuart Hall points out, the consumption is both material and symbolic: “Even consumption, in some ways the privileged terrain of reproduction, is no less symbolic for being material...In a world tyrannized by scarcity, men and women nevertheless express in their practical lives not only what they need for material existence but some sense of their symbolic place in the world, of who they are, their identities.”³³ Our wardrobe conveys messages about who we are, as does the consumption of comic material. Male comics fare better in the market but why? When humans are the product (entertainers), the exchange of those “products” in the economic realm will be as equally fraught by power relations as they are in the sociopolitical sphere. I argue that based on existing social inequalities there is simply no reward for engaging with or learning to identify

³² Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004), 17.

³³ Hall, “The Meaning of New Times,” 130.

with women whose power is already determined as secondary to men in this society. The same is true for comics (male or female, but more often female) producing charged humor. The willful adoption of views, opinions and behaviors requires incentive, a payoff of sorts. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recognized that material gains and advantages are not easily calculable or reflected in one's bank statement. He dissected the many forms capital takes, generating the terms "cultural capital" and "social capital," as forms of capital gain that yield benefits (e.g., prestige, networks, education, opportunities, experiences, proximity to power, etc.) not quantifiable in dollars or relative currency.³⁴ This thinking places the discussion right where it should be...in the shifting realm of culture as it plays out in the economy, rather than Hitchens' biologically deterministic explanations. Women and/or comics producing charged humor are clearly lacking in power, opportunities, prestige, etc.—all the criteria necessary to ensure that viewers will be motivated to (learn to) "buy-in" or identify.

Norman Holland argues that "*interpretation is a function of identity,*" or that personality traits and "differences in age, sex, nationality, class, or reading experience will contribute to differences in interpretation."³⁵ Who we are—the sum of our parts—shapes our reception but I would go further to argue that it also determines what (or who) we are likely to consume. The Blue Collar Comedy Tour with Bill Engvall, Jeff Foxworthy, Ron White, and Larry the Cable Guy (Daniel Lawrence Whitney) features four White men whose comedy capitalizes on appealing to a

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 66.

³⁵ Norman N. Holland, "Unity Identity Text Self," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), 123.

specific working-class blue-collar ethos. This is not to say that they do not reach viewers outside of this class-based demographic (since class status is not fixed and there is a certain nostalgia attached to this ethos that can appeal to viewers who have transitioned into white-collar labor or who can identify based on regional, affectational, or gender similarities), rather that they are more likely to appeal to viewers sharing similar categories of identity.³⁶

We cannot deny the overwhelming power of our economy—a hypercapitalist republic—to dictate popular culture forms including who and what we enjoy (read: consume). Shane Phelan, in *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship*, argues that:

[s]truggles for inclusion are shaped not only by the needs of the excluded and the fears or needs of the excluders, not only by whether demands can be framed within the rhetoric of the polity, but by *whether state actors have an incentive to include the excluded*. The incentives of those actors will not only affect whether a group is included, but will importantly shape the terms under which inclusion will occur. (italics mine)³⁷

Based on women's proximity to power or their tacit social standing as inferior to and subordinated by men, there is simply no economic incentive for anyone, men and women alike, to learn to identify and "buy in" to a woman's point of view.³⁸

Understanding male perspectives and experiences—which are more recognizable as

³⁶ It is interesting to note that these four comics have all achieved enormous success in the comedy industry, making them incredibly wealthy. Since their comedy relies on cultural references to a certain class-inflected lifestyle (though they also capitalize on regional identity: rural and not urban; southern and mid-western states rather than East Coast or West Coast), they have had to make choices about self-presentation in their stand-up. I attended a live performance by Ron White in 2007, noting that his jokes inadvertently calling attention to his wealth were not as successful as his "old" jokes or the misogynist humor he uses throughout.

³⁷ Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 2001), 149.

³⁸ Women may enjoy watching other women comics but patterns in the current economy of humor indicate that they seem to collude with and shore up mainstream proclivities for consuming male humor, at least in ways more supportive of their continued success such as buying tickets for you and your (mixed-gender) group of friends to go watch Flip Orley the hypnotist comic and later, watching Maria Bamford on YouTube (alone).

the standard or norm by which we measure all other experiences—whether or not you are yourself male, bears the promise of incentive or Pierre Bourdieu’s social and cultural capital. Women’s experiences and identities as marketable commodities will fail every time when placed alongside their male counterparts, whose lives and identities bear far greater promise for cultural and economic viability. *Last Comic Standing*, the longstanding and popular reality show gearing up for its seventh season, has in all its seasons had one female winner, Iliza Schlesinger (Winner of Season 6, 2008)—a situation I attribute to an audience’s propensity to identify more strongly and in most cases, with male comics, rather than any lack of ability on the part of the women to be humorous.

Popular representations of male lives and experiences abound whether in literature, television or film and consumers learn to identify with these normative representations, finding means of accessing the cultural capital concomitant with having the privileges of being male, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.³⁹ We recognize privileges bestowed by virtue of money, access to resources, powerful networks, and the protection provided by belonging to the dominant culture; more than that, we strive for it, seeking the secrets of success, wanting to assimilate by mimicking the techniques, attitudes, and even the speech of the successful. The message is that if you do what “they” do, you might achieve some modicum of success, too. Audre Lorde made this observation thirty years ago: “For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor,

³⁹ Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1995).

even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection.”⁴⁰ If women’s experiences are subordinate to men’s, then when it comes to a form of performance like stand-up comedy, whose success is dependent on audience identification with the comic, audiences will respond (read: identify) less enthusiastically. Their logic: why would I need to or want to understand and identify with women’s and/or minorities’ lives and experiences when society continually reinforces that they are of little value. As consumers, even though we may not be thinking of ourselves as such while watching television or attending a live performance, we must have incentive for our investments, whether monetary, emotional, psychic, or time-based.

Last Comic Standing has never included an equal number of male and female contestants and in their weekly battles (between three comics, where one is sent home) often two or more females were voted into the battle ensuring that one or more left nearly every week in the first several episodes of each season. Frequently, the final three ratio is 2:1, male to female. Some may argue that there are fewer successful female comics because they comprise a smaller percentage of those attempting to pursue comedy as a career, creating a smaller pool from which to extract talent. Fewer numbers of female comics may be the result of public skepticism towards lady jokesters but does not adequately explain the general public’s lower rates of consumption of women’s stand-up comedy. UK comedian Jimmy Carr offers one explanation, and Kathleen Madigan agrees, that the life of an itinerant road comic is difficult for anyone and not necessarily a lifestyle women would be drawn to

⁴⁰ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” (1980) *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 114.

particularly if they have partners and/or children.⁴¹ Practical concerns aside, the bottom line is that if the public believed—and shored up that belief with cold hard cash—that women were as funny as men, then we would be exhausting our female comedy reserves to accommodate for the demand. I think of the market as neutral, a capitalist engine insouciant to creed, race, gender, or sexuality. The market or the economy, in this case, is not inherently sexist or any other –ist or –ism; the market supplicates to the dollar. However, the market is influenced by consumers whose consumption choices reify social inequalities. Cultural perceptions influence audience reception and in turn determine the economy of humor, meaning that gender anxieties inform who audiences are most likely to favor and this determines the economy of humor. The cultural capital yielded as a product of identification with male comics and the incentive to identify with and consume the stories, activities, and ideas of the powerful will continue to ensure that audience reception will favor men.

While the numbers fluctuate, women generally constitute anywhere from fifteen to thirty percent of those in the field of comic performance. Shaun Breidbart conducted a statistical analysis of gender differences in comedy and was among the many individuals responding to Christopher Hitchens' inflammatory article(s). Breidbart's analysis indicates that "one third of amateur comedians are female," though the percentage decreases for professional female comics. And this despite his concomitant findings that women are more likely than their male counterparts to take a comedy writing or improv course and to approach the craft more seriously than their male peers. He concludes, writing: "As a male-dominated industry, it's a long, hard fight for women until the numbers start to even out. What will help to even them out?"

⁴¹ *History of the Joke with Lewis Black*, op.cit.

If people would stop publishing articles claiming that women aren't funny. It's clearly not true.”⁴²

Higher numbers of male career comics alone cannot explain an audience's predilection for male comedy, a phenomenon reinforced by the simple evidence of who is hired to emcee, feature, and headline in comedy clubs across America— men. While more men in the industry could certainly be a product of the persistent notion that men are categorically funnier than women, this gender inequity does not by itself explain and/or create this cultural perception. It is true that audiences have more opportunities provided them to identify with male comics, making this process more commonplace or making it appear a more natural connection, but more exposure to male humor does not explain the general reluctance to invest (economically and personally) in women's humor.

One could also argue that the cultural perception that men are funnier than women functions to dissuade women from pursuing comedy professionally. If the odds are stacked against you, why even bother to combat the odds. Another argument could be that women are acculturated differently. With an enormous list of television and film credits, African American stand-up comic and author Aisha Tyler thinks fewer women take a stab at stand-up comedy because “[w]omen are not socialized generally to be assertive...We're very much kinda told by culture like: 'be precious, be pretty, be cute' and so comedy's not precious or pretty or cute.”⁴³ However, women are not homogenous and while Tyler accurately describes the way society perpetuates codes

⁴² Many letters sent to *Vanity Fair* responding to Hitchens' article were published online. See: Shaun Breidbart, “The Humor Gap” *Vanity Fair* (3 March 2008), http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/hitchens_letters200804

⁴³ Ibid.

of femininity, these gendered norms vary among communities distinguished by race/ethnicity, national origin, region, creed, and education. A young Black girl living in Chicago may be given more latitude in her expression of femininity than a young White girl raised in Selma, Alabama by Pentecostal parents. Changing the ways we construct gender and socialize young people can do its part to encourage more women to enter the field of stand-up comedy but audience members will still require some kind of incentive in order to identify, i.e., the humor produced must draw from and reference the most profitable comic frames, namely what stands in for the ideal—the ideal citizen, the male ideal, the White ideal, etc.

Gender determines incentive because each audience member has to “work” to identify with and share in the humor and laughter. If there is no payoff, no capital gains—culturally or otherwise—to be had, audiences will opt out or experience distancing or negative emotions much like those described by Kenneth Winiecki as apathy, boredom, annoyance, and/or disapproval. Cultural attitudes affect economic choices and this includes buying tickets to see comics or purchasing the opportunity to identify in humorous terms with individuals. As a result, topics addressed by women comics specific to the female condition are ghettoized and seen as “special interest” comedy. During a phone interview with a reporter from *The Columbus Dispatch*, prior to an all-women comedy show I produced and emceed in spring 2004, the reporter asked if men were welcome to attend the show, assuming that since it featured an all female line-up that men may be unwelcome (or perhaps disinterested). I assured her that men were welcome and added that precious few think to ask the

same of the typical all-male line-ups at local open-mic shows and comedy clubs across the nation.

Successful comedy relies heavily on affirmation of and identification with the comic. A comic leads her audience “in a celebration of a community of shared culture,”⁴⁴ what I am calling a shared national imaginary. Benedict Anderson’s definition of nation, which is “an imagined political community,” makes it an ideal popular cultural form to gauge social constructions of citizenship that include extralegal concepts of inclusion such as social acknowledgement.⁴⁵ Shane Phelan is careful to point out that invoking a national imaginary or imagined national community does “not mean to posit one way of thinking in which all members of a nation participate, but rather the persistent cluster of images and rhetoric that, however inadequately and imperfectly, signal to a population who and what it is.”⁴⁶ The success of live comic entertainment functions as litmus test or cultural index for national belonging. Success stands in for belonging, which is largely predicated on Phelan’s idea of positive acknowledgement. Comics must establish some or many points of identification with their audience in order to be successful; laughter signals belonging or affirms that one “gets” where you are coming from.⁴⁷ L.H. Stallings writes, “In order to recognize the humor of any comic, the public audience must be privy to the personal and private identity and subjectivity of the performer as well as

⁴⁴ Lawrence E. Mintz, “Standup Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation,” in *American Humor*, ed. A.P. Dudden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 189.

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

⁴⁶ Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*, 7.

⁴⁷ For further explication of laughter signaling belonging and affirmation see Lawrence E. Mintz, “Standup Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation,” in *American Humor*, ed. A.P. Dudden (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Allison Fraiberg “Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women’s Stand-Up Comedy,” in *Studies in Humor and Gender, Vol. 1.* ed. Gail Finney (Gordon & Breach Science Publishers: USA, 1994), 315-334.

the hermeneutics the comic may be using.”⁴⁸ We laugh because we simultaneously appreciate the lawlessness of comedy *and* because we “get it” and through our “getting it,” we also belong. Humor issuing from the mouths of women and members of minoritarian communities that falls flat with audience members can reflect a culture’s lack of desire to acknowledge the experiences of the “Other,” signaling their tacit exclusion from the national imaginary. Group laughter in response to a joke affirms one’s position in the national imaginary by signaling group belonging and agreement; this is Lawrence Mintz’s “community of shared culture.”⁴⁹

The experience of being part of a live audience offers audience members a more participatory and authentic community of shared culture than televised performances, which undergo serious editing to add laugh tracks and remove any unfavorable or lackluster responses from the audience, leaving only a stream of cackling patrons not necessarily laughing at the joke just performed. Laughter is dubbed into the background much like the canned laughter associated with sitcoms and favorable audience responses are carefully selected to present a pleasing and positive response to the comic performing.⁵⁰ And yet, we are compelled to make many assumptions at the point of engagement with the humor we see on the silver screen. First, that since I belong to a national community and this is being aired nationally, my laughter is shared by and with my imagined national community. If this is not compelling

⁴⁸ L.H. Stallings, *Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2007), 117.

⁴⁹ Mintz, “Standup Comedy as a Social and Cultural Mediation,” 197.

⁵⁰ For further discussion about the editing of televised comedy to create a simulated comedic effect not necessarily indicative of the experience of the live audience see: Philip Auslander, “Comedy About the Failure of Comedy: Stand-up Comedy and Postmodernism,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt & Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992), 196-207 and Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television 1750-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

enough, also implicit here is the niggling suggestion that if I do not find this funny I may not belong; in other words, I risk being an outsider. Second, that comics are selected based on their talent and any comic on television, particularly with their own show, must be highly skilled; implicit here is that if I do not find this very funny, this may speak to my ability to assess the quality of comic performance. Based on this evidence, the responses of audiences during live shows are the most useful indices of gauging the success of the jokes and the extent to which audience members identify with the comic performer. Audience identification illumines cultural/social outsiders and determines who sells and who does not.

A patriarchal society producing White male norms that are taken to be the natural order of things ensures that masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality prevail as superior and desirable and determines who belongs and who does not. Loosely translated, this means that when it comes to comic performance, socially constructed notions of how we belong in the national imaginary dictate success with the live audience. Comics occupying privileged social locations in the national imaginary, i.e., male, able-bodied, White, heterosexual, advance a position and bear identity markers that audiences recognize as dominant in the shared national imaginary and thus bear the promise of incentive, e.g., if I can understand dominant modes of being I will increase my chances of gaining access to the power and prestige of the dominant class or ideal citizens. Heterosexist, sexist, racist, classist, and ableist ideas of nationhood work to create an economy that supports these beliefs. In time, the market reflects social inequalities. It comes as no surprise, then, that most

comics touring the national circuit are heterosexual men.⁵¹ The DC Improv in Washington D.C., where I live, booked four female comics (Sheryl Underwood, Sommore, Aisha Tyler, and Loni Love) in the last two years (August 2008 – August 2010) constituting approximately five percent of their bookings. With some exceptions, I attribute this to the overwhelming majority of folks identifying with a heterosexual male standard because *affirming a male identity bears the greatest incentive and cultural cachet in society*.

Comedy is just one of the many popular cultural forms that offer us a particular view of our cultural history and our own unique position in this nation’s social matrix. Artistic interpretation of women’s lives—whether via performance art, stand-up comedy, theater, or dance—functions to put substance where there is absence, to replace fiction with non-fiction. Women’s visibility in humor production marks a contribution and a disruption, indeed reminds audiences of exclusionary constructions of citizenship, challenging and “transforming the gendered rhetoric of belonging in new ways.”⁵² They are framing life as they know it and in the process exposing their position in the national imaginary; it is cultural work that illumines “yet another dimension of the possibilities, anxieties, and contradictions of cultural citizenship within the modern state.”⁵³ Stand-up comedy is an intentionally humorous

⁵¹ I intentionally do not include White as part of the standard, not because Black men do not experience racism and marginalization, but because Black men in particular have achieved an inordinate amount of success in stand-up comedy compared with their female and queer counterparts. This does not mean that Black men do not experience racism or are not subject to social prescriptions and racialized expectations and stereotypes. Dave Chappelle was extraordinarily successful with his sketch comedy that lampooned stereotypes about African Americans, whereas Wayne Brady, an incredibly talented Black comic performer, struggled to achieve success by performing race neutral comedy.

⁵² May Joseph, “Bodies outside the State: Black British Women Playwrights and the Limits of Citizenship,” in *The Ends of Performance*, eds. Peggy Phelan & Jill Lane (New York & London: New York UP, 1998), 198.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 197.

performative iteration of (national) identity and audiences vocalize affirmation or dissent consonant with dominant constructions of national belonging. It is an exchange between performer and audience, a dialogue signaling acceptance and rejection, and usually predicated on the performer's perceived proximity to the straight male standard.

In *Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show*, Vince Vaughn hits the road for thirty days of consecutive live shows with four up and coming comics—Sebastian Maniscalco, Bret Ernst, Ahmed Ahmed, and John Caparulo—most of whom have achieved feature status in comedy clubs nationwide. In Austin, Texas, one of the many cities on the tour schedule, Sebastian Maniscalco mocks men who wear flip-flops and who order “feminine” drinks, as characterized by fruit juices and garnishes.⁵⁴ Though they laugh at his mockery of men buying wussy beverages, the crowd boos him following the flip-flop joke and he commences to cut that particular segment short so as not to lose the audience entirely. Here he is reinforcing what he sees as gender appropriate foot apparel, an opinion not shared by the majority of those in the audience. Maniscalco employs the strategy of using humor to reference concepts of staid masculinity and to ridicule questionable behaviors that undermine “real” men as macho, caring little for their outward appearance and participating only in consumptive practices acceptable for men (i.e., electronics, cars, tools, etc.). In an interview following that show, he shares that he routinely performs this joke because it has proven successful in the past and with audiences in other cities on the same tour. This joke typically meets with success because it draws from stereotypical

⁵⁴ *Vince Vaughn's Wild West Comedy Show*, DVD. Directed by Ari Sandel (MMVII New Line Cinema Picturehouse Holdings, Inc., 2005).

notions of masculinity circulating in contemporary culture; “[a]nd when a joke bases itself upon a distortion—a ‘stereotype’ perhaps—and gives the lie to the truth so as to win a laugh and stay in favour, we’ve moved away from a comic art and into the world of ‘entertainment’ and ‘success.’”⁵⁵ Jokes emerging from and capitalizing on gender stereotypes and differences are used frequently and continue to be successful, particularly if they make women the butt of the joke.⁵⁶ In my own experience of performing stand-up comedy there are two sure-fire ways to get a laugh: use obscenities and make fun of women. Despite drawing from a well-spring of easily identifiable gender conventions, audience members in Austin did not identify with Maniscalco’s parameters of masculinity as set forth in this joke because it made questionable the masculinity of a number of those in attendance (most likely those men, Maniscalco’s gender truants, wearing flip-flops at the time). In this way, there is a palpable exchange between audience and performer where laughter signals affirmation and negative responses such as booing, hissing or shaking one’s head signals disagreement, disapproval or lack of identification with the comic frame or the fundamental premise of the humorous material. Both the blessing and the curse of live comedy is that not all audiences will respond similarly and the comic must be prepared for this.

While audience responses can be telling about who is included in our shared national imaginary, comic performances themselves reveal the ideologies and discourses constituting national belonging or citizenship and the ways these are

⁵⁵ Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), 22.

⁵⁶ Mary Crawford, “Just Kidding: Gender and Conversational Humor,” in *Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Series in Studies in Gender and Culture, Volume 5, ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 23-37.

expressed—reified, interrupted, and unsettled. The stuff of comedy draws from the everyday lives of its practitioners and from this we can bear witness to the way citizens are marked by race, sexual orientation, gender, class, and ability, all of which inform one’s experiences and constructions of nationhood. For example, Bonnie McFarlane who appeared on Season Two of *Last Comic Standing* and since then has been touring nationally with her now husband Rich Vos (also a comic), has a joke in one of her appearances on *Comedy Central Presents*: “Stop judging people by the color of their skin and judge them by the way they act. And if they act White. Let ‘em stay.”⁵⁷ We laugh because she flipped the script—her opening line bears the promise of tolerance, which is belied by her next sentence. It is humorous because it is unexpected and also because it illumines racist axioms of who does and does not belong. It also points towards the US legacy of extending legal and social rights to racial/ethnic groups most willing to assimilate and comply with White male Western behaviors, norms, and values. Our notions of national belonging are built upon racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, and ableist assumptions of who constitutes the ideal citizen and this is aptly reflected in the circulation of contemporary humorous discourse (i.e., jokes such as McFarlane’s) and discourse about humor production (i.e., the widely read essay by Christopher Hitchens).

Put simply, live audiences populating the comedy clubs across the nation will identify with and affirm the perspectives of the comics whose beliefs and lifestyles reflect mainstream, socially acceptable norms—values shared, condoned, and exhibited by many. Since these dominant ideas and values arise from a mainly White

⁵⁷ Bonnie McFarlane in *Comedy Central Presents* (video recording) (California: Comedy Central, 15 February 2008).

patriarchical epicenter of power (and based on the hiring trends in comedy clubs across the US), we can conclude that the humor emitting from the mouths of men has been and will continue to be highly sought, an economically viable investment, and a safe bet for mixed race and gender audiences who are well trained in what *should* make them laugh. Andy Medhurst writes that “nation construction is also involved in the business of identifying internal others, who are seen by those subscribing to an imagination of national community wedded to closed, fixed and impermeable versions of belonging, as threatening groups that are *on* the inside but must on no account become *of* the inside.”⁵⁸ Critical here is the understanding that comic performers situated as outsiders on the inside are going to struggle to establish mutual points of identification with their audiences and in the process be perceived as less competent or funny—in this case, that would be the ladies and/or minoritarian subjects performing charged humor.

To be clear, I am not arguing that all male comics will be successful and all female comics unsuccessful; in fact, there is evidence contrary to this. Many US female comic performers such Wanda Sykes, Kathy Griffin, Margaret Cho, Chelsea Handler, Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, Ellen Degeneres, Amy Poehler, Molly Shannon, and many more have found national recognition and acclaim. However, when placed in their respective entertainment venues, i.e., national comedy circuits, talk-shows, sitcoms, and variety shows, they are the gender minority. However, I *am* suggesting that success is largely predicated on audiences’ ability to identify with the jester in question and there is a greater likelihood of this when the subjects and topics

⁵⁸ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007), 28-29.

broached are gender neutral or fulfill existing stereotypes about women, e.g., women are high maintenance, nagging, passive, sweet, bitchy, etc. The women humorists garnering a following have done so by either appealing to broad-based niche audiences comprised of like-community members (e.g., Kathy Griffin enjoys a fan base of primarily LGBTQ persons, women, and popular culture enthusiasts, of which she belongs to the latter two and while she is not herself a lesbian, she is very supportive of the LGBTQ community) or because their comedy is non-threatening and while offering a female perspective, seldom focuses on specifically female issues or overtly challenges patriarchy or the status quo (e.g., Sarah Silverman endorses a brand of shock comedy that targets everyone with equal vehemence so as to render any real satire or critique moot).⁵⁹

The promise of comedy is that these challenges can be made in subtle fashions; therefore, it is important to note that many of these women strive to incorporate critiques of patriarchy, gender norms and stereotypes, capitalism, racism, and heterosexism into their comic performances, albeit in ways that do not risk alienating audiences.⁶⁰ By winning Season 6 of *Last Comic Standing*, Iliza Schlesinger

⁵⁹ Russell Peterson in *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* discusses shock comedy in the chapter, “For Whom the Bell Dings,” and makes this argument about Sarah Silverman and the creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone: “Yet most of the ‘edgy’ comedy sold and celebrated as such is as nihilistically ‘neutral’ in its way as the equal-opportunity offender political comedy of the late-night mainstream.” (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 149.

⁶⁰ Margaret Cho, like Kathy Griffin, has achieved and maintained a certain status as female comic icon because she appeals to *several* niche audiences like LGBTQ persons, feminists, liberals/leftists, and intellectuals. Cho pushes the envelope in ways that most televised female comics listed above do not and cannot, simply because her career unfolds onstage and not in front of the camera (unless taping a live show for a new video). In fact, she overtly fights gender stereotypes and has used her comedy to expose Hollywood's preoccupation with beauty standards and White norms. She can do so because of her position *beyond* the night-club circuit; however, the material that made her famous and got her to this point in her career was not her more controversial humor employed now with more gusto and frequency but the ethnic humor she employed as a Korean-American young woman impersonating her first-generation Korean immigrant mother.

demonstrated that women can secure audience identification and success; however, her comedy routinely depicts women as vapid and hyper-feminized, which functions to fulfill pre-existing perceptions audience members may have of women and further enhances the likelihood that audience members will identify, if not with her, then at least her world view. Her own performance of gender, a woman spurning high heels, laughing at her social foibles, and speaking with confidence, often defies the very stereotypes she deploys each time she mimics a female friend or persona on stage. She asserts herself as one of the gang, someone who herself participates in the gendered social customs even as she pokes fun at the social demands she cannot live up to. While her comedy may offer subtle critiques of codes of femininity impossible to achieve and maintain, her performances for the nationally televised show revolved mainly around targeting women as the butt of the joke, the overarching subtext reading: aren't women silly (and if you think I'm funny then you agree)? Her comedy makes it clear that she belongs, and in some fashion endorses dominant beliefs about gender held by the majority of Americans.

For many of us not 'belonging' to the mainstream, humor functions as a way to create community and culture among the marginalized. For instance, feminist humor and lesbian humor "affirms the values, beliefs, and politics of the in-group and forms part of a shared stock of stories and myths that help form, disseminate, and preserve an imagined community."⁶¹ Kate Clinton, a Caucasian lesbian comic whose biting political humor has made her a favorite among liberal and lesbian audiences in alternative performance venues, repeatedly stated at a live performance at Ellington's

⁶¹ Janet Bing and Dana Heller, "How Many Lesbians Does it Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?" *Humor* 16, 2 (2003): 158.

in Austin, Texas: “You create the world; you invite the people in.”⁶² In her case, that world is one comprised of her experiences as a female, as a lesbian, as a European-American and as an intellectual. The problem she and other subordinated comics face is that mainstream audiences, when confronted with the comedy of the marginalized (by virtue of race, sexuality, gender, ability, class, and age), tend to struggle to find common referents and experiences compatible with their own. If the world created is one based on marginalized subjectivities and experience, you can invite people in, but it does not mean they will understand or value (literally, in economic terms) that world. Audiences tend to enjoy themselves more when they can identify with the comic. Unfortunately, when identification is primed as White, heterosexual, and male oriented, women must struggle all the more to be heard and to legitimate their experiences, let alone have them qualify as being humorous.

The same struggle exists for comics producing charged humor or humor that reminds its audience that not everyone is equal. Humor that foregrounds one’s marginality in a way that challenges stereotypes and illumines the history and consequences of one’s exclusion disrupts the illusions of US claims to democracy and meritocracy. This is, perhaps, unsettling for privileged viewers occupying dominant categories of identity, but audience members sharing a similar history of exclusion, scapegoating and exploitation may be compelled to identify; however, this is not a given and even within minoritarian communities, there is greater cultural cachet associated with a male perspective and world view than a female one. At the risk of parsing this out ad nauseam, what this means is that given a male and female comic,

⁶² Kate Clinton (1987) quoted in Linda Pershing, “There’s a Joker in the Menstrual Hut: A Performance Analysis of Comedian Kate Clinton,” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991), 222.

both of whom perform humor enacting cultural citizenship, identification with the male comic still yields the greater incentive.

One of my favorite “bits” I perform addresses the lack of synonyms or slang words circulating for discharge or women’s vaginal fluids. This is in direct contrast with the plethora of synonyms in play for a man’s seminal fluids, i.e., jizz, spooge, Petey’s protein, spunk, etc. I consider this disparity in my stand-up and the way the term itself (associated with the firing of weapons and being released from the hospital) alienates women from their bodies. To improve the situation, I offer the audience my own alternative term for discharge and invite them to use the term as a substitute in the future:

Instead of using the term discharge, I would like to suggest the term ‘panty soda.’ Say it with me now: PANTY SODA! It’s fun, it’s fizzy, it’s *you*. I can’t create this kind of change on my own people. I need your help telling others about panty soda. So, tell your family, neighbors, and friends at Bible study and together we will spread panty soda all over the nation.⁶³

Reactions to this joke vary based on my audience. Performing for LadyFest Ohio, a feminist arts festival, in 2004 for an audience comprised mainly of feminists (male and female alike), this joke brought down the house eliciting cheers, clapping, hooting, and roaring laughter. Performing at the Funny Bone Comedy Club in Columbus, Ohio the joke elicited nervous titters from a smattering of women and some applause from a group of women (without any men) seated at a table in the back of the club. Like Maniscalco’s failed flip-flop joke, I sensed that I was “losing” the audience with this joke and adjusted my set to jokes less particular to the female condition. This joke, by virtue of its subject matter, has nothing to do with men and unless male audience members are willing to imagine otherwise, namely what it

⁶³ Rebecca Krefting, “Discharge,” Original material written and first performed spring 2002.

might be like to be a woman, to occupy a body pathologized and considered substandard by Western medicine, there is little pleasurable yield from this joke other than the humorous term itself: panty soda. When there is no point of reference, listeners can detach, which often leads to judgment and alienation, a phenomenon I argue is more likely to occur during the performance of a female comic. Women and men are conditioned to perceive male experience as the norm or template genera and thus when women take the stage and implicitly request or require your attention and/or identification with female experiences, many find themselves experiencing a kind of distancing, confusion, or simply an ambivalence towards this performance of “Otherness” or what Joanne Gilbert calls a “performance of marginality.”⁶⁴ This might explain why Christopher Hitchens struggles with such a myopic and sexist view of what constitutes the humorous. His diatribe warrants closer examination in order to understand the fundamental flaws of his claims as well as the public response it elicited from fellow journalist, Alessandra Stanley.

Hitchens Revisited

Christopher Hitchens draws from diverse sources to prop up his argument that women are innately not as funny as men, including the similarly minded early twentieth century print journalist H.L. Mencken and women contemporaries in the field of literary humor production like Nora Ephron (not actually quoted) and Fran Liebowitz, whose comments contribute less to any premise or argument he makes and more to the sexist conditions under which opinions like his can thrive and generate support. Ephron and Liebowitz believe that we live in and abide by male cultural

⁶⁴ Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, xviii.

values that allow for men to be funny (read: aggressive) and women to be pretty (read: submissive). Therefore, and this is Hitchens argument not theirs, gender performances running counter to this like Roseanne Barr and other female comics who “are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three” are either tacky, unladylike or quite simply, not funny.⁶⁵ He also draws heavily and quotes at length from a poem by Rudyard Kipling whose arrogant imperialist attitude does a remarkable job of legitimating similar sentiments in the sweeping generalizations, objectifying remarks, and essentialist comments made by Hitchens throughout. Hitchens ingratiatingly pays mock deference to women’s superiority, on account that they can bear children, endorsing biologicistic arguments with religious inflected language such as characterizing maternity as a “higher calling.”⁶⁶

The bulwark of his more essentialist claims relied on one Stanford study that found that when confronted with humorous material, in this case cartoons, women demonstrated more activity in some brain regions (specifically the left prefrontal cortex) than men, “suggesting a greater emphasis on language and executive processing in women.” Further, they found that women could identify the “unfunny” faster than men and since they tended to have lower expectations for the cartoon functioning as humorous, “they were more pleased about it.”⁶⁷ Hitchens’ analysis of the study is summarized as: “Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine?”⁶⁸ That women are quick to recognize when a joke is not funny, which in

⁶⁵ Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.”

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dr. Allan Reiss quoted in Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.”

⁶⁸ Ibid.

many cases means that it just made ‘her’ the object of the joke, that they have a higher order of processing and functioning, and are imbricated in a legacy of misuse and abuse that may prime their suspicion of anything shoved in their face and declared “hilarious,” speaks less to their inabilities than to their capacity for discerning judgment.⁶⁹

In April 2008, Christopher Hitchens’ invectives against lady humorists were countered in an essay by Alessandra Stanley paired with a *Vanity Fair* cover of female comedy greats including Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, and Amy Poehler. The magazine cover invites you to consider this article in contrast to/with the Hitchens essay published over a year ago and Stanley references Hitchens’ essay repeatedly throughout. Unfortunately, by doing so, she locks herself into an essentialist and tautological debate that make her earnest attempts to unseat his biases appear as feeble as her lengthy and somewhat inaccurate contemplation of changing beauty standards for women in the comedy industry.

Alessandra Stanley acknowledges that early-to-mid twentieth century female jokesters were attractive but notes that their comedy routines required them to be ‘ugly,’ that “they couldn’t be funny if they were pretty,” which prompted them to don outrageous costumes and wigs to achieve the comic effect.⁷⁰ She then launches into the beauty and sex appeal of contemporary women’s comic performers, disregarding a number of important items. One, that the women selected for this issue were and are considered the (mainly White) belles of comedy, while other equally notable female

⁶⁹ Dr. Allan L. Reiss, the Stanford University researcher cited by Christopher Hitchens, wrote a letter to the editor protesting that his study was misinterpreted and misused by Hitchens. See Allan L. Reiss, “The Humor Gap.” *Vanity Fair* (3 March 2008),

http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/hitchens_letters200804

⁷⁰ Alessandra Stanley, “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” *Vanity Fair*, no. 572 (April 2008), 185.

comics were not included, presumably because in some way they do not fit the White standards of beauty perpetuated by the media (i.e., Ellen Degeneres, Kathy Griffin, Paula Poundstone, Rosie O'Donnell, Mo'Nique Hicks, Kathleen Madigan, Roseanne Barr, Kathy Najimy, Julie Goldman, Kate Clinton, Judy Gold, Whoopi Goldberg, Laura Hayes, Tig Notaro, Lily Tomlin, etc.). Second, she ignores the evidence that these women do frequently alter their appearances and not necessarily for the better, for comic effects. *Saturday Night Live*, a live sketch comedy show televised weekly and also the training ground to a third of the women featured in the photo shoot, is chock full of sketches requiring its lady performers (several of whom were selected for the photo spread) to transform into a myriad of other characters more unseemly than sexy such as a long-time resident of a trailer park or a prepubescent teen with questionable social skills and a speech impediment.

Not to be outdone and certainly unable to allow Alessandra Stanley the final word on the matter, Christopher Hitchens responded to Stanley in a follow-up essay: "Why Women Still Don't Get It" posted exclusively to *Vanity Fair's* website.⁷¹ The second essay advances a tired reiteration of the first as equally rife with contradictions and misogynistic language that either turns women (including his colleague Alessandra Stanley) into vampish sex kittens or castrating bitches. He reduces Stanley's essay to a flirtatious overture, writing: "Oh Alessandra, oh angel, if you wanted a giggle or even a cackle, you only had to call me." And in the tradition of great bombasts, he gloats that Stanley's essay coupled with a layout of sexy funny ladies is precisely what he intended: "Did I never tell you this was my Plan A, and was my deepest-laid

⁷¹ Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Still Don't Get It," *Vanity Fair* (3 March 2008), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/hitchens200804>.

scheme all along? I forgive you for being so slow to see my little joke because—ah well, just because.”⁷²

This last line casting Alessandra Stanley as simple-minded or naive is not meant just for her. In fact, he is alluding to the Stanford study and the erroneously contrived “scientific” evidence proffered in his first essay. He has to forgive her because her sex excludes her from being able to see his “joke.” Every woman becomes the butt of this joke, though we may not even know it, and though we may be complicit and laugh along with it. If there truly existed substantial evidence and objective data (whatever that is) indicating that women are biologically and genetically inferior in the realm of humor production, I would not waste my time or yours concerning myself with these matters. But I am loathe to allow anyone to invoke biological determinism for what is and always has been culturally determined. The premise of Hitchens’ diatribe is hardly original; he follows in the footsteps of other notables using science and genetics to support their racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and heterosexist agendas. Fortunately, women have the advantage in this day and age of being in a position to combat these kinds of views and it is imperative that they do so. For this, we should applaud Alessandra Stanley and the other pundits, scholars, and comic performers who argue, demonstrate, and perform otherwise.

Conclusion

*Cultural citizenship is not only about rights to produce and consume symbolic goods and services but also an intervention in this identity work. It is not only about redistributive justice concerning cultural capital but also about recognition and valorization of a plurality of meanings and representations.*⁷³

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood, *Citizenship & Identity* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999), 152.

Engin Isin and Patricia Wood (quoted above) recognize the need for cultural practices enacting cultural citizenship. Expressions of cultural citizenship incite consumers to invest the same cultural capital in these productions of cultural citizenship as are given “ideal” citizens. As I argue throughout, audiences will identify with performers representative of the most ideal or desirable citizens, i.e., those comfortably situated within the dominant culture and bearing the privileges of not only legal but social inclusion, namely White, male, heterosexual, able bodies, eighteen years or older. While stand-up comedy may appear an innocuous form of entertainment, successful performers often reflect the status quo. Our beliefs about ideal members of the polity influence who we support with our time, energy, and money. It is most advantageous to understand and identify with those with the most access to privilege and power. This phenomenon of the cultural economy, at least for the time being, ensures that White, male, heterosexual, Christian comics will elicit the laughter necessary for continued advancement in the business of humor production. Since many (if not most) women comics in some way produce charged humor, this may also explain why women comics are not perceived to be as funny as men. As long as women perform humor that reveals their second-class status, builds community or advocates on behalf of women or any other minoritarian community, they will elicit the same tepid public response because not only is there no incentive to buy into women’s points of view but any point of view that calls into question the male ideal or the category of the ideal citizen.

There have been many outstanding male comics who are Jewish, gay, differently abled, and/or people of color, e.g., Lenny Bruce, Josh Blue, Richard Pryor, Bill

Cosby, Mort Sahl, Eddie Murphy, Dick Gregory, Eddie Izzard, etc. The history of stand-up comedy is full of exceptions and it is simply inaccurate to say that only White dudes can get a break and achieve success. However, any analysis of the schedules for headliners in the mainstream comedy-club-circuits reveal that White and Black men outnumber their Arab, American Indian, Latino and Asian male counterparts and Christian male comics are more prevalent than their Jewish, Muslim and Hindu male counterparts. Just as prisoner demographics are not representative of the nation's demographics, comics' demographics are not either. In main, though, what is most important to recognize is that despite occupying a marginalized subject position like being a Jewish male, a Black male, etc. that being male trumps the subordinated subject position, still making them more ideal candidates for identification and yielding greater social/cultural capital than women. *Being White, Christian, able-bodied, and/or straight is less predictive of success than is being male.*

Women, try as they might, will continue to flounder when placed next to their male counterparts as will queer comics alongside heterosexual comics, disabled comics alongside able-bodied comics, and comics of color alongside White comics. There will be exceptions to this rule but for the most part those exceptions will be minoritarian comics who opt not to discuss or bring their marginality to the forefront such as Ellen Degeneres who has gained national adoration for her quirky, girl-next-door brand of observational humor. These exceptions will be the fodder for the naysayers (like Christopher Hitchens) as they argue either that anyone can succeed in stand-up if they work hard enough or that unequal success between men and women

is merely a product of genetic encoding or biology. Both arguments are problematic, the former invoking the myth of meritocracy and placing the blame on the individual for lack of success and the latter making moot any possibility for equity among male and female comic performers. Both are equally strategic and safe arguments to make because neither holds the people or audiences responsible for their lack of desire or willingness to identify and collude with women's comic perspectives, which in turn dictates their success in the business of stand-up performance. Abby Paige echoes this in her article "Laugh Trap," which opens and closes by taking to task the arguments proffered by Hitchens in *Vanity Fair*. She concludes the article writing:

Great comedians are critical thinkers and deep feelers, and these days that may be precisely why the current crop of female ones are so threatening to so many: They are smart, they have a microphone and they are not afraid of you. In a sense, Hitchens was right: Women are too smart, powerful, and authoritative to be funny. He was just looking in the wrong direction for a fuller explanation. If you want to know why women aren't funny—or why they shouldn't throw their heads back and laugh—don't look toward the stage, but to the audience.⁷⁴

The audience, sometimes contained in a physical space but more often broadcast widely to a national audience or community, determines who is funny and this audience is shaped by the *social relations and material conditions* specific to this historical moment.

In sum, Christopher Hitchens presents an argument for which there is no debate, at least on his terms. In the face of such myopia Alessandra Stanley can do little other than point to the history of women's disenfranchisement from the industry of humor production and pay homage to the small but growing army of women jokesters active in the world of comedy today. Replacing biological determinisms, which have the

⁷⁴ Abby Paige, "Laugh Trap," *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Issue 41 (fall 08): 37.

unfortunate history of reflecting whichever cultural attitudes are in mode, with cultural determinisms, places this debate back into the actual realm responsible for women's *perceived* ineptitude in comic performance compared to men. One reader, commenting on Emily Wilson's article "Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?" profoundly states: "None of us can 'decide' to find something/ someone funny-- it's a primal, involuntary response we can't control. We can only hope that subsequent generations provide us funny women and receptive audiences NOT so entrenched in the power bullshit of our culture's outmoded past."⁷⁵ Recognizing the influence of culture in the economy of humor and in determining consumption of humor also opens the door for change, the possibility that the cultural economy will shift over time, making charged humor and/or women's ideas and perspectives profitable investments for audiences and in turn profitable investments for booking agents and comedy club owners. In the words of Shaun Breidbart, "[c]omedy is a business; it runs on money. Your money is your vote. Go out and vote."⁷⁶ While I cannot say that it pleases me, the extent to which capital—material, social, and cultural—dictates success and opportunity, the way it determines laughter in the final instance, I can say with a certain amount of confidence that it explains the question of why men are (perceived to be) funnier than women.

⁷⁵ Comments to "Are Men Threatened by Funny Women?", op.cit.

⁷⁶ Shaun Breidbart, "The Humor Gap," *Vanity Fair* (3 March 2008), http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/04/hitchens_letters200804.

Chapter 4: Guffaws of Protest: Towards a Queer(ful) Intersectional Politics

Not since the days of segregation has a whole community faced constitutional amendments branding them as non-citizens... Even before the latest offensive on our rights, LGBT people were not citizens in this country. Citizens, by definition, have equal legal rights with others. Not just with respect to marry, but in employment, housing and public accommodations, and increasingly, adoptions, access to medical care and anything else the religious right can dream up, we are not citizens.

—Robin Tyler and Andy Thayer¹

At the time of writing, I am weeks away from not being able to file joint taxes with my partner of twelve years and just a few months away from having to find my own health insurance once I am no longer covered by my educational institution because my partner's employer does not offer domestic partnership benefits. This weekend I will fill out legal documents so a lawyer can draft a durable power of attorney and a medical directive that protects us and our assets in the state of Maryland should one of us fall ill or pass away. A marriage certificate would grant us all these rights and many more, automatically. Protecting ourselves as a lesbian couple is costly—in time, money, and energy—and the extra work and hassle are a tacit reminder that this would all be a lot easier if we were just normal, “straight” like everyone else. After all, if we weren't different, then we wouldn't feel like second-class citizens in the first place. Latino Cultural Studies Working Group (LCSWG) members posit that while some citizens may be citizens in the legal sense, they do not feel incorporated into the national imaginary and on some level understand that compared to their privileged brothers and sisters, they function as second-class

¹ Robin Tyler and Andy Thayer, “The ‘Gay Marriage’ Struggle: What’s at Stake & How Can We Win?” in *Defending Same-Sex Marriage* Volume III, eds. Martin Dupuis & William A. Thompson (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 19.

citizens. The experience of second-class citizenship felt by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) persons is the catalyst for using cultural practices to enact cultural citizenship to improve media representations and make advances in civil rights.

Cultural practices like stand-up comedy emerge as an expression of cultural citizenship. Sometimes this is subtle as when Egyptian American Muslim comic Ahmed Ahmed tells the following joke, the subtext of which clearly identifies those experiencing a second-class citizenship (all for different reasons):

I read a statistic on CBS.com that said right after September 11th, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims went up over a thousand percent, right after September 11th, which apparently, check this out, which apparently still puts Arabs in 4th place behind Blacks, gays, and Jews. It's true. So what do we have to do? [*big break of laughter*]. ... We want to be number one in something!²

Other times it can be more overt as when Jewish, lesbian comic Robin Tyler positions herself as the formerly powerless and newly empowered woman who will fight for recognition and inclusion as a woman and as a “dyke.”

The women's liberation movement has given us a new word called assertive, right. Assertion is taking your own power. Aggression is taking power over others. I'm not assertive, I'm aggressive. I intend to take power from the people who took power from me. So, I am aggressive. And it's better to be aggressive than repressive! But every time a woman is aggressive, self-confident, her own person, they call her a dyke. So, I think it's a compliment, don't you?³

Robin Tyler combines cultural work and legal advocacy to develop interventionist tactics aimed at queer equality and resulting in legislative changes and greater public acceptance for LGBTQ persons.

² *The Arab American Comedy Tour*, DVD. Videography by Oscar Films (Seattle and Dearborn, Michigan: Arab Film Distribution, 2006).

³ Robin Tyler, *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (University of New Mexico, Albuquerque: Olivia Records, 1979). An original LP recording is available at the June Mazer Lesbian Archives.

Appeals for queer equality are predicated on two claims. First, the American claim to and promise of freedom and second, a claim to equality and “what it means to be gay or lesbian” (e.g., essentialist arguments have been very effective because they line up with the US ideology that people have a right to be who they are).⁴ Main strategies employed by outsiders seeking to become a part of the body politic are assimilation and visibility. Boosting cultural visibility is essential and empowering, but there is always the concern of who is visible or who becomes representative of the queer community. Furthermore, history indicates that cultural visibility strategies alone cannot and will not result in equal civil liberties and rights for the queer community. Assimilation combats marginalization but has been criticized for asking its proponents to adopt the values of the dominant culture. This is the primary strategy of the “new gay visibility” movement that seeks to assimilate LGBTQ persons by emphasizing their normalcy. Two major flaws accompany this strategy; one is that we cannot underestimate the vociferous nature—ideological and visceral—of its opponents and second, that any move to assimilate strengthens existing gender, sexual, and kinship binaries, which exclude others from the fold, in this case sexual minorities on the fringes and those most likely the most stigmatized, even by LGBTQ persons.⁵

The question at hand is how strategies should be enacted to confer rights without being exclusive to any group or without effacing cultural differences. It is not that either set of strategies—assimilation or visibility—is wholly unsuccessful, but that in most cases they are deployed to the exclusion of the other and both have

⁴ Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 2001), 141.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

consequences that do not call into question citizenship as it is currently understood. When it comes to the strategy of cultural visibility, questions are raised as to whether this strategy aimed at heightening the visibility of LGBTQ persons does anything to actually change their real material existence or legal rights. Some scholars maintain that we need a “thorough queering of public culture,” rather a move towards the queering of citizenship, altering its infrastructure and effectively broadening citizenship to be more inclusive and to achieve the goals of inclusion.⁶ This means that cultural visibility, while less effective if pursued as the only course of intervention, is essential to and should be deployed in concert with the assimilationist strategies such as legal protections and legislation conferring the same rights held by heterosexuals. As a comic performer, Robin Tyler aims to heighten LGBTQ visibility and as an activist she uses radical tactics to champion civil rights for LGBTQ persons.

Scholars and activists working within the gay civil rights movement examine terms of citizenship specific to the LGBTQ community, attempting to answer the question of what full inclusion should look like and the inroads required to achieve this. In this chapter, I argue that Robin Tyler employs a number of tactics⁷ enacting cultural citizenship, among them humor. In *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations*, Jane Ward demonstrates that activists can exemplify a queer intersectional politics or “an intersectional politics that struggles for racial,

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ I will be using the terms “strategies” and “tactics” in collusion with Michel de Certeau, who distinguishes between them, linking strategies to institutional practices and arguing that individuals use tactics to negotiate and define their lives in relation to institutional powers. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

gender, class, and sexual diversity while resisting the institutional forces that seek to contain and normalize differences or reduce them to their use value.”⁸ As a pioneer in the entertainment industry and in the gay liberation movement, Robin Tyler employs useful tactics for civic and cultural intervention, or queer(ful) intersectional politics that challenges and transforms the meanings of citizenship to incorporate LGBTQ dynamism rather than downplaying it. There are a handful of activist comics performing and working in the US right now who serve up queer(ful) intersectional politics or a politics that seeks cultural recognition without muting diversity, like Tyler—such as Margaret Cho, Kate Clinton, Karen Williams, and Rene Hicks. Unlike most of them, Tyler’s career spans four decades of engagement with social movements; and through her comedy and activism you can track shifts in these movements. Additionally, no other comic is as pro-active as Tyler on both cultural and legal fronts.

Scholars examining the gay civil rights movement offer compelling arguments and critiques of the movement. In this chapter, I will augment my arguments and frame Robin Tyler’s advocacy work with some of this scholarship such as Shane Phelan’s treatise on queer citizenship, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship*. Phelan suggests that the best means of seeing concrete change in the ways citizenship is conceived and legally framed is to challenge ideas of who belongs and who does not on *cultural and legal* fronts. I will draw from Phelan, Jane Ward and others to offer additional political and historical context to the

⁸ Jane Ward, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt UP, 2008), 136.

life and career of Robin Tyler and the tactics she employs to boost cultural visibility and secure legal inclusion.

This is an attempt to offer a model for how one or many can together employ multiple tactics that transform public opinion and public policy. My sources include interviews, archival research, Robin Tyler's performances, and scholarship on the gay civil rights movement. The first section introduces Tyler—her personal life, political sensibilities, and career as both stand-up comic and LGBTQ activist. Using Tyler's advocacy work and some key scholarship, I chart shifts in the gay civil rights movement over the course of forty years, including her pivotal role in the marriage equality movement. Arguing that Tyler's body of work exemplifies a queer(ful) intersectional politics, this is an examination of a number of tactics, including humor, employed to enact cultural citizenship. It is about an activist and performer and the history of a movement through the tactics she employs.

*Presenting: Robin Tyler*⁹

We're not a cute comedy team... We are a revolutionary comedy team. We came here to educate, [and] to entertain.
—Robin Tyler¹⁰

⁹ There are a number of articles ranging in length and detail about the life and career of Robin Tyler, which include: Betsy Borns, *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy* (NY, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1987), 303; Ed Karvoski Jr., *A Funny Time to be Gay* (NY, NY: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), 23-28; Barbara J. Love (ed.), *Feminists Who Changed America: 1963-1975* (Champaign, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 2006); Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Women in Comedy: The Funny Ladies from the Turn of the Century to the Present* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1986), 419-423; an interview with Robin Tyler by Laura Post, "Robin Tyler," in *Revolutionary Laughter: The World of Women Comics*, ed. Roz Warren (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1995), 247-253. For the most comprehensive biographies of Robin Tyler, see Paul D. Cain, *Leading the Parade: Conversations with America's Most Influential Lesbians and Gay Men* (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2002), 131-141 and Val Edwards, "Robin Tyler: Comic in Contradiction," *Body Politic* (1979): 21-23. Details about her life were corroborated via personal interview, autobiographical solo performances, her resumes for activism and performance, as well as primary documents and sources such as newspaper and magazine articles referencing her activities and career, original recordings of performances, speeches, and workshops.

Robin Tyler's life and career as a performer and activist extends beyond her. Her vantage, her battles, her triumphs are the stuff of history, the history of the gay civil rights movement in the US. Seldom does any social movement move forward with ease and without dissension in the ranks. Everyone has different ideas of what success looks like and the strategies most useful for achieving it. Tyler's philosophy has always been to make progress and move forward and she has little patience for other individuals and organizations profiting from the community without yielding any results. Her strong opinions and willingness to voice them no matter how unpopular may be partly to blame for her tumultuous relationship with the movement. Over the course of forty years on the front lines of the gay liberation movement, now the gay civil rights movement, she has devised and employed a great number of tactics for educating the public about LGBTQ issues, such as providing a safe space for women to gather and celebrate their diversity and for ending the public defamation of LGBTQ persons in the media. She has rallied support for various LGBTQ causes and the marriage equality movement in California.¹¹

Robin Tyler was born Arlene Maxine Chernick on April 8, 1942. Her parents owned a pet store and raised their family in "farm country" in Winnipeg, Manitoba,

¹⁰ I obtained a copy of this article from Robin Tyler, and noted that in this particular passage she had the word "not" crossed out and replaced with "and" so the quote would read as it does above. It is unclear whether she was misquoted or whether it was a mistake made by Robin Tyler when being asked to comment for this piece. Her performances and engagement with the public indicate that she does seek to *educate and entertain*. The quote was taken from a magazine article whose author is unknown: "Gay Lib blues for college prexy," *The Advocate* December 20, 1972. Part of Robin Tyler's personal memorabilia.

¹¹ While much of the literature refers to the LGBT or GLBT community, I intentionally add the 'Q,' denoting 'queer,' to this acronym in order to be inclusive of those identifying as queer—be that for political, sexual, or other reasons.

Canada.¹² Her grandparents on her mother's side were Russian Jews who migrated to Canada after getting married. In her own words, "My grandmother ended up becoming a religious fanatic and dying in a mental institution. Now my mother, who was always trying to be thin all her life...became an amphetamine psychotic trying to lose weight."¹³ On her father's side, Tyler shares that while she is unsure of the circumstances or details of the event, she did learn that her grandfather killed her grandmother but does not provide details of when or how this occurred. She professes having a penchant for the dramatic at an early age and by the age of eleven was performing professionally at the Manitoba Theater Center. At the age of 16 she was cognizant of her lesbian desires and had stopped dating boys. In her teen years, she became friends with Terry, a young gay Ukrainian. Without realizing it at the time, she and Terry—two strong—held the first gay civil rights demonstration in Canada in 1959 by standing on street corners and holding up signs saying: "Gay is Good!" Passersby thought 'gay' meant happy and some even stopped to give them money.¹⁴ Concerned that she was not taking an active interest in men, her parents sent her to study at the Banff School of Fine Arts.

As a Canadian citizen she had access to the dramatic arts, which, in her own estimation, influenced her desire to be a performer. She says:

I was raised under socialism in Manitoba, and this affected me to the extent of I got to go to theater school for free...The reason they call opera and all those other things the high arts—opera and symphonies—it's because of the high price. But we got to go to symphonies and operas and be very educated culturally because it was free in Manitoba.¹⁵

¹² Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

¹³ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*, DVD (L.A., California: ACME Comedy Theatre, 10th February 2007). [Work Film]

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

She came out as a lesbian in Winnipeg at a time when there existed little understanding or tolerance for LGBTQ persons. In order to pursue show business and meet other out LGBTQ persons, she moved to New York City at the age of twenty and began training at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. Here, she changed her name to Robin Tyler, a legal change prompted, if not inspired, by an article written by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review*, a publication by the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights organization in the US.¹⁶ Their message urging lesbians to become politically active and move to urban centers spurred her desire to assume a personal moniker reflecting her burgeoning activist sensibility, which she channeled into her performances—be they music, comedy, or female impersonation.¹⁷

Just working at the 82 Club and having the police chase me, thinking I was a, you know, a drag queen, politicized me. And, I never knew about segregation, nobody ever talked about it, so I used to go to the park in New York and hear people talk about civil rights and about Black civil rights in the 60s and, this was like [*gestures wide with hands*] amazing to me...And, so I just became politicized by being chased by the cops, by being arrested for impersonation, by going to the park and hearing Black civil rights speakers.¹⁸

While attending the New York Drag Ball put on by the Imperial Court at Manhattan Center, she was arrested for female impersonation. As she recalls, the police assumed she was a man and “they took me to jail and all the queens were saying, ‘She’s a girl!’ And so they allowed me one phone call. I called the *New York Post*.”¹⁹ The headlines the next day read: “Cops Grab 44 in Dresses—And a Real Girl in Slacks.”

¹⁶ Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon met and began dating in 1952. Together, they founded the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) and remained active in the fight for gay-rights. Del Martin passed away August 27, 2008. She and Phyllis had been together over 56 years. DOB published *The Ladder: A Lesbian Review* from 1956-1972. The exact issue that Tyler is referring to is unknown though it is most likely an issue published in the years 1960-1962.

¹⁷ Cain, *Leading the Parade*, 132.

¹⁸ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The article, written by Alfred T. Hendricks, details the raid on the gala and the ensuing confusion leading to the arrest of a “real girl.”²⁰ The city filed charges against all forty-four men—six for indecent exposure and thirty-eight for masquerading. After being arrested for female impersonation, Tyler began performing professionally in drag under the pseudonym Stacey Morgan and often as Judy Garland.

Her political sensibilities infused her performance work, particularly when she paired up with the “very famous high-fashion model,” Pat Harrison, who became her partner on-stage and off.²¹ Afraid of the consequences of representing two out lesbians, their agents advised them to bill themselves as sisters, Robin and Rachel Tyler. In their earlier work they performed using mainly self-deprecating humor, which was a common style of humor production used by women comics such as Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers during this time. They soon rejected self-deprecating humor instead opting to satirize oppressive institutions.

Sexist jokes were the mainstay of the profession, and women comics were expected to make themselves, as women, the brunt of their own jokes—witness Phyllis Diller. “But we wouldn’t be self-deprecating,” says Robin, “and at first we weren’t funny. Then all of a sudden feminism came along. In essence what we did then is now called the new women’s humour, a humour which finally gave women the opportunity to make not themselves the brunt of the jokes, but rather the society that was oppressing them.”²²

Hearing that they could make \$220 a week per person performing overseas for the troops, in 1972 the duo auditioned and were invited on a USO tour to Vietnam (and later to Bangkok) to entertain the troops. Few female entertainers were booked for

²⁰ Alfred T. Hendricks, “Cops Grab 44 in Dresses—And a Real Girl in Slacks,” *New York Post*, Sunday, October 28, 1962.

²¹ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

²² Robin Tyler quoted in Val Edwards, “Robin Tyler: Comic in Contradiction,” *Body Politic* (1979): 22.

this tour and Tyler and Harrison may not have been had they auditioned as comics. In fact, Tyler and Harrison, who had since changed their names from Robin and Rachel Tyler to Harrison & Tyler, billed themselves as singers rather than comics so it came as a surprise to their audiences to see them really doing more comic entertaining and as the tour progressed, inserting anti-war material into their sets.

It's only as we started to play in Vietnam that we started to make comments on what was happening [with the war] and then we really started to do comedy in Vietnam—to the point of, they wanted to throw us out. But the soldiers loved us, you know, because we were doing anti-war material. We didn't even know it, it's not like we came from an anti-war position. It's when you see war close-up, nobody can be pro-war.²³

Although they “didn't go for any political reasons,” the experience politicized them and when they returned they continued to do anti-war and became very popular in the anti-war movement, “playing all the free anti-war demonstrations.”²⁴ Before returning home from the USO tour, Tyler accidentally overheard and captured on tape a commanding officer disclosing that the US had begun bombing Cambodia, an international news item that the government failed to disclose to the media. When she returned home, she called the *Los Angeles Times* to tell them about this breaking story, offering the tape as evidence. Hours later a CIA agent showed up at her doorstep demanding the tape. Fortunately, she made duplicates and hoping for a better response, she called the *Los Angeles Free Press*, who broke the story the following day.²⁵

Their performances before and after the USO tour already incorporated other pressing social issues of the time. Together they put out two LPs of radical feminist

²³ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

²⁴ Robin Tyler in Pat Harrison and Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008

²⁵ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (2007), op.cit.

sketch comedy: *Try It, You'll Like It* (1971)²⁶ and *Wonder Woman* (1973),²⁷ touring universities and colleges around the country in the early 1970s, interrogating issues of sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism and inciting audience members to think and act differently about civil rights and equality for women, people of color, and LGBTQ persons. The first two minutes of their act situates them as lesbians and feminists, a move that did not win them additional fans or venues in which to perform:

Robin: Who out there thinks we're strange huh? How many out there think we may be "you know what?" Anybody? It's not true. No, it's not true. It so happens that Patty and I met in a very usual way.

Pat: Yeah, I was driving the truck and she was loading it.

Robin: Cut that out, cut that out. Most of you who know about us know that Patty and I happen to be feminists...

Pat: And that's not a hygiene deodorant.

Robin: What it means is that we believe in the women's liberation movement. Now, how many of you brothers and sisters out there believe in the women's liberation movement.

Pat: You know people have the wrong idea about women's liberation. They really do. All it means is that women want to get out of the kitchen and back on the streets where they belong!

Robin: Back on the streets, organizing, marching, and protesting. Now, of course, the question that we get asked the most is what made you personally become feminist.

Pat: Well, we were born women...

Robin: Yeah, that helped.²⁸

²⁶ Pat Harrison and Robin Tyler, *Try It You'll Like It*, LP (USA: Dore Records, 1971). I have yet to locate a copy of this LP or hear its contents.

²⁷ Pat Harrison and Robin Tyler, *Wonder Women*, LP (USA: 20th Century, 1973).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In their acts, they donned characters and personas to reveal the sexism in advertising and education, wage inequalities, gendered double-standards, and homophobia.

Looking back on that period of performing with her then-lover Pat Harrison, Robin says: “We took all of the jokes that had ever been done on women and we did them on men. And when a man jokes about a woman it’s called funny but when a woman does jokes on men it’s called anti-male.”²⁹

Robin Tyler began performing independently as a comic on the West Coast in the mid-seventies. No stranger to the entertainment industry or successful techniques for comic performance, she quickly made a name for herself, releasing *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979),³⁰ “which was the first openly gay or lesbian comedy album.”³¹ Stepping out on her own and learning to develop her own comedy stylings, Tyler had to learn to shift from the straight woman (as she was when performing with Pat Harrison) to deliver her own punch lines. Using her own life as backdrop and narrative for her jokes, her first album demonstrates her passion for exposing social ills and inequalities, the sexism inherent in the English language, and the limitations of assigning roles and rules to expressions of gender identity. As these examples indicate, her comedy is first and foremost unapologetically feminist and pro-woman.

My mother delivered me. They’re always saying doctors deliver our babies.
Doctors don’t deliver our babies. Doctors receive them, WE deliver them!

Besides, women don’t have breakdowns, we have breakthroughs. We just get
in touch with our anger, right?

²⁹ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (2007), op.cit.

³⁰ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979), op.cit.

³¹ Robin Tyler gave me a copy of her personal resumes: activism and performance, which in many instances contains descriptions of events and activities. Here I have taken direct passages from her biographical sketches.

Alright now, come on guys. Let's not get insecure about this kind of material. Anytime you're insecure. Just do crotch-check, it'll still be there. I mean we've been listening to this tits and ass jokes for sixty years guys... you're not going to pull the foreskin over our eyes!³²

This album borrowed from earlier jokes written for her duo comic performances and while very funny at times, overall it leans to the didactic as she uses the stage to broadcast radical feminist beliefs. Robin, whose life indicates that she was always an activist in her own right, co-opts the cultural practice of stand-up comedy to gain ground and followers for the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement. Using comedy as a window dressing for pointed social critique, she, like others taking this tack in stand-up comedy, did not get picked up by major networks or launched into the mainstream. She elicits positive responses such as cheers, clapping, whistling, and laughter as much for her punchlines as for stating beliefs with which audience members agree.

I believe in wages for housework. I believe that women who work in the house, women that raise children, people that raise children should get paid by the government for raising those children... There's no such thing as welfare. We're not giving anybody welfare, we're paying people to do a very hard job to raise those children [*hoots and hollers*]. The only thing wrong with it is that we're underpaid; now that's all that's wrong with it [*clapping and cheers*]!³³

There is no hidden joke in the above passage and no laughter either. It was a statement made about our sexist wage economy, an attack on the stigmatization of welfare recipients, and a challenge to change the way we think about and legislate public assistance. However, this was hardly the kind of dogma likely to gain

³² *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979), op.cit.

³³ *Ibid.*

popularity with the same American public ushering in neoliberal policy and legislation under Ronald Reagan's administration.³⁴

Following the release of this album Robin Tyler toured clubs and universities as a lesbian comic and “appeared on the *1st Annual Funny Women's Show on Showtime* in 1979, hosted by Phyllis Diller, during which she did openly lesbian material, becoming the first openly gay or lesbian comic on national television.”³⁵ Her second solo comedy album *Just Kidding* (1985)³⁶ is, as her first was, a humorous indictment of bigotry, homophobia, and Christianity. She used her notoriety as comic performer to buoy her move into a full-time career as an advocate for social justice, mostly related to gay and lesbian rights. Anita Bryant, a well-known singer, led a successful campaign in Dade County, Florida to repeal an ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexuality and pursued similar campaigns in St. Paul, Minnesota, Wichita, Kansas, and Eugene, Oregon. In an effort to counter Bryant's gay rights opposition, in April 1978 Tyler called for the first National Gay March on Washington while she was performing in a St. Paul, Minnesota benefit for the St. Paul Citizens for Human Rights. The show was intended to raise money to “prevent the repeal of the ordinance in St. Paul which protects people from discrimination on the basis of sexual or affectional

³⁴ Lisa Duggan writes in *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* that “Beginning with the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency and throughout the 1980s, the overall direction of redistribution of many kinds of resources, in the U.S. and around the world, has been upward – toward greater concentration among fewer hands at the very top of an increasingly steep pyramid.” She argues that policies of redistribution downwards were available, albeit limited, during the reign of the welfare state, a model shaped during the 1930s and on its way out by the late 1970s. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), x.

³⁵ Tyler, “Resume,” op.cit.

³⁶ Robin Tyler, *Just Kidding*, LP (Southern Women's Music and Comedy Festival, Camp Coleman, Cleveland, Georgia: Harrison & Tyler Productions, 1985). Original LP available at the June Mazer Lesbian Archives.

preference.”³⁷ A planning committee convened the following day to begin organizing the march. Newly elected City Supervisor of San Francisco Harvey Milk called Tyler to let her know that a march was unnecessary. He was elected and for all intents and purposes this battle was won. Tyler disagreed and maintained that the march was essential to rallying support for policy changes giving LGBTQ persons protection and civil rights. She reports that with the help of one of his aides, Cleve Jones, Milk became convinced of the importance of this effort and soon after joined in to lead the march. Harvey Milk was assassinated before the march took place on October 14, 1979 and in many ways the march became a tribute to him, an event to honor the contributions he made to the gay civil rights movement. In the week preceding the march, Reverend Troy Perry and Robin Tyler led the Gay Freedom Train across America, stopping in major cities to demonstrate, rally and speak on behalf of civil liberties and equal rights for LGBTQ persons.³⁸

Thirty years later, Robin Tyler continues to be at the forefront of the LGBTQ civil rights movement, most recently by being the first to file the equal marriage rights lawsuit against the state of California to “include gays and lesbians in being able to marry.”³⁹ She and her partner, Diane Olson, along with their attorney Gloria Allred, announced this decision at 9:00 a.m. on February 4, 2004, only hours before Mayor Gavin Newsome began marrying same-sex couples in San Francisco, California. The

³⁷ This quote is taken from a promotional flyer for Robin Tyler’s performance in St. Paul, Minnesota. This document is part of the vast collection of memorabilia saved and stored in Tyler’s personal library.

³⁸ Information about the Gay Freedom Train was taken primarily from Robin Tyler’s resume, her autobiographical performances, and the LP documenting the event: “The National March on Washington for Lesbian & Gay Rights,” (Magnus Records in association with Alternate Publishing, 1979). The LP can be found at June Mazer Lesbian Archives.

³⁹ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

case, *Tyler, et al vs. the County of Los Angeles*, went to California’s Supreme Court, which ruled on behalf of Tyler and Olson making gay marriage legal for approximately six months until California residents voted for the passage of Proposition 8—a 2008 ballot initiative amending the constitution and eliminating the right for same-sex couples to marry. After a twenty-three year hiatus, Tyler returned to the stage, performing *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (2007)—a title borrowed from her first solo comedy album—a nearly two-hour long autobiographical solo comic performance. In it she offers a retrospective of her life as an entertainer and activist while addressing LGBTQ social and political history over the course of forty years. She has thrown her hat in the ring as an educator and a writer, developing workshops, lectures, and courses, and authoring and co-authoring a number of articles about the gay civil rights movement. She frequently responds to contemporary issues in magazines, newspapers, and online on *Huffington Post*. Tyler’s work as a performer and activist meshed well and succeeded in generating discussion, edifying audiences, enlisting support for LGBTQ causes, and humanizing the movement in order to encourage extending civil liberties to the LGBTQ community.

Queer(ful) Intersectionality: Radical Politics and Performances

Why did we want to marry? Was it because we could assimilate? No, I just simply wanted civil rights, the same civil rights heterosexuals have, and maybe to choose to raise children. And so I began to work in the marriage movement because I realized that I didn’t want to be a movement just talking about sexual politics.

—Robin Tyler⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

As Robin Tyler attests above, her role in the marriage movement was not an overture to assimilate. She has never been interested in fitting in and being like heterosexuals, though she does use her comedy to point towards heterosexism: “Flaunting...isn’t that a funny word? When a heterosexual shows us a picture of their family it’s called sharing. When we show them a picture of our lovers it’s called flaunting.”⁴¹ And she does expect to have the same rights conferred to heterosexuals conferred to any couple seeking civil union. Her comedy and activism embody what Jane Ward terms a new “queer intersectionality,” rather an intersectional politics resisting efforts to normalize and demanding respect for diversity. Among the activists Ward interviews from Christopher Street West (pride festival organization), the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center, and Bienestar (HIV health and prevention center for LGBT Latino/as), she references several whose activist work and careers enact queer intersectionality by countering “professionalized approaches to diversity” and introducing new queer “critical discourses.”⁴² As will be apparent, Robin Tyler continues to be a visible presence in the gay civil rights movement and the marriage equality movement and in both she invokes queer(ful) intersectionality by using radical tactics within assimilationist strategies, and by challenging assimilationist tendencies to bring civil liberties and acceptance to US cultural citizens.

Scholars like Michael Warner criticize the gay marriage movement for ushering in a new era of homonormativity (as Lisa Duggan calls it), rather, “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and

⁴¹ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979), op.cit.

⁴² Ward, *Respectably Queer*, 136.

privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”⁴³

Warner believes that the focus of the marriage movement, in practice, leaves other sexual strangers not fitting the paradigm of lesbian or gay without civil rights or protections to love and be with the partner of their choice. In other words, gay marriage legislation simply reincorporates one group while strengthening another’s status as gender and sexual outlaws.⁴⁴ Despite Robin Tyler’s active role in the marriage movement, I argue that her goals are sympathetic to Warner’s critique. She, like Warner, is critical of assimilationist strategies and instead she works sometimes within and more often alongside and outside human rights organizations supporting gay civil rights, devising her own radical tactics for intervention and cultural visibility. For Robin Tyler, “[i]t’s not about marriage, it’s about showing them that we are full human beings. We are not fighting for the right for sex... This is about our lives.”⁴⁵

Robin Tyler’s tireless advocacy work was the product of trial and error, tactics that sometimes succeeded and other times failed. I do not attempt to conceal failed tactics nor will I refrain from commenting on their appropriateness or shortcomings. The overarching objective is to examine Tyler’s tactics for social change even as they functioned alongside the movement’s strategies to achieve similar goals, yielding potentially useful tactics and strategies for current and future social movements.

LGBTQ citizens have long recognized their status as cultural citizens or second-class citizens, prompting them to mobilize to obtain and protect basic civil liberties

⁴³ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 50.

⁴⁴ Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999).

⁴⁵ Robin Tyler in *Annul Victory*, DVD. Directed by Cheryl Riley (California: Manmade Multimedia, 2009).

like the right to job security, the right to adopt, and the right to marry. The late 1970s was an important moment in the gay civil rights movement. In 1978, the year Robin Tyler called for the first National Gay March on Washington, Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man elected to public office, and the Briggs Initiative—an initiative developed by John Briggs, a California senator, and promoted heavily by musical artist Anita Bryant, which banned LGBTQ teachers and those supporting gay rights from working in public schools— was moving through the court system of several states. The initiative failed in California but passed in Oklahoma and Arkansas.

The 1970s are considered “the moment of rupture...for Western states radically renegotiating conceptions of democratic citizenship.”⁴⁶ Indeed, in the US, the civil rights movement, women’s liberation, and the gay liberation movement cast suspicion upon any claims to real democracy in the US. The question became: how can any nation boast itself a democracy while having different rules and allowances for different groups based on gender, race, sexuality, and class? Capitalizing on this national contradiction, in 1978 Robin Tyler called for the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. In a brochure detailing the event, the organizing committee, among them Robin Tyler, published the following five demands wanted for the LGBTQ community: repeal all anti-lesbian/gay laws; pass a comprehensive lesbian/gay rights bill in Congress; issue a presidential executive order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in the federal government, the military, and federally-contracted private employment; end discrimination in lesbian mother and gay father custody cases; and protect lesbian and gay youth from

⁴⁶ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 153.

any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs, and social environments.⁴⁷ While she was very involved in the 1987 and 1993 marches as main stage producer and main stage co-producer (respectively), she did not call for another march until 1999, when she called for the Millennium March on Washington for Equality (MMOW). During her brief stint as executive producer for MMOW (she left the position and had no further involvement with the 2000 March due to irreconcilable differences with the executive committee),⁴⁸ Tyler enumerates countless reasons for participating in MMOW “What Are We Marching For?” In it she reminds her audience that the demands made in 1979 at the first national march have yet to be met over twenty years later.⁴⁹ Robin Tyler’s resume of activism includes performances, unauthorized protests, civil demonstrations, marches, letter writing campaigns, online mobilization efforts, legal action, and women’s music and comedy festivals spanning from the 1970s to the present.

Robin Tyler’s production of humor and tactics aimed at securing civil rights relies on the premise that acknowledgement—cultural, political, and legal—is a key

⁴⁷ Brochure for the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights held in conjunction with the National Third World Lesbian/Gay Conference (October 12-15, 1970; March held on Oct. 14). Part of Robin Tyler’s personal memorabilia.

⁴⁸ MMOW ended up being a financial disaster with millions in revenue missing after the march. Robin Tyler delivered a speech to the Board of Directors warning of impending disaster if they allowed a member of the board’s business to sponsor and profit from the march. In an article written by Michelangelo Signorile and published online in the news section of <http://gay.com>, “Ex-MMOW Executive Producer Prophesied Financial Disaster,” Robin Tyler is quoted as informing the board well before the march that “[u]nless the gate is tightly controlled by bonded people, there is no way to insure the cash not being stolen.” This article was accessed online May 26, 2000 and is part of Robin Tyler’s personal memorabilia. For further information on the MMOW debacle, see: Michelangelo Signorile’s “Collapse of MMOW’s house of cards reveals flawed strategy” and “MMOW committee fumbles its way deep into debt.” Both were published in the news section of <http://gay.com>, accessed online May 26, 2000 by Robin Tyler and part of Tyler’s personal memorabilia.

⁴⁹ Robin Tyler, “What Are We Marching For?” June 8, 1999. Part of Robin Tyler’s personal memorabilia. Based on email correspondence with Tyler, the manifesto was published but she does not recall where.

component of full citizenship. In *Sexual Strangers...*, Shane Phelan, argues that sexual minorities exist as “sexual strangers” in a land resistant to strangers (of any ilk).⁵⁰ This distinction is made in order to qualify LGBTQ persons not as national enemies but as persons excluded from citizenship legally and culturally, a mostly non-hostile consignment to the fringes of the national body politic. Her use of the term stranger draws from the theorizing of the term by Zygmunt Bauman (1991) whose work centers on European Jews and argues that this designation as stranger exists outside the us/them binary. Building from Bauman’s theorizing, Phelan argues that strangers occupy an ambivalent space that both “troubles the border between us and them” and “is more fraught with anxiety” making strangers “prey to renewed exclusion, scapegoating, and violence.”⁵¹ By examining the nature of citizenship, she hopes to illumine the “ways in which official citizens may nonetheless be civic strangers” because “[t]he question of citizenship does not concern only what rights, offices, and duties are to accrue to citizens, but also how the polity decides who is eligible for them; that is, it concerns the structures of acknowledgement that define the class of persons eligible for those rights, offices, and duties.”⁵² Who is acknowledged and who is not typically matters most to those belonging to the “who is not” category and is itself a legend of that nation—its assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and structures of power. In short, in order to avoid the consistent and rather untrue argument that LGBTQ individuals have full rights as citizens, Phelan argues we need to broaden our understanding of citizenship to include “acknowledgement and

⁵⁰ Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 12; 14.

inclusion in the national political imaginary.”⁵³ Doing so illumines an entirely different picture of citizenship, one in which LGBTQ persons are considered and treated as second-class citizens. For Shane Phelan, legal inclusions and protections (though whether LGBTQ persons have this on their own terms is dubious at best) and acts of civic participation alone—voting, participation in the civic polity, demonstrating social responsibility, and activism—does not a citizen make and there is historical evidence that these acts did not and do not ensure an extension of equal rights nor acknowledgement as citizens. This further evinces the need for creative tactics that generate visibility and contribute to a “public culture of acknowledgement.”⁵⁴

For Robin Tyler, one such tactic is comic performance or producing charged humor, a method she began using in her early performances with comedy partner Pat Harrison. Their comedy found sympathetic ears on college campuses across the nation and even to soldiers fighting in Vietnam when they couched social and political grievances in humor.

Robin: Men are very hung up about women saying dirty words.

Pat: Yeah, the only kinds of words we think are dirty are: kill, war, hate, I mean those are the kinds of words that are dirty.

Robin: But men don’t want us to say dirty words and I’ll give you an example. For instance, there’s one word that begins with ‘f’ that ends with ‘k’ that most men don’t like to hear women say.

Pat: Yeah they want us to do it but they don’t want us to say it.

Robin: And I don’t think people should be hung up over saying words. I think people should, you know, just let it all hang out and just say words.

⁵³ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 148.

Pat: Say it...be liberated.⁵⁵

When they were not performing, Pat Harrison and Robin Tyler were still working to bring awareness of inequality; they staged protests and sent letters to major print media sources openly indicting public and military officials for their treatment of entertainers and handling of funds for U.S.O. and Special Services. On Saturday, August 22, 1970, Tyler and Harrison commemorated the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage by staging a sit-in at a Rams-Raider football game. They were removed by force from the playing field, all the while shouting "demands for more sports scholarships for college women; for schools to end discouraging females from participating in athletics; and for women to have the right to form teams or to participate in any professional sport."⁵⁶ Not all coverage of the demonstration was as thorough or as objective. In another article about the sit-in, published by the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* and written by Steve Bisheff, the author describes the pair as "[t]wo pretty young things...One was a well endowed redhead, the other an equally curvaceous blonde."⁵⁷ Apparently their physical appearance was far more noteworthy than their rationale for interrupting the football game because their demands or the impetus for the sit-in were not mentioned at all in Bisheff's brief synopsis of the event as they were in the *Los Angeles Times*. This demonstrates the importance of sympathetic and thorough news coverage for public demonstrations and protests.

⁵⁵ *Wonder Women*, op.cit.

⁵⁶ "Women sit-in at football game," *Los Angeles Times* Sunday, August 23, 1970. Part of Robin Tyler's personal memorabilia.

⁵⁷ Steve Bisheff, "Ram-Raiders Game Women's Lib Target," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, Sunday, August 23, 1970, Sports section.

The following year, Tyler authored an open letter to the editor of *The Hollywood Reporter*, which was reprinted with her permission on Thursday, March 11, 1971. In the letter she chastises USO officials for not increasing salaries for entertainers, for being out of touch with the kind of entertainment the troops prefer, and for “losing” all thirty-seven (positive) reports submitted following the performances of Harrison & Tyler in Vietnam. The letter ends with a “call for a Senate Investigation into the workings and distribution of funds of both U.S.O. and Special Services.”⁵⁸ Through the years, one can see improvement in Tyler’s ability to manipulate press to support various causes, which is a vital part of the process in keeping the public informed.

In the spring of 1972, Pat Harrison and Robin Tyler were asked to fill in for two vacationing deejays at KGBS radio. They went on air with a show they called “The Feminist Forum” an intentional jab at a concurrent KGBS show called “The Feminine Forum” hosted by Bill Ballance, a radio show Tyler and Harrison criticized as “cater[ing] to the worst in feminine fantasies and frustrations.”⁵⁹ Ballance’s radio personas earned him a reputation for being a shock jock, e.g., Howard Stern and Don Imus, or any radio/television personality relying heavily on political incorrectness and offensive humor, in other words, shocking their public.⁶⁰ On “The Feminine Forum” Ballance was known for excoriating feminists and women liberationists who called into his show. Whether a product of Harrison and Tyler’s making a mockery of his show or merely the result of shifting public interests, “The Feminine Forum” was canceled the following year. While on the air for their two-week guest stint, Tyler and

⁵⁸ Robin Tyler, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Thursday, March 11, 1971.

⁵⁹ Susan Stocking, “Feminist Forum Duo Loved, Hated,” *Los Angeles Times*, Thursday, April 27, 1972

⁶⁰This wikipedia page has an alphabetical listing of shock jocks throughout US history, most of which aired during the latter twentieth century. “Category: Shock Jocks,” Wikipedia page accessed online on March 9, 2009: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Shock_jocks.

Harrison dispensed information about abortion centers, women's clinics, and the women's liberation movement. The show fused practical information for women with radical politics mixed with a healthy dose of humor. The comedic duo created quite a stir when they compared Alabama Governor George Wallace to Adolf Hitler in their comic routine. This "left management in the somewhat awkward position of having to offer equal time to Wallace supporters. That in itself might not have been so bad, but the next day Harrison and Tyler apologized—to Hitler."⁶¹

Robin Tyler uses guerilla tactics in activism and in her comedy, breaking contracts by adding radical material, bringing on unplanned performers, and by using humor to openly attack major corporations and political figures. She seldom apologizes for these breaches of contract; in fact, she often concludes live performances as in her first solo-comedy album, in a rebellious Puck-ish fashion by telling her audience: "If I've offended any of you, you needed it!"⁶² Following the success of their radio debut, Harrison and Tyler took "The Feminist Forum" on the road, performing at colleges and universities across the US. Maxine Feldman, a folk singer and one of the first openly lesbian musicians, traveled with them opening many of their shows by singing the now-famous lesbian anthem "Angry Atthis," often against the wishes or at least unbeknownst to those coordinating these performances.⁶³ Tyler's comedy focused on sexist commercials and popular representations of women and used the stage to refigure feminist versions of religious folklore like the birth of Jesus and well-known children's stories:

⁶¹ Stocking, "Feminist Forum Duo Loved, Hated."

⁶² *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979), op.cit.

⁶³ "Gay Lib blues for college prexy," op.cit.

You know who the biggest purveyor of pornography was in the United States in those days?...The biggest purveyor of pornography was Walt Disney. It's true! The first portrayal of women, I'm seven years old I go into a movie theater and there's a princess on stage singing a song [*she sings*] 'someday my prince will come'...and then, he leans down. He thinks she's dead and then he kisses her. Now there's a word for that where I come from. And what happens? Snow White leaves the wicked witch who had had a wonderful relationship with her for four years to wash socks for seven little dwarfs. Now come on!⁶⁴

Her points are well-taken. Corporate Disney has managed to create an empire on fairy tales and fables reinforcing women's dependency and passivity. Whether we can assign this foul play as falling under "child pornography"...well that seems far more specious. Aware that she was not gaining any favor with major networks with these kinds of jokes, Tyler sought to create her own venues in which to perform.

In 1978, Robin Tyler, with her then-partner Boo Price, performed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Lisa Vogel, one of the festival's producers was hesitant to allow Tyler to perform comedy on the main stage at a typically all-music festival. Her performance went over well with many but angered some for its criticism of the festival's fundamentalist politics like refusal to serve meat, assuming its attendees were all vegetarians. Tyler, herself a butch attracted to other butches, openly questioned butch-femme binaries perpetuated by lesbians and in general poked fun at the internal standards imposed by the community even as they fought constraining standards placed on them by dominant culture. After two years of experiencing what Tyler describes as "[u]nbendable rules made by a few for the majority—in the name of what is 'politically correct,'" she decided to produce her own festivals for women; "[i]ntolerance of others' choices was not acceptable. I was a feminist, and to me

⁶⁴ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (1979), op.cit.

feminism meant the right to choose.”⁶⁵ For fifteen years (1980-1995), Robin Tyler produced the West Coast Women’s Music and Comedy Festival and for nine years, with some exceptions, produced the Southern Women’s Music and Comedy Festival (1983-1992). In total, she produced twenty-five festivals over the course of two decades.

The 1980s were tumultuous times for Robin Tyler who continually fought to secure the land necessary for the festivals, facing hostility and overt discrimination from surrounding communities, especially when the locals caught wind that thousands of lesbians had converged on Camp Coleman (property belonging to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) in White County, Georgia. Some of the general hostility towards these large-scale attempts to gather, educate, and develop community can be attributed to the effects of neoliberalism as it took hold during the Reaganite years. According to Lisa Duggan, in *Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy*, late twentieth century neoliberalism was born out of pro-business activism, which “was built out of earlier ‘conservative’ activism.”⁶⁶ This conservative ethos was gaining ground throughout the 1970s and was embraced fully under the Reagan administration “in ways supportive of upward redistribution of a range of resources, and tolerant of widening inequalities of many kinds.”⁶⁷ Neoliberal hegemony, what Duggan characterizes as the consent of the people to shift in attitude and policy towards certain communities and sectors of the public, occurred in five phases in the US: first, with challenges to and legislation

⁶⁵ Robin Tyler, “Robin Tyler,” in *Eden Built by Eves: the Culture of Women’s Music Festivals*, ed. Bonnie J. Morris (USA: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1999), 39.

⁶⁶ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, xi.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, xi.

undermining New Deal and progressive policies; then building public skepticism and disdain for any movement emphasizing distribution downwards, i.e., Black Power movement, women's liberation, gay liberation. This affected Tyler's advocacy work because the women's festivals she organized became the target of public scrutiny, hostility, and overt discrimination. While performing at one of these festivals, Tyler remarked on the stir their presence created, saying: "When men think of two lesbians, you know it excites them, and two thousand they're scared to death. So, we are not only their worst fear but we are also their greatest fantasy and they must be in tremendous conflict over us."⁶⁸ In the economic sector, the third phase of neoliberalism is increased mergers, acquisitions and creation of giant monopolies in corporate America; and on the cultural front, the emergence of 'culture wars' (1980s-1990s) imposing religious beliefs (and restrictions) on "public institutions and spaces for democratic public life." And finally, a watered-down "form of 'equality' designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources."⁶⁹ The latter manifestation—what Jodi Melamed argues is a stage of neoliberalism called neoliberal multiculturalism—can double as the American dream or more cynically as the myth of meritocracy or more recently as the jaw-dropping moniker being bandied about the media: (we're so equal that we live in) 'post-race America.'⁷⁰ One of the characteristics of neoliberal

⁶⁸ *Just Kidding* (1985), op.cit.

⁶⁹ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, xii.

⁷⁰ Following President Obama's first State of the Union Address in 2010, MSNBC host Chris Matthews said: "He is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour. You know, he's gone a long way to become a leader of this country and passed so much history in just a year or two. I mean, it's something we don't even think about." His statement, at best, is a feeble attempt to assert that President Obama can sit at the cool kids table (read: As long as you do not act Black, you will fit in just fine here) and at worst draws from stereotypes about Black affect, speech and mannerisms, which openly belies the possibility that we are living in anything resembling 'post-

multiculturalism is that “racism constantly appears as disappearing according to conventional race categories, even as it takes on new forms that can signify as nonracial or even antiracist.”⁷¹

America loves to publicly embrace diversity, as long as it is not actually that different from those doing the embracing. Jane Ward addresses this impulse suggesting “that neoliberalism is characterized not only by the expansion of corporate control into all realms of economic, political, and social life, but also by the co-optation of social justice concepts—such as freedom, equality, and diversity—which are now invoked by corporate elites in an effort to protect their own financial interests.”⁷² LCSWG members join queer theorists and activists in their efforts to redefine diversity and inclusiveness, to return it to its rightful place as a term and strategy that welcomes real difference, rather than begging entrance from people who walk and talk like the mainstream but just happen to be Latina/o or lesbian or Muslim, a move that makes their “diversity” incidental to the other likenesses and similarities that abound. LCSWG members capitulate that incorporation in the national polity should cultivate and respect diversity for the richness it adds to the national tapestry of mixed races, ethnicities, nationalities, and cultures. This is foundational to Robin Tyler’s comedy and the lynchpin of a queer(ful) intersectional politics. She used her comedy and activism to advocate for equal rights and to admonish the movements she associated with when they rejected intra-group

racial’ society. I cited from a transcript of Chris Matthews’ report posted on *Think Progress* blog: <http://thinkprogress.org/2010/01/27/matthews-obama-black/>. Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text* 89 (Winter 2006): 2.

⁷¹ Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 3.

⁷² Ward, *Respectably Queer*, 1.

differences like lesbians who did not choose to define themselves as butch or femme or feminists who were not vegetarians. Unafraid of being vocal about what were very unpopular views even in her own circles, she also adamantly refused to take on the role of victim as a woman, lesbian, or Jew and criticized social movements promoting a rhetoric of victimage.⁷³

At times throughout these years she was verbally attacked, marched on, and boycotted by women in her own community who accused her of being “a rich Jew trying to get rich off the backs of the women’s community.”⁷⁴ Just as Robin Tyler led her communities in boycotting orange juice, for which Anita Bryant was a spokeswoman, the women’s and LGBTQ community used the same tactic and no longer booked Tyler at LGBTQ events and boycotted the following year’s festival (1982). Tyler stopped performing, “had a nervous breakdown,” and “became a periodic alcoholic;” however, she refused to stop creating festivals and using them to educate and politicize attendees.⁷⁵ Her second solo album, *Just Kidding*, was a live recording from her performance at the 1985 Southern Women’s Music and Comedy Festival and reveals some of the tension Tyler was experiencing within her own

⁷³ Her comedy on both early albums, *Always a Bridesmaid...* (1979) and *Just Kidding* (1985) challenge the (gendered) roles established for expression of lesbian identity and the standards for inclusion set by feminists, womanists, lesbians, and lesbian feminists. Her stance on victimage is taken from a workshop she conducted at the 1987 Women’s Music and Comedy Festival in Yosemite, CA. A VHS of that workshop is available at the Mazer Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, CA.

⁷⁴ This particular event occurred in Yosemite State Park during the second West Coast Women’s Music and Comedy Festival in 1981. A group of women (about 200) marched on her while she was speaking on the main stage threatening to burn down her cabin. Those attending the festival paid \$65 for four days and nights of workshops, performances, facilities and prepared meals. The complaints centered on what they considered a high price for the event and what was perceived to be racist hiring practices because all the kitchen staff were Black women. Tyler counters that the price for the event was comparable to other events and the festivals were never a business venture as much as a way to develop and educate the women’s community. On the matter of the all-Black kitchen staff, Tyler reports that she hired two African American kitchen coordinators who in turn did the hiring for the entire kitchen staff. These positions also happened to be the highest paid positions in the camp. Tyler, *Eden Built by Eves*, 40.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 41

community at the time.

I've been noticing the way you've been responding to the singers and I'd like to say something as a comic. And Kate Clinton and I were discussing it backstage. They [singers] really get the kind of adoration that comics don't get, yep. [*audience moans and disagrees*] I was a singer, oh yes. [*groans continue with boos*]. Sure, yeah. Oh that's good, we're going to do an act by consensus. Shut up. [*scattered laughter*] We're not processing. I'm not glad you're sharing this. [*few whistles from crowd*] Now let me get on [*cheers from crowd*]!⁷⁶

Robin Tyler was clearly caught off guard and almost loses her audience, though ends up gaining back their favor and finishing the rest of the performance without any further trouble.⁷⁷ Already having a reputation for having a diva personality, it would not be surprising if the audience found her statement to be a silly and pandering proposition—that singers get more adoration than comics—and a means for Tyler to promote receiving celebrity treatment and status from her own community. Surely those in attendance knew of the tenuous relationship Tyler held with major players in the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement; tensions were running high. Unlike other live recordings from her performances at festivals, this one reflects the unease between Tyler and her audience. No doubt, her terse response to defection from the crowd was, among other things, also a product of the immense pressure she was under. While she continued to travel, speaking on behalf of the gay civil rights movement, she did not perform again until 2007 when she performed a one-woman multi-media show called *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom*.

⁷⁶ Tyler, *Just Kidding*, op.cit.

⁷⁷ Having listened to nearly all of her performance work, I can say with confidence that she was setting up for a joke that she's been doing for years without negative responses and which is merely an introduction to talking about her work as a female impersonator.

These music and comedy festivals showcased talented women eager to find a venue to explore their feminist sensibilities in a welcoming space. The objectives were to entertain and educate and each year portions of the proceeds were devoted to various political and social initiatives. The women attending the festivals raised thousands “to fight an initiative that was to put people with HIV into ‘camps’ in California,” helped fund the 1987 National Gay March on Washington, and salvaged woman-owned Redwood Records among other initiatives.⁷⁸ Tyler created and led workshops on anti-Semitism, racism, and the civil rights movement. These opportunities to teach were the early seeds of courses she later developed on the history of comedy based on the civil rights movement. Shane Phelan argues that “[c]itizenship strategies must combine legislative and judicial campaigns with social activism and education” and citizenship must include “acknowledgement and inclusion in institutions.”⁷⁹ Together, Robin Tyler’s tactics constitute a queer(ful) intersectional politics that embodies these practices, asking us to reconsider the terms of citizenship on all frontiers—legal, cultural, and political, in the classroom, on the books, in the courtroom, on the stage, and in the streets.

The movements to which she belonged began changing as the grip of neoliberalism tightened. Political and cultural shifts influenced the definition and experience of citizenship and as such shaped and informed the tactics deployed by Robin Tyler. One of the defter maneuvers on the part of the Reaganites in promulgating the American Dream was to connect private/personal success with the nation, which “sets the stage for a national people imagining itself national only

⁷⁸ Tyler, *Eden Built by Eves*, 43.

⁷⁹ Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*, 148.

insofar as it feels unmarked by the effects of these national contradictions.”⁸⁰

Accordingly, because citizenship is associated with the American dream/myth in this way, when bad events occur, one’s value as a citizen become questionable, automatically making it a personal failure and ensuring that people occupying certain (negligible) social locations (queer, people of color, disabled, etc.) will experience a kind of second-class citizenship that dominant ideologies tell them is their fault in the first place. As Lisa Duggan points out:

...[t]his rhetoric promotes the *privatization* of the costs of social reproduction, along with the care of human dependency needs, through *personal responsibility* exercised in the family and civil society—thus shifting costs from state agencies to individuals and households. This process accompanies the call for the tax cuts that deplete public coffers, but leave more money in the ‘private’ hands of the wealthy.⁸¹

The end product is a culture of blame placed upon those living in poverty because their destitution either signals their failure to achieve the American dream, i.e., lazy, irresponsible, incompetent, etc. or belies the American dream altogether (it has been far more profitable to foster the former).

The 1980s and 1990s were also characterized by an explosion of new media changing the way movements could mobilize constituents. Robin Tyler capitalized on emerging technologies to reach a large swath of the public for online issue campaigns. Indeed, Shane Phelan argues that the LGBTQ movement “must focus on infrastructure as well as issue campaigns.”⁸² Otherwise, it runs the very real risk of perpetuating the existing belief that rights alone can and do level the playing field, negating the ways in which state institutions are perpetrators of racism, sexism, and

⁸⁰ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 4.

⁸¹ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 14.

⁸² Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*, 147.

heterosexism. In 2000, Robin Tyler and John Aravosis founded the StopDrLaura.com campaign, which coordinated protests all over the nation against Dr. Laura Schlesinger, a radio pundit routinely spewing unfounded and disparaging information about LGBTQ persons.⁸³ This campaign, which ran on a budget of \$18,500, focused on coordinating protests against Dr. Schlesinger's radio program, generating petitions with thousands of signatures from people not agreeing with her agenda or program content, and sending letters of complaint to companies sponsoring her show. At the time of the campaign, Dr. Schlesinger was negotiating syndication of her show on national television. Potential sponsors began dropping their bids for commercial space after supporters of StopDrLaura.com threatened to boycott their products. After Proctor & Gamble retracted an offer to sponsor the television show, the whole thing fell through and there was no more discussion of Dr. Schlesinger hosting a television show. "The successful StopDrLaura campaign showed that by leveraging the volunteer enthusiasm of new activists, even a cash-poor campaign can have a dramatic impact on public opinion and ultimately force multi-billion dollar institutions like Proctor & Gamble to do the right thing."⁸⁴ In total, over 170 advertisers left the show as a result of this online campaign.

Buoyed by the success of this web campaign, on July 15, 2003 Robin Tyler and John Aravosis went on to co-found DontAmend.com, an online campaign aimed at preventing anti-gay constitutional amendments.⁸⁵ This initiative posted articles from

⁸³ This campaign used the following website: <http://www.stopdrlaura.com/> to educate, inform, and coordinate opposition to Dr. Laura Schlesinger's programming.

⁸⁴ Tyler & Thayer, "The 'Gay Marriage' Struggle," 24.

⁸⁵ While the online campaign is no longer active, you can view original web pages for www.dontamend.com via the internet archive: Way Back Machine. See: <http://web.archive.org/web/20031029163941/www.dontamend.com/subpages/aboutus.html>

newspapers across the country related to anti-gay legislation and offered a number of ways of becoming active in the campaign for gay civil liberties including contact information for California senators, information about upcoming rallies, online petitions, and a pledge to not vote for politicians supporting anti-gay amendments. In 2003 the campaign targeted Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum for his vocal opposition to homosexuality. Founders posted contact information for companies donating money to Santorum's re-election campaign such as Gateway, Sprint, and United along with the amount donated. For five years this web site featured the latest news, information, and ways to intervene on behalf of gaining and otherwise not limiting civil liberties for LGBTQ persons. Despite the fact that the campaign no longer exists, Tyler reports the venture as successful, so successful in fact, she said that the Human Rights Campaign took over the task of posting similar data encouraging citizens to become socially aware and politically engaged.

While activists found means of harnessing new media for their own ends, Lauren Berlant warns that the proliferation of this media "has paradoxically enabled the standards and rhetorics of citizenship to become so privatized and subjective that even privileged people can seem legitimately to claim 'outsider,' if not 'minority' status."⁸⁶ With ballooning numbers of those claiming have-not-status, there is a risk of not recognizing the ways people enjoy unearned privilege by virtue of race or gender, even if they experience oppression based on another marginalized subject position. Too often, an influx of those claiming outsider status leads to fragmentation and dispersion in the movement, detracting attention from important initiatives and efforts aimed at securing rights. Seeking to avoid such pitfalls, the gay civil rights

⁸⁶ Berlant, *The Queen of American Goes to Washington City*, 7.

movement is currently channeling its energy into securing civil rights for LGBTQ persons, reintroducing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), working to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), and funding the marriage equality movement, in which Robin Tyler is a key player.

In Terms of Belonging: The Marriage Equality Movement

But the anger that we should still have I don't feel anymore. The anger that we should still have for not having anything...because we've been given the illusion of acceptability, an acceptability without rights is just an illusion.
—Robin Tyler⁸⁷

Currently, Robin Tyler's efforts are aimed at marriage equality, a social issue becoming increasingly politicized as states usher in constitutional amendments to prevent same-sex marriage. She is critical of and skeptical towards any political or social organization refusing to incorporate LGBTQ civil rights into their agendas. In her most recent performance she laments the lack of support for LGBTQ rights in Democratic and Republican camps: "We want marriage equality, that's the front of the bus. The Democrats want us to have civil unions, or domestic partnership. That's the back of the bus. The Republicans want us off the bus. And the radical religious right wants us under the bus."⁸⁸ In an interview with Nicholas Snow for *Notes from Hollywood*, Tyler simultaneously points a finger at both the Democratic Party as well as human rights organizations for ignoring LGBTQ social inequalities.

The only organization in the country that will not support a presidential candidate who does not support marriage equality is the National Organization for Women. None of the gay organizations have this policy,' she emphasized. 'The excuse is that this 'issue' will lose the Democrats the elections. But, choice is equally divisive, and none of them back down from

⁸⁷ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

⁸⁸ *Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom* (2007), Ibid.

that issue. Until our LGBT ‘leaders’ stop acquiescing to democratic politics, and the ‘blame’ game, we will never get our rights.⁸⁹

During her interview, she positions herself politically as “a very angry democrat,” incensed that democrats, “instead of having the courage like Martin Luther King [Jr.] did, to come up against the Democratic Party,” have “become pawns with the Democratic Party.”⁹⁰ For this and other public indictments like it, Tyler has *not* emerged as the funny lesbian mascot for the gay civil rights movement, instead waging her most recent legal battle, *Tyler, et al vs. the County of Los Angeles*, in relative obscurity despite her position at the helm of the marriage equality movement. The case attracted a great deal of national attention; however, there was little to no mention of her involvement, let alone her leadership role in the process.

Robin Tyler believes that heightened visibility leads to tolerance and understanding, which in turn leads to an increased likelihood of legal and legislative changes—a formula she has been documenting and advancing for decades. In an interview for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Tyler says: “If you can get people to laugh, it’s a way to get them to listen to what you have to say, to challenge their thoughts and illuminate lies.”⁹¹ Her performances broach social issues in a humorous way—targeting sexist advertising, homophobic attitudes, and hypocrisy in her own community (like butch-femme dichotomies), while her activism focuses on legislative inroads for LGBTQ persons.⁹²

⁸⁹ Robin Tyler quoted in Nicholas Snow, “Laughing in the Fight for the Freedom to Marry,” *Notes from Hollywood*, February 2, 2007: <http://www.notesfromhollywood.com/>

⁹⁰ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

⁹¹ Robin Tyler quoted in Leah Hendry, “Gay comic comes home: Tyler to emcee Rainbow Resource Centre’s 30th anniversary,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, Saturday, November 3, 2001, Local section.

⁹² In an interview with Val Edwards for *Body Politic*, Robin Tyler discusses how her comedy is meant to point out social discrepancies like how LGBTQ persons are accused of “flaunting” their love when they share about it, but heterosexuals doing the same thing call it “sharing.” In response to rigid ideas

In order to ensure that her advocacy work was accurately targeting the issues most salient to LGBTQ persons, in 1999 Robin Tyler mailed surveys to tens of thousands of LGBTQ people and received 17,354 completed surveys, of which 95% of the respondents were registered to vote. The survey, listing some of the most pressing issues facing LGBTQ persons and allowing space to write-in additional issues, asked respondents to rank issues in the order of their importance. The top five issues all require legislation reform and in the order of their importance are: hate crimes legislation (73%); non-discrimination in employment (72%); right to marry (64%); overturning anti-LGBT laws (62%); and child custody and adoption rights (56%).⁹³ LGBTQ respondents convey concerns related to obtaining civil rights and liberties, illustrating that legal protections and civil rights can substitute for or at least indicate a certain level of public acknowledgement and acceptance.

Once considered a liberation movement, LGBTQ persons sought to secure social acceptance despite their differences; now, the focus seems aimed at demonstrating similarities and hence suitability for cultural and legal inclusion and assimilation into the dominant culture. From disrupting nationally televised football games to being the plaintiff in *Tyler, et al vs. the County of Los Angeles*, Tyler's activism and performances mirror this shift in the movement. To be more accurate, the concrete demands she makes for acknowledgement have remained consistent and stable over many decades; however, she alters the tactics for achieving acknowledgement to

about lesbians having to be either butch or femme and to date accordingly (butch-femme), she says, "through my humor I hope to make it okay to be a butch" and for a butch to date another butch. See Edwards, "Robin Tyler," 23.

⁹³ Document: "Platform Balloting Results for the Millennium March on Washington for Equality." Accessed online by Robin Tyler on Friday, December 1999. Part of Robin Tyler's personal collection of memorabilia.

work within the political and cultural climates of the time. In an interview, she reflects on this shift in the movement.

This is a civil rights movement about not being on the back of the bus for anything. And so I think that what's changed in my lifetime is we've gone from being a "gay liberation movement" [*uses air quotes*]*—it really didn't get much anywhere—to a lesbian/gay/LGBT civil rights movement that essentially is going after the right to work and the right to marry and the right to have children and the right not to be violated and so forth and so on. And so I think that the marriage movement has wrested it...wrested the movement away from the 20% of LGBT people that just wanted to be a liberation movement, so that we can be culturally different, into a civil rights movement where we can have choice.*⁹⁴

As a liberation movement or a civil rights movement, the prize remains social and political acknowledgement, which Shane Phelan implicitly codes as positive, i.e., achieving acceptance, and not the kind of negative acknowledgement that resulted in twenty-nine states amending their constitutions to ban same-sex marriage.

Acknowledgement does not end at cultural visibility, because the issue is not the visibility of LGBTQ persons in society; indeed, cultural visibility of LGBTQ persons has increased.⁹⁵ But for Robin Tyler visibility is not sufficient and means relatively little in terms of rights. She opines, "Do you know we don't have any rights in 2008 on a federal level? We have no rights. People are talking about gays assimilating in the United States...How can we assimilate? We don't have any rights, it's an illusion...this illusion that there's somehow equality out there is, is not true."⁹⁶

Accordingly, acknowledgement extends beyond visibility and manifests in concrete

⁹⁴ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

⁹⁵ LGBTQ folks enjoy a certain amount of visibility. After all, Ellen DeGeneres hosts a daytime talk show and there are openly gay celebrities like Lance Bass, Wanda Sykes, Jodie Foster, and Queen Latifah. There is now an LGBTQ focused television network—LOGO, popular television shows about LGBTQ persons like *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *The L Word*, and a number of popular films that have addressed same-sex relationships like *Better Than Chocolate*, *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Chutney Popcorn*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Boy's Don't Cry*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Gray Matters*.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

social and political acceptance, which for Tyler would ideally result in equal rights for the LGBTQ community.

Without consideration of acknowledgement, one can argue (and many have) that LGBTQ persons enjoy all the civil liberties and protections—the right to vote, to marry within a heterosexual union, to call upon law enforcement for protection, etc.—guaranteed any other. But when we broaden what constitutes citizenship:

...we can use the concept of acknowledgement to evaluate whether and how particular polities incorporate diversities of various sorts, and how far that incorporation leads those polities to transform their dominant self-understandings. Whether and in what ways a polity is open to change can be signaled not only by who is allowed to hold office, but by how they are enabled or prevented from transforming public meanings.⁹⁷

Tyler's advocacy warns against ignoring the way sexuality influences one's experience of citizenship and the way this is overlooked in the interests of maintaining rights for heterosexuals to the detriment of the LGBTQ community.

Historically, Robin Tyler has never curried favor with any political party at the expense of the gay civil rights movement and the movement for marriage equality. In fact, her unwillingness to compromise when it comes to issues of equality for LGBTQ persons has made her unpopular with even those within the movement. After filing the equal marriage rights lawsuit against the state of California she was confronted by a number of organizations and individuals working in the movement who accused her of steamrolling an issue they believed the American public was not yet ready to decide.

And the legal law firms, the gay legal law firms were really angry at us for making the decision, [be]cause they thought it wasn't the time. You know, they kept saying to Martin Luther King [Jr.], "Now's not the time."...He used to say, "If not now, when?" And they'd say to Martin Luther King,

⁹⁷ Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*, 140.

“There’s gonna be a backlash.” And he says, “Backlash? We’ve never gone forward, how can there be a backlash?” So we have the same thing...when the Supreme Court of California dissolved the marriages in San Francisco, then the gay legal firms, the City of San Francisco, Lambda [Legal], ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] filed for people in San Francisco...so, they now had a lawsuit going to the Supreme Court...And eventually all the lawsuits were combined, and it’s interesting [be]cause all the activists were friends with each other. But the unfortunate thing is that the group that filed in San Francisco tried to make us invisible, like we didn’t file first ...I mean, we go to San Francisco and they have a press conference and they have the San Francisco couples there but not us...they really treated us very badly and tried to make it like it wasn’t our case at all, that it was always their cases. These very people that yelled at us for daring to file a lawsuit at this time... But now all the organizations have decided to throw big demonstrations that night—call it a celebration of life—and we haven’t been invited to it. It’s like we didn’t do it and didn’t exist. Why not? Because these corporations, these organizations are going to make a lot of money off of looking like they started and put this lawsuit through.⁹⁸

The most popular strategies being deployed right now by gay rights organizations fall within the category of assimilationist. Shane Phelan finds this tendency towards assimilation more than a little troubling, writing that “[t]he ‘de-gaying’ of HRC [Human Rights Campaign] collaborates in the deeper homophobia that motivates resistance to equal rights.”⁹⁹ The tools employed in the move for gay assimilation include appeals to empathy and of course, the visible normalization of the population seeking inclusion, usually characterized by an ostracizing of bad queers. The marriage equality movement has utilized assimilationist strategies like fighting for same-sex marriage at the state level in the courtrooms and the polls to obtain rights and benefits for LGBTQ communities. Robin Tyler works within the movement, utilizing assimilationist strategies like petitioning for legal recognition of her marriage with Diane Olson (though her activism seldom coincides with the timeline preferred by movement leaders). However, she employs a queer(ful) intersectional

⁹⁸ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

⁹⁹ Phelan, *Sexual Strangers*, 103.

politics by criticizing the non-profit industrial complex spearheading (read: funding and representing) the marriage equality movement.

Until we think of ourselves and act like a civil rights movement instead of the gay industry, and realize that most of these organizations that have taken over for us, that attending a dinner for \$150.00 or being an activist on the web...does not promote change. Change is promoted in the streets and in the suites. When *Brown vs. the Board of Education* happened, when the Supreme Court ruled free integrated schools, they didn't integrate right away. There was this huge civil rights movement in the 60s of people on the streets insisting on their civil rights. And it took years and years of activism. So, so I think what's happened is we've allowed our organizations to take over for us thinking they're acting in our best interests. When I think most of the time they're acting in the best interest of maintaining their jobs. And so, any other corporation where the head of corporation makes a quarter to a third of a million dollars a year, and does not produce a product, they'd get fired. But here we have corporations, gay corporations with great logos, you know—Human Rights Campaign: the equality sign—but they're like Enron: great logo, no product. So, until we demand, until we stop just handing over millions of dollars blindly to our corporations that produce no results, and until we understand that change happens from the bottom up, then we won't change.¹⁰⁰

Tyler has been assailed for her vocal criticism of issues within the LGBTQ community and for her leadership role in the marriage equality movement by those who oppose assimilationist strategies as well as members within the movement who prefer to take things slowly and to proceed carefully, believing that change will be more amenable over time or that there are more pressing concerns in LGBTQ communities.

Some argue that the gay liberation movement sought to celebrate diversity, while the fight for marriage is a legal maneuver humanizing and drawing similarities between LGBTQ persons and the public in order to incorporate LGBTQ folks without any distinctions. Robin Tyler combats this stance in a co-authored piece with Andy Thayer, titled “The ‘Gay Marriage’ Struggle: What’s at Stake & How Can We Win,”

¹⁰⁰ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

by suggesting that the “issue is the question of *choice* in joining an institution in U.S. society, not an *obligation* to join it and be ‘assimilated.’”¹⁰¹ For all of those in the movement poo-pooing the fight for the right to marry, calling it an elitist assimilationist agenda, she argues that “equal access to marriage rights is far more vital to the material lives of working class LGBT people of color than it is to stereotypical, upper middle class white male couples.”¹⁰² To those who would rather see the fight for same-sex marriage taken more slowly or attention focused on other issues, Tyler responds that the “point of winning equal rights legislation is not so that we have the ability to repeatedly file lawsuits just in order to secure our rights, but instead, to win a societal acceptance of LGBT people so that such lawsuits are rarely needed,” i.e., if social acceptance is gained alongside marriage rights, a good deal of time, money, and energy can be put towards making other advancements in the LGBTQ community.¹⁰³

When I was at the Supreme Court three weeks ago, one of the questions...one of the lawyers said (on our side) Terry [Teresa] Wright, this brilliant lawyer from the city of San Francisco. She said, “If the word marriage doesn’t matter, then when interracial marriage was ruled for on behalf of interracial marriage, instead of calling it marriage, why didn’t you call it interracial domestic partnership?” And I need to tell people that in 1948 when they ruled, the California Supreme Court for interracial marriage, 76% of the American public was against it. You know, now it’s 50/50, but so it wasn’t on the whim of the American public that they ruled. And it was only until 1991, in 1991, finally the majority of the American public believed that there should be interracial marriage. So right now it’s a 50/50 thing with gay marriage. But we shouldn’t be waiting and letting them vote on whether we should have this civil right or not.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Tyler & Thayer, “The ‘Gay Marriage’ Struggle,” 12.

¹⁰² Ibid., 4.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁴ Teresa Wright represented San Francisco couples in Tyler’s case. Now she represents the City of San Francisco in the case filed in response to Proposition 8. Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

She and Thayer argue that “the importance of winning marriage equality goes well beyond the 1,138 rights which come with marriage, as important as winning those rights would be to the lives of countless couples. The marriage equality issue has become a national litmus test on whether or not LGBT people are going to become citizens in this country.”¹⁰⁵

My interview with Robin Tyler and Pat Harrison took place on Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 11, 2008 and following the interview I was invited to stay in Tyler’s guesthouse for the remainder of my research trip. She allowed me access to her personal archives and library and was incredibly helpful in piecing together the materials needed to write this chapter. She helped to contextualize the performances and information gathered at the June Mazer Lesbian Archives. On May 15, 2008, two days after I returned to the East Coast, California’s Supreme Court announced its decision to legalize gay marriage, declaring it a constitutional right for same-sex couples. While working in Tyler’s library and office, the quiet was punctuated with phone calls made to various gay rights organizations and people from the press to organize a press conference on the day the verdict was made public. While the exact date was unknown, Tyler and many others were preparing their public statements and making arrangements to respond to either verdict. Her excitement and anticipation was palpable as was her frustration with a particular gay rights organization that had already arranged for a press conference at an ideal and coveted location for such events. These arrangements were made without including Tyler and Diane Olson, excluding them from the event and effectively securing the best location for a press

¹⁰⁵ Tyler & Thayer, “The ‘Gay Marriage’ Struggle,” 27.

conference. This kind of ostracism and intra-community backlash is a recurring trope in Tyler's career, which some might argue as justifiable and others as unfortunate.

Robin Tyler's outspoken brand of performance and activism has earned her a reputation as tenacious and indefatigable...not necessarily desirable traits to some. She has drawn criticism from within and outside her community, but perhaps this should be the benchmark of successful advocacy work—you know you are making progress when even those within your community think you are moving too fast. Whether or not you agree with Tyler, it is clear that she has launched numerous successful tactics for changing public opinion and fighting for equal rights for LGBTQ persons. These tactics may prove indispensable to a movement that still stands at ground zero when it comes to acquiring civil rights and liberties on par with their heterosexual counterparts.

Conclusion

Out of these organized forms of struggle for cultural justice and the sometimes unorganized forms of popular cultural resistance may come a third moment, or level, or cultural politics: the formation of a new culture, a new 'conception of the world,' as Gramsci put it, a cultural revolution.

—Michael Denning¹⁰⁶

Many were shocked when California voters passed Proposition 8 banning same sex marriage in California on November 4, 2008. After nearly six months and thousands of wedding licenses doled out to same-sex couples, those having married were left uncertain as to their legal status as a couple. A week and a half later, on November 15, 2008, Wanda Sykes, a comic and actress, spoke at a rally at the LGBT Center of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas. She responded publicly to the passage of

¹⁰⁶ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London & New York: Verso, 2004), 165.

Proposition 8, which coincided with Arkansas passing legislation banning gay couples from adopting and Florida making same-sex marriage unconstitutional.

I felt like I was being attacked. I was personally attacked. Our community was attacked...If we had equal rights we wouldn't, shouldn't have to be standing out here demanding something that we automatically should have as citizens of this country... Instead of having gay marriage in California, NO, we're going to get it across the country. When my wife and I leave California I want to have my marriage also recognized in Nevada, in Arizona, all the way to New York...Gay is not a choice...that's like telling me that I chose to be a woman; that I chose to be Black. Are we saying that if being gay is a choice that people are straight because they chose not to be gay? I am very proud. I am proud to be a woman. I am proud to be a Black woman and I'm proud to be gay!...Now let's go get our damn equal rights! Come on!¹⁰⁷

Any social movement demands momentum to sustain any sort of legal policy or legislative changes. It also draws strength and inspiration from celebrities like Wanda Sykes, willing to come out to her fans in order to generate support for the marriage equality movement.¹⁰⁸ There are many strategies for achieving social justice and equal rights for the LGBTQ community. Robin Tyler and Andy Thayer enumerate many tactics they found successful over the course of (her) four decades of activism in the gay civil rights movement. They stress the importance of finding the linkages between various causes so people understand how these issues are related and progress for one issue can positively impact other initiatives.¹⁰⁹ Further, along with Wanda Sykes and many others, they urge members of the LGBTQ community to become active in local and grassroots initiatives seeking legal reform to include LGBTQ persons. Writing a check to an organization and signing online petitions is

¹⁰⁷ Wanda Sykes, "Wanda Sykes' Speech (Original)," November 15, 2008: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRyVH-1zadg>

¹⁰⁸ While Wanda Sykes' friends and family were aware that she is a lesbian, it was not something she shared with her public until a recent decision to use her recognition and status to enlist support for gay civil rights. She now incorporates her lesbian identity into her comedy.

¹⁰⁹ Tyler & Thayer, "The 'Gay Marriage' Struggle," 15.

not sufficient action for achieving the kinds of legislative reform and inclusion into the national polity that LGBTQ persons desire. Moreover, Tyler and Thayer write that “[w]e need a radical reshaping of the terms of the debate. No legislative victories we might win will be secure until there is a wholesale shift in public opinion.”¹¹⁰ Using her own involvement in the financial fiasco at the MMOW as an example, she warns that while large-scale mobilizations are important for inspiring individuals to become active in their local communities, “if they are not combined with a savvy political strategy, the legislative result can be nil, the hopes of the affected community dashed, and a huge defeat reaped instead.”¹¹¹ The terms of citizenship need reform but since those terms operate in the psychic field of our imaginations and as legal torts and documents, Tyler believes that efforts must be focused on both arenas.

Winning legal battles is important, but if they come in a vacuum of next to no public education, relatively little is accomplished from the perspective of the ‘average’ LGBT person in the street, the young person growing up in a homophobic school system, etc. We need to change the social climate in which every day LGBT people live. When public opinion shifts in concert with legislative advances, then that legislation takes on far greater power and also is much more impervious to reversal. Changing public opinion is the key to civil rights defense, and advance, of our community.¹¹²

Changing public opinion is no easy feat. Some argue that tolerance coupled with time will breed future generations more willing to accept and incorporate those marked by alterity into the national body politic. Others believe dynamic and increased representations, cultural visibility, and public education are important to developing understanding and tolerance for sexual diversity. These are all tactics intended to document and effectively alter the psychic and material conditions contributing to

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹¹² Ibid., 21.

one's position as an outsider—together they constitute the project of cultural citizenship.

Stand-up comedy, for Robin Tyler, offers a forum for producing charged humor specifically aimed at challenging homophobia and sexism and lobbying for civil rights and liberties. Fueled more by her activist sensibility than by dedication to the craft of comedy, Tyler's comedy takes a backseat to her convictions, when it is essential to remember that a comic's *first* job is to make people laugh, second to make them think. Signaling agreement with a statement is not the same as eliciting a laugh and eventually working comics must develop a reputation of being funny and thought-provoking, not just the latter. At times, her unwavering commitment to the political material is won at the cost of the funny and in question is how effective her comedy can be when it finds friendly audiences only among existing converts. Therein lie the limitations of Tyler's brand of comedy but you have to admire her convictions, which she will not divorce from her comedy.

While I do not expect her brand of comedy to be on a network channel anytime soon, there is a spot at the table for these kinds of comics. Consider the recent boon of gigs for comics willing to perform for non-profit functions, pride festivals, and galas hosted by civil rights organizations, which has shaped and produced a small army of activist lesbian comics like Judy Gold, Kate Clinton, Marga Gomez, Suzanne Westenhoefer, Vicki Shaw, Karen Williams, Rene Hicks, and Julie Goldman. For human rights organizations, edgy pro-gay liberal humor is inspiring and reinforces their agendas; however, when that comic material is an indictment of the movement—its narrow agenda, corporatist strategies and disquieting dismissal of

other needs for reform that are unfundable—the comic runs the risk of losing paying jobs in this small but profitable market of entertainment. Robin Tyler uses stand-up comedy to vocalize discontent with the gay civil rights movement, not because she does not want to be a part of it, but ultimately because she wants it to be a better movement. Her criticism of the gay industrial complex echoes Lisa Duggan who writes:

No longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite. Consequently, the push for gay marriage and military service has replaced the array of political, cultural, and economic issues.¹¹³

A queer(ful) intersectional politics and practice, like Robin Tyler's, can help propel the gay movement towards increased inclusiveness, both in the issues tackled and persons represented.

Robin Tyler counts her comic performances as a form of activism but recognizes that jokes alone will not emancipate the LGBTQ community.

And how do I think my comedy has affected my activism? Well, because I'm a comic, I can get people to, for a moment, agree with what I'm saying. Comedy is a very good way to get people to loosen up, but I only use the comedy to get into my activism, to make the speeches, to try to do the change. Comedy in itself is not enough to change people, [be]cause they would laugh, but maybe they'd forget it... There's a couple of my lines that became very famous...: "If homosexuality is an illness, we should all call in sick to work. [*hand mimics a phone*] Hello? Can't work, still gay," So that line is kind of famous. So people remember some of the famous lines but still, you have to have the activism behind the lines.¹¹⁴

Her queer(ful) intersectional politics on behalf of LGBTQ communities include comic performances, national marches, supporting lesbian-owned businesses and

¹¹³ Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 45.

¹¹⁴ Robin Tyler, Personal Interview, May 11, 2008.

artists, raising public awareness about sexism, homophobia, and religious and racial bigotry, boycotting products, producing women's festivals, spearheading successful online initiatives such as the StopDrLaura.com and DontAmend.com campaigns, developing organizations like the Equality Campaign, of which she is the executive director, and legislative reform for the marriage equality movement. She employs multiple tactics to optimize progress for the movement such as grooming a generation of twenty and thirty-somethings attending the festivals in the 1980s and 1990s to support and pursue the legal reforms necessary to change their status as second-class citizens; to become active in local and national politics; and to be ready to champion the constitutional reform Tyler herself would initiate in California in 2004. Despite the setback posed by Proposition 8, Robin Tyler remains queer(ful). Her struggle to be heard, to be acknowledged, to be legally recognized continues.

Chapter 5: ‘Where My Girls At?’

[A]s a former history teacher, I see what gets written in the history books, and if we don't document ourselves, there's no guarantee that someone else will. So, whether through art or, you know, in other ways, these characters I'm hoping are really documenting a—a group of people in the world right now. We might look different a hundred years from now, but there are people who are just like this right now.
—Micia Mosely¹

Creating representations that make Black lesbian subjectivities visible is a key goal in Micia Mosely's body of work as a comic performer. As the above quote indicates, her background in education and her knowledge of history's occlusions fuels her desire to remedy Black lesbian invisibility. Jewelle Gomez writes that “[i]t is the *representation* of black lesbian lives, not simply its analysis and deconstruction that has the most immediate, broad-based and long-lasting cultural and historical impact.”² The value is in being represented—seeing someone like you—and creating opportunities for others to consume varied and various representations of someone like you.

Born on April 2, 1973 in Charlotte, North Carolina, Micia Mosely was raised by a single mother but was also very influenced by her godfather, who has been a strong presence in her life since the age of five.³ She was raised and educated in the public school system in New York City, going on to earn a bachelor's degree in history at Brandeis University and a masters and doctorate in education at University of California, Berkeley. She has over a decade of experience teaching social studies and history to young people, training teachers, coaching administrators, and leading

¹ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

² Jewelle Gomez, “But Some of Us Are Brave Lesbians: The Absence of Black Lesbian Fiction,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2005), 290.

³ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, May 23, 2008.

whole-school reform efforts. Her research areas—urban education and equity-based school reform—inform her scholarship and presentations for professional organizations.⁴

While earning her doctorate, she became involved in comic theater at Luna Sea, a women's theater in San Francisco, California.

[At Luna Sea] I got to see people perform and talk about their sexuality and there were a lot of lesbians of color and White lesbians talking about issues of race and sexuality openly. It blew my mind. I didn't realize my mind was getting blown at the time but I remember feeling so inspired and excited by it all. And that really opened me up to new possibilities of what I could do; that I didn't have to make fun of who I am for a community that was outside of my community. So, I didn't have to make fun of Black people for a White audience to get a laugh. I didn't have to make fun of gay and lesbian people in front of straight audiences to get a laugh. Instead I could talk to my communities and laugh, you know, sort of the intra-community jokes if you will.⁵

Shifts in how she utilized comedy and humor were the catalyst for a series of Black lesbian sock puppets she created while living in Oakland, CA. At Luna Sea Theater she hosted a show called *WET* (Women Expressing Themselves), which focused on women of color expressing themselves through their sexuality and race. There she showcased a series of sock puppets, all Black lesbian archetypes, some of which are very early iterations of the five Black lesbians in her one-woman show *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, currently touring. Developed over a period of time, these characters are carefully crafted to represent issues germane to Black lesbians such as feeling like an outlier in the African

⁴ She is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including: Louise Patterson Award for Academic Achievement (1999-2000), Spencer Foundation Research Training Fellowship (2000-2001), Facing History and Ourselves Fellow for Northern California (1997-1998), National Endowment for the Humanities Teaching Fellow (1997), and Diane A. Rottenberg Davis Memorial Endowment Prize for Excellence in Education (1994-1995). This information was taken from Micia Mosely's CV mailed to me in April 2008.

⁵ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, May 23, 2008.

American community or their Blackness being elided in the lesbian community.

Providing representations of Black lesbians, where there are few, and documenting where Black lesbians are absent from history, is a central priority in her work.

In *Where My Girls At? A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, Micia Mosely offers a counter-narrative to the dearth of opportunities available to the public to identify with Black lesbian subjectivities. The show's interactive format encourages identification with any or all of the Black lesbians she portrays. Audience members and Mosely co-construct the performance by asking audiences to evaluate each character, and ultimately selecting one as the "winner" of the show. In this way, Mosely's humor entices and solicits members of the dominant culture to learn to identify with the social, political, and cultural conditions of her life, offering opportunities to inform and mobilize constituents beyond their respective communities. Mosely's charged humor challenges the status quo consumption of humor. Thus, it is humor production that shifts the dominant pattern (read: produced by men but meant for everyone) of humor consumption by forging a connection between the audience and the many Black lesbians she portrays in her show.

Mainstream comic success hinges on identification, but what happens when identification is based upon false constructs such as stereotypes about marginalized groups or equally as troubling, when members of minoritarian groups are not represented at all. Jose Esteban Muñoz answers this question in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. He argues that minoritarian subjects disidentify with representations excluding and/or excoriating them. Members of minoritarian communities, when confronted with mainstream representations, are

implicitly asked to identify with members of the dominant culture who do not necessarily reflect their cultural, spiritual, or political values or in many instances, even look like them. When a community has little visibility and what little visibility we have is fraught with stereotypes, there are few alternatives: ignore or opt-out (read: stop consuming), accept the representation (read: continue consuming) or as Muñoz suggests, find a way to refigure such representations. The result is disidentification, a way of reading oneself back into a script in which one was never cast, a way of buying into the White ideal without conforming to that ideal. It is a strategy offering “the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency” and “a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.”⁶ Like Muñoz, I suggest that comic performances by members of minoritarian communities offer a rare opportunity for identification with someone—though they may be quite different in many ways—whose political, historical, and cultural marginalization reflects our own. One major boon is, of course, that Black lesbians do not have to employ disidentification when they attend Micia Mosely’s one-woman show.

I begin with the crisis of the ideal or the problems arising when society’s social ideal excludes women and members of minoritarian communities, making a strategy like disidentification necessary. Throughout, I will draw from Mosely’s performance text and a series of interviews to discuss Mosely’s objectives for her comic performances (be it stand-up comedy or performance art) and to address the pressure she feels to represent the diversity of members in Black lesbian communities. Along

⁶ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 1;11.

with this evidence and audience evaluations collected from across the country, I argue that her one-woman show, *Where My Girls At? A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians* creates multiple transgressive representations of Black lesbians that prompt her audience to identify with the “Other,” expanding the ability of non-Black lesbians to identify with Black lesbian subjectivities and to establish important points of connection between communities and across categories of difference. For Black lesbian audience members, Mosely’s one-woman show offers a rare occasion to see members of their communities represented and eliminates the need to invoke strategies such as disidentification, an internal refiguring of the White ideal and the ignominy commonly associated with representations of queer identity.

The Crisis of the Ideal

When the modal form of the citizen is called into question, when it is no longer a straight, white, reproductively inclined heterosexual but rather might be anything, any jumble of things, the logic of the national future comes into crisis.

-Lauren Berlant⁷

Self-determination is seldom available to women and minoritarian actors in the film and television industry because they have little control over how they are represented to the viewing public. Minoritarian performers face myriad obstacles to the pursuit of careers in performance. Melanie Comarcho says, “As the black female comedian I can do the black night in any club in the country, but when it comes to a white night where there’s a white audience, they’re not putting us in those slots.”⁸

Directors are more likely to cast White folks in the lead roles for fear of losing their

⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 18.

⁸ Melanie Comarcho in Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006), 292.

mainly White patrons and if few substantial roles exist for White women, there are far fewer available allowing women of color to express the complexity of their identities and experiences. The roles that do exist for women of color are epitomized by the hypersexualized Jezebel or Sapphire caricatures and their relegation to colonized sexualized bodies.⁹ To combat these stereotypes, Sabrina Lamb, a Black actress, turned to stand-up comedy and eventually to writing so she could exercise control over how she is portrayed—not an unusual trajectory for any performer, regardless of the categories of difference they occupy, seeking to exercise autonomy over their presentation of self.¹⁰

After receiving offers for other roles where I was asked to be a Caucasian man's wet dream, and wondering who wrote this script, I began to ask myself, "How do I flip this script?" The answer came: "By writing the images myself." From these pathetic experiences my writing career was fueled, and I joined the small cadre of black comedienne-writers. We as black women are still marginalized, fighting against Mammy, Sapphire, and Foxy Mama stereotypes. And in today's book market, where sitcom stardom is almost essential for a lucrative book deal, it is not surprising that African American comediennes, without sufficient opportunities in television, are also conspicuously absent in publishing... Hopefully, more black comediennes will take the publishing plunge and put in print images created for us and by us.¹¹

⁹ Sue Ellen Case, "Women of Colour and Theatre," in *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Methuen Inc., 1988), 95-111.

¹⁰ Jewelle Gomez examines the relative absence of Black lesbian fiction in "But Some of Us Are Brave Lesbians: The Absence of Black Lesbian Fiction," arguing that this genre has been marginalized in part due to the rise in popularity of non-fiction. This may bode well for Black lesbian authors of non-fiction like Sabrina Lamb. More likely though, Black lesbian non-fiction will suffer the same publishing and marketing difficulties with major presses and "[w]ith the narrowing of the market it has become more difficult for independent publishers to maintain themselves" (295). See: *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, eds. E. Patrick Johnson & Mae G. Henderson (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2005), 289-297.

¹¹ While there is not a huge market for Black women's comedic non-fiction, Sabrina Lamb has managed to join a small cadre of Black women comedy writers and authors such as Nikki Giovanni, Mo'Nique Hicks, Bertrice Berry, Whoopi Goldberg, Kim Coles, and Jemma Jones, all of whom have published books. Sabrina Lamb is the author of *Keepin' It Real: The Rise of Bullshit in the Black Community* (Cambridge House Books, 2006) and *Come Meet Miss Jones* (Random House, 2007). She also developed and produced the docu-comedy *Unbeweavable: Woman, What Did You Do To Your Hair?* In addition to an extensive list of appearances on television shows and radio programs, Lamb is the founder and executive director of WorldofMoney.org, a non-profit organization teaching financial

To be accurate, the dominant culture *does* demonstrate a willingness to consume humor produced by racial/ethnic and sexual minorities; however, consumption of this humor tends to favor the comics who project and reify stereotypes. This dilemma of audience reception, rather, the inability to control the way performance material is interpreted by consumers, poses a weighty concern to most comic performers who seek success but not at the expense of the community to which they belong. Dave Chappelle canceled the wildly popular *Chappelle's Show* that lampooned stereotypes about Black people because he was concerned that viewers were misinterpreting his efforts to subvert stereotypes and reading his comic material as a reinforcement of those stereotypes. Global capitalism and consumerism, particularly the desire to consume ethnic "Others," plays a pivotal and lasting role in the maintenance of stereotypes and primitivist paradigms. To counter this, artists and entertainers will play with the signifiers (these could be words formerly used as pejoratives like "nigger" or "queer," or stereotypes like that all Latinos/as love nachos and salsa) used to subordinate them and hence their work intends to respond to and challenge these relations of domination.¹² Unfortunately, with little variation on the racialized stock images and characters, we cannot say with certainty that viewers will not misinterpret performances to fulfill rather than challenge existing belief systems, to reinforce rather than raze stereotypes.

literacy to underserved and impoverished youth. Sabrina Lamb, "Laughing, Lying & Writing: Black Comediennes Turned Authors!" *Black Issues Book Review* Vol. 1, 5 (Sept./Oct. 1999): 29-30.

¹² Coco Fusco discusses this as an objective for the play, "Stuff," which she co-wrote and performed with Nao Bustamante. Coco Fusco, "Stuff," in *The Bodies That Were Not Ours* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 111-127.

Audre Lorde, in the seminal article “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” points out that stereotypes occur and are self-sustaining due to the process by which we learn to understand and read differences.

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to human difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion.¹³

Lorde’s use of the verb “destroy,” when it comes to responding to human difference is more metaphorical and in this case can substitute for lack of willingness to “buy” into one’s comic persona. In other words, the comic cannot garner top billing for her work. As I argued extensively in chapter three, many individuals, regardless of their social positions, will opt to identify with and therefore ensure the success of comics representing the dominant culture and also mimic comic performers exhibiting the traits and characteristics of the social locations bearing dominance. Comics, particularly women of color and lesbians (or both) who perform comedy challenging stereotypes and presenting self-evolved humor, offer a dynamic representation of their marginalized subjectivity. Comics using this kind of conscientious rhetorical marginality (comedy that draws from their sociological marginality) will have difficulty selling their comedy material because the general public has little incentive or prior experience in identifying with human difference. The public will consume what they understand and who they have been primed to identify with and if what

¹³ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” (1980) *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 115.

they understand and are most inundated with are stereotypical versions of an “Other,” then this is the image that will profit in this economy.

Women use performance art and other kinds of solo performance like stand-up comedy because it allows them the freedom to step outside the constraints of formal theater and mainstream media where they are largely undervalued and underrepresented. With budgetary constraints and little funding for the performing arts in general, solo performance is also more financially feasible to produce than other kinds of theatrical productions. Like Micia Mosely, Gloria Bigelow, an African American lesbian comic, wants her comedy to offer representations where there are few to none. She says, “Growing up I didn’t have, I didn’t see lesbians around that looked like me or that I could relate to or that I knew. So I’d like for people to say like, ‘That’s a dyke we haven’t seen before’.”¹⁴ Similarly, Sabrina Matthews, a White lesbian comic, expresses the desire to see more diverse representations: “I have a vision of a non-pigeonholed show, like I would love to be a character somewhat like myself in a show that represented people that actually existed.”¹⁵ The opportunity to showcase their own marginalized identities becomes a means, albeit on a small scale, of offering a unique representation to consumers. Stand-up comedy, performance art, and other forms of comic performance allow performance artists the opportunity to write and perform original material based on their personal experiences and lives.

The premise of Micia Mosely’s one-woman-show, *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, is the creation of a new reality television series

¹⁴ Gloria Bigelow lives and performs in New York City. Gloria Bigelow in *Laughing Matters...Next Gen*, DVD. Directed by Andrea Meyerson (U.S.A.: All Out Films, 2009).

¹⁵ Sabrina Matthews in *Laughing Matters...More!*, DVD. Directed and produced by Andrea Meyerson (U.S.A.: All Out Films, 2006).

called *Black Beauty: America's Next Top Negress*¹⁶ where a house full of Black lesbians will compete for this title. The show opens with Vanessa, the show's producer, introducing the concept and positioning the audience as casting directors assisting the producer with selecting the winning contestant who will move on to live in the mansion and compete for the title of America's Next Top Negress.¹⁷ The audience meets four Black lesbians, first viewing their submission tapes and then seeing each one perform a monologue. In the iteration I filmed in the Laboratory Theater at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland (UMD), the audience was divided into three sections, each one charged with the task of ranking each contestant on a scale of 1-10 (1 = lowest; 10 = highest) for one of three categories: Blackness, woman-ness, and lesbian-ness.¹⁸ Before the decision is made, the audience has an opportunity to ask the four contestants any questions that may help them determine their rankings and ultimately decide who is sent to the house. The contestant with the highest-ranking score over-all is determined by the

¹⁶ This performance took place on November 12, 2008. During the talk-back following Micia Mosely's performance at the University of Maryland, Associate Professor of American Studies, Psyche Williams-Forsen asked Mosely to "unpack 'Negress' a little bit." Mosely responds: "Lots of research went in so my initial thought about it was that it just cracked me up. So in my typical semi-Ziggy way, I had round tables when we were first putting the show together—little table-talk: 'what do you think about this character and that character,' right. Negress came up and it just made me laugh, right, because it felt so over the top. With the [hit reality television show] *America's Next Top Model*, obviously the reference is there. I was like, if someone were to do a show where they really just wanted Black women, like how would Hollywood producers... what would they [producers] really be thinking, you know, about what they would want to see, the performance of femininity and Blackness or not—just those interactions? And for me that word seemed to embody what I thought they'd really be thinking and that they would feel. So, like I feel the media does feel about themselves like [*in a schmaltzy voice*]: 'I can just do whatever I want.' So I feel like that's where Negress fits in here. It's kind of like [*in a voice of authority*]: 'Yeah you negresses, like get up there on the show and perform for us for 30 days.'"

¹⁷ Vanessa, the show's producer, is also a lesbian, though this identity is understated which is why I focus on the other four characters as obvious representations of Black lesbian identity

¹⁸ Other iterations of the performance have played with how these rankings occur sometimes having the entire audience rank for each category, other times dissecting the audience into three sections with each focusing on a specific category, and recent iterations have been divided the audience into three sections while also electing a section leader who has a few moments to talk over the ranking with audience members in their group.

strength of applause and audible feedback for each identity category.

While the show's producer, Vanessa, is also a lesbian and pivotal to the performance, her character is peripheral to the four contestants showcased throughout the performance. She functions more as narrator or interlocutor, instructing the audience, laying out the show's premise, leading the Q & A portion of the show at the end and determining the winner based on audience feedback. Each of the four contestants is charged with answering the same series of questions, some of which are: "what makes you the woman that you are?"; "what makes my Blackness beautiful?"; "what do you enjoy most about your lifestyle?"¹⁹ They respond to the questions differently, some adhering to them with due diligence and others abandoning the questions and speaking candidly with the audience about some aspect of their life. The audience meets Playher first, a rowdy Casanova who interactively teaches the audience basic rules of "roll[ing] to the club" such as not going alone, not going with an ex-girlfriend, having gum on hand and how to approach someone attractive or desirable.²⁰ Ziggy is the only character whose full name we are told—Zigawella Washington—which is emblematic of her precision and attention to details. Her response to how her Blackness is beautiful begins:

First, I want to acknowledge that the notion of Blackness is a complicated one. It's important to recognize that race is a social construct with complicated histories as to its scientific and political formation. Whether you are talking about 18th century [Johann Friedrich] Blumenbach or 20th century [Karl Gunnar] Myrdal the whole notion of race wasn't even entirely based on color...²¹

¹⁹ *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, by Micia Mosely, directed by Tamilla Woodard, Laboratory Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, November 20, 2008.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

This character, a popular one on college campuses, is highly analytical and self-reflexive. She is the mouthpiece for Black intelligentsia, incorporating key critical race theories, and revealing the problematics of inter-racial and inter-sexual coalition building.

Where Ziggy is the youngest of the contestants, Sistah is the oldest of the four as a youthful fifty-something who responds to potential surprise at her age saying, “Children, you see Black don’t crack.”²² She uses her vibrant and charming personality to lead the audience in an abbreviated yoni (vulva) power workshop, drumming and coaxing the audience to find their own yoni power. The fourth and final contestant, Lady D, chooses to express an empowered femininity and uses her stage time to bring several volunteers forward in order to give them pointers on tapping into and “help[ing] them see their fabulousness.”²³ Micia Mosely deftly moves from one character to another and the most impressive feat is the Q & A portion when audience members can ask any contestant anything they want. Mosely sits on a single chair in the middle of the stage and with no time lapses or signifying props, she slips in and out of characters answering the questions as different contestants, even having arguments, interruptions and interactions between the various contestants. If you close your eyes, you could hardly guess that one woman generates this fiery and fast-paced repartee among four very different women.

The history of audience reception to performance is full of solicitation, cues for applause, laugh tracks and coercion all aimed at training audiences to identify with a narrow, though dominant contingent of the public. As such, there is little cultural,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

political or economic incentive for identifying with the likes of Micia Mosely or any of the Black lesbians she represents in her one-woman show. Darryl Littleton, author of *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African Americans Taught Us To Laugh*, reported in an interview with NPR that his research unearthed evidence of such coercion when theaters became integrated in the early twentieth century; rather, performance venues allowed both Black and White patrons to frequent the same establishment at the same time though not in the same sections (Black folks were confined to theater balconies or back row equivalents). Black patrons watching vaudeville, minstrelsy, and comedy shows were laughing at different parts of the performance than White patrons. Whether a product of social discomfort or unease, an indication that Whites were not “getting it” or did not understand what was funny, or simply a matter of power, theater managers instructed Black patrons to wait to laugh until White patrons cued them to do so.²⁴ Cuing laughter and the need to do so assumes that the author and/or performer dictates the terms of what counts as humorous (read: I will tell you when it is time to laugh). Not laughing or laughing in moments not intended to be comical (though they are) is a way that audiences have historically asserted themselves, revealing comic frames particular to minoritarian communities. The struggle over the power to interpret debunks authoritative claims to how we *should* respond to and make sense of performances, regardless of authorial intent.

Albeit less overt, people are still repeatedly inundated with the tacit (and sometimes not so tacit) social instruction as to what constitutes funny and who

²⁴ Tony Cox, 2007, “A Short History of Black Comedy,” *News & Notes*, radio program. Guest speaker Darryl Littleton. U.S.: NPR Radio, February 26. See also Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (New York, NY: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2006).

produces the funny. For minorities and the powerless, these terms are set by the powerful and in most instances brown faces will watch white faces rule the roost, save the day, and bring home the bacon.²⁵ The refiguring of these largely White, heteronormative representations, namely how “Others” digest representations that do not include them and go on to construct their own identities, is what Jose Esteban Muñoz describes as disidentification.

Disidentification is a response/strategy that “minority subjects practice in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”²⁶ In other words, disidentification is a story of “identity formation” concerning “subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny.”²⁷ This disidentification is neither assimilationist (desiring to be like) nor anti-assimilationist (desiring to be different); rather, a buy-in “strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse.”²⁸ Identification with others establishes points of desire and when the dominant culture’s White, heterosexual, able-bodied, affluent, and male-centric ideal is peddled to the public, it implicitly asks audiences to admire, attain, and achieve that ideal, even when categories of difference like being queer prevent us from doing so.

²⁵ I am not saying that there are no opportunities to attend comedy and performances by minoritarian subjects. Indeed, there has been a small explosion of minoritarian comics performing for niche communities, a phenomenon discussed in the documentary *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy*. Interviewees seemed to concur that as comedy venues have grown to accommodate the desire of niche markets to consume the comedy of performers who share their sociological marginality, there has been a lapse in the vetting process typical for mainstream success. In other words, a growing market has decreased the likelihood that comics will have invested the time necessary to be a good comic performer. I discuss niche markets for stand-up comedy later in the chapter.

²⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

Queers are not always ‘properly’ interpellated by the dominant public sphere’s heterosexist mandates because desire for a bad object offsets that process of reactionary ideological indoctrination. In a somewhat analogous fashion, queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted by an ideological component that tells us that such modalities of desire and desiring are too self-compromising. *We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but desire it with a difference.* The negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification (italics mine).²⁹

Importantly, Muñoz instructs us that disidentification is not a wholesale adoption of the White ideal; instead, it is a process of consumption that refigures the White ideal, simultaneously understanding its cultural currency and import while unpacking the ideological underpinnings of this ideal to establish points of connection, making it meaningful and relevant to cultural outsiders.

According to Jose Esteban Muñoz, lesbian comic performance can challenge this crisis of the ideal whilst deploying camp and “*choteo*,”³⁰ both performance styles using humor to mock social conventions and “to examine social and cultural forms.”³¹ His examination of performances by Marga Gomez, Ela Troyano, and Carmelita Tropicana defy any move to neutralize radical lesbian performance of camp and *choteo* and instead demonstrates how these performative maneuvers “[access] a new reality” by imitation that never reproduces the original, though it tries.³² And in its “trying,” these performances seek not to assimilate but to deracinate the dominant social order, in part by mocking the existence of a stable and preferred origin of being (read: White heteronormativity). Judith Butler, who commercialized

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ Muñoz identifies “*choteo*” performance as a “form of mockery and joking that systematically undermines all authority. It is a practice that perpetuates disarray, mixture, and general confusion” and counters the notion of fixed or stable identity/subjectivity (136).

³¹ Ibid., 119.

³² Ibid., 133.

gender as artifice, play, or performance, points out in *Bodies That Matter* that there is no originary template of gender from which to model; rather, we reproduce citations of citations which carry with it the authority of repetition, the force of its history of being repeatedly repeated.³³ Abolishing this notion of an a priori fixed or stable subject frees the project(s) of identity politics from its seemingly inextricable relationship with essentialist framings of identity without diminishing the heft behind any projects seeking to educate and theorize about identity. As a result a new queer polyvocality or homo-heteroglossia, to *choteorize* Mikhail Bakhtin's term, emerges...one in which theories such as Muñoz's disidentification can flourish.³⁴

In *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, performer and audience co-constitute. Every iteration requires audience members to determine the show's outcome, thus the winning contestant varies from one performance to the next. Audience members are apprised of their role in this performance, a maneuver asking that they invest on some level in the performance. This participation in the outcome ensures that most audience members engage with the performance. Micia Mosely hopes that this scenario forces viewers to question how and why they rank contestants according to Blackness, woman-ness, and lesbian-ness; she also hopes that in the process, viewers will connect (read: identify) with one or more of the Black lesbian contestants regardless of whether they occupy similar or identical categories of difference.

³³ Many of the issues discussed in *Bodies That Matter*, were initially broached in *Gender Trouble*. The former serves as re-articulation of topics such as performativity, parody, drag, etc. based on the responses and critiques marshaled by the academic community. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 227.

³⁴ Neither Muñoz nor Fernando Ortiz, whom Muñoz cites as excavating the etymology of *choteo*, employ the term as a verb. This is my (insistent) re-rendering of a term, resonant as "playing," "tearing," and "systematically undermin[ing] all authority," to do the same with Bakhtin's original deployment and usage of the term "heteroglossia" (Muñoz 135-6).

The audience at the performance held at UMD elected Sistah to win and move on to be in the faux reality television show. To date, every contestant has won at least once, but Playher, Sistah, and most recently Lady D (after considerable effort was made to work-shop the presentation of this persona) have the strongest record of wins, with Playher leading the pack in total number of wins. In one of her interviews, Mosely reported that, based on the feedback she has received thus far, audience members vote in one of two ways: “who they think would actually be fun on the show, like, who they would want to watch if there was going to be a reality TV show, or it’s who they feel the most comfortable with, and who they feel they’ve made a connection with. It’s not always clear what that connection is.”³⁵ Mosely does not presume the manifold ways viewers can connect to Playher, Ziggy, Lady D, and Sistah but does understand the importance that these connections have on the outcome (determining a winner) of the show.

While disidentification demonstrates its ability to recuperate and renegotiate identities without compromising the individual, it is a strategy developed in response to a market showcasing certain identities and attributes while devaluing and ignoring other identities and attributes. More valuable are the opportunities provided women and minorities to identify with similarly situated—culturally, politically, regionally, sexually, affectationally, racially—individuals, i.e., performers bearing similar markings of alterity. Consumers do not have to disidentify if there are multiple representations that look like they do. For Black lesbians, the opportunity to see not one, but four very different and all very funny representation of Black lesbians in *Where My Girls At?*, is one of the most important aspects of her show.

³⁵ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

Despite the odds against them, there are many comics who have found success marketing themselves to niche audiences like gay, Jewish, Black, and Latino/a communities. These niche markets offer an additional route for success for minority comic performers. Much like the gendered expectations for film, members of these communities are likely to be conversant with the exceedingly popular stand-up comics who make it “big” in mainstream television and/or film—demonstrating that the oppressed must know more than the oppressor—by understanding their own cultural oeuvres as well as that of the dominant culture. However, minoritarian communities will also support the live performances of lesser-known comics belonging to their respective communities. With the ease of travel and the accessibility of images in today’s technocratic world, minoritarian communities have even greater opportunities to see live or filmed performances of comics who are also Black, Hispanic, or gay or some combination thereof. When mainstream comedy includes only a precious few from various minoritarian communities, members of these communities turn to comics marketing themselves to niche markets in spaces outside the national comedy club circuit, i.e., gay and Black pride events, punk and indie rock venues and clubs, specialty cruise lines and conferences/conventions, etc.

Many of these niche market performers offer a representation of experiences and points of view arising from the performers’ sociological marginality. They are exercising rhetorical marginality. E. Patrick Johnson argues “black performance provides a space for black culture to reveal itself to itself—to come to know itself, in

the process of doing.”³⁶ Johnson works to articulate Black performance as its own way(s) of knowing and just as usefully, as its own way of resisting mechanisms of oppression. In doing so, he allows room for engagement with other marginalized subjectivities within Black performance studies, a move meant to incorporate the intersectionality of subjectivities and suggestive of the myriad performances generated by unique combinations of subject positions.³⁷ Black comic performers crossing over into mainstream comedy must make the critical decisions of how best to communicate their (marginalized) experiences while retaining the affections and support of middle (White) America. This might translate into a complete absence of rhetorical marginality as with Ellen Degeneres or Bill Cosby, neither of whom use their marginalized subjectivity to inform the content and topics in their stand-up routines. Or it can translate into a presentation of self playing into and on stereotypes circulating about that category of difference like Rita Rudner’s (White) glorification of women as ditzy shopaholics dependent on men for survival or Ant’s (White, gay) hyperbolic effeminacy on stage.

Often, comics who are able to gain national recognition, whose productions of humor acknowledges sociological marginality and challenges stereotypes (e.g., Margaret Cho, Mo’Nique Hicks, Rosie O’Donnell), have difficulty finding roles in mainstream film and television. Whoopi Goldberg stands out as an example of a crossover comic having a conflicting relationship with film and comedy. Having come out as a politically charged female comic, using characters to deliver her

³⁶ E. Patrick Johnson, “Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2006), 449.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 458.

messages, she found herself available for and sought out for films but did not have a comic persona lending itself to any cinematic archetype (in main, because her comic persona does not replicate the stock female comic personas such as the hapless ingénue). This made for an interesting film career that often cast Goldberg as peripheral characters that both embodied and broke from stereotypical Black characters. As Bambi Haggins notes in her examination of Goldberg's career in *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, Goldberg is someone "who occupies a space in the entertainment worlds that, as much as possible, she defines (or tries to define)."³⁸ Because she does not fit standard archetypes for Black women, she continues to have to carve out a performatic niche for her comic persona using the stage, radio, film, and television (she is currently the moderator and co-host of the television talk show, *The View*) to disseminate the multitude of messages she has to impart.

Comedy provides a space for identification between audience members and performers, making this kind of performance a useful one to combat the crisis of the ideal. There is power in this exchange between audience and performers and there lies the potential to humanize, to educate, to instruct, and to laugh (sometimes about serious matters). In a filmed interview with Jennifer Corday at the Dinah Shore Classic in Palm Springs, CA, Kate Clinton said, "I think people hear things that they might not ordinarily hear if they are laughing."³⁹ Micia Mosely agrees that comedy allows her a "smoother way in" and also believes that her comic performances allow

³⁸ Bambi Haggins, "Crossover Diva: Whoopi Goldberg and Persona Politics," in *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers UP, 2007), 134.

³⁹ *Kate Clinton: The 25th Anniversary Tour*, DVD. Directed by Andrea Meyerson (USA: All Out Films, 2007).

her “to speak openly about those things [sex and sexuality], not conflict them, but really tease out the issues, and help us understand who we are and how we can be in the world.”⁴⁰ Both agree that comedy has a great deal of sway and influence on audience members because it can expose you to alternative view points and experiences; this kind of information affects core belief systems, which ultimately feed the way we participate in various systems—e.g., political, social, sexual, religious—and how we consume humor in the future.

Other ways of combating the crisis of the White ideal are to make consumption choices in favor of performances, music, films, and television programming that offer dynamic representations of minoritarian subjects or to voice dissatisfaction and offer constructive criticism when confronted with limited and reductionary representations. Black lesbian audience members attending *Where My Girls At?*, indicate they are highly invested in any widely disseminated images of themselves. In turn, Micia Mosely conveys deference to the opinions and feedback from Black lesbian communities for whom she frequently performs. She is very clear that the agenda here is “making fun of it [Black lesbians] in a way that’s: ‘Isn’t life funny? Look at how much we’re just like everybody else and look at how different we are, isn’t life funny?’ kind of a way.”⁴¹ Karen Williams, a Black lesbian comic performer, notes that the lesbian audiences she performs for “are knowledgeable, wise and informed, and you cannot put junk in front of them. They’re not havin’ it.”⁴² It is important to please your audience, but more than that Mosely has a sense of duty to represent Black lesbians fairly, respectfully, and accurately. They too are invested in her

⁴⁰ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

⁴¹ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

⁴² Karen Williams, “Healing Humor,” *Metroweekly* 14, 50 (April 24, 2008): 36.

representations because members of other communities are attending her shows as well and making judgments and inferences based on her representations.

I find that Black lesbians talk about these characters very different than anyone else because it's, it feels more like a "You got this right, you didn't get this right." It's a particular kind of investment. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that there aren't a whole lot of comedies about Black lesbians out there rolling around in theaters. You know, I don't know everything, but I'm guessing there aren't a whole lot. So, I think when people see this, internally I think people can get what we're up to in terms of documenting who we are, and they want to make sure we get it right. So when I say they talk about it in very different ways, the content isn't always different, but the way they talk about it...there is a sense of entitlement and you need to get this right.⁴³

Some of their concerns have been hyperbolizing stereotypes for a laugh, misrepresentations, and a lack of character complexity, all of which Mosely carefully attends to by soliciting feedback from her community via audience evaluations, talk-backs, and post-show discussions with audiences. bell hooks notes that "[a]ttention to the politics of representation has been crucial for colonized groups globally in the struggle for self-determination" and encourages readers not to ignore the "political power of representations."⁴⁴ This is a central concern for Mosely and throughout the course of the show's tenure, she came to realize just how deeply invested fellow Black lesbians were in how they are represented, making it all the more imperative for Mosely to "get this right." Because she uses her own life to develop these characters and write this show, Mosely is already drawing from her own Black lesbian subjectivity, a lived experience that informs the presentation of each character in her one-woman show.

⁴³ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

⁴⁴ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990), 72.

On some level, Micia Mosely believes that her performance acumen for each character affects the outcome of the show; while the audience makes the decision, how she performs contributes to the final verdict delivered by viewers. When Lady D could not claim a single win after many performances, she focused on rewriting the character. Since Ziggy stopped winning the show (about a year ago) and Lady D, Playher, and Sistah repeatedly won audience affection, Mosely re-scripted Ziggy to enhance her appeal. This refiguring of Ziggy is done in concert with the audience over time as she performs various versions of Ziggy to arrive at a winning persona, meaning Mosely and audience co-construct and character revisions are co-constituted by Mosely and her audience. Equally important, we might question her desire for each Black lesbian to appeal to the audience; instead, asking what are the pedagogical and performance values of creating characters that may not appeal to audience members. It could be equally instructive having a less popular character because this presents viewers the opportunity to grapple with their dislike for the character. This may be particularly effective in this show where contestants are evaluated on their Blackness, woman-ness and lesbian-ness because it would illumine where identification failed among specific categories of identity, forcing viewers to think more complexly about difference. While the show unapologetically celebrates Black lesbian identity, Mosely's reliance on audience feedback to revise the characters means that over time we might actually be celebrating other people's fantasies of Black lesbian subjectivity. When it comes to "getting it right," the question becomes whether you *can* get it right and whether or not you need to. Regardless of Mosely's

intentions, her characters remain subject to interpretation, meaning they can still be read as recapitulating stereotypes.

Simply by putting out their comedy for consumption, comics like Kate Clinton, Karen Williams, and Micia Mosely and the other comics I discuss throughout, offer performances that are unapologetic in their deference to and celebration of their communities. These performances forego the need for similarly situated persons to employ disidentification. They offer, to their own communities (and anyone else interested), thoughtful representations commenting on life, laughing at, and ultimately building their respective communities. These alternate representations, particularly as they deviate so obviously from the narrow interpretations of gender, race, sexuality, and ability, do as Lauren Berlant suggests in the quote opening this section, “call into question” the White ideal and in doing so incrementally challenge and reshape how and in what ways various communities figure into the national imaginary.

Disidentification Interrupted

And with all of the characters...I'm...really trying to get them to be seen by as many different audiences, so that people can see themselves in the characters. And see people in the Black lesbian community that they may not really have a chance to intimately interact with, because they either don't know the women in their lives are lesbians, or they just don't know any at all.

-Micia Mosely⁴⁵

Social positions and the ways in which we are limited, inhibited, and subdued based on these positions affect the kinds of performances we use to express the precise conditions of our lives. While originating from discreet loci, each identity-based history of performance—i.e., African American, Chicana, Asian American, LGBTQ, or differently abled—seeks similar objectives: to be the author of our own

⁴⁵ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

experiences and arbiter of the representation(s) presented to the public. In doing so, our performances serve as an open challenge to the representations manufactured and disseminated widely in mainstream media. Even more importantly, though, we offer our own communities an opportunity to identify with a representation that looks familiar, versus the ones available commercially and typically developed to fulfill a set of notions or beliefs about what a lesbian is like or what a Latina is like.

For Micia Mosely and other minoritarian comic performers enacting cultural citizenship, achieving mainstream success *could* change the pattern of consumption of humor by transforming the kinds of humor valued and therefore consumed. Comic performance can “offer Black women alternative methods to express their sexual desires and expand blackness in the process” in part because it is self authored but also because it employs humor and trickery.⁴⁶ L.H. Stallings states: “Black stand-up comedy...is an unacknowledged queer space that African American women have been manipulating for their very own drag performances meant to annihilate heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality.”⁴⁷ Accordingly, Micia Mosely’s performance in *Where My Girls At?* is one woman’s choice “to work from the knowledge of [her] bod[y] as a territory of cultural and political maneuvering

⁴⁶ L. H. Stallings looks to the historical origins and scholarly discussions of the trickster figure in literature, myth, and folklore finding it to be a useful point of inquiry for examining Black radical female subjectivity. Countering androcentric theories of the trickster (pace Henry Louis Gates Jr.), she writes that the trickster is “difference and desire personified,” allowing “difference to be read equally and without classifying elements of difference as deviance” (9). Trickster-troping “means the deployment and recognition of differences through an equilateral order” or “[w]hen writers, performers, and artists utilize a creative technique of constructing anomos narratives, characters, settings, or culture through multiple and simultaneous manifest traits of the trickster” (10). Moreover, the trickster is neither male nor female but androgynous or both, encompassing all of these things. In fact, the “figures’ trickeration in this regard often mean that the tricksters discombobulate the usual heterosexual readings trickster research yields” (17). See: *Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2007). See also: Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

rather than accept false gender ideologies of whatever time period they exist in...this is [her] way of ascertaining the sexual ideology and reassessing the material circumstances of [her] era.”⁴⁸ Achieving this higher consciousness was not easy for Mosely who says she struggled throughout college “to find [her] comedic identity.”⁴⁹ She credits most of her formal training in comedic performance to her stint as an improvisational actress in “False Advertising,” Brandeis’ improv comedy troupe. At Brandeis University, an undergraduate institution attended by mainly heterosexual White Jews, Micia Mosely worked to negotiate her racial and sexual identities.

I didn’t feel comfortable joining the Black Student Organization because they were really homophobic...at that time, the gays were fine with me being Black but the Blacks were not fine with me being gay. It was also very new to me; much more comfortable for me to focus on my sexuality. But in my comedy what was really apparent when I was on stage with my troupe mates was our difference in race and so that’s what I played on because you kind of would have to know me. So, when I look back on it I am very critical of that time because I feel like there were times when I did what I felt like I had to do for the joke but I was the joke. Like it got to the point where I was making fun of myself and that was a problem.⁵⁰

Comedy provided a forum to explore these identities though she struggled to not make her Blackness or lesbian-ness the object of humor. Over time she was able to deploy humor without making herself the object of ridicule. Her involvement with Luna Sea Theater allowed her the opportunity for performative self-determination and inspired her to create a show giving viewers something she never got in her youth—representations of Black lesbians.

Mica Mosely uses complex representations of Black lesbian identity to demonstrate that “[s]exual vernacular, when used strategically by Black women” can

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, May 23, 2008.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

interrupt “master narratives on Black womanhood and motherhood.”⁵¹ As part of her monologue, Ziggy interrogates the language of sexuality in order to locate herself. Unhappy with the term “queer” because it “means strange” and dissatisfied with the term “lesbian” because it is “derived from women who lived on a Greek Island” and does not reflect her African heritage, Ziggy prefers the term “woman-loving-woman, because it says who I am and what I do.”⁵² Acknowledging the power of words to create, construct, and confine, Ziggy defines herself and simultaneously offers the audience a means of interpellating her—in and on her own terms. Ziggy’s race and sexuality inform her preference for how she identifies. In this instance, audience members are groomed to consider how her Blackness and lesbian-ness intersect. Mosely works to complicate the intersection of these categories of difference and to train audience members to identify with queered *and* raced individuals. Each persona (e.g., Ziggy, Lady D, Playher, and Sistah) has qualities making her relatable beyond the Black lesbian community. Identification with one or all four of the main Black lesbian subjectivities portrayed expands, humanizes, and combats the flattening/reductionary work of stereotypes, which helps to inform and mobilize (coalition building) constituents beyond their respective communities.

Having filmed the show and spoken with Micia Mosely at length about her performance and career, it is clear that her objectives for *Where My Girls At?* are to insert voices and representations where there are few to none: “I think that what I seek to do in my comedy whether it be my stand-up or in the show is to really create space for myself and people like me. Because I feel like the more we do that for

⁵¹ Stallings, *Mutha’ is Half a Word*, 25.

⁵² *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, Ibid.

different kinds of people than everyone gets to move through the world feeling normal, feeling represented and being represented.”⁵³ She works hard to make sure these characters do not turn into caricatures, capitalizing on existing stereotypes about Black women or lesbians. During the talk-back at UMD, following the performance, she shares with the audience some of her goals for the show:

I want people to have access to seeing variety in whatever way they can. When I make the choice to do that through comedy, when we look at most comedy you’re automatically, you’re kind of on that fine line whenever you decide to really go there with comedy: Are you offending people? Is it political or is it just offensive? Is it a stereotype, is it a caricature?...For me, I’m much more interested that people are able to have a conversation and look at the world differently so the next time they see someone, who they may not have ever see on the metro they can actually see that person. With Lady D, that people can see that there are femme Black women who are lesbians and are very excited about that and don’t want to be ignored because they don’t show up like Playher and there’s a whole bunch of people who embody Playher and are very proud of who they are and who want to be seen *as women* and everybody in between. So, for me, it’s really just giving folks a little taste so that we can continue the conversation and expand our notions (emphasis hers).⁵⁴

These characters are being consumed. As Mosely says, her characters give audience members a “little taste,” a phrase that brings to mind bell hooks’ essay “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” where she argues that commodification of the “Other” makes consumption of “difference” analogous to an exotic adventure or a spicy dish.⁵⁵ In this instance, though, Mosely gets to be author and producer of that “little taste,” and while she cannot undo this tendency, this impulse to eat the “Other,” she

⁵³ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, November 21, 2008.

⁵⁴ Mosely was responding to a question posed by Associate Professor of English, Marilee Lindemann who said: “I’m interested to hear how you talk about how you work with stereotypes in the show because I think it’s really powerful what you’re doing. Do you ever worry thought that some audience members might walk away with certain stereotypes being validated?” Micia Mosely, “Talk-Back,” *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, by Micia Mosely, directed by Tamilla Woodard, Laboratory Theatre, Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, November 20, 2008.

⁵⁵ bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” in *Eating Culture*, eds. Ronn Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1998), 181-200.

can make sure that what is consumed is well-conceived and with the good intentions toward the communities she represents.

The show is purposefully crafted to prompt audience members to consider the intersecting and often-competing subject positions the characters face as Black lesbians. As she said in an interview: “it’s not just the gay play, it’s not just the Black play, it’s, you know, a couple of things coming together...I definitely think people’s notions of African American-ness come into play relative to sexuality.”⁵⁶ The show intentionally introduces some interesting concerns about how we judge people based on social categories often treated as discreet such as race, sexuality, and gender.

In general, Lady D, a highly feminized self-proclaimed diva, scores low for her lesbian-ness. Playher, a butchy heartthrob looking for Miss Right-Now, scores lower for her woman-ness. And Ziggy, a young civic-minded intellectual with a White girlfriend, receives low rankings for her Blackness. These rankings reveal assumptions that people have about what it means to be lesbian, female or Black.

When one Black person says to another Black person, “you’re not Black enough,” there’s an extra narrative at play that they’re then using and internalizing and passing on. So to be able to have that exchange with folks and talk about what it means for them to be in a mostly White college, have people call them not Black enough, and then have them vote that Ziggy gets a “one” on her Blackness, is deep. It’s deep and it’s important for me that while we’re laughing, we’re also having those kinds of conversations...And with that particular character [Ziggy], it was important for me for people to recognize the complexity of Blackness, and the complexity of lesbian-ness, and for us not to have to choose—I mean the whole show is definitely about that—but also for people to see different possibilities of who we are, and who we can be. And a lot of Black women my age in particular get written off depending on what category people put you in. So you’re off in the kind of Afro-centric, only ever hang out with people of color, maybe only ever hang out with Black people, kinda Black lesbian. Or you have a White girlfriend and most of your friends are White, and you’re very uncomfortable around Black people type of Black lesbian—and that’s not

⁵⁶ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

limited to lesbians, that's an experience that many Black people have faced...For me, because there's so much marginalization in the larger society, when it comes to Black people and when it comes to gay people, when you're combining those two identities, I really wanted Ziggy to be able to tease out what happened within our community.⁵⁷

These responses to various representations of Black lesbians reveal social limitations placed on various identity categories, particularly those grappling with competing and intersecting social identities. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson warn that “to ignore the multiple subjectivities of the minoritarian subject within and without political movements and theoretical paradigms is not only theoretically and politically naïve, but also potentially dangerous.”⁵⁸ Importantly, audience members are challenged to consider how they compartmentalize various categories of difference without considering those that occupy multiple marginalized subjectivities. Mosely asks her audience to confront their assumptions about not one, but three intersecting categories of difference.

Most people, if asked to list mainstream representations of Black lesbians may haltingly cite the biracial character of Bette Porter played by Jennifer Beals on Showtime's *The L Word* or suggest Wanda Sykes as an example of a Black lesbian comic (though Sykes did not foreground her sexuality in her stand-up comedy until a couple years ago and *after* she achieved national notoriety).⁵⁹ In a social setting and cultural climate where Black lesbians are seldom visible, Mosely's one-woman show gives viewers multiple parties with which to identify.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (eds.), “Introduction: Queering Black Studies/ ‘Quaring’ Queer Studies,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2005), 5.

⁵⁹ Following the passage of Proposition 8 in California, Wanda Sykes officially “came out” to the public on November 15, 2008 at a rally in Las Vegas, Nevada. The comedy that made her popular did foreground race and gender, but her more recent comedy also draws from her identity as a lesbian.

Micia Mosely seeks to compel audience members who are themselves *not* Black lesbians to identify with one, several or all of the personas developed. This may not be a difficult task, given the title of the performance, its billing and the typical venues in which Mosely performs such as universities, colleges, and identity-based festivals. It is highly likely that those attending the show are willing or easily coaxed to identify with someone unlike them. Post-show audience evaluations gathered from approximately half a dozen performances asks respondents to supply the following information: race, age, gender, sexual orientation, and zip code/region. An accumulation of these evaluations, indicate that a little over half of the audience identify as members of the LGBTQ community. Even fewer identified themselves specifically as lesbians or dykes (their words). While this hetero-to-homo ratio will certainly vary depending on the performance, it is safe to assume that the majority of audience members will not identify as lesbians, thus are being placed in a position of identifying with someone unlike themselves in terms of sexual orientation. The same evaluations show that approximately forty percent of audience respondents identified as Black, African American or bi-racial (with Black denoted as part of their racial make-up). Clearly Micia Mosely is presenting her work to audiences who are not all or even mostly Black lesbians, an aspect of the show that is very important to her.

And politically speaking, obviously, politically and socially and culturally, I want the audience to walk away with a deeper understanding of Black lesbians. Period. You know, I am who I am in the world, and I'm blessed to have so many friends and loved ones and family members who love me for all of who I am, and that is not true for everyone on this planet. There are women and men being beaten and raped and tortured every day because of who they are, because of their sexuality, because of their race, and I can't take my freedom for granted, and if doing this show allows some audience member a different insight into a human being that they may identify with or not identify with initially, then I feel like I'm helping us take a step in the

right direction. And given where we are right now with race and sexuality on this planet, I feel like this particular project is very, very important for people to see no matter how you identify, and I want people to connect to the ways that feel appropriate for them and then push themselves a little bit further.⁶⁰

The order of business here is to offer up a wide variety of Black lesbians demonstrating their complexity, dynamism and diversity. Mosely's performance functions similarly to the performances of Marga Gomez, Carmelita Tropicana, and Ela Troyana as examined by Jose Esteban Muñoz. They are all performances indicating that "identity politics does not need only to be rooted in essentialized notions of the self and simplistic understandings of resistance, but rather that it is essentially a politics of hybridity that works within and outside the dominant public sphere, and in doing so contests the ascendant racial, sexual, and class strictures."⁶¹ What Mosely wants people to understand is that "it's *both/and*. It's not either/or" (italics mine).⁶² Fellow Black lesbians are able to see parts of them and others in their community represented—this is disidentification interrupted. Other audience members benefit from this rare access to so many different personalities and characters, all of whom are Black lesbians.

The uber feminine Lady D is mouthpiece for Micia Mosely's objectives for the show: "America needs to see this fine example of Black Beauty. Because too many images of the Blackness is not beautiful. Or the Beauty is not Black. I can give America a new vision of Black Beauty à la lesbianess."⁶³ Lady D laments, along with the other characters, that she was not taught to embrace her beauty as Black or as a

⁶⁰ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

⁶¹ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 141.

⁶² Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 27, 2008.

⁶³ *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, Ibid.

lesbian. Each of the characters reveals their own struggle to embrace their woman-ness, Blackness and lesbian-ness in a culture rendering Black lesbians invisible. Lady D reports that she had “to reprogram [her] brain” to become the sassy, self-loving woman you see confidently strutting around the stage. She says, “I don’t let anyone question my beauty. I don’t let anyone question my intelligence because of my beauty and don’t let people question my sexuality because some man may want to fuck me.”⁶⁴ She shares her fabulousness with the audience by selecting several audience members who are then given individualized tips on coming into their own fabulousness. While this instruction is meant to be humorous, Micia Mosely also intends for it to be edifying and to flip the traditional script. How often does a Black lesbian get the chance to serve as role model and motivational speaker to anyone, let alone members of the dominant culture?

Where Lady D demonstrates that being a lesbian and being feminine are not mutually exclusive, Playher reminds the audience that androgynous self-expression does not obviate her woman-ness. She acknowledges that “some of ya’ll may not be used to seeing a woman like [her]self” and suggests that the audience watch and learn from her: “I may not wear the heels and the makeup, but you know I like the heels and the makeup. But you gotta open your mind. Cause whether America is ready or not, this is a fine example of a Black Beauty.”⁶⁵ Lady D challenges stereotypes about lesbian aesthetics and Playher challenges heteronormative constructions of femininity.

Audience surveys collected include one open-ended question: “What did you

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

enjoy about the show?” and space is reserved at the bottom for any additional comments audience respondents may have regarding the show, talk-back, performer, etc. Common responses to the question generally express appreciation for the diversity and variety of characters portrayed: “I love the variety of people being represented;” “I loved all the characters and how rich they were;” “They all represented very different black women;” “The wide range of characters;” “The number of personalities and social issues she so skillfully displayed;” “Insightful characters.” One respondent wrote “1 woman = all women,” which seems to indicate that Mosely’s intentions to draw connections among Black lesbians, between Black lesbians and other women, and between Black lesbians and any person, were successfully conveyed to that individual. Audience feedback indicates that she is offering well-conceived depictions of Black lesbians.

The performance also serves to temporarily place White and heterosexual patrons in positions similar to the daily experiences of the disenfranchised who are offered entertainment and information from a White, straight, male perspective. This is not to say that members of the dominant culture who are placed in a position as cultural outsider undergo disidentification. Jose Esteban Muñoz warns that “disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects” nor is it a strategy that we can affix to just anybody.⁶⁶ As such, disidentification is a strategy of the powerless and disenfranchised, one that is developed over time in response to the crisis of the White ideal and I suggest we exercise caution before asserting that such a strategy can be employed by the privileged.

Black lesbians attending *Where My Girls At?* do not have to resort to

⁶⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

“disidentify[ing] with the white ideal,” to “desire it but desire it with a difference.”⁶⁷

Micia Mosely’s performance and presentation of these characters interrupts the usual process of disidentification. Instead, audience members belonging to the dominant culture or occupying positions of social privilege are placed in a position to identify with Black lesbians, temporarily making them cultural outsiders as the various personas draw from in-group humor and experiences. For the Black lesbian who gets to see four comedic representations of Black lesbians, she is (finally) offered an array of personas to identify with versus the typical experience feeling excluded by virtue of gender, race, and sexuality.

Conclusion

I don’t want to fight you...I’m just going to show you something that I hope will turn your views upside down.

—Micia Mosely⁶⁸

As I argue throughout, the conscientious work Micia Mosely does in crafting each character—Ziggy, Lady D, Playher, and Sistah—offers dynamic representations of Black lesbians. While disidentification may serve as a useful strategy for members of minoritarian communities, Mosely’s performance displaces the need for disidentification that has become rote for the marginalized, instead offering thoughtful representations of Black lesbians with which one can identify—as women, as lesbians, and/or as African Americans. During an interview on the day after her performance at UMD, she said candidly:

So for me it’s about expanding those notions in multiple communities and pushing those boundaries so that what we think of as the norm we at least question because it might just simply be the norm that gets presented to us

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁸ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, February 15, 2010.

and I feel very, very strongly about the role of history and the media in all of this when it comes to representation... what if Harriet Tubman were a lesbian. And what if she were an out lesbian? ... Yes there were lesbians who were enslaved and there were gay men who were enslaved. Like we didn't just pop up after emancipation like: "ooh I think I'll be gay, I'm free," you know [*laughing*]. So how do we change our notions of even our understanding of who we are and where we came from to include the truth of all of who we are and where we came from? So if the documentation has to start in the twenty-first century, fine... But I don't want 200 years from now someone to simply look at whoever they would look at now and think that that's it.⁶⁹

The predominant absence of women of color as leading protagonists in the entertainment industry prompted some women of color performers to develop theater collectives like Spiderwoman Theater Company and Rivers of Honey and create all-women performance spaces such as Luna Sea Theater Company in Los Angeles (no longer operating) and WOW Café Theater in New York City. These collaborative ventures remain committed to illuminating specific objectives deemed insignificant or radical by the dominant culture like attending to women's issues and perspectives, the political efficacy of anger and humor, and developing heterogeneous representations of women of color. Queer performance troupes like Split Britches, the Five Lesbian Brothers, the Nellie Olsens, the Mickee Faust Club, and the Gay Mafia emerged confronting similar issues of representation. Micia Mosely joins the company of the small but dedicated group of performing artists working to develop rich and diverse representations of members of their respective communities. In doing so, she offers counter-narrative to (the limited) circulated images of Black women that are devoid of Black lesbians. Like other lady tricksters, Mosely uses her one-woman show "to contend with life, for personal amusement, to entertain others, to educate, and to

⁶⁹ Micia Mosely, Personal Interview, December 21, 2008.

articulate social and political critique.”⁷⁰ Her agenda for the show is clear and audience evaluations indicate that viewers grasp the objectives for this performance; however, her work is limited by virtue of its relative lack of exposure nationally and globally.

Micia Mosely’s ability to challenge the social invisibility of Black lesbians, largely hinges on commercial success. Shalonda Ingram, a Black lesbian and the founder of Nursha Project™ which produces *Where My Girls At?*, sought to create a production company that helps establish and represent performance artists in order to “elucidate sociopolitical activism through the incubation of sustainable ideas, strategic planning, collaborative project design, and product development.”⁷¹ It would seem obvious that Mosely’s one-woman show would be popular and quite successful at gay pride events. But as Ingram explained to me during an interview at Café Sureia in Washington D.C., event planners are not willing “to make sure people learn about them [lesser-known performers]” or to “take the risk on our community, within our community at events that are specific to our community.”⁷² Thus, artists with less notoriety tend to get short shrifted and instead celebrity entertainers are hired to perform, who are oftentimes not members of the LGBTQ community and whose work does not necessarily advocate for gay civil rights or cultural acceptance. It is hard to reprimand mainstream theater production for its lack of representations of difference when events expressly produced for queer communities elide their own artists.

⁷⁰ Carol Allen, “‘Shaking That Thing’ and All Its Wonders: African American Female Comedy,” *Studies in American Humor* 3,12 (2005): 97.

⁷¹ Direct quotes are taken from the mission statement for Nursha Project, which is available at <http://nurshaproject.com/about-us/missionvision>.

⁷² Shalonda Ingram, Personal Interview, February 21, 2009.

In spite of the difficulty she has placing the show at key national pride events, Ingram continues to promote Mosely's show, believing in its value and the message it imparts. For a couple years now, Mosely has been invited to perform at Washington D.C.'s Black Pride, though they are not offering compensation. After a couple of years struggling to subsist off of the show's revenue, Mosely now works full-time for the Posse Foundation, a non-profit organization selecting and training young people to become student leaders on participating campuses across the nation. She uses her vacation and personal days to continue performing the show as well as stand-up comedy, which she began performing two years ago.

For African Americans, whose particular history of enslavement and exploitation in the US shapes the production of cultural practices, humor functions as survival strategy, coping mechanism, a means to develop community, and an effective means of critique.⁷³ Truth couched in humor has a tendency to unmask and challenge racist, sexist, and homophobic cultural scripts, to offer a teachable moment that neither looks nor feels like "teaching." And while Micia Mosely continues to tour her show and has performed at colleges, arts festivals, and in theaters across the country, her work continues to play for audiences who in main, are already receptive to examining differences more complexly. The real boon will come when *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians* achieves the same popularity enjoyed by Lily Tomlin's *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* or Whoopi Goldberg's *The Spook Show* (what was later titled *Whoopi Goldberg Live*), both of which became

⁷³ For a lengthy discussion of the roots of African American humor, see Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

instantaneous hits on Broadway in the 1980s. Mosely's one-woman show has the same potential.

Each of the Black lesbians represented contain pieces of Mosely's identity: Ziggy's intellectualism, Sistah's earthiness, Playher's hip attitude, and Lady D's self-loving ethos. Regardless of whether you are a Black lesbian, she hopes that audience members will connect with some aspect of one or each character. Experiencing the pleasure of this connection may prompt viewers to change typical patterns of consumption that favor White, heterosexual, male performers, effectively altering the current economy of humor. Mosely's one-woman show evinces the need to look more complexly at difference, particularly among those occupying more than one subordinated category of difference. We, regardless of which minoritarian community(ies) you identify with, are in desperate need of exposure to varying and complex representations of members in our own communities in order to rewrite racist, sexist, ableist, and homophobic scripts about our social, familial, and sexual proclivities; to gain social acceptance and respect; to offer members of the dominant culture opportunities to identify with diverse representations of members of society; to lend cultural currency to that identification and undermine existing hierarchies in the public's propensity to identify with men (often straight, often able-bodied); and to strengthen our respective communities so we can mobilize on behalf of social justice and to combat social inequities.

Chapter 6: Making Citizens: Negotiating Belonging in Youth Comedy

Though citizenship may be treated as a birthright, citizens are made, not born.
—Randy Martin¹

Setting: Board members and a superintendent sit in a conference room discussing the future of education and ways to cut the budget.

Board Member Y: I know! We shall embezzle budget money!

Superintendent: No, I already do that.

Board Member Q: We could give these kids a good education.

Superintendent: Too expensive!

Board Member Q: I think we're just doing a bad job with the budget!

Superintendent: I find your lack of faith disturbing! (*Chokes him to death using the force, like in the first "Star Wars" movie; Board Member Q dies*)

Janitor (*entering*): Do you have to kill them and leave a mess for me? (*exits dragging Board Member Q*)

Superintendent: Yes, now on with the plans for the "EducationStar"...

Board Member A: Don't you mean Deathsta-

All: COPYRIGHT LAW!

Board Member A: Sorry I forgot. What exactly does this "EducationStar" do?

Superintendent: It's a giant school! IT WILL HOLD ALL the children and best of all it will turn them into us! They will think like us and become us!

Student (*entering*): Not if I can help it!

(*Light saber battle between Student and Superintendent*)

Superintendent: I taught you well but know this. I AM YOUR FATHER!

Student: I already knew that. I kind of live with you. I'm sorry that I must do this! KAME HAME HA! (*Runs at him with a giant hammer and hits him over the head*)

Superintendent: I am defeated! You must continue my legacy! Become the superintendent of schools!

Student: Excellent!

*Lights: Blackout*²

¹ Randy Martin, "Artistic Citizenship: Introduction," in *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts*, eds. Mary Schmidt Campbell & Randy Martin (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 10.

² Joshua Rosen, "School Board Meeting," *Slaw & Disorder: Comic Intent*, Performed at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, April 28 & 29, 2006. Joshua wrote this sketch while in eighth grade. In most instances I have corrected misspelled words and added punctuation (periods at the end of a

Drawing from a highly recognizable cultural reference such as the *Star Wars* inspired spoof of the inner workings of education administration—where bureaucracy culminates in a blood bath—we are given access to author Joshua Rosen’s particular vantage. It is the ultimate bad ass version of a school board meeting gone awry as seen through the eyes of a (then) twelve-year-old, eighth grade boy. While Joshua Rosen’s primary aim is a successful (read: funny) sketch included in the Comedy Club’s annual sketch comedy show, *Slaw and Disorder: Comic Intent* (2006), we can also see that he is expressing some opinions about education, capitalism, and authority. Good education is dismissed as “[t]oo expensive,” embezzlement is a foregone conclusion, and the questioning of authority is punishable by death. It is clear, based on this sketch and conversations I have had with him, Joshua has little faith in the education system. He is not alone in this belief and most likely culled this skeptical attitude towards government from a variety of sources. This anti-bureaucratic sentiment is one frequently disseminated and condoned vis-à-vis the political humor of late night television’s comic giants: David Letterman, Jay Leno, Conan O’Brien, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert. They, among others, “declare the entire system—from voting to legislating to governing—an irredeemable sham.”³ Despite early education efforts to instill a sense of pride, respect and faith in the existing system of governance, most people would agree that as we mature “this naïve faith in representative democracy joins Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny on the scrap heap of our childish beliefs.”⁴

sentence) to the students’ written work cited here; however, I have not altered their original texts in any other way.

³ Russell L. Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick, New Jersey & London: Rutgers UP, 2008), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

Joshua Rosen is reconciling a couple things in the text of his comic sketch—formal education teaching a utopic version of democracy with an evolving understanding of a corrupt system—and he takes issue with institutions like schools, the bastions of knowledge, serving as playground for profiteering. Most importantly, he writes agency into the text by having a student dismember (literally) the system, or at least the individual representative of a failed system. His comic rendering of a school board meeting analogizes who should belong in the national imaginary—people of good character, i.e., those willing to stand up for what is right, to combat corruption, and to resist a conformist mentality—and who should be effaced. Unwittingly or not, he offers a response to the question of what we can learn through the writing of young people that we may not know otherwise—about our values, government, and institutions, and about who should belong and who should not. Specifically, this sketch lampoons corrupt bureaucracy in a supposedly democratic system of governance, presenting itself to the very culprits responsible: their parents, teachers and administration, not unlike that of the players in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The comic writing of young people offers a lens into the world as they see it and incorporates social experiences relevant to their lives such as alienation, betrayal, falling in love, and bullying. It is for this reason that the Comedy Club began in the first place, namely to offer young people a space to critique, satirize, and otherwise talk back to a world in which they are an integral part but in which they have little say as members of the national polity.

The Comedy Club, now a project of the Comedy Academy, a non-profit arts organization established in 2009, is a unique after school activity, which develops an

original sketch comedy show annually in Montgomery County, Maryland.⁵ This program, currently in its fifteenth year, allows young people an opportunity to become the authors of their own lives and experiences by allowing them to write and perform sketch comedy.⁶ Additionally, students are encouraged to participate in the decision-making processes—from generating ideas for sketches, to offering input on blocking choices, artistic rendering of set designs, and character development decisions—and to learn strategies for using humor and parody to cope with life experiences. Each year, the program demonstrates its ability to provide a viable creative outlet in a community combating high rates of gang violence and to enlist young performers, writers, artists, and those interested in the technical aspects of putting on a professional stage production. It is an arts education program that, among other things, helps young people develop a comic sensibility, fosters intellectual and creative acumen, and provides a comedic space for young people to claim as their own, a place for them to find their own (funny) voice.

Children are the sites upon which parents inscribe cultural values such as teamwork, fairness, community participation, social protocol, and civic/social responsibility. All of these lessons merge and compete with a host of other messages disseminated via powerful forces like the media, peer influence, and education, to assist in the shaping of young people into the next generation's adults, grooming them

⁵ The Comedy Club established itself at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School for thirteen years and expanded to one of the feeder high schools in the county, Northwood High School. With the desire to expand the successful program to other schools in Montgomery County, Maryland and to offer courses and performances in multiple venues for the broader community, the Comedy Academy was established in 2009. I serve on the Board of Directors as the secretary; its founding directors are Harry Bagdasian and Robbie McEwen and other board members include Richard Haight and Mark Drury.

⁶ During my tenure with the program we have included writing workshops for five of the six years, encouraging students to author sketches for the annual show. Typically, we select enough student sketches to comprise the entire second act of the show (10-12 sketches) and in recent shows nearly all the sketches have been written by students.

to negotiate, perform, and participate in maintaining the importance of identity categories like citizenship—seemingly democratic in its guarantee of equal protection and rights. Children’s theater programs, particularly ones that incorporate the voices of children, their experiences and feedback into the performances, offer a creative space for young people to challenge cultural assumptions like the myth of meritocracy and the inevitability of capitalism. They allow them a forum for expressing an alternate vision of community and belonging based on character versus categories of difference like race, sexuality, and class, the same categories predictive of social and cultural belonging in our national community.

Young people may be US citizens but their legal rights and social responsibilities are limited. I argue that young people are cultural citizens that use creative expression to lobby for acknowledgement—of their contributions, of their struggles, of their limitations; in other words, to enact cultural citizenship. In recent years, student scripts have been published and sold widely nationally and internationally, distributing these critiques broadly. How do young people enact cultural citizenship in sketch comedy? When they envision the world and have the space to imagine otherwise, who do they cite as belonging and not belonging in the national imaginary, regardless of legal status as citizens? What can we learn through the comic writing of young people about our nation, media, and those in positions of power, about our values, government, and institutions? Using ethnographic methods such as interviews, participant-observation methods, and first-hand involvement, this chapter examines the way young people participating in Comedy Academy programs produce charged humor and the impact this opportunity has on its participants.

While audience reception is not the primary focus here, this case study offers useful opportunities to gauge audience reception to charged humor.⁷ Any claims regarding audience receptivity made in earlier case studies have drawn directly from visible and audible audience response and evaluations; however, this is somewhat limited when relying exclusively on comedy albums (i.e., LPs and CDs) as with Robin Tyler or as in the case of Micia Mosely; for example, I have seen only four iterations of the many shows Mosely has performed. Audience evaluations from Mosely's performances that I was unable to attend are helpful in assessing general audience demographics and specific aspects of the show respondents appreciated. But they do not provide information about how and why individual viewers may identify with the five Black lesbian characters portrayed and how this may alter individual consumption patterns of humor in favor of charged humor. Mosely has clearly articulated both as desirable objectives for the charged humor she performs.

As co-director of the Comedy Club, I regularly attend rehearsals, workshops, and performances allowing me to witness the development of sketches as they move from an idea into a comedic narrative and later to a polished performance ready for audience consumption. This kind of participant-observation illumines and contextualizes some earlier concerns raised by previous case studies. For instance, earlier case studies broach the issue of performances that preach to the choir or the converted. Understandably niche comics must garner a following and it is often times easiest to do so by appealing to similarly situated persons, whether that is based on region, race, creed, sexuality, or ability. This examination of the Comedy Club

⁷ The conclusion contains a more detailed discussion of audience reception issues and possibilities for future scholarship in this field.

program, participants, material, and performances reminds us not to assume audience homogeneity. Having worked closely with program participants over a number of years, I have seen first-hand shifts in the quality of sketches alongside an increased commitment on the part of the writers to make their work meaningful to an audience diverse in age, creed, politics, ability, and class. This kind of proximity gave me perhaps the most comprehensive vantage of any of the three case studies—its collaborative structure provided detailed information about students’ production of charged humor. Being present at each performance allowed me to gauge audience response even as it shifted from one night to the next and my familiarity with the students and parents offered numerous opportunities to engage in conversations with and among parents, friends, and family as they responded to the performance or to specific sketches. In this way, the ensuing case study presents an opportunity to expand on some issues raised in earlier chapters while also raising some new possibilities for studies in audience reception, which I address in the conclusion.

To be clear, I am not making any claims to objectivity. Objectivist claims to “knowing” are at the least worrisome and at the most a violent misrepresentation and disservice towards the very persons we seek to understand; after all, identity is mutable and dynamic as is any creative process. I offer instead my experience with the Comedy Club program, spanning six years as Co-Director (2004-2010) and my own convictions about the usefulness of arts education to enlist young people to act out and on their own life experiences, which is “grounded in the understanding that direct hands-on participation moves people more than anything else, enlarging their vision of possibility much more immediately than might be achieved through mere

observation.”⁸ This text should be read as a “polyphonic”⁹ ethnography, a myriad of voices rising up, speaking out, and rendering their lives comedic. Using the concept of cultural citizenship, a framework shaping the arguments made throughout this project, I argue that young people, as cultural citizens, use creative expression such as the dramatic and fine arts to comment on their second-class status as citizens and on the world at large. In this discussion, I will include background about the Comedy Club, i.e., administrative history, participant demographics, educational/creative benefits, and its influence in the lives of participants. I suggest that a turn to the content and subject matter of youth artistry reveals the ways young people enact cultural citizenship and their perspectives about the world around them; the history and impact of this program offers additional evidence of the value of such programs.

Birth of a Comic Nation

Fifteen years ago (1995), Dr. Elizabeth Glowa, the principal of Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School at the time, separately approached Harry Bagdasian and Lisa Levin Itté, both parents of middle school children and active in their local PTSA and community, to see if either one of them would be interested in handling the after school drama program, which no longer had an adult sponsor (usually an English teacher). Harry was well known in the community for being a published playwright and director who made, and continues to make his living from local and national theater projects. Lisa has a background in community service and is also an educator

⁸ Arlene Goldbard, *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2006), 54.

⁹ I borrow the term polyphonic from the text, “Producing Ethnographies: Theory, Evidence and Representation,” by Robert M. Emerson who cites various ethnographies employing this tactic as a means to “decenter...the privileged voice of the narrator/ethnographer” (316). See: *Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations*, 3rd ed. (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2001), 308.

who later went on to help develop the Leadership Training Institute (LTI) at John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, MD, an innovative program that teaches students to develop leadership qualities and provides them access to leadership roles in the community and later on in college. Both were excellent candidates for the position, but the principal assumed only one of them would actually be interested, though she was not sure which one. When both agreed to accept the position(s) it was the best case scenario for the students and for Harry and Lisa, neither of whom realized just how time consuming this endeavor would be. When asked why they took on this project, and their main goals for doing so, Lisa responded, saying: “We wanted the kids to have fun... basically we were really trying to develop the school community and we knew that parents came out to support the school and we knew kids felt better about their school if they had after school activities and specifically things like productions.”¹⁰ Harry responded differently, though both were nodding vigorously while the other stated their intentions for accepting the position: “Very selfishly, one of the things I wanted to do was create a special program at my middle school because I was so tired of hearing about these magnet schools and special programs this and special programs that and personally I wanted to do something that was going to put Lee on the map,” he said with pride and a hint of defiance.¹¹

The inception of the Comedy Club and their rationale for taking on the program were all influenced heavily by local school politics. Lisa and Harry were both active advocates of quality education and programs for their children, seldom missing an opportunity to voice their dissent or offer their praise, depending on what the situation

¹⁰ Harry Bagdasian and Lisa Levin Itté, Personal Interview, May 1, 2005.

¹¹ Ibid.

called for. I recorded hours of conversation about the politics of magnet schools, the dissolution of redeemable academics in the face of falling property prices, and White-flight, or as Lisa called it, “affluent flight,” because this local exodus was characterized more by socio-economics than by race.¹² There were, she recalled, just as many, if not more families of color moving or pulling their kids out of public schools to place them in private institutions that were more academically reputable. Local conditions demanded active parental involvement and Lisa and Harry were in the trenches of this bureaucratic warfare for nearly a decade. They saw numerous principals come and go, some chased out necessarily, one of whom Harry refused to call by name, instead referring to this principal in Rowlingesque vernacular as “She-who-cannot-be named.” Both were emphatic that the Comedy Club could not be divorced from local politics and that, in part, the Comedy Club is shaped by their position as agitators for their children, and for the local community.

Harry Bagdasian: After many years of trying to fight the system and making some inroadsI realized that I could do more, have more direct effect on my community by running a really good program at the middle school... I want Lee to be on the map. I want people anywhere in Maryland when they hear of Lee Middle School, “oh wow they’re the ones, *they* create plays that are performed all around the world.” So in a way it’s kind of an egotistical thing...I want there to be something special in our community (italics for his emphasis).¹³

Harry and Lisa fought for quality programs and education in their schools; the Comedy Club is one of the byproducts of this desire. Their commitment to the community, to maintaining high standards of education for all kids, and to the artistic and creative development of young people coalesced in the inception of the Comedy

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Club in 1995.¹⁴

Kid Nation: Our Belonging Looks Different Than Yours

Above all else, comedy is an invitation to belong.
—Andy Medhurst¹⁵

Arts education facilitates spaces for creative expression allowing young people to develop and express their position as young citizens and to comment on and (in the case of this program) satirize the psychic and material conditions of their lives. I am most interested in *what* they are saying when given the creative forum through which to express themselves and their social views. As evidence, I will draw from and analyze the comic sketches authored by student participants over the past five years. In five of the six years I have been involved in the program, we invited students to join us for weekly writing workshops, from which we select student written sketches that comprise approximately half the show's content.¹⁶ The process is organic and while sketch ideas are independently contrived, we spend workshops generating and gathering feedback from each other about the development and effectiveness of sketches being written. We espouse only two rules: that we strive to be humorous and that in any form of writing you must "say something about how we are living."¹⁷ The sketches written by students reflect how young people feel about and toward the forces

¹⁴ Lise Levin Itté co-founded the Comedy Club in 1995 and remained co-director and co-author of Comedy Club productions for seven years. While stepping down as co-director, she remained supportive of the program and occasionally co-authors sketches with Harry Bagdasian for the annual show.

¹⁵ Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (New York & London: Routledge, 2007), 19.

¹⁶ Students' sketches comprised approximately 75% of those performed in the 2009 performance, *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret*. After thirteen years at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School the Comedy Club moved to Northwood High School (2008-2009).

¹⁷ Gale Jackson, Susan Sherman and Kimiko Hahn, "Three Voices/Together: A Collage," in *Art on the Line: Essays by Artists about the Point Where Their Art and Activism Intersect*, ed. Jack Hirschman (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2002), 324.

shaping their lives, the psychic, cultural, and material conditions in/through which they live.

Cultural studies of Anglo-American youth, most famously those conducted by British scholars in the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, attempt to convey “the power of cultural representations to engage with notions of who the citizen is, and what kinds of citizenship could be imagined.”¹⁸ Similarly, this examination establishes the connections between citizenship and youth culture as they are negotiated vis-à-vis arts education to evaluate how young people use creative expression to reconcile their own second-class status as citizens and to imagine alternative visions of belonging or citizenship specific to their status as young cultural citizens. Nearly every aspect of the life of a child is regulated and maintained by adults either following their own rules or abiding by the laws of the land. Children’s opinions about the education system, politics, and the media are seldom solicited or considered. They must rely on their parents or other adults to lobby for their rights or protections, and their lack of experience and resources makes them less likely or able to mobilize for change on their behalf.¹⁹ I also employ cultural citizenship as a framing concept because it “allows for the potential of opposition, of restructuring and reordering society” and enjoins empowerment and affirmation in the “expression of ‘cultural citizenship.’”²⁰ An examination of young people as cultural citizens prods us to read for resistance, to identify empowering practices and subversive critiques, and to bear witness to how

¹⁸ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 156.

¹⁹ To date, the United States and Somalia are the only two members of the United Nations that have not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (ratified by the United Nations in 1990). The US helped draft and even signed the convention but failed to ratify it as of 2009.

²⁰ William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor (eds.), “Introduction: Constructing Cultural Citizenship,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space, and Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 15;12.

young citizens imagine otherwise.

Analysis of the dozens, perhaps hundreds of scripts written by students over the years, show that their comic writings target parents, political officials, religious figures, celebrities, and authority figures. Leah and Rachel Solomon, sisters separated by three years, have been involved with Comedy Club in some capacity for nine years and are two of the program's most prolific writers. Together they turned the unfair circumstance of being compared to one another into comic material in sketch series titled "Why Can't You Be More Like Your Sister."

Father: (*enters*) Sooo how did my girls do on their report cards?

Mom: Well Leigh got straight A's [in cooking and bowling] (*Father smiles*) and Rachelle got two B's [in AP statistics and AP government] (*Father frowns*).

Father: Young lady you better get those terrible grades up or you're not leaving the house at all.

Rachelle: Terrible? My grades are fine...in fact I'm rated 1st in my class.

Mom: Well that's nice, but the truth is **I DON'T CARE!!!**

Father: Rachelle why can't you get grades like Leigh?

Mom: Yeah, why can't you be like your sister!?!²¹

The Solomon sisters wrote four such sketches for *Laughing Matters* in 2005, drawing from their lived experience of being endlessly compared with one another. Their sketches tapped into a parental practice familiar in many households and by relating to their audience, parents, and children alike, they made a typically uncomfortable experience humorous, but not without exposing it as a frustrating and irksome experience for young people.

²¹ Leah Solomon and Rachel Solomon, "Why Can't You Be More Like Your Sister, pt. 1" in *Laughing Matters*, Performed at Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, April 14 & 15, 2005. The Solomon sisters wrote this sketch while in seventh and tenth grade, respectively.

Throughout the years the students have written a number of sketches lampooning teachers such as the series of sketches called “Teacher Types,” inspired by actual teachers in the school. At the insistence of Harry Bagdasian, who thought it only fair there be a comparable sketch about students, a graduating senior at the time (class of 2009), John Kilmer, wrote a sketch hyperbolizing various “Student Types” like the emo student, shy student, suck-up student, troublesome student, and gangster student (his categories).²² Many student-written sketches develop in response to what they perceive as asinine school policies like school medical professionals requiring students who have hurt themselves to have a hall pass before administering aid. The sketch, “No pass? Get back to class!”—the title is taken verbatim from a sign hanging outside the nurse’s office at school—by Liam Brennan and John Kilmer, captures the absurdity of this rule as we witness a parade of students with increasingly grave injuries being denied medical assistance because they cannot supply the necessary pass.²³ Another sketch, written by Sara Mozersky (eleventh grade at the time of authorship), entitled “Safety Quiz” ridicules the safety quiz given to students participating in science labs. Mozersky casts the student, Ted, as responsible and invested in safe lab practices. Drawing directly from the safety quiz administered in her high school, she illustrates how the test assumes student irresponsibility and portrays the teacher as the only logical and informed person in the lab setting. The

²² There have been several versions of “Teacher Types” sketches over the years; most recently, students performed the high school edition “Teacher Types,” written by Joshua Rosen (eleventh grade at the time of authorship), in *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret* at Northwood High School on April 16 & 17, 2009. “Student Types” by John Kilmer was also in the 2009 annual show.

²³ This sketch was written by Liam Brennan and John Kilmer, ninth grade and twelfth grade, respectively, at the time of authorship. Liam has been a Comedy Club participant for three years and his mother, quoted later, has been sewing costumes and making props for the program during that span. The sketch was performed in *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret* at Northwood High School on April 16 & 17, 2009.

instructor must explain this contradictory and patronizing safety protocol to Ted, only exacerbating the ridiculousness of its logic. The following is an excerpt from the full sketch:

Science Teacher: Yes, but the correct answer was to tell the science teacher Ted! (*getting annoyed*) For any question that has an answer option of telling the science teacher, the correct answer will always be to tell the science teacher. Let's try *one* more of these. Question 2: If you have long hair you should: A) Cut it off B) Tell the science teacher C) Set it on fire D) Pull it away from your face and tie it up. You answered B) Tell the science teacher.

Ted: (*hopeful*) Is that correct?

Science Teacher: No! Of course not! Why would you bother your science teacher with something so trivial?!

Ted: I don't know. The same reason you need to tell your science teacher you have contacts?

Science Teacher: No! The correct answer was D) Pull your hair away from your face and tie it up!

Ted: But you just said "the answer will always be tell your science teacher"!

Science Teacher: It doesn't matter what I just said. The answer is D.

Ted: But-

Science Teacher: No buts. Now, study this for when you come back. You're going to have to retake the quiz until you get 100%. I will not have any safety hazards in my classroom!²⁴

In these sketches, amidst the reality television and game show parodies, movie spoofs, and sketches satirizing the various forces orchestrating the lives of young people, it is rather common to find a young heroine or hero. In many instances, young characters are portrayed as more poised and knowledgeable than their adult counterparts. Joshua

²⁴ The sketch was performed in *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret* at Northwood High School on April 16 & 17, 2009.

Rosen's mock game show "Smells Like Cafeteria Food To Me" pits savvy teen Jessica "Iron Stomach" Orange against two other culinary experts, Erick Von Schnozz and Nozz Eey, in a competition to see who, when blindfolded, can guess the mystery cafeteria food dish.²⁵ Jessica Orange repeatedly beats out her adult (and highly acclaimed) competition, earning a spot on next week's edition of the show. Whether it is Sara's safety conscious Ted or Joshua's discerning Jessica, these students reveal that they think highly of their and other teens' capabilities. In some respects, this is one of the few ways for young people to purposefully and creatively reflect their beliefs about the world around them, a world which they constitute but do not immediately construct. By the same token, it is also a means for them to voice dissatisfaction and discontent with rules, authority figures, and institutions.

You can hear the murmurs of dissent in the sketches written by young people for the Comedy Club's annual production. For one, this dissent is evident in young people's articulation of belonging or expressions of youth cultural citizenship, like authoring comedic sketches, revealing that belonging is predicated on character and social values. While we may be able to discern who is socially, politically, and culturally alienated from dominant culture based on the categories of difference we/they occupy, there is little evidence that student writers in the Comedy Club frame belonging in the same way(s). There are elements of Randy Martin's definition of citizenship echoed in these comic sketches, particularly the idea that belonging is predicated on exhibiting certain behaviors reflecting societal values like honesty,

²⁵ The sketch was performed in *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret* at Northwood High School on April 16 & 17, 2009. Joshua Rosen was a junior at the time of authorship.

integrity and respect for others.²⁶ In fact, recent scholarship on the US public sphere “renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere.”²⁷

Youth cultural citizenship echoes this emphasis on social values where membership relies more on exhibiting desirable character traits and less on the social locations one occupies. For example, the characters in the comedic sketches written for the Comedy Club who do not uphold these values will have a price to pay. We saw evidence of this in the sketch used to open this chapter, i.e., the death of the villainous superintendent who schemes to rob students of their identities and of the money needed to adequately educate them. Here, death or otherwise removal from the polity is the consequence for undesirable behavior.

Behaviors not in keeping with social values like greed, arrogance, and lack of civility, become the measure by which one deserves to belong. Consider the following example, an excerpt from “Rude Cell Phone Guy (The Presidential Debate),” a sketch written by Leah and Rachel Solomon, (seventh grade and tenth grade, respectively, at the time of authorship):

Setting: A presidential debate is interrupted by the entrance of an audience member talking loudly on his cell phone

Audience Member (Person 2): Could you, sir, please cease your infernal talking? It is interrupting and disrespecting this prestigious event.

Josh: Whoa, dude, does it look like I speak dork?

Audience Member (Person 2): Well I graduated from Harvard with a 3.5 GPA.

Josh: Well La-de-frickin-da. I graduated from E. Brooke Lee Middle

²⁶ Martin, *Artistic Citizenship*.

²⁷ Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1997), 5.

School with a 3.8 GPA so HA! ²⁸

This sketch, written by two sisters, deals humorously with the person we have all come to recognize as that annoying-person-glued-to-their-cell-phone, who, incidentally, is later ejected from the presidential debate for his disruptive antics. It prompts the audience to laugh at a character we usually love to hate, providing a healthy catharsis from the annoyance and anger we inwardly harbor towards those who are disrespectful, lacking in civility or downright rude. But no one is safe in Comedy Club, as evidenced by the fact that the Solomon sisters make the Harvard graduate an object of ridicule by having Josh compare his own, higher GPA, to another patron of the debate. We laugh because the comparison is ridiculous, because we are all taught to revere Ivy League institutions; yet, there is satisfaction in the laughter because the pompous Ivy Leaguer just got served. In fact, when this sketch was presented at the school assemblies, the audience roared and cheered in response to Josh (played by Joshua Rosen) comparing his higher—albeit presumably less prestigious—GPA to that of a Harvard graduate.

The character of Josh is disrespectful, the consequences for which are expulsion, the Harvard graduate is pretentious and arrogant, the consequences for which are being lampooned publicly. Andy Medhurst argues that the national imaginary is formed by identifying who does not belong. Therefore national identity is referential; that is we are constituted by others and in part by what we are not. This is also true of the smaller groups and communities that together constitute the whole of the nation. The dominant culture defines and maintains in-group status; hence while many may be legal citizens,

²⁸ Leah Solomon and Rachel Solomon, “The Presidential Debate,” in *Laughing Matters*. Performed April 14 and 15, 2005.

many experience a kind of second-class citizenship due to cultural and political invisibility. Out of this, communities emerge and organize for rights and civil liberties based on sexuality (LGBTQ community), race/ethnicity (Latino/a community) and other marginalized social indices. William Flores and Rina Benmayor, both original members of the Latino Cultural Studies Working Group developing the concept of cultural citizenship, argue that marginalized communities develop a sense of cultural citizenship, a sense of belonging based on shared culture. In the same way that Medhurst theorizes national belonging as referential, marginalized communities also develop beliefs about who does and does not belong, which in turn define that community. Medhurst argues that this entails “identifying others who are outside, competing and contrasting identities located in different places...A sense of national belonging is strengthened through comparison with another identity demarcated as definitely elsewhere.”²⁹ Given the opportunity to do so, these students demonstrate their construction of “elsewhere” or the terms upon which one belongs as a young cultural citizen as linked to corrupt behavior and civic irresponsibility, offering a value judgment based on character versus identity. In the US national imaginary, “elsewhere” is directly linked to occupying a marginalized social location such as being a person of color, female, queer, disabled, or economically disenfranchised.

The tendency for national belonging to hinge on identity categories suggests that over time certain behaviors are linked to identity categories vis-à-vis widely disseminated stereotypes sanctioned as undesirable—i.e., a gay man’s effeminacy, a woman asserting herself, English spoken colloquially or with an accent—conflating identity with behavior and reinforcing the current machinations of systematic

²⁹ Medhurst, *A National Joke*, 28.

oppression that ultimately condition and construct who belongs or at least who is the *most* ideal citizen. We can gauge this by attending to who has the most legal rights, cultural visibility, and social acknowledgement. In order to intervene in this tendency, one objective must be to teach young people about stereotypes and that identity and behavior do not have a causal relationship. The Comedy Club helps to do this by using humor to identify and spoof stereotypes, behaviors peddled to young people by the media as innate and natural.

One young woman, a participant in Comedy Club as both writer and performer, bemoaned the lack of school activities that help young people realize their potential in areas outside of scholastics or athletics, particularly in elementary and middle school. She cautiously began writing for the annual show the first year we accepted a limited number of student sketches, first with a one page commercial.³⁰ The sketch, “Chippin’ Dippin’ Doughnuts,” is a spoof of television commercials featuring a wacky parade of motley characters united in their love for chippin’ dippin’ doughnuts. Notably, she specifically included unlikely pairings—characters or personalities typically not seen in amicable instances like a police officer and prisoner, a bully (big and fierce kid) and geek (small and awkward kid), and a janitor and a politician. In the faux commercial these characters are dancing, laughing, hugging, and celebrating together because chippin’ dippin’ doughnuts are just *that good*. Mocking conventional commercialization of products, this student comedy writer imagined a new kind of belonging, one offering inclusion and equality regardless of social location. She used the Comedy Club to craft sketches reflecting

³⁰ Three of this student’s sketches were performed in the show *Laughing Matters* (2005), which is considerable in number given that most writers have only one sketch in the final show.

her life—as a twin, as bi-racial, as a young woman, and as a cultural citizen—and to advance alternate standards for belonging.

The Comedy Club not only provides a space to share a rich experience of writing the world, it allows young people to express their evolving and dynamic understanding of belonging, which in this instance looks different than ours (read: adult). Students offer us valuable insight into the ways we construct national community and more importantly, alternatives for that construction. This program also strives to give voice to experiences and cultural traditions and I suggest that students' writing expresses views, beliefs, and opinions about the world around them, a world view shaped by their own social locations. The result is a road map of their lives turned funny.

Locating Citizens

The whole premise of this is they've got something to say.
—Principal Mary Beth Waits³¹

One objective here is to examine the comic rendering of life by young people to see what we can know about the way they experience their local, national, and global cultures. In Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, whose racial demographics are approximately 80% minority (mostly Black and Hispanic) and 20% Caucasian, the Comedy Club is surprisingly by and large White. The cast for the 2004-2005 school year (out of 34) was 29% minority and 71% Caucasian and for the first time there

³¹ Former Principal Mary Beth Waits, Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, was quoted saying this in Julia Rasicot, "Club Gets a Laugh Out of Hard Work: Theater Pro Helps With Teen Humor," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2007.

were more male participants than female (44%-female; 56%-male).³² These demographics remain consistent in subsequent years. In 2008, the program expanded to Northwood High School in Silver Spring, Maryland, for which Colonel E. Brooke Lee is a feeder school.³³ The racial make-up of students at Northwood is nearly identical to Colonel E. Brooke Lee and yet last year's cast (2008-2009) had even fewer students of color—approximately 10%—though this number has slightly increased for the 2009-2010 annual show.

There are numerous reasons for this racial disparity in Comedy Club composition, not the least of which is the overwhelming number of participants who are legacy students having an older sibling in the program.

I think the reason has to do with there are Comedy Club kids whose older brother and sisters were in comedy club and you know they came when they were in third grade and their older brother was in it and probably sat there and said “oohhh ohhh I want to do that when I get to Lee middle school.” That's how most traditions start.³⁴

Members having a sibling in the Comedy Club currently or in the past account for 14 of the 34, or 41% of the members in the 2004-2005 program, obviously a key factor affecting who participates. This remains a stable trend in the program and in some years this figure rose. Since establishing the program at Northwood High School, 75% of the cast members are former participants from Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School.

³² I am only considering those members performing in this years show. This data does not include the AV crew or the artists working on set design. Since I had less access to these groups I did not want to run the risk of representing them inaccurately, though it is safe to say that there was greater racial/ethnic diversity in these groups than within the performers.

³³ This year (2009-2010) we are now working with both age groups in two separate Comedy Club programs culminating in an age-integrated, combined show.

³⁴ Mary Beth Waits, Personal Interview, March 15, 2005.

Social grouping plays a significant role as well. Cliques of young people often participate in similar activities and when they share their excitement for an activity, they are likely to encourage participation among their friends. As Harry and Lisa testified earlier, the first Comedy Club cast was comprised of their children and their children's friends almost exclusively. Since the club is open to anyone who wants to join, socioeconomic status contributes to who can or who is simply unable to be in Comedy Club, be it attributable to time conflicts, transportation issues, or monetary difficulties. Former Principal of Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School, Mary Beth Waits comments on this during an interview:

One of the things that is difficult beyond the interest [in the Comedy Club], which I think we can have some influence on is that because our kids are poorer, many of them have after school responsibilities at home, that's why they can't stay. They can't stay for anything...There's also the issue [that] Comedy Club does so many things beyond just the normal extra curricular times. They'll have times where no other club is meeting but Comedy Club and Harry will call the parents you know: "We're going to do this, you need to pick them up." Well for some of my low-income kids their parents can't do that.³⁵

As Waits points out: "45% of our students receive free or reduced meals, which is a poverty index."³⁶ Socioeconomics, being friends with participants in Comedy Club, and/or having older siblings in the program all determine cast composition each year. We should be careful not to frame diversity as pertaining exclusively to race/ethnicity/nationality and yet the lack of racial diversity in the program is a real concern, particularly when we continue to witness the benefits the program has on its participants. We continue to discuss effective outreach to students of color for this program and other workshops and shows produced by Comedy Academy.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

While the racial/ethnic composition of the Comedy Club does not reflect the school's population as a whole, this is not to say that there is no diversity among student participants. Nearly every year we have differently abled students, openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual students participate in the program, and in any given year 30%-50% of the students in Comedy Club are Jewish.³⁷ Joshua Rosen wrote a sketch transporting the audience to Vatican City where Cardinals Rosenberg, Gelt, and Zaftig are warming up for the Holy Water-to-Wine swim race. The Pope is called in for an interview and appears as a spunky Jew.

Jim: Now, a special guest...here he is, the Don of Divining, THE POPE!
(*Pope enters*)

Pope: Good Shabbas, Good Shabbas! Sorry I'm late, I got a little ferblunjit 'cause of all the crowds and it had me quite fermisht.

Jim: So Pope, what is going to be your first event?

Pope: Oy vey, I'll be in my first Olympic event ever...Pope vaulting.³⁸

Clearly, Joshua is drawing from his own Jewish customs, beliefs, and traditions; doing so against the backdrop of the Catholic Church enhances its comedic effect and calls attention to both belief systems, drawing from the folklore, stories, and customs associated with both. We might even consider it an equal opportunity offensive emerging from a young man who is himself Jewish but acculturated by Christianity's pervasiveness in the dominant culture. Joshua enjoys writing and performing comedy but he loves composing music and playing the piano or the French horn, skills that have earned him entrance into top music conservatories in the country. He combined

³⁷ The Kemp Mill neighborhood in Silver Spring, Maryland, near to both Lee Middle School and Northwood High School, is one of the largest orthodox Jewish communities between New York City and Miami.

³⁸ Joshua Rosen, "The Vatican City Olympic Team," *Seriously Funny: A Comedy Club Cabaret*, Performed at Northwood High School, April 16 & 17, 2009. Eleventh grade at the time of authorship.

his passion for comedy and music by composing comedy songs, which are now sung between sketches at annual shows and benefits. The crowd favorite is always “Catholic School Dance,” where we find two rather uncomfortable Jewish lads, Joshua and Saul, attending a multi-faith mixer.

I tried to dance with Mary
And I tried to dance with Sally
But they tried to take me
To an anti-abortion rally
We were the only Jews
Me and my friend Saul
But I was really freaked out
By the dead guy on the wall

It’s a catholic school dance, catholic school dance
Don’t forget to leave room for Jesus, inside your pants

The girls here keep getting hotta’ and hotta’
But they keep telling me about stigmata
Because I am smart I made sure to floss
But I was not prepared to deal with a big wooden cross³⁹

The lyrics illustrate a clash of religious traditions casting Jews in an outsider position. This stands in contrast to the large in-group created by this humor as Christian audience members laugh alongside Jewish audience members.

In a recent benefit show for the Comedy Academy at Randolph Road Theater, the sketch “Nancy Jew and the Hardy Goys” only played well to a small but strong contingent of Jewish audience members probably because unlike Josh’s song, the sketch relied exclusively on Jewish traditions. Non-Jews would be hard pressed to “get” the humor in this sketch. As a result, many (presumably non-Jewish) audience members did not respond to the sketch (read: remained silent), which depicts the

³⁹ Joshua Rosen composed the music for “Catholic School Dance,” which was co-written by Matt Lebowitz and Rosen. He performed this in the 2009 show and recently at the Comedy Academy benefit show, February 20, 2010.

Hardy Goys searching for Alfie Koman (afikoman), whom they think is someone who went missing at Passover, but what Nancy Jew, of course, knows is actually the term given a matzo cracker broken in half and hidden on the evening of Passover. Children search for afikoman and are rewarded with gifts or money if they find it. Realizing that the Hardy Goys were unwittingly looking for a cracker, Nancy Jew shakes her head and says “Mashugana goyum” (calling them “crazy non-Jews” in Yiddish) while exiting the stage.⁴⁰ While they have different end results—“Catholic School Dance” decenters Christianity and unites the audience in laughing at Catholicism and “Nancy Jew and the Hardy Goys” unites Jewish audience members and others in the “know” to mock Gentile ignorance of Hebrew customs and traditions—I find both kinds of attempts at representing Jewish identity important. Joshua’s song offers cultural visibility to Jewish youth put in awkward situations by virtue of their Jewishness and the Nancy Jew sketch unapologetically produces humor for Jewish audience members without attempting to generalize its appeal or comic effect for those who do not get the joke. For those left in the dark, the implication is perhaps that one need seek edification from the closest Jew, or s/he that laughed loudest. Both are products of Joshua producing humor enacting cultural citizenship, to come to terms with his Jewish identity and related experiences, and to provide representations and information about Jewish culture and traditions.

Liam Brennan, Comedy Club participant for four years, is an active writer, actor, and musician for annual and benefit shows. He is bright, funny, and sensitive and

⁴⁰ Joshua Rosen conceptualized “Nancy Jew and the Hardy Goys” though the sketch was written by Harry Bagdasian. This sketch was included in the Comedy Academy benefit show, held February 20, 2010. Interestingly, I heard several conversations following the benefit show involving one or more persons explaining to others the Jewish custom held at Passover.

when not on stage you can find him plucking the strings of his guitar or reading political philosophy such as *The Communist Manifesto*. One of his more recent sketches, “What? Inc.” includes a gay character named Peters, whose presence is inserted not as simple comedic or dramaturgical device meant to disrupt the natural order of things; rather, co-workers engage in casual conversation with Peters about when and if he will marry his long-time partner. The following exchange shows how Brennan undermines the common rhetoric used by the religious right to oppose same-sex marriage:

Stacy: so much for the sanctity of marriage.

Peters: there hasn’t been any for a long time.

Stacy: and how do you figure that?

Peters: how many times has the average politician been married?

Stacy: point taken.⁴¹

Liam uses this sketch to not only offer representations of the queer community (in an educational setting that typically renders queer history and accomplishments invisible) but to demonstrate that while they may not be able to cast votes in favor of marriage equality, young people still have opinions about legislation that affects themselves and their loved ones. Peters being gay is not the issue here. Whether or not queer folks will be able to marry legally is. Liam has voiced his approval and desire to see federal legislation allowing same-sex marriage and is finding ways to integrate his political sensibilities with humor production. Where educational theater

⁴¹ Liam Brennan work-shopped “What? Inc.” for the 2010 annual show April 22 & 23, expanding it considerably and changing the title to: “John Peters, Corporate Physician.” The sketches namesake is taken from the name of the gay character in the sketch and places him as a central figure in the sketch. He is currently completing his sophomore year in high school.

for kids *may* insert a gay character to show that s/he is just like everyone else in an effort to promote multiculturalism and tolerance, Liam uses a gay character to politicize the terms of belonging and illumine inconsistencies in who belongs to audience members.

This program also continues to demonstrate its ability to unite students hailing from different age groups, social groups, and with varying degrees of ability. The program's ability to unite such disparate student groups—many of them coming from GT, LD or GTLD tracks in the school system—is in large part because it offers them a space to respond to the forces shaping *all of their lives* like peer pressure, the push to consume, bullies and snobs, political and cultural issues, the media, and academic, administrative, and familial demands.⁴² Recognizing that students will enter this program with varying skill sets and backgrounds that may be useful to the process, the Comedy Club accepts all interested students regardless of experience or ability and engages them in various aspects of production. Mary Beth Waits connected student participation in Comedy Club with improvement in other areas of students' lives.

We have by percentage the highest number of special education students in our school of any school in Montgomery County. And many of our GTLD students have been Comedy Club participants all three of the years they are here at Lee and that is not only helping them with their academic skills because of the writing and the speaking and performing but also their social skills, their management skills.⁴³

This was recently echoed by a mother of one of the Comedy Club participants, who in an email credited this program with being a positive influence in her son's life

⁴² GTLD is the acronym in the Montgomery County school system that refers to students placed in the Gifted and Talented and Learning Disabled Program. Students can also be classified and enrolled in the Gifted and Talented Program (GT) or the Learning Disabled Program (LD).

⁴³ Mary Beth Waits, Personal Interview, March 15, 2005.

writing:

It is no accident that my seriously disgraphic son began writing for fun the summer after his first year with the Comedy Club. And does any school anywhere in the county have an extra-curricular activity that more organically or more smoothly unites students from both GT tracks and LD programs and brings about both social and performance equality?⁴⁴

Her son is Liam Brennan and her other son Conor has become involved in the program. Both young men have proven incredible assets to the program and are consistently relied upon to mentor younger participants. Sherry Chiasson, also the mother of a Comedy Club student participant, corroborates the value of this program that accepts and appreciates *all* students and the positive effects this program has had in her own son's life and others. She writes in an email: "Since 1995, the Comedy Club has involved students regardless of their abilities -- or disabilities...Students' growth and development is beyond compare. Students have a place to belong—and a place to shine. They feel GOOD about themselves."⁴⁵

It is promising to see a program like the Comedy Club that can house diversity—cultural, experiential, social, or otherwise—and still successfully speak to the issues important to most members of the Comedy Club like the pain of being ostracized or the fear of failure. This after school program began and continues to flourish because its directors, school administrators, and parents believe that humor can be cathartic and positive, both physically and emotionally. Regardless of ability, creed, race/ethnic, gender, class, academic success, or sexual identity, these young people find common ground in shared experiences.

⁴⁴ Tish Hall. Email. April 2, 2008.

⁴⁵ Sherry Chiasson. E-mail. April 10, 2008.

Do As I Say, Not as I Do...

'Laughter takes the tyranny of the lies we are told and told and it blows them apart.'
—Kate Clinton⁴⁶

Arts education is about learning in the arts (artists, art forms, art history, etc.) and about learning through the arts (arts in the service of other academics) like the correlation between music and math, acting and public speaking, creative writing and communication, etc. It is a beneficial component for a well-rounded education for all student participants regardless of race/ethnicity, creed, sexuality, or ability. Using contemporary models of infotainment like *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart and *The Colbert Report* with Stephen Colbert, these young people produce “serious comedy” or comedy that “raises a set of important questions that we must consider if we hope to come to terms with the nature of contemporary political discourse.”⁴⁷ Student authored sketches show that young people express different criteria for belonging, criteria based on character traits versus socio-economic status; sketches also illumine the negotiation of identity, the cultural traditions salient to their lives—as Jewish, as differently abled, or as queer. They also use the opportunity given them to narrate their lives and point out life’s absurdities and societal contradictions. This is particularly important because they are not of age to vote against or for legislation affecting them, nor are their opinions solicited from decision-making bodies.

Few venues exist for young people to respond to national contradictions. Liam Brennan addresses one such contradiction—the penchant for news stations to practice

⁴⁶ Aimee Dowl interviews Kate Clinton asking her to comment on her own quote stated above. Aimee Dowl, “L in a Handbasket: Kate Clinton’s politics of funny,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Issue 30 (fall 05): 38.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Baym, “Serious Comedy: Expanding the Boundaries of Political Discourse,” in *Laughing Matters: Humor and American Politics in the Media Age*, eds. Jody C. Baumgartner & Jonathan S. Morris (New York & London: Routledge, 2008), 21.

fear mongering and yellow journalism rather than accurately informing viewers—in his sketch “FNN Reports: Bread—The Gateway Food” (FNN stands for Fear News Network), which parodies this strategy.

Johnny: What we are about to reveal to you tonight is especially disturbing because it regards a substance that has been a part of the lives of most Americans, and is in products that can be bought by anyone of any age, from a newborn child to a grandmother.

Jo: ...and is cheap enough to be purchased by people of any class...from a poor hardworking man struggling to feed his family, to a decadent Washington insider.

Johnny: ...a substance long doing damage to the moral fiber of our society.

Jo: ...and to our youth, and it’s going on right under our very nose. That’s right folks...

Johnny: ...bread!

Jo: Yes, bread, that long time staple of the American diet, was recently exposed by an FNN informant for what it really is.

Johnny: Bread is a gateway food!⁴⁸

Johnny and Jo continue to wax the dangers of bread consumption concluding their report with the cheerfully ominous “Good night and...watch out!” Liam wrote a second FNN Report with his younger brother Conor, titled “FNN Reports: BigboxCo Babies,” in which news anchors Jo Mama and Johnny Walker happily campaign for corporate family expansion services or the mass production and sale of children “in a number of different styles and ages for fifteen to one hundred dollars.” In a nation giving lip service to family values while cutting aid to families needing public assistance, and in a society whose government subsidizes the corn industry, in

⁴⁸ This sketch was performed at the Comedy Academy benefit show, February 20, 2010 along with “FNN Reports: BigboxCo Babies.” Both were successful with the audience, generating audible laughter and applause.

essence funding the production of unhealthy, processed foods, while bemoaning high rates of obesity in the US, it is clear that what we teach young people stands in contradiction to reality and to their own experiences in this world.

The sketches are a textual and performatic window into the way young people understand these contradictions, also offering a creative forum in which to couch their criticism. Frustrated with the undue attention and excessive disciplinary efforts associated with student use of profanity in school, Liam Brennan wrote the sketch “Dropping the Bomb.” Viewing profanity as a non-violent offense or a victim-less crime, Liam believes that there are other important issues like adequate funding for arts programs, that faculty could target.

Joe (student): Hey did you hear about the budget cuts? They’re cutting the school art budget.

John (student): BEEP that!

Mr. Lovecraft (teacher): (*enters*) Who said BEEP?

Joe: Mr. Lovecraft? You just said BEEP.

Mr. Lovecraft: No I BEEPing did not!

John: You did! You most certainly did say BEEP!

Mr. Lovecraft: That’s it, both of you little pieces of BEEP get your BEEPing butts to the principal’s office now!

Joe: But why?

Mr. Lovecraft: For saying BEEP, and for lying and claiming that I said BEEP.

John: But you DID say BEEP, and you just said BEEP again!

Joe: And you called us, and I quote, “little pieces of BEEP.”

Mr. Lovecraft: No I BEEPing did not!

SFX: Siren sounds then Principle Locnoar walks on

Principal Locnoar: Who keeps saying BEEP?

Mr. Lovecraft: Principal Locnoar these two keep saying BEEP!

Joe + John: HE KEEPS SAYING BEEP!

Ms. Hastur (Principal's Assistant): (entering) Principal Locnoar, there is an army of penguins outside threatening to bomb the school if we don't give them 38,000 pounds of kipper.

Principal Locnoar: Who gives a BEEP? Someone said BEEP! Open negotiations, see if they'll settle for tuna, we've got that budgeted in!

Joe: Why the BEEP do you care if people say BEEP? It BEEPing gets beeped out by that BEEPing buzzer you mother BEEPing pieces of platypus BEEP bought with the arts budget!⁴⁹

Joe and John, the students in this sketch, become the voices of reason, revealing inconsistencies and contradictions in the ways adults teach behavior versus the ways adults model behavior. Some of the objectives for the writing process are to encourage young people to examine the world around them and in that process learn to identify and evaluate social contradictions, to value difference, and to learn from one another so that they may be better citizens themselves. To wit, Arlene Goldbard, author of *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, links community cultural work with ideal citizenry:

Someone taking part in a collaborative theater project, for instance, is able to share a very full and rich experience of citizenship: to be one among many whose ideas and efforts are welcomed equally, who pursue common aims in a climate of respect and affection, who together make something meaningful to themselves and to the whole community. Even in a dark time, this experience foreshadows true democracy and full, vibrant

⁴⁹ No profanity is used in the sketch. Instead, a student stands off stage and calling out the word "BEEP" while the actor silently mouths the word "truck." Liam Brennan wrote the sketch "Dropping the Bomb" over fall 2009. It was first performed at the Comedy Academy benefit show, February 20, 2010 and again for the annual show (2009-2010). Both times it was hugely successful.

citizenship.⁵⁰

The value of arts education programs to provide encouragement for expressions of cultural citizenship that empower and affirm, are not to be underestimated. The Comedy Club, in its inception, sought to provide a social and creative outlet to young people with little opportunity to express their own worldviews and opinions.

Former Principal Mary Beth Waits believes that students involved in extra-curricular activities tend to have higher stakes in their academic performance, employ good time management skills, and do better handling stress. Using her many years of experience as an educator and administrator she concludes that the most successful students are ones that “we have a hook in them beyond the classroom. They want to stay eligible because they want to be able to participate. It brings them into contact frequently with kids that are a different age, social group.”⁵¹ This broadens their social groups and experiences, exposing them to difference, which typically transforms into an understanding, if not respect and tolerance for differences. Many former members of the Comedy Club testify that the program has obvious and lasting positive effects on themselves and others, offering a safe space to explore their lives creatively and humorously without censorship. For shy and reserved students, it provides a space to develop confidence and self-assurance, both concomitant with performing in front of large crowds.⁵² One such student, now a freshman in college,

⁵⁰ Goldbard, *New Creative Community*, 14.

⁵¹ Mary Beth Waits, Personal Interview, March 15, 2005.

⁵² Austen Villemez, a former participant and now one of the comedy coaches for the annual production, specifically noted this phenomenon of shy students becoming more confident and extroverted throughout the duration of their time spent in the Comedy Club, sometimes over a span of three years and also within just one year’s time. He has been involved in the program as participant or assistant for over a decade. This phenomenon is remarked upon repeatedly by various parents, participants, and staff. Austen Villemez, Personal Interview, March 1, 2005.

entered the Comedy Club in sixth grade a quiet, self-conscious student and by the time he reached eighth grade he had enough confidence to run for Student Council President—and won.

Student evaluations describe the benefits gained from participation in the Comedy Club. Post-program evaluations indicate that 100% of students agreed or strongly agreed that Comedy Club improved their ability to work with others as an ensemble and helped them appreciate the importance of teamwork; 100% agreed or strongly agreed that their writing and/or performing with Comedy Club helped them in their creative writing, public speaking, or communication; and 92% agreed or strongly agreed that working with Comedy Club increased their self-confidence.⁵³ Jeffrey Hacker, who participated all three years he attended Colonel E. Brooke Lee Middle School and recently joined us again for a benefit show, says in addition to it helping him with presentational skills, “[i]t relieves stress. I can get away from what I actually have to do—homework” and it has helped him to “learn to laugh at stuff. I used to not laugh at jokes. I didn’t have a sense of humor.”⁵⁴ Student testimonials gleaned from 2009 evaluations taken from Northwood High School Comedy Club participants report that the program helped improve their people skills, grammar, and creative skills and a few wrote that participating in Comedy Club compelled them to maintain academic eligibility, keeping their grade point average at ‘C’ or above. Other participants, like Joshua Rosen and Sara Mozersky, attest that the experience informed and inspired them to pursue theater, music, or comedy professionally. An

⁵³ We administered post-evaluation surveys to student Comedy Club participants in April 2009. Not all students were able to attend this final meeting for the program, so about 30% of regular participants are not reflected in the data collected. There were thirteen respondents, six female and seven male, with 3 students each from 9th, 10th, 11th grades and 4 students from 12th grade.

⁵⁴ Hacker quoted in Rasicot, “Club Gets a Laugh.”

overwhelmingly high number of students participating in this program have, in fact, successfully pursued careers in theater—whether performing as musicians, actors, stand-up comics, or behind-the-scenes as theater technicians, stage managers, directors, and production crew members. One student writer attests that writing “was gratifying and allowed me express some of my frustrations with the high school environment,” while another appreciated “being able to see my ideas performed.”⁵⁵ Another common by-product of student participation in the program is simply the opportunity and value of learning how to make other people laugh.⁵⁶

Student evaluations help us gauge whether we are carrying out the vision and goals of the Comedy Academy; in other words, we can determine whether we are creating an environment where humor enacting cultural citizenship can flourish. While participants do not employ the term cultural citizenship when referring to their own writing or objectives, it is evident—based on evaluations, comic material, participant-observation, and conversations with students—that many student authors conceive of their writing as having power...the power to inform, challenge, and refigure how they are treated and characterized in the US national imaginary.

Conclusion

*Learning to laugh means learning about life*⁵⁷

This is the caption above a picture of a harried looking Harry Bagdasian as he directs the 2006 cast of *Slaw and Disorder: Comic Intent* in a front page story in *The*

⁵⁵ Post-evaluation surveys, 2009.

⁵⁶ Specifically, Chelsea Vanderweele was quoted in an article about Comedy Club saying that she loved to make others laugh; Rosen is also quoted here as attributing his desire to pursue professional theater stems from his experience in Comedy Club. See Fred Lewis, “After 11 years, still running the comedy asylum,” *The Gazette*, April 26, 2006, A Section, Wheaton Edition.

⁵⁷ Lewis, “After 11 years,” A-1.

Gazette about the Comedy Club annual show. Indeed, the process of writing sketch comedy and performing it is one that allows young people to process and learn from life. As Co-Founding Director of the Comedy Academy and serving as Vice-President and Treasurer on the Board of Directors, Robbie McEwen says: “For me, the value of Comedy Club comes...from the process, not the product...They’re taking a creative idea and understanding what the essence is. A lot of this is a way for kids to deal with issues in their lives and to take the sting out of it.”⁵⁸ Young people’s production of charged humor—particularly the humor framing cultural belonging basing inclusion on quality of character rather than socio-economic status; the humor drawing from identity categories; and the humor revealing social and political contradictions between what they are taught and what is actually modeled to them—also offers audience members access to a kind of humor seldom available to them or anyone for that matter. While family-friendly television networks and programming abound, rarely are shows meant to entertain devised by the young protagonists themselves. Our entry point into youth culture as you might view it on television is one contrived by other adults and their perception of what it means to be young in the US. Community cultural development that builds theater arts education and programs do a fine job of housing and training young aspiring actors but even these initiatives tend to purchase someone else’s (usually adult) script for the students to perform. The Comedy Club distinguishes itself by yielding a product that is wholly student based and for the most part, student produced.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Robbie McEwen plays an integral role in the Comedy Club, now the Comedy Academy, not only as Vice-President and Treasurer of the Board of Directors but by spearheading grant writing, program development, prop and scenery work, and programs, among the other countless contributions she makes to the organization.

Participants attest to the emotional, academic, developmental, and social benefits of being a member of the Comedy Club, but they also speak just as frequently about the amazing opportunity afforded them to work with playwright and director Harry Bagdasian, a “real professional”⁵⁹ and a man who offers the same skill set and dedication to this youth comedic arts program as he does to his other, far more illustrious and prestigious contracts, among them the US Military’s annual theatrical extravaganza “Spirit of America.” When asked what it would take to create a similar program in other schools, Austen Villemez, a comedy performer, now an adult and former member of the Comedy Club, remarked on the necessity of having a director who believes in young people and recognizes the importance of raising the consciousness of their local community and the general public to their insights, viewpoints, and experiences through humor.⁶⁰ Fortunately, for schools that do not have the resources or capacity to create what Harry Bagdasian and Lisa Levin Itté established fifteen years ago, Bagdasian shares his scripts from Comedy Club productions with hundreds of schools and thousands of students by having them published annually by an international publishing company. These original scripts are being bought and performed in schools in the US, Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and the United Arab Emirates.⁶¹ That these humorous sketches about young people’s lives can translate across cultural boundaries and national borders, speaks to the universality of the difficulties associated with coming of age and establishing identity in any region or country. As student written work has been

⁵⁹ Mary Beth Waits, Personal Interview, March 15, 2005.

⁶⁰ Austen Villemez, Personal Interview, March 1 2005.

⁶¹ All scripts have been published by Meriwether Publishing, LTD Contemporary Drama Service. This company publishes and distributes plays internationally for students ranging in age from 5-19.

increasingly utilized in annual shows, Bagdasian has also successfully orchestrated the publication of scripts written by the students, making them published authors while still in high school and offering other young people around the world the opportunity to perform creative work written by their peers. Last year a student collection of scripts, *America's Next Top (Boy) Model and Other Comic Sketches*, outsold Bagdasian's scripts.

Annual shows are well-attended and the most recent benefit show for Comedy Academy held on February 20, 2010 was filled to capacity at Randolph Road Theater in Silver Spring, Maryland. Typically, the audience is comprised mainly of family, friends, fellow students, and Comedy Club alumni. And, while we are delighted that students can share their work with their local and immediate communities, a central concern for the Comedy Academy in the future is how to export this program broadly to others beyond Montgomery County, Maryland. Publishing and making available scripts written by students is a good beginning but replicating the program would offer more students a broader array of creative tasks and more ways to participate in the production of humor. The success of this program, I believe, is indication that young people are hungry for arts education, particularly initiatives that value their input and recognize their creative capabilities and potential.

Young people extend belonging to others who exhibit and share the social values extolled them by family (micro-model) and culture (macro-model), values such as fairness, equality, kindness, honesty, integrity, etc. They eventually learn that while we tout such virtues in society, we do not actually model them. We do waffle on issues of torture; we do deny certain groups rights based on their sexuality; we do

construct a physical landscape that does not accommodate for the differently abled; we have been lied to by our government; and special interests do take precedence over the public's wellbeing. Young people use creative expression to reconcile these contradictory messages and to present possibilities for other social outcomes, other standards of belonging. Inclusion based on the quality of one's character offers a schema for belonging. This is a product of the culture they live in. They would not know to value honesty, integrity, and equality were it not for the value imparted these qualities by adults, and a product of their own social positioning, i.e., how they experience the world based on the categories of difference they occupy. Put differently, "[h]ow we choose to live, our collective imagination about how we can live and what we can do, is so tied to our culture. Our culture is after all our eyes."⁶² This poetically profound statement written by Gale Jackson reminds us that what we are capable of imagining is a direct product of our culture. Part of the reason young people can imagine a world devoid of inequality, treachery, thievery, and manipulation is because we construct that ideal for them every day in the history books, in television shows and books targeting young people, in civic, athletic, and group activities...it is only a matter of time before they start noticing the leaky sections of this pipedream. Young people are interpreting belonging and difference—theirs and others—in ways unconnected with race/ethnicity, national origin, ability, religion, or sexuality. It is important that we hear them. Students participating in Comedy Club programs demonstrate in their comedy writing that they understand societal contradictions and resent the lies they are told. It is important that we start being honest and earn back their faith. We can start by improving education on

⁶² Jackson, "Three Voices/Together," 332.

myriad fronts and by taking a more complex look at differences, perhaps via community cultural development, helping young people to filter their experiences, emotions, and ideas through artistic mediums. Comedy writing and performance, in particular, offers young people a forum to satirize, parody, and critique the world around them. This is just another way that the production of humor can enact cultural citizenship, another way that the production of humor lends itself to social change

Chapter 7: Conclusion: Laughing All the Way

A constitution or bill of rights which enshrined the idea of the 'double focus' of citizenship – equal rights and equal practices – would have to specify rights with respect to the processes that determine outcomes.

—Stuart Hall and David Held¹

Stuart Hall and David Held go on to elaborate what entails full citizenship, the criteria necessary to truly achieve social equality. These changes can be summed up as acknowledgment—via equal legal rights, cultural visibility, and acceptance—and being granted access—to education, health care, and child care, to an adequate retirement plan, and to civic and political processes. Access to information, the ability to make the political process meaningful, and the right to speak to one's discontent are critical to the experience of full citizenship. These are the rights Hall and Held suggest as “determin[ing] outcomes.” As I argue throughout, comics are using charged humor to lobby for acknowledgement and access, revealing the ways they do not fully belong in the national polity. Comics are using their humor to enact cultural citizenship and while this is not the most economically viable mode of humor production, increased consumption of this kind of humor does bear the potential of challenging patterns of humor consumption that favor men, minoritarian comics who reinforce stereotypes about their respective communities, and those performing in gender neutral ways or choosing not to perform marginality .

Our cultural, political, and economic co-ordinates shape our experiences of national inclusion or exclusion. It is impossible to extricate these experiences from who we are and the categories of difference we occupy. Therefore, desire to refigure

¹ Stuart Hall and David Held, “Citizens and Citizenship,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 185.

citizenship in order to confer acknowledgement and grant access to all legal rights and how one goes about enacting this desire is directly related to our identities and the minoritarian communities to which we belong. Humor opens up dialogue, conversations, for example, about how one's experience of being queer is affected by ideologies and institutions—it is Homi K. Bhaba's "narration of nation" iterated through comic performance.²

Some comics narrate our nation in ways more palatable than others and some comics who enact cultural citizenship may do so sparingly in order to enhance marketability. There are rewards for playing safe, such as increased economic viability and there are consequences for pushing the envelope, like losing your audience or your sponsor. Lea Delaria was dumped (if only temporarily) by leading organizations in the marriage equality movement, after a fundraising event in Palm Springs when she began criticizing George Bush. Her mic was cut off and she was escorted off stage. Following this censorship, Lea Delaria used the experience in her stand-up, as illustration of the ways certain opinions are stifled, even among seemingly progressive organizations. She goes on to indict assimilationist strategies associated with the gay civil rights movement:

We used to be queer. We were fuckin' queer. What are we now? Now we're middle-class mainstream assholes who sit around and talk about how we're just like straight people...you go to the pride rallies and there's always some piss-ant mainstream faggot standing up there saying [*in a high voice*], 'We're just like everyone else.' You know that asshole?! 'We're like straight people, we're just like 'em. We are like straight people. We are like them and they are like us. We're like everyone else.' Yeah and that's when the seven and a half

² Homi K. Bhaba (ed.), "Introduction: narrating the nation," in *Nation and Narration* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

foot tall drag queen walks by with three foot spangle platforms and opens his butterfly wings.³

Intra-community criticism is critical but there is no glut of folks happy to hear what Lea Delaria opines above, in main because she uses an angry lesbian shtick to rail against pretty much everything, including the marriage equality movement, without offering any alternatives. Where should our energies be focused, if not on obtaining civil rights at the state and federal level and ending legal discrimination based on sexual orientation? She makes clear that occupying a minoritarian status and even referencing that marginality in the performance, does not result in humor enacting cultural citizenship. Charged humor identifies an issue and offers possible solutions. For instance, following a twenty-minute set of stand-up comedy, Dean Obeidallah concluded his performance saying:

You know we are all Palestinians....we are all Egyptians and we are all Lebanese and we're all Iraqis and we're all every country in the Arab world and if we work together here we can do anything we want. [*big applause*] It's the truth. The more we get involved in politics and in the media, then we can do more to define who we are as opposed to letting others define us with their own agenda.⁴

Obeidallah casts a wide net and makes us all Arabs, charging all viewers to make it part of their task to challenge erroneous and harmful misrepresentations of Arabs.

This encouragement to mobilize and how to do so is a central feature of charged humor. Some, unlike Obeidallah's advice, is less practical, though humorous, as with this joke by Margaret Cho:

I think we should get really active [about gay marriage]. I think we should make all the wedding planners go on strike. [*in a mock 'gay' voice*] 'If I can't

³ Lea Delaria in *Outlaugh: The Best of Queer Comedy*, DVD. Directed by Gene Merker (USA: Edit This Productions, 2007).

⁴ Dean Obeidallah in *The Arab American Comedy Tour*, DVD. Videography by Oscar Films (Seattle and Dearborn, Michigan: Arab Film Distribution, 2006).

get married, you can't get married. Go ahead. Try to do your own makeup. Oh boo hoo. Who need [sic] a floral arrangement now [*burst of laughter*]?⁵

This joke encourages activism, draws from the existing arsenal of oppositional tactics by alluding to a worker's strike, and reveals the irony of not being allowed to marry the person you love while working in the marriage industry. Randy Martin writes that performing artists who "make a commitment to speaking on behalf of their work undertake a social compact with their audience that opens routes between creativity and judgment and between who gets to make art and who gets to decide what is done with what is made."⁶ Art can be beautiful, but it can also be pro-active—these qualities are not mutually exclusive. Not every artist compels viewers to action, but as Martin intimates, when they do they are undertaking a "social compact with their audience." This relationship of mutual accountability between artist and audience helps buoy and sustain action even when contact is severed. Remember, Benedict Anderson says that the national imaginary does not hinge on the veracity of these imaginings, rather on our understanding and grasp of our simultaneous activities and experiences. My stomach grumbles and whines as I type and I will soon remedy this hunger, imagining that others are doing the same. Beyond the performance, we can imagine that the social compact is intact and we can imagine that other individuals are united in the fight to achieve equality (even if they are not).

In this way, comic performance can instill and inspire a sense of community, of unity towards a common goal. It doesn't have to, which is something I often tell students whose hackles are raised in defense of the shock comedy and equal

⁵ *Annul Victory*, DVD. Directed by Cheryl Riley (California: Manmade Multimedia, 2009).

⁶ Randy Martin, "Artistic Citizenship: Introduction," in *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts*, Edited by Mary Schmidt Campbell and Randy Martin (New York & London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

opportunity offending that is so popular right now. The point is that it can and there are many comics who opt to make their comic artistry meaningful, whatever that looks like for them. I return now to the subjects from earlier case studies to reflect on future possibilities, potential future scholarship, and action needed in order to create the changes—legal, philosophical, political, and cultural—necessary so that all may have the experience of full citizenship.

Future Possibilities

Furthermore, each of these worlds...allow those individuals who have some access to them some space in which to reassert a measure of choice and control over everyday life, and to 'play' with its more expressive dimensions...Such opportunities need to be more, not less, widely available across the globe, and in ways not limited by private appropriation.
—Stuart Hall⁷

The students in Comedy Club continue to write sketches and in this year's annual show on April 22 and 23, their sketches will comprise the majority of the show's content. The Comedy Academy has adopted the following vision: "To help children, youth, and adults achieve creative self expression through comedy," a vision they seek to expand to additional high schools and middle schools in Montgomery County in coming years.⁸ This summer the Comedy Academy will be among the performances you can catch at D.C.'s Capital Fringe Festival, where mostly unknown performing artists apply to be a part of an alternative theater arts festival exposing them to local and national media. The festival, lasting three weeks in July, is in its fifth year and arranges for performances in a centralized area so patrons can walk

⁷ Stuart Hall, "The Meaning of New Times," in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, eds. Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (London & New York: Verso, 1990), 129.

⁸ The Comedy Academy's vision is a part of a one-year strategic plan drafted and distributed to board members on November 16, 2009.

from one venue to another—this year between two neighborhoods: Mount Vernon Square and Penn Quarter. This will prove a unique opportunity for students to showcase their work to a different audience and different demographics and a wonderful means of exporting student concerns and their views of the world around them in and on their own terms.

Performing off of school property allows students to include sketches administrators will not allow in school performances, such as those containing overt sexuality, weapons, and profanity. Censorship of student material affects what can be included in the final performance and a way students' authentic voices can and have been distilled or muted. Student writers quickly learn, and this is all the more true for older students, that good comedy does not have to rely on shocking the audience, gratuitous violence made ridiculous, bad “blonde” jokes, and references to scat. Since we are aware of administrative oversight, student sketches are vetted during the writing process so the final sketches are not and never have been a comic orgy of farting, senseless violence, and debasing humor. The final rulings on acceptable sketches made by administrators are often based on a principle—i.e., a student is carrying a (water) gun on stage—neglecting to contextualize the sketch—i.e., a student playing the role of a policeperson is carrying a water gun on stage in order to arrest a corporate weasel for invasive and coercive advertising.

Student writers authored a series of sketches pitching a new product called the “smart car.” Much like the soothing mechanical woman’s voice directing drivers with global positioning systems, the smart car is a vehicle paired with a personality...offering you navigation with attitude. Consumers can choose from any

four styles: the Mama, Gossip Girl, Grumpy Gramps, and a Rastafarian. All four sketches were submitted to administrators and two were rejected—the Mama and Rastafarian—the first because they believed it caricatured a Jewish mother and the other because it featured a car smoking marijuana. In a program where half the participants are Jewish in any given year, the sketches are bound to represent such a cultural identity. Administrators panicked at the thought of turning a Jewish mother into a caricature, not thinking about giving students the opportunity to parody their own mother figures at home or the in-group humor the sketch utilized making it even funnier to Jews than to Gentiles not in the “know.” Written by Liam Brennan, the smart car featuring the Rastafarian navigation system—coined the Rastafarari because it combined “the speed and agility of an Italian sports car with the laid back calm of a Jamaican Holiday”—was intended to be funny, but to also serve as an anti-drug message.⁹ As soon as the driver realizes her car is smoking a joint, she angrily inquires, “Are you smoking a reefer under your hood? Those things give you carburetor cancer!” The driver immediately pulls the car over and walks the rest of the way to her destination. The sketch concludes with a student displaying a sign saying that the Comedy Club does not in any way endorse drug use. In fact, the program has for many years been funded by the Under 21 Fund, which stipulates that grant recipients include anti-drinking, anti-smoking, and anti-drug messages in their program. This sketch was a part of that effort...until it got axed.

⁹ Liam Brennan wrote “The Smart Car- Grumpy Gramps” and “The Smart Car- the Rastafarari,” the latter, after being removed from the 2009 annual show by administrators, was performed at the Comedy Academy benefit show, held February 20, 2010. The “smart car” concept came out of writer’s meeting and other sketches in the series were authored by Jennifer Bagdasian (Gossip Girl) and Harry Bagdasian (the Mama). All four smart car sketches are slated for publication in fall 2010.

The value of student-authored performance is somewhat lessened when the final products are censored, though it does not diminish the value and impact *the process* has on student participants. They are still able to produce charged humor, even if it will not be available for consumption, at least on school premises. Increased exposure to self-authored youth comedy may begin to confer a certain amount of legitimacy to their creative work and their requests for acknowledgement as politically astute, civically responsible, and capable young people. This necessitates the creation of more arts education programs and initiatives valuing student authorship and voice. Our job is to listen to those voices, so we can begin to meet young people on their own terms...they just might be better than ours.

Future Scholarship

If we want to be a strong society we gotta' include everybody. If we're gonna' be a weak society, we'll be splintered and we won't stand together. And that's not American, you see. We were sold a bill of goods that's different than what we were taught in the first place. And what's in our constitution. So, we gotta' re-look at that.

—Cyndi Lauper¹⁰

Micia Mosely's range of Black lesbian subjectivities expressed through her one-woman show, *Where My Girls At?: A Comedic Look at Black Lesbians*, has the potential to engage members of the dominant culture to identify with minoritarian subjects. Mosely spoke about a number of instances when White men, in particular, have approached her after the show to express their delight with the show along with their surprise at that delight. These men shared that they never really thought they would have anything in common with a Black lesbian but were surprised at how they identified with the characters. It must be a stunningly strange moment when the

¹⁰ *Annul Victory*, op.cit.

straight man realizes that he and the Black lesbian desire to bed the same women, when that becomes a way for him to relate. But this goes beyond pursuing similar sexual conquests. Though it may begin there, sometimes all it takes is a foot in the door for that same viewer to identify with other qualities like Playher's street savvy sensibility, Sistah's altruism, Ziggy's hopefulness, and Lady D's confidence.

Audience identification with "Others" humanizes individuals and demystifies their respective communities, but it is difficult to determine its long-term impact or effect.

Performance artists concerned with audience reception should devise and distribute post-show surveys and evaluations assessing issues of identification and audience engagement. The resulting data can inform creative decisions and script revisions.

Mosely uses this technique to workshop individual characters in the show when they repeatedly fail to gain the audience's favor. She wants all of her characters to have the chance to move on to the next round of *America's Next Top Negress* and audience surveys help her identify what worked and what did not in her presentation of the five Black lesbians featured in the show.

In addition to working full-time for the Posse Foundation and performing her one-woman show and stand-up comedy, Micia Mosely recently began creating bi-weekly vodcasts (video podcast) called the "Progress Report" in which she tackles various cultural and political issues with humor, verve, and critical dialogue either alone and sometimes with other Black intellectuals. In the inaugural vodcast, released in that post-new year fugue when goals are set and change is imminent (for at least two weeks), she tells you how to balance your budget, increase self-efficacy, and the key to taking good care of yourself. Subsequent "Progress Reports" reflect on the first

year of President Obama's administration and another released around Valentine's Day encourages viewers to find a Black person to love or to simply love yourself. Recently uploaded is a two-part "Progress Report" on Black authenticity in which she interviews Dax-Devlon Ross, lawyer and author of *Beat of a Different Drum: The Untold Stories of African Americans Forging Their Own Paths in Work and Life* (Hyperion 2006). They walk through a residential neighborhood in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn discussing the value and function of Black-owned businesses, race loyalty and the economy of cultural work. As cultural entrepreneurs themselves, when it comes to the folks consuming their work, they want members of their own community to benefit from work about, by and for them but recognize the value of exposure beyond the African American community. The market reduces the labor of cultural production to a value, regardless of the skin color, creed, or sexual orientation of those owning the means of production. Thus, according to Ross, the responsibility lies with the producer—the writer, the performer, the musician, the craftsperson, the farmer—to exercise responsible production:

To me, it really is about are you creating quality product and are you supporting the product. I'm not necessarily as concerned with who owns that means...It's in the capitalist structure, which says that I as the owner am going to feel like I am more entitled to you as the worker. And that necessarily has nothing to do with race. Whether a Black person who owns it or a White person who owns it...I am going to enact pretty much the same means of co-opting your labor for a value that's less than probably what it's worth.¹¹

For him, what is essential is the product itself. In this case, is the book, painting, or comic performance fair to the community it represents? Is it well-intentioned, instructive, and meant to inspire rather than parody and mock? These are

¹¹ Dax-Devlon Ross in "Progress Report #5: Black Authenticity Part B." Available on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8fKV2w5dy0&feature=channel>

important questions for all consumers to ask of the products and entertainment they consume.

It is difficult to work outside of the corporate American oligarchy and there is seldom a commercial venture that does not reduce humans to the labor they produce. Michael Denning, writing in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, argues for a labor theory of culture so that labor performed by entertainers is not overlooked or trivialized.

Performance is always tied to a strict economy of when and when not to show them that you're sweating. How do the rhythms of work become the rhythms of art? The hypothesis of a 'labor unconscious' would mean that cultural historians and interpreters might explore the relations between forms of work and forms of art not only in those classic folk genres – quilts, sea chanteys, and field hollers – where the connections seem immediate, but in the arts and entertainments that seem most distant from the world of work.¹²

As Denning suggests, additional research is needed on entertainment, past and present. Humor continues to pervade nearly every facet of communication and form of entertainment and over the course of the last forty years it has insinuated itself in news programming, resulting in the explosion of infotainment or “soft news.” While scholars have mined the field of late-night television talk shows and adult cartoons like *South Park*, *Family Guy*, and *The Simpsons*, they have overlooked Chelsea Handler's work as host of *Chelsea Lately*, the way humor is used in daytime television talk shows like *The Ellen Degeneres Show* and *The View*, and all-women prank and stunt shows like *Rad Girls* and *Girls Behaving Badly*.¹³ I would encourage scholars examining stand-up comedy or other forms of comic performance to select

¹² Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London & New York: Verso, 2004), 95.

¹³ See Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick, NJ & London: Rutgers University Press, 2008); and Paul Lewis, *Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (Chicago & London: The U of Chicago P., 2006).

comic practitioners or performances whose influence is broad but who have not already been the subjects of analysis, such as Margaret Cho, Karen Williams, Paul Mooney, Kathy Griffin, Lisa Lampanelli, Kate Rigg, Julie Goldman, or other cast members from *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, etc. Relatedly, while there is scholarship documenting the cultural struggles, material conditions, and historical experiences of various minoritarian communities, there is a paucity of literature on humorous cultural practices emerging from minoritarian identities such as Arab, differently abled, Asian, Latino/a, and LGBTQ communities residing in the US and its territories. It is also rather disquieting to note that scholarship on women's humor and stand-up comedy has all but petered out in the past five years. Whether this is a publishing issue or a result of little interest in the topic, I am not sure.

Additional data on audience reception would help us to know how viewers interpret certain comic material and the impact and effects of charged humor on individuals. Follow-up surveys conducted months later can indicate the long-term impact humor can have. Audience members may not remember specific jokes, but what are the impressions that linger, what ideas, strategies or instruction remain with them long after the curtain closes. Documentation of the strategies humor employs to curry favor and facilitate audience identification would be useful to members of social movements seeking to co-opt cultural practices such as entertainment and artistic production and to advance causes and initiatives more effectively. It is also important to gather information on as many of these comic voices on the fringe as possible, for their fringe status already obviates the likelihood that they will be documented and remembered. This was part of my project here, to document a group

of creative young people writing and performing in Silver Spring, MD, a Brooklyn-based performer, and the first openly lesbian comic in the US, all of whom seek to use the domain of humor to enact cultural citizenship, but none of whom have been the subjects of study by performance or cultural studies scholars, Americanists, or humor studies scholars. It is certainly valuable, important, and helpful to direct readers towards the kinds of scholarship enhancing future analysis of performance. However, I am also a firm proponent of action and believe that it takes *theory and praxis* to invoke change.

Future Action

Why do Republicans hate gay marriage, they certainly don't hate gay prostitutes?
—Margaret Cho¹⁴

On November 5, 2008, the day after the passage of Proposition 8, Robin Tyler and Diane Olson were there when the courthouse opened at 9:00 a.m. They filed a petition to the California Supreme Court to overturn the proposition. This time Tyler forecasts success and believes the proposition will be overturned because in May 2008, when California's Supreme Court made its decision to legalize same-sex marriage, they also recognized LGBTQ persons as a "suspect class" or minority. Based on the earlier ruling that LGBTQ persons are a recognized minority, she is confident that Proposition 8 will be found unconstitutional. Now she waits along with the rest of the country.

Shane Phelan reminds us that "[a]ttempts to acquire citizenship without changing the construction of citizenship that prevails in the United States will fail, and they will

¹⁴ *Annul Victory*, op.cit.

harm our most vulnerable members in the process.”¹⁵ Accordingly, making legal changes to citizenship without changing public opinion or broadening who belongs in the public’s understanding of cultural citizenship may actually fail. Both forums—public opinion and policy/legislative changes—must be addressed when undertaking any significant reforms to how citizenship is constructed (read: who is given full rights as a citizen). Shifts in public opinion require visibility, education, and acceptance, making performance a viable strategy for social justice. Other strategies include marches, demonstrations, community outreach initiatives, and other means of generating public dialogue about the issues. Changes in the legal status and recognition of LGBTQ persons require federal protection against employment discrimination based on sexuality, the right for same-sex couples to marry and be afforded the 1,138 rights conferred upon heterosexual married couples, a reform of hate crime legislation, the right to foster and/or adopt, and the list goes on. These legal reforms require legal action like law suits, lobbying Congress, electing sympathizers to public office, and constitutional reform, to name a few. Scholars examining the gay civil rights movement often have at least one objective, even if peripheral to their larger claims and objectives, namely to illumine useful strategies for effective and long-lasting change so that the movement can advance. To account for the necessity of interventions on cultural and legal fronts, it is critical for scholars tackling this subject matter to emphasize the importance of using a definition of citizenship that includes acknowledgement—social, legal, and cultural—otherwise,

¹⁵ Shane Phelan, *Sexual Strangers: Gays, Lesbians and Dilemmas of Citizenship* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 2001), 152.

we cannot understand and evaluate hierarchies in contemporary citizenship that position LGBTQ persons as second-class citizens.

It is critical to employ a queer(ful) intersectional politics so that isolated tactics are not rendered impotent. Robin Tyler believes that “[m]arches don’t mean the politicians listen to you. But what it does, it motivates and activates youth.”¹⁶

Marches and protests that energize their activist base must combine these events with direction for future political intervention. The same is true of charged humor. How can audience members or sympathizers get involved beyond this gathering—in the street or in the theater? What tactics can be employed individually like letters, emails, and visits to local and national politicians and where can we direct interested parties to participate in future collective action be that a rally, a letter-writing campaign, or volunteering for a local non-government organization or non-profit organization.

Another necessary task is the de-stigmatization of civil protest and collective action; rather, strategically linking freedom and autonomy with those rights allowing us to make the political process meaningful.

Radical social movements and activist institutions often reach beyond the liberal categories of collective life—the state, the economy, civil society, and the family—to transcend and overcome their mystifications and mutually constituting inequalities. Calls for expansive democratic publicness, *combined* with arguments for forms of individual and group autonomy, attempt to redefine *equality, freedom, justice*, and *democracy* in ways that exceed their limited (neo)liberal meanings.¹⁷

Neoliberalism continues to do its work to undermine the likelihood of positive reception to social movements and it is part of the neoliberal project to discredit and

¹⁶ *Annul Victory*, op.cit.

¹⁷ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003), 87.

malign social movements aimed at “redistribution downwards.”¹⁸ We must start connecting ideal citizenry with active participation in the political process (regardless of how that manifests), activity that goes beyond voting every four years. This can contribute to Lisa Duggan’s “democratic publicness” but, as she points out, it must be coupled with an inclusiveness that does not divest groups or individuals of their cultural differences. The image of the active constituent and the activities associated with cultural resistance and political activism is in dire need of a makeover, a new image if you will. Recent historical events and shifts in cultural attitudes and political beliefs may present an opportunity to refigure the tenets of democracy and what it means to promote diversity and multiculturalism; to offer all constituents real freedom and equality. Cultural revolutions require numbers, legitimate grievances, and a receptive body politic. Kate Clinton believes that gay visibility is not enough, that we are “in a particular historical moment when we need to come out again. It’s a second outing. We need to come out and challenge people around us, or at least identify ourselves as gay in a world that is larger than a gay world.”¹⁹ Unlike the first coming out, this one is not about salvaging and celebrating a sense of self; rather, it is motivated by the desire to change the real material conditions and lived experiences of LGBTQ persons.

Real inclusiveness means legal rights and cultural recognition that value all diversity. Indeed, everyone “must be able to claim common” rights and entitlements,

¹⁸ There has been a recent resurgence of conservative collective action, i.e., Tea Party protests; however, I do not consider this a social movement aimed at “redistribution downwards” rather a movement that seeks to stymie other such movements or any collective action that challenges capitalism or the tenets of neoliberalism. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equility?*, x.

¹⁹ Aimee Dowd, “L in a Handbasket: Kate Clinton’s politics of funny,” *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Issue 30 (fall 2005): 39.

as full members of the political community, without giving up their cultural identities. This is a key entitlement in any modern conception of citizenship – especially in societies whose populations are increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse.”²⁰ Appreciation of diversity comes from exposure to difference and early cultivation of respect for other cultural identities.

We cast votes every day when we elect what television shows and films to watch and we cast votes by purchasing tickets to see live performances. Increased consumption of the kind of humor that enacts cultural citizenship will ensure that it remains available for consumption and force recognition of its viability as a sound economic investment, like when *The Queens of Comedy* (2001) was expected to generate modest sales and instead was wildly successful, spawning similar commercial ventures like *The Latin Divas of Comedy* (2007). It will also export important critiques, ideas, and vantages to the very groups having the power to create the change we want to see in the world. Louise Bernikow said “Humor tells you where the trouble is.”²¹ All we have to do is listen.

²⁰ Hall & Held, “Citizens and Citizenship,” 187.

²¹ Louise Bernikow, “Humor,” in *The New Beacon Book of Quotations by Women*, Ed. Rosalie Maggio (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 330.

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