IT’S NOT A JOKE: WOMEN’S WORK AND FEMINIST LAUGHTER IN STAND-UP COMEDY

by

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Abstract

Live feminist stand-up comedy, and the shared laughter it generates, is a potent form of popular cultural performance that has become increasingly politically relevant and commercially successful in contemporary North America. In this thesis, I take an interdisciplinary, mixed-method approach to studying the cultural and political work done by Ontario-based, women-identified stand-up comics and comedy producers. I engage with and extend the emerging field of critical comedy studies by drawing on a range of disciplines to analyze the affective politics of live feminist stand-up comedy. My position is informed by, and my writing integrates, the voices of contemporary and historical women-identified stand-up comics whom I have encountered through a variety of cultural texts, including: live and mediated performances, memoirs, interviews, histories, and anthologies. I interview a range of Ontario-based women-identified comics and critically reflect on performances I attended, recorded, and/or helped to produce. I focus in particular on explicitly feminist comedy events both produced and populated by women. These include: Yas Kween and SHADE, and those produced by the Hysterics Collective.

I argue that in writing and performing live comedy, comics claim positions of epistemic authority and affective and discursive power. They position themselves as experts on their own lives and subject positions, and they claim to know what will (and how to) make an audience laugh. On stage, in these spaces of authority, comics maintain discursive control over how they present themselves and their experiences. This is a powerful position that counters processes of cultural and political abjection. In generating laughter, comics affect (and are affected by) their audiences. I theorize this circulation of affect as politically powerful and personally meaningful. I reject the notion that a joke could be objectively funny or a comic universally appealing, and instead problematize social constructions of women as unfunny. Through autoethnography and reception studies, I argue that “getting” the joke and finding it funny (or not) depends on our interpretive repertoires. Additionally, I show that generating laughter takes work—work that is at once alienating and affirming, and almost always precarious.
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Finding Feminism Funny (Or, Finding Funny Feminisms)

Audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements (Jill Dolan, 2001, p.455).

Laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism (Judith Butler, 1990, p.xxviii)

How Many Feminists Does it Take to Screw in a Lightbulb? –That’s Not Funny

Feminism has a long and complicated relationship with comedy. Consider how, in her widely discussed Netflix Special Nanette (2017), queer Australian comic Hannah Gadsby reflects on the gendered and sexualized dimensions of humour and laughter:

I should quit. I’m a disgrace. What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Classic. It’s bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it’s funny. Because it’s true. The only people who don’t think it’s funny are us lezzers, but we’ve got to laugh, because if we don’t, proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn’t write that. That’s not my joke. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, lesbian meant something different than it does now. Back then, lesbian wasn’t about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. ‘Why aren’t you laughing? What are you? Some kind of lesbian?’ Classic. ‘Go on. You gotta laugh. Lighten up. Stop taking everything so seriously! Fucking learn to take a joke. You need to lighten up. You need a good dicking. Get a cock up you! Drink some jizz! You know?’ Actual advice? It’s counterproductive. (Gadsby, 2017)

This excerpt gestures toward the power that is exercised through both joking and the (un)laughing responses that affirm or undermine the (would be) jester. It describes performances of gender that influence our relationships to (and expectations of) humour and audiences of humour. In this bit, Gadsby surfaces the dominant and resistant discourses of gender and laughter that I explore in this thesis through formal semi-structured interviews with women-identified stand-up comics,
participant-observation at shows that are produced by and feature women-identified comics, and
the experience of creating the Hysterics Collective with whom I produced three feminist stand-up
comedy shows. I elaborate further on this excerpt further in chapter five.

Throughout this thesis, I celebrate funny women and explore the ideological and cultural
tensions between feminism and laughter. I study contemporary live stand-up comedy performed
by women who speak from a range of racialized, class-situated and gendered subject positions. I
chose to interview women who produce, seek out, and perform stand-up comedy, and I argue that
their work furthers the aims of intersectional feminism because they are engaged in projects that
amplify and diversify the voices of women in the public sphere. That is, I argue that in
performing stand-up comedy, comics claim positions of epistemic authority and discursive and
affective power. They laugh and make their audiences laugh, displacing shame and disgust and
reorienting women to our individual and social bodies, and through the circulation of laughter, to
one another. In this way, women comics perform the work that Judith Butler and Jill Dolan, in
very different ways, call for in the epigraphs that opened this chapter.

This research is guided by the overarching question: What political and cultural work is done
by women performing stand-up comedy? When I interview women-identified comics, when I
observe their performances, and when I engage with the broader literature, I explore the following
questions:

• What strategies do women develop and enact in order to become intelligible to their
  audiences as funny, laughing subjects (rather than receptive audiences, laughable objects,
  or disgusting abjections)?

• What are the effects of shared, joyful laughter?

• Under what conditions are women producing such laughter?

I provide theoretical and methodological foundations in this introductory chapter, which I
conclude with an overview of the chapters that follow. But first, before presenting a review of the
literature that I draw on to situate this study, I provide an autoethnographic account of how I
came to engage with the particular substantive material that is included in this thesis.

Seeking out Feminist Comedy in an Oppressively Unfunny Patriarchy: An
autoethnography

Cook et al. remind researchers that “academic and other knowledges are always situated,
always produced by positioned actors working in/between all kinds of locations, working
up/on/through all kinds of research relations(hips)” (p. 16). Relatedly, the
researcher is always a part of his/her study. His/her scholarly background, as well as the political and methodological choices
she/he makes define the position from which the study will be
conducted, and directs the results of the study. The ‘objectivity’
of a study evolves from the explicit positioning of the
background factors influencing the methodological choices, the
perspectives taken, as well as the selection of the material.
(Jarviluoma, Moisala, & Vilkko, 2003, p. 21)

Acknowledging the situatedness of this research is particularly salient given that it arises from my
own sense of humour, which itself is mired in a complex and unstable web of subjective
experiences, perceptions, ideologies, dispositions, affects, and more. To a significant degree, my
sense of humour determined the material I selected, the comedy nights I attended and produced,
the comics I interviewed, my interpretation of the data I collected, and so on. It is an unstable
starting position, and yet it directs the results of this study. It must be reckoned with.

Complicating this further, I am a fan of stand-up comedy. As Lawrence Grossberg
argues:

The collapse of critical distance and the crisis of authority is not
epistemological but a concrete historical dilemma called into
existence by the fact that, as critical intellectuals, we are
inextricably linked to the dominant forms of popular culture; we
are fans writing about the terrain, if not the objects, of our own
fandom…. My existence as a fan, my experiences…. are the raw
material, the starting point of critical research. (Grossberg, 1997,
pp. 250–251)
Since I am a fan of feminist comedy, and my sense of humour directs this study, it is important for me to situate myself in this study, and to provide an account of how I have developed my approach to and definitions of feminist stand-up comedy. In short, to reveal my research as a reflexive process (Holliday, 2002) and to, as Grossberg articulates, lay out my experiences as the starting point of this critical research. This section provides an overview of my preliminary research and traces the development of my thinking about stand-up comedy, my own relationship to the form as researcher and audience member, and conclusions I have drawn about what it means to define comedy as feminist.

Among the first of the shows I attended as a participant-observer was The Crimson Wave, a “feminist-friendly” comedy night with an explicit “no rape jokes” policy. Its tagline is: “Always LGBTQ+ and feminist. No Rape Jokes.” This weekly show is produced and hosted in Toronto by comics Natalie Norman and Jess Beaulieu. In keeping with the euphemistic reference to menstruation, the hosts regularly discuss their periods during their sets, as well as on their eponymous podcast. Additionally, they are involved in activist work that seeks to increase access to menstrual products.

Crimson Wave takes place on Sundays at 21:30-22:30 at the Comedy Bar, and typically has 4 or 5 comics performing per night. This show is not exclusive to women; it showcases “funny tellers of all genders”. Tickets cost $10. The Crimson Wave, which is a significant feature of the Toronto feminist comedy scene, was a formative element of my preliminary research. While I had frequent conversations with Crimson Wave producers and hosts about my research, in which they were interested, they proved to be elusive each time I tried to arrange to meet for formal semi-structured interviews (i.e., they didn’t return my emails).

Crimson Wave was the first women-centric live stand-up comedy night I attended. It left an impression on me and expanded my understanding of what comedy could be. Prior to these events, I primarily watched live stand-up at what comics refer to as the ‘club circuit’: Yuk Yuks (Toronto and London), or Absolute Comedy (Kingston). Neither of these venues showcased
nights of feminist comedy. Additionally, these comedy club chains are more restrictive than venues like The Comedy Bar or Bad Dog Theatre. Absolute Comedy, for example, enforces a dress code for performers, and “the owner will reprimand you if you wear short sleeves” (A-M. Stojic, personal communication, 2018). In my experience, the majority of performers presented as cis-gendered, straight White males, supporting Antoine’s finding that:

Any analysis of the schedules for headlines in the mainstream comedy club circuits reveals White men far outnumber their Black, Latino, and Asian male counterparts, and heterosexual males are more prevalent than their gay male counterparts […] Being White, able-bodied, and/or straight is less predictive of success than is being male. (2015, p.152)

The material that I watched at these shows often uncritically surfaced stereotypes and put forth essentialist characterizations of men and women. Minorities were often the “butt” of the jokes. Ashley Moffatt, who at the time of our interview had been employed (“rostered”) by Yuk Yuks for four years, had a clear sense of the defining characteristics of these venues. She points out that at the time of her hiring, Yuk Yuks “had like four women which worked on their roster out of 200” (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018). She continues:

There's a guy who is a headliner for Yuks, and I am a host, mainly, because I do a lot of crowd work. He has five minute bit about, and I am not kidding, how Asians are bad at driving, and he does the voice, and it's crazy, and he also has a joke about gay men, and he does the voice. I've just got to sit through it for 45 minutes. Because I am going through smaller towns and stuff, this guy fucking slaughters. People love it. He does an Indian voice. Think about a straight White man, in case you're wondering, and people are like throwing roses at his feet, and I'm like where am I! It's crazy. (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018)

This description of mainstream live stand-up comedy is affirmed and repeated in similar terms by several other participants in this study, some of whom report feeling uncomfortable and restricted in these spaces.

In 2018, Yuk Yuks hosted a show in Toronto called: White Guys Matter: Making Comedy Great Again. Ironically, despite appeals to freedom of speech, upon entering the venue
audience members were told “No heckling allowed,” and were asked to turn off their phones. The event poster read: “XXX RATED! All White guys, seriously! All funny stuff. There is no safe space tonight. Watch these seasoned pros take on race, religion, sexuality, sexism, and anything else your prime minister finds unworthy of humour. Let’s Make Comedy Great Again!”

While I focus primarily on two events, Yas Kween and SHADE, which I describe in more detail below, it is important for me to point out the ways that The Crimson Wave introduced me to live, feminist stand-up comedy. This production resonated with me in a meaningful way. I felt relaxed and receptive because I was not worried about being affected by comedy whose premises I rejected. Rather, I was open to being affected by the comics I was audience to. As I explore further in Chapter 3, we are exposed or made vulnerable through our laughter. Not only was I receptive to this comedy because I shared overlapping political beliefs and cultural frameworks with the comics, but also because I was not worried about the existential and social risks of involuntarily laughing at something offensive.

In her text, “Creating the Audience”, Rayner argues that sometimes we laugh in spite of ourselves. Citing the following joke: “Why was Helen Keller such a bad driver? …She was a woman,” Rayner explains that

> it was not funny to me as female, capable driver, sympathetic to blindness, American, of a certain age—that is, until I laughed. The laugh invaded not just my sensibilities but also the demographic description of my position: of who ought or ought not to laugh as well as when I accidentally laughed. (2012, p.35)

Sometimes might be surprised to find ourselves laughing at a joke that we believe we should not be laughing at. In these instances, laughter is an occasion for self-reflexivity. Several questions emerge: How deeply do we reject sexism? To what extent have we internalized that to which we consciously (and socially) object? Do we laugh because the comic is being ironic? Because we are surprised by their audacity? Are we uncomfortable? To what extent can we understand our own motives and impulses in these situations? I explore these questions throughout this work.
The Crimson Wave was an important starting point for me for the reasons listed above, and also because the feminist comedy scene in Toronto is relatively small compared to the comedy scenes in L.A., NYC, or Chicago. Many of the comics whom I later interviewed and/or recorded have connections to, and positive associations with, The Crimson Wave. Hoodo Hersi, for example, cohosts The Crimson Wave every February when it becomes The Ebony Tide. I saw the hilarious comic Courtney Gilmour for the first time in a bar in Ottawa on tour with the Crimson Wave. She later headlined a Hysterics Event in Kingston.

In September 2016, while in Princeton New Jersey visiting a friend, I attended another show that helped me to understand and contextualize live, feminist stand-up comedy: Adrienne Truscott’s Asking for it: A one woman rape about a comedy (2016). This event was open to the public and put on by Princeton’s Gender Studies department. While The Crimson Wave’s “No rape joke” policy is highlighted by several comics I interviewed, and is a significant feature of the show’s premise, “Asking for it” challenged the idea that one cannot or should not joke about rape.

Truscott surfaced and undermined the rhetoric and logics of rape culture through comedic techniques including: irony, exaggeration, satire and ridicule. Truscott’s costume, which leaves her vulva bare and visible throughout the performance, contests the boundaries of propriety and victimhood. She dances on stage while consuming alcohol, behaviours that she points out are, “all the things that ladies aren’t supposed to do.” These acts are cited in victim-blaming rhetoric. She asks the audience, ‘who here has raped someone?’, subverting expectations for the ‘who here has experienced sexual assault?’ question we thought she was leading up to. Truscott presses the issue, arguing that given the statistics, we were likely to have perpetrators of sexual assault in the audience.

Truscott goes on to address the controversial nature of discussing rape and asks the audience if we can agree that rape is “at the very least rude?” She underlines this point by interacting with two male-presenting audience members, one at a time, and asking them to participate, from their seats, in a scene with her. “I am going to ask you if you want milk in your
Truscott mimes pouring milk into their imagined coffee (for one participant it was coffee, for the other it was cereal, which set up a “cereal rape” joke) while they yelled, as directed, “no!”.

“Wouldn’t you be mad?!” She asks, “that your coffee was ruined?” (Truscott, 2016).

Truscott also points out that we are likely to wait for explicit affirmation that someone would like milk in their coffee before pouring it. This enactment of violating the desires of men in the audience in a trivial way provides a non-threatening analogy that emphasizes the cruelty of victim blaming and the importance of receiving consent. This aspect of comedy is important to me: highlighting the absurdity of patriarchal norms and discourses. I understand feminist comedy as a performance style that denaturalizes ideological frameworks. Feminist comedy exposes and deconstructs normative frameworks. This enables a critical examination of prevailing norms and our relationships to them. Feminist comedy is a form of resistance.

“Asking for it” in particular helped me to understand that treatment of material, rather than the apparent theme of the material itself, is important for understanding the sociopolitical effects of comedy. This sentiment was later expressed by comics in interviews I conducted. I asked participants if they thought there should be limits to what comics joke about. Several cite rape as an example of a topic that should be handled with care. Highlighting the work that goes into comedy, several point out that it takes a lot of work to make a rape joke funny. If a comic feels compelled to joke about something like rape, they have a responsibility to their audiences to make the jokes funny. For example, comic Hoodo Hersi responds by saying that,

I think you can do trans jokes, I think you can do Muslim jokes, I think you can make gay jokes, you can make Black jokes. Any kind of joke I just think. It's really like: how are you writing these jokes? The writing better be amazing (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018).

Comic Daphne Joseph likewise did not want to place restrictions on material, but refers to the responsibility of the comic to recognize the effects of their work:
You do not have to censor yourself, but you have to know that you'll be triggering people. That is your responsibility. Decide to say whatever you want, but if you go into these waters [...] you better be ready. This is something I can't stand, if you're making a joke about rape, and then someone comes up to you like, ‘that was shitty cause it hurt my feelings’, or ‘this is rape culture’, you can't push back and say ‘wtf it was just a joke’. No. Be honest. You know it's a trigger. You know that shit happens, right. Are you OK with that? You have to know that you hurt people's feelings. (D. Joseph, personal communication, November 28th, 2018)

Zoe Brownstone refers to an audience who may benefit from hearing or telling rape jokes. She argues that a comic should be allowed to engage with offensive material and the responses of their audience will determine if the joke is successful or not.

[An audience who doesn’t laugh] is a more profound lesson to me than like shut your mouth don't say it. No, educate the person because there are also like survivors of rape and abuse and those who have PTSD who like that shit, and want to hear about it, and use it as therapy and can say, ‘yeah, I am gonna laugh about this, I am trying to recover from it, and part of my recovery is finding humor in it’. People say like a really common trope is that comedy is tragedy plus time, and that is not true for everything, but fuck, it's true for a lot of things. I got cheated on eight months ago, and I have been banking on it ever since. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Brownstone’s response surfaces a notable element of feminist comedy. The practice of stand-up comedy enables its practitioners and audiences a means of reorienting themselves to their experiences. Sometimes, reframing our experiences through a joke changes how we remember or feel about an experience. Laughter can act as an antiseptic, clearing away the trauma that otherwise infects our psyche. Nelu Handa describes an experience she had on stage “right after a break-up”:

You feel raw, and you feel like you don't want to really be up there and share yourself with people ‘cause you don't know how to process it for yourself yet. I am a private person about that stuff so I don’t talk too much in any depth about. But it does feel like, feels like some unity ya know. I was like, ‘who else got broken up with?’ and one woman in the front row was like, ‘I did’. I hugged her. Like we had this moment, so you don't feel alone, and it feels nice to say that thing. You can just talk and
understand how universal the condition of being a human is for people. (N. Handa, personal communication, February 5th, 2018)

This act of connecting to one another is a significant component of feminist stand-up comedy that I refer to throughout this thesis. I am reminded of a joke I heard several years ago that stuck with me, though I can not find the name of the performer: “Ladies, do you cry on the train? On the train, tears just come. I didn’t even know I was sad! If I see a girl crying on a train, I cry louder to give her privacy”. When I heard it, I laughed. The image of a woman crying loudly to make space for someone else to cry was both a hilarious and touching act of emotional solidarity. The circulation of affect connects us to one another, and we are changed in direct correlation to the intensity of the experience. Laughter is an exceptionally powerful affective display.

To return to the formative comedy events I attended: I found out about Truscott’s show from a poster I saw while roaming Princeton University campus. My primary reason for visiting that part of the world, however, was to attend the SheDevil Comedy Festival in Brooklyn, New York City. I attended four nights of this comedy festival, and took copious notes. The structure of this comedy festival was unusual. Comics were competing against one another to win a $1500 cash prize. This changed the energy of the room; the nature of the festival meant that comics were competitors. It may be the case that stand-up comics compete in other settings, but this competition was foregrounded at this festival, and so was unlike any other comedy event I had attended. At SheDevil, after each comic performs for her allotted time, audience cheering (as interpreted by the host) determines who continued to the next level.

I learned a lot while attending this festival. Since the audience immediately determined the failure or success of each comic, contributing to or diminishing their chances of winning a substantial amount of money, I was compelled to think more seriously about the role of the audience. I was annoyed when the audience cheered for comics who I felt did not work hard enough, were not good enough at their craft. I felt that the audience failed to recognize what I
interpreted as better comedy, better jokes, more engaging and authentic stage presence. Conversely, I felt connected to my peers when we agreed on a comic, when we laughed together, and I felt good about affecting a positive outcome for a comic whose set I enjoyed. Through this experience, I learned that the role of the audience is as important as that of the comic in determining the success of the performance.

Comics who perform at this festival are not allowed to repeat material, and with each round, set times increase. There were three shows a night. Comics start with three minutes. If they pass, they perform for five, seven, and then fifteen minutes. Comics at the early stages of their career who had only developed five or ten minutes of material were at a significant disadvantage. Many comics explicitly address this in their acts by saying they find it very difficult to continue, that they had used up their material in the early rounds. One comic tells the crowd “I spent last night looking through the dictionary to find something talk about up here”; another calls out, “Fun fact! We need all new material for each round, and I am bone dry!” While the audience wants to laugh, and is in fact rooting for the comic, the comic must deliver.

At the SheDevil comedy festival, I witnessed the consequences of performing comedy without enough time to work on and develop material. The labour involved in generating material, and in generating laughter, was strikingly apparent. I continue to think about a particular comic whose early sets I really enjoyed. Her discussion of class resonated with me, and I enjoyed her delivery; I was hopeful that she would win. Here’s a sample joke regarding her role as a nanny for “rich kids”: “I didn’t even know what ‘tepid’ meant. I ran that bath however I wanted”; “Mommy got us a special treat for dessert! Clementines!’ That’s borderline child abuse. My parents were not saints, but I knew what a treat was.” (Cara Connors, 2016) In one of the final rounds, it was clear that she did not have enough material, and left the stage before her set was done. I was devastated, and I still feel residual discomfort and sympathy for her when I recall this event. If comics ‘die’ on stage, then I still mourn her death, and am haunted by her performance.
The silences in between jokes were agonizing. The confident delivery that I witnessed the night prior was gone.

In addition to the SheDevil Comedy Festival, throughout 2016-2018, I attended two more comedy festivals that were produced, hosted, and populated by women performers: Lady Fest in Montreal, and the SheDot Festival in Toronto. I attended at least two shows per night for several days for each of these festivals. Each show included between five and eight performers. I was in contact with the organizers of these festivals, and they were kind enough to pass along my information to the comics who performed. I attended SheDot three years in a row, and was purchased a ‘festival pass’ at a reduced rate of $50.00, which allowed me entrance into all shows happening over the three-day festival run. The SheDot festival went on for five years, and its last run was in May, 2018.

While not stated explicitly, some comics I spoke to critiqued White, trans exclusive feminism that permeated the Toronto feminist comedy scene. One participant describes some events as catering to and prioritizing White, cisgendered comics. From my perspective, it was clear that there were demographic and stylistic differences between comedy events that were explicitly intersectionally feminist, like SHADE and Yas Kween, on the one hand, and others like SheDot on the other. Audiences who attended the latter appeared to me, more likely to be White and seemed, on average, to be about 10-15 years older than those at Yas Kween and SHADE. The following joke, told at LadyFest will illustrate some of the difference between the events:

I am so confused why men are so grossed out by blood coming out of a vagina. 'Cause a man can annihilate his friends and turn them inside out on a video game all day, and I'll just like pull a tampon out and he'll fuckin walk right away from me. Like what the fuck, I thought you thought it was cool! Isn't this cool to you? WHAT IS HAPPENING?! That's not fair, fucking man-up, man. If penises exploded every month, I would keep a fucking band aid in my purse. (Anonymous comic, 2017)

I did not find this joke funny, and on the recording of the event, it does not seem to elicit much laughter. This could be for a variety of reasons. The comics performing this joke was not
scheduled to perform that night; she was doing an impromptu set to kill time (more than “to kill” her audience) while the act that was scheduled that night was stuck in traffic. The audience had been waiting for about thirty minutes at this point. Another comic had stepped in as host, and gave an impromptu set that included similarly themed-jokes that I interpreted as uncritically reproducing stereotypes.

My notebook for the event includes several references to ‘tired’. I was tired, and I felt that the comedy was tired. I don’t think that this kind of humour (joking about how men find periods disgusting) is doing anything interesting. Nor is it surprising. It does not articulate ideas that I find difficult to say or explore in other contexts. As such, I did not feel the relief that might compel laughter and re-energize anyone. Nor was I surprised. The jokes are not, to my mind, incongruous in any sense. I do find dominant discourses of femininity or masculinity disrupted by this joke, rather, the substance of this joke rests on stereotypes: men play video games but are disgusted by blood when it’s on a tampon. I also did not believe the comic actually had the view she expressed.

Comics are more successful when an audience believes that they are ‘authentic’. The comic assumes a position of epistemic authority. We, the audience, must accept their authority and regard them as experts. They must convince us that they understand and can articulate their perspective in a way that is surprising, and/or relieving; and that they know what will make us laugh. This joke seemed like it was intended to capitalize on the stereotype rather than convey an authentic perspective.

Later that evening, comic Ashley Moffatt told a similarly themed joke about men’s reactions to her period. I did find her joke funny.

I was raised by a single dad. It was hard to be a young girl without a mom around. There’s a lot of things dads don’t know about. For instance, when I first got my period. Here we go, Crimson Wave show, no straight men, safe space. When I first got my period, or my ‘monthly’ as my dad would call it, he would just give me sixty bucks. That’s a lot of money! I don’t
know what he was thinking. ‘Well, you're a woman now, you're gonna need tampons, pads, [Michael] Bublé tickets.’ It's so much money, but he never wanted to talk about it. It was as if every time I lost an egg, the period fairy would come into my room, put sixty dollars under my pillow and say, 'here ya go, I don’t wanna hear about it.' (Moffatt, 2017)

I work for a business, it rhymes with suck sucks, and I was headlining the downtown Toronto suck suck show. Just full of like clipboard business dicks, and I talk about my period, and they hate it. They hate it so much! That's why I love to do it. They're like ‘oh, female comedian talkin' about her period. Original!' ‘Oh, now she's talkin' about talkin' about her period. What a visionary! Where's your blazer, Paula Poundstone?’ ‘Oh! she's fired up now talkin’ ‘bout, talkin’ ‘bout talkin’ ‘bout her period. I hate this. I am just gonna stare at her tits. SHE DOESN'T HAVE ANY TITS.' I know. Listen, dudes, I know, but if you don't want to hear about my period, GIVE ME SIXTY BUCKS. (Moffatt, 2017)

I interpreted Moffatt’s anecdotes as taking up the same stereotypes as the previous joke and doing something more interesting with them. Perhaps because I am studying women in comedy, I was especially pleased by the performance of male responses to period jokes. Thus struck me as reflective of popular responses to women in comedy, as well as theorizations of stand-up audiences as employing a heteropatriarchal frame for viewing.

My social location as a relatively young, White, educated feminist informed my appreciation of this humour. Elise Tomsett writes that, “For some audience members, a discussion about aspects of the female body that are normally taboo may be one of the few ways in which they can affirm that they exist and are validated” (Tomsett, 2018, p.10). We tend to engage with communities who reflect our social and political beliefs. The anecdote in the first period joke did not reflect my experiences interacting with peers and intimate partners who may be privy to my use of menstrual products.

While evocative constructions like ‘penis exploding’ are used intentionally here to amplify the shock and humour of this material, I find this image excessive and reminiscent of the ignorance of women’s biology that Tuana refers too in “The epistemology of ignorance”. Our uteruses don’t explode; they shed their lining. Relatedly, the connections between playing violent
video games and desensitization to real-world violence is tenuous at best. The imaginary
interlocutor does not even express disgust in the frame of the joke—he “walked away.” If the
comic pulled her tampon out in front of me (her phrasing suggests it was done casually and
without warning or an invitation), I imagine I would also walk away—perhaps to give her
privacy, perhaps because I too would be disgusted in that setting. I align myself with the butt of
the joke in this case, rather than the comic, and so find it difficult to laugh. To summarize my
justification for not laughing at this joke: I find the reproduction of stereotypes boring and the
material underdeveloped.

Moffatt’s joke, by contrast, mocks gendered stereotypes (Bublé tickets, a female comic
talking about her period). She performs her own poignant perspective of her father, and her
audience’s perception of her as a performer. She speaks quickly and expects the audience to keep
up. Her joke is formally innovative: she is switching in between perspectives and her voice and
rhythm increases in speed and volume as she conveys the anger of her male audience. She is both
a comic talking about her period and articulating a perspective that makes fun of her potential
self-satisfaction in delivering original material (“what a visionary!”). She punctuates the joke
with two occasions of yelling: “SHE DOESN’T HAVE ANY TITS!” and “GIVE ME SIXTY
BUCKS”, resulting in peals of laughter from her audience. She meets the male audience’s
imagined aggression with her own, demanding payment before she is willing to move on from
material that makes them uncomfortable. Two years after this performance, when I interviewed
Moffatt, she reports that on one occasion, an audience member actually had paid her sixty dollars
to move on. Through this event and the performance of two ‘period jokes’ in an evening, I began
to fine tune my expectations for resistant comedy. Additionally, I began to pay closer attention to
my own sense of humour, or why I thought one joke was funny, and another not.

During this same October 2016 trip to New York and Princeton, I was very excited to
attend a live recording of the Two Dope Queen’s WYNC podcast. This podcast was produced and
hosted by Phoebe Robinson (stand-up comic and author of best-seller You Can’t Touch My Hair
and Other Things I Still Have to Explain, 2016), and Jessica Williams (Actor, director, first female Black correspondent hired on the Daily Show). This live recording took place in Brooklyn, in a large venue that doubles as a bowling alley. I waited in line for two hours outside the venue for one of the small number of tickets that were kept available at the door, and another two hours inside before the show started. If I left, I would forfeit my place. Before the show started, chairs were removed and there was standing room only for the three-hour show. The large venue was packed, and it was difficult to move. All of this is to say: I was excited. I did not anticipate finding tickets for this event since it sells out well in advance. There was a frantic energy in the room. I could sense the impatience of the crowd as we waited for the show to begin many of whom had been waiting hours to secure a good view of the stage, almost an hour behind schedule.

At the end of the night, the producer came on to the stage and asked the audience to laugh and cheer according to her directions. They needed to equalize the sound for the podcast. We were asked to laugh several times with low to high levels of enthusiasm. Prior to this, I had no experience with recordings, and did not expect this. I was taken aback by what I perceived as the artifice of an art form that I had naively understood as ‘authentic’ or ‘real’. I recalled believing, when I was young, that the canned laughter on television shows I heard was the laughter (in real time) of families in their homes watching the same shows I was watching.

These five productions (The Crimson Wave, The SheDevil Comedy Festival, Asking For it, and the live recording of 2 Dope Queen’s) informed my research praxis and helped me to contextualize the stand-comedy events that later became the focus of this study. Other stand-up comedy events produced and populated by women that I attended and that informed my analyses include: Laugh Your Butts Off, So Fresh and So Clean, Black and Funny, and Ebony Tide, of which were hosted in Toronto, and Queer as Jokes, which was hosted in London, U.K. As stand-alone performances with ticket prices between $30-85, I saw Wanda Sykes (Syracuse, 2019) DeAnne Smith (Kingston, 2019), and Bridget Christie (London, U.K., 2017). I have watched live
stand-up comedy in New York City, Princeton, Chicago, Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Kingston, Syracuse, London, U.K. I experienced comedy in a range of venues: bowling alley, bars, night clubs, theatres, comedy clubs, and community centre auditorium. I have attended workshops. The only thing that I haven’t done is perform stand-up myself. I am too afraid.

**Case Studies: Yas Kween, SHADE, and The Hysterics Collective.**

In this study I prioritize three intersectionally feminist recurring live stand-up comedy events that are produced, hosted, and populated by women: Yas Kween, SHADE and the Hysterics Collective. Yas Kween happens the first Thursday of every month at Bad Dog Theatre Company in Toronto. This alternative comedy venue has been in Toronto for over 35 years (previously known as TheatreSpots Toronto). They “specialize in the art of unscripted comedy and improvised performance, and [have] provided affordable, accessible improv training for thousands of people of all ages and experience” (Bad Dog Theatre Co., 2019). Tickets can (and should, given that they frequently sell out) be purchased in advance, and cost ten dollars each. There are no mandatory beverage or food purchases. The venue is not accessible for those with mobility issues: To enter the venue, you must walk up a narrow, steep staircase. The entrance serves as a bar with seating room. Tickets are collected at the entrance to the theatre, usually by Handa, host and producer of Yas Kween, herself. Once inside, audience members find two sections of raised seating facing a floor-level stage. The room is painted black, and there are small, stringed lights hung, giving a festive vibe to the room. Seated above the audience, in the back corner, is a box for the sound and lighting technician. This venue has 64 seats, with an additional ten folding chairs. The tagline for Yas Kween, which started in November, 2015, is “Ethnic. Women. Funny”. The event description, taken from social media accounts, is:

YAS KWEEEN is a monthly night of comedy that creates a space for those who identify as Women of Colour/Ethnicity (WOC) to share their voices, develop their craft, and connect with each other. Each month is a different mix of stand-up, sketch, improv, musical, and storytelling performances.
Please note that in some cases, YAS KWEEN will include performers who are not WOC, because they are the partners/troupe members that our WOC have committed to working with to develop their craft. We allow space for performers from the wide spectrum of the skin tone rainbow who self-identify as women of colour/ethnicity. These talents often may not feel their voices represented in the mainstream/comedy world and we wanna give them that opportunity to rep it up.

YAS KWEEN strives to be a safe, inclusive space for our performers and audience members. Good vibes encouraged.

SHADE began in January, 2017 at the Comedy Bar, and shortly after moved to larger venue, The Rivoli. The Rivoli has been an important alternative venue in Toronto since 1982. New owners took over in 2014. Today, it is a pool hall, concert venue, and restaurant. It is wheelchair accessible, and the performers use microphones. If purchased online well in advance, tickets are $20.00. Online closer to the show, they are $25.00, and $30.00 at the door. The website notes that $5.00 of each ticket is donated to the Native Women’s Resource Centre. The lighting and sound system at the Rivoli is more sophisticated than at Bad Dog theatre. It is a larger venue that hosts a variety of performance events, while Bad Dog Theatre focuses on comedy. The stage here is 30 inches above the ground, in front of which there are seats for 200.

SHADE’s tagline is “The show for women, comedians from the LGBTQ2S+ community, and comedians of colour.” Its social media platforms and website state, “SHADE is a monthly comedy show that represents and celebrates comedians of colour, comedians LGBTQ2S+ community, and women”.

In addition to formal and informal interviews and observation, I also gathered data through forming The Hysterics Collective. I began the collective out of a desire to bring some of the comedy I was seeing in Toronto to the city I lived in at the time, Kingston Ontario. Its members include Rachel Williamson, Robin MacDonald, and Carina Magazzeni. Over the course of my thesis, we produced three comedy events: Just a Joke, Hopes and Dreams, and Laugh it Up. Our mandate, again displayed on our social media accounts is as follows:
The Hysterics Collective is a Katarokwi/Kingston-based feminist comedy group. We aim to make spaces and occupy stages. We’re here to have fun. We’re here to laugh. And we’re here to assert an anti-oppressive presence within comedy. We are dedicated to offering peer-to-peer workshops, open mics, and shows that are envisioned, produced, and performed by women, genderqueer, nonbinary, trans people, and anyone with a “tendency to cause trouble.” We operate by a non-hierarchical and community-based framework that connects and supports funny folks and all those who want to laugh.

These events took place at a student-run venue on Queen’s Campus called the Grad Club. This is a multi-use venue, although it is primarily set up as a licensed bar and restaurant with meeting rooms spread over three floors. We were responsible for decorating and setting up the main room as a comedy venue. A stage about 24-30 inches high was set up at the front of the room, with around 40 chairs in front of it and standing room at the side and back. Cost of entry was a suggested donation of $10.00 or pay what you can.

**Literature Review**

**Setting the Stage: Critical Comedy Studies.**

This thesis contributes to the developing field of critical comedy studies. In a statement that defines the field, Weaver (2016) writes that:

> this emerging strand of humor theory and research is specifically political, critical, concerned with social inequality and the role of humor in perpetuating unequal social relations. This develops humor studies through an interaction with the standpoint epistemologies of much mainstream sociology, cultural studies and media and communications research. In many ways, critical humor studies, and the equality theories of humor that it is producing, signal the movement of humor studies into the social scientific mainstream. (Weaver, 2016, p. 228-229)

As Weaver (2016) discusses above, critical comedy studies diverges from conventional approaches to studying comedy in several important ways; researchers argue that processes of identity formation and distributions of power are crucial elements of studying and understanding comedy (Weaver, 2016; Cooper, 2019; Pelle, 2010).
Critical comedy studies scholars point out that stand-up comedy is autobiographical in a postmodern sense. That is, comics express the world as seen from multiple and diverse perspectives that they occupy sometimes temporarily (S. K. Cooper, 2019a; Gilbert, 1997; Gillota, 2013; Horowitz, 1997; Pelle, 2010). Writing on race and performance, Ali Na approached identity as “a diffuse category that accumulates and divests meaning in context. It, in general, projects constructed histories and representations through perceived physical and social attributes shared by a group.” (Na, 2019, p. 309) Thinking through identity and autobiography as contextual builds on earlier work that considers the role of autobiography. For example, Francis Gray points out that the female comedian “stands up to be counted. Her task is to devise, develop, and project a self in a process of dialogue with an audience. In doing so she transforms the autobiographical process itself into a public event” (Gray, 1994, p.149). Similarly, Matthew Daube argues that “stand-up distinguishes itself from previous structures of humorous monologues largely through this focus on the non-performer as performer—or, alternatively, on the performer as non-performer, engaged in the public construction of the private self” (2012, p. 60).

Seen through the lens of a postmodern understanding of autobiography (i.e., the performance of a self-identity is not a fixed representation of an already given, essential identity, but, rather, is an emergent pastiche of the relational), stand-up comedy is a performance style that, through its ambiguous performance of the self, elevates the individuals’ experiences of the matrix of intersecting privilege, oppression, and resistance. This research operates on the premises that discourses “sustain a hierarchically gendered social order”, and that “the subtle and complex ways in which taken-for-granted social assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, perpetuated, negotiated and challenged have actual material and phenomenological consequences” (Lazar, 2005, p.2).

Stand-up performances surface both hegemonic and critical conceptualizations of race, gender, and sexuality; comics integrate both dominant and subversive readings of their identities
and social locations. This destabilization of fixed identity that is a key part of what makes comedy funny has an affinity with poststructuralist analysis:

any coherent conceptions of identity are specious since even race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, are constructed within discursive fields and changeable within the flux of history 

[...] subjectivity is never monolithic or fixed, but decentered, and constantly thrown into the process by the very competing discourses through which identity might be claimed. (Dolan, 1993, pp. 96)

This is resonant with the framing and performance of intersectional identities that play out on the stand-up stage—a liminal space that affords its practitioners relative freedom to play with our shared assumptions and beliefs about one another. The feminist stand-up subject aims to surprise us, to make us laugh and feel good in our bodies alongside one another, seeing the potential in alternative ways of inhabiting our shared worlds.

Critical comedy scholars are asking important questions about live comedy audiences. Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore (2010) examines how audiences engage with female sketch comedy performers, asking how and why women have been constructed as unfunny. She argues that “these gendered constructions [of women as unfunny] can be related to a patriarchal opposition between comedy and appropriate feminine behaviour” (Bore, 2010, p.153). Sociologist Giseldine Kuipers (2006) uses Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) work on the relationships between cultural capital, economic capital, and taste in her qualitative analysis of Dutch television comedy audiences. Her work finds that appreciation of humour is linked to class, identity and the drawing of symbolic boundaries. Working with Sam Friedman, Kuipers (2013) researches comedy, taste, and symbolic boundaries in a mixed methods study of British and Dutch comedy audiences, relying on survey and interview data. They argue that social actors evaluate one another’s moral characters by their sense of humour and find that “by expressing your sense of humor, you show what you find important in yourself, in others, and in a social life” (pp. 219-220).
Other researchers have focused on the techniques comedians employ in order to encourage audiences to accept controversial humour or jokes. Fabiola Scarpetti and Anna Spagnolli (2009) argue that stand-up comedy is interactional and examine the strategies comedians use on stage that encourage audiences to accept their punch lines. Their guiding question asked why audiences accept racist or sexist humour when they would otherwise reject the premises of these jokes. They identified stages of the routine that enabled Black male comics to read their audiences and sort out whether or not they will accept a punchline. This research is valuable because it is among the first to highlight the conversational, or what the authors coin as interactional nature of stand-up comedy. Audience members are identified as both “coconstructors of” and “coresponsible for” the comedic situation (Scarpetta & Spagnolli, 2009, p. 229). Scarpetti and Spagnolli identify strategies that the participants adopt in order to achieve affiliative responses from their audiences. Importantly, they identified the different strategies Black male comics adopted when performing in front of predominantly White and predominantly Black audiences. They find that Black male comics were less likely to make audience-directed jokes to White audiences. This finding makes connections between the racial politics outside the comedy club and the interactional context within it. Namely, it points to the risk involved in directly making fun of a White audience as a Black male, a risk that is mitigated by the carnivalesque framing of stand-up comedy and the comedic strategies developed and performed by marginalized speakers (in this instance, Black male comics; in the following chapter I expand on this argument and explore the strategies that women-identified comics devised and performed).

White comics too develop strategies to encourage audiences to affiliate with or accept their comedy. Raúl Pérez (2013) studied how White comedians in particular use rhetorical performance strategies that enable them to talk about race through the use of racial and ethnic stereotypes in ways that are read as funny rather than offensive. He argues that this contributes to the public expression (and acceptance) of racism. Elise DeCamp (2015, 2017) similarly focused
on how comedians foster audience receptivity. She points out that the identity and perceived
trustworthiness of performers are determining factors for audiences’ affiliative or dis-affiliative
responses. In other words, DeCamp finds in her qualitative study that comics must develop
performative and rhetorical strategies in order to gain their audiences’ trust and interest before
they are able to interrogate hegemonic discourses of race. This is especially true when comics and
audiences “belong” to different “races” (2017).

The emerging field of critical comedy studies is an interdisciplinary space that engages
with many of the themes and topics that I address in this thesis. I engage with critical comedy
studies because it draws attention to the relational aspect of stand-up comedy and the role of
identity formation in processes of meaning making and audience enjoyment of comedy. Critical
comedy studies, however, does not emphasize gender as an analytical frame. Thus the
contribution I make in this thesis to critical comedy studies is precisely that: an in-depth,
empirically grounded and theoretically nuanced understanding of the relation between feminism
and comedy. To this end, I draw from several other bodies of literature, to which I now turn.

Deepening the Field: Intersectional Feminist Theory.

I realize that there’s a real disconnect with my identity ‘cause
I’m Black, I’m Muslim, and I’m a woman on the outside, but on
the inside I just have this Caucasian confidence. Ya know, like I
don’t know where it’s coming from, but it feels very real to me
and that’s how I’m surviving, ya know. I am like batman. Black
on the outside, but on the inside I feel like a White billionaire.
Do you understand? I am transracial. Thank you. (Hersi, 2018)

My intention with this thesis is to contribute to the emerging field of critical comedy
studies by drawing on academic discourses of post-structural and Marxist feminisms that are
informed by theories of abjection, affect, and critical race. Additionally, the theoretical landscape
of this work is built up through conversations with performing comedians. In each body chapter
of this thesis, I elaborate on the theoretical dimensions of the arguments I make to understand and
make sense of the cultural practice of stand-up comedy. As such, this section serves as a cursory
overview to situate the focus on my research.
In thinking through women and comedy, the dominant structures of power that I focus on in particular are patriarchal heteronormativity and hegemonic (White) femininity. Patriarchal heteronormativity describes the “gendered and sexual ideals of heterosexuality” (Ferguson, 2004, p.10) that place women and men in a hierarchal relation where men represent the dominant, or ‘universal’ position (De Beauvoir, 1949). Following Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshawe, I understand race, gender and sexuality, not as distinct domains or natural categories of identity, but as co-constitutive systems of power/knowledge (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1990).

The primary analytical category for this research is gender. I argue that gender remains a meaningful frame through which we can understand the varied forms of gendered oppression and resistance. The category “woman” is compatible with intersectional feminism. In the words of Kathryn Gines, “intersectionality does not eliminate the category women just as it does not eliminate any of the other categories like race, sexuality, class, nationality, ethnicity, etc. that might intersect with the category women” (2011, p. 281). Throughout this thesis, the terms ‘women/woman’ refer to all who identify as such; this term is not meant to connote a universal or particular woman. It does not exclude entry to anyone who desires, even temporarily, to exist under the heading “woman.” It is a category that is useful, and one that contains multitudes of subjectivities, social locations, perspectives and experiences. For this reason, I do not always use the term “women-identified”. Instead, I trust that readers know that I do not intend the term “women” in an essentialist manner.

I am also guided by foundational texts written by French feminists Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. These feminist psychoanalytic works are important for their articulation of phallogocentrism and the primacy of the phallus in critical and analytic theory. While their conceptualizations of woman have come under fire for their implicit essentialism, and their tendency to “abet the patriarchal valorization of motherhood” (Hart, 1992, p. 114), their call to centralize women’s desires and sexuality as anti-patriarchal is important and informs this theoretical framework. I discuss their contributions further in chapter 3, “Cracking Up”. By
returning to these foundational figures in the theories of affect and abjection, and putting them in conversation with contemporary theorists of intersectional feminism, we can extend and expand their analyses.

Humour plays an important role in Sarah Ahmed’s (2017) analysis of power. She writes that the “fantasy of the humourless feminist (as part of a more general fantasy of humourlessness of those who question a social as well as political arrangement)” as a technology of power that reproduces inequality (Ahmed, 2017, p. 261). In addition, her work on the cultural politics of emotions is important for understanding the political and cultural work done by women who perform stand-up comedy. Ahmed’s investigation into “how emotions operate to ‘make’ and ‘shape’ bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations toward others”, or, in short, “what emotions do” (2004, p. 4) influences my understanding of economies of affect and how comics participate in them. “What do emotions do?” Is the question that provides the basis for Sarah Ahmed’s Cultural Politics of Emotion (2004). She talks through pain, disgust, shame, hate, and of their “stickiness”. Her conclusion states: “the ‘doing’ of emotions … is bound up with the sticky relations between signs and bodies: emotions work by working through signs and on bodies to materialize the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (p. 191). A good joke (or a bad joke), when it sticks to us, changes who we are. The experiences that inform stand-up routines, though they could be articulated with anger or sadness in another setting, are formulated in such a way to make them funny—to elicit laughter, rather than commiseration, rather than anger.

In the context of stand-up comedy, I argue that the laughter we share, as it circulates through the room, connects us to one another and affiliates us with the comic, whom, through our laughter, we are affirming and celebrating. Ahmed’s work also explores the geo-spatial elements of belonging and the limitations that a space can impose on one’s potential for action. She draws on Nirmal Purwar’s (2004) Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place to examine how and why certain bodies are entitled to spaces that they can comfortably inhabit, while others
are perceived (and feel like) space invaders. I argue that the space around and within the comedy club limits and/or extends the space for action for those who inhabit it.

In this thesis, I also consider the labour of stand-up comics, drawing on a long history of feminist scholarship that focuses on women’s work. Feminist theory and politics have long been engaged with emotional labour and political economy. Both first- and second-wave feminists explored the social and political roles of housework in important ways, though, while not universally true, many embedded their critiques within White, middle class frameworks. In the 1950s and 1960s, second-wave feminists, focusing on the experiences of upper middle-class White women, began to argue that society undervalued women’s domestic labour. Important texts like Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, argues that domestic labour is not fulfilling. Whereas second-wave feminists argue that middle-class White women should have freedom from domestic labour, they did not consider who would take over this work, or on whose backs White women would build their freedoms.

Marxists feminists rejected parts of Marxist theory for failing to acknowledge gender differences in experiences of alienation and exploitation under capitalism (Hartmann, 1979; Holmstrom, 2002); they likewise rejected feminist analyses that failed to account for class differences among women and how these experiences affected our relationships to waged and unwaged labour (Hennesy & Ingraham, 1997). However, Marxist feminists continued to develop different perspectives on which categories people should regard as central: gender or class? Evelyn Reed’s (1970) *Women: Caste, Class, or Oppressed Sex* argues that class inequality is a primary feature of women’s oppression, whereas Heidi Hartmann’s (1979) *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union* argues that Marxist feminist analyses need to account for both class and gender. Black researchers critiqued this approach for being blind to race. For example, Gloria Joseph did so in *The Incompatible Ménage a Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism* (1981) and “Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and White Feminist Perspectives” (Joseph & Lewis, 1981), works that are committed to
examining “the ways in which racial and sexual factors interact in the oppression of women” (Joseph & Lewis, 1981, p. 4). Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis aim to build a coalition between women in order to combat oppression but note that this coalition cannot materialize without accounting for the differences in women’s experiences and forms of oppression. This critique has a long tradition. For example, Sojourner Truth, in her speech advocating the abolition of slavery, interrogates the category of woman from her perspective as Black woman and former slave (Gines, 2011). She repeatedly asks her audience: “Ain’t I a woman?”

I undertake my analysis of women’s work as stand-up comics through an intersectional feminist Marxist analysis, with a focus on the cultural economy. I draw on the work of recent Marxist feminists and affect theorists to understand the emotional, intellectual, and physical labour that stand-up comics perform and to understand the value of this labour under contemporary capitalism. I examine the economic conditions in which comics perform this labour, as well as the affective economies that the production and performances of stand-up comedy participate in.

The stand-up stage provides a useful site of analysis because it is less severely governed by expectations of propriety; the politics of respectability are relatively lax—comic performers are encouraged, or even expected, to play with cultural norms. Comedy has an “anarchic thrust” and subversive tendencies (Mizejeweski, 2014; Bakhtin, 1965). Comics are granted license to articulate counter frames and critical discourses (Gilbert, 1997; Kotthoff, 2006; Pelle, 2010). Through comedy, women transform material into something more palatable and accessible to their audiences. This enables an opportunity for audiences to hear an account that in another setting they may reject. As Ritter points out:

the comic can be defined by the fact that it indirectly as well as directly introduces into a seemingly harmless and acceptable semantic field a second semantic field that significantly was excluded from the first because it was viewed as inappropriate. (as cited in Horlacher, 2009, p. 34)
Women-identified stand-up comics are exercising greater freedom of expression and affective power than in other public contexts. Stand-up comedy is a performance style that challenges grand narratives and critiques universal truths. It breaks down binaries between the rational and irrational, the mind and body. A post-structural analysis is useful for understanding the political and cultural work done by stand-up comedy. Both projects (comedy and post-structural performances) employ shared techniques to convey multiple messages and meanings, including: incongruity, irony, exaggeration, performativity, and deconstruction.

Engaging with the Material: Women Comics as a Substantive Topic

I think the best way I can explain [why I’m not a feminist] is like: think of struggle as a mountain. Eventually you'll overcome it, but it's kinda hard. So I am Black, right. That's a mountain I gotta climb, right, that's one mountain. Once I'm done climbing that, I am a little bit winded, but I can keep going, right, and I arrive at the Muslim mountain. We've all seen the news, it's a much much much much muuuuch bigger mountain right. Gotta climb that mountain. When I am done that I am done, I am done, do you understand? OK? female mountain is there, and I am done for the day. Black Muslim mountains taking up all my time. I don't got any time for this woman stuff. And there's nothing interesting happening at the top of the female mountain. ‘Cause at the top of the female mountain, it's just a bunch of White women skiing. (Hersi, 2018).

In addition to the literature on critical comedy studies and intersectional feminist theory discussed in the previous sections, I also draw from literature that focuses on women in comedy as a substantive topic of research. Researchers have long demonstrated the subversive nature of comedy, and in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars of film, sociology, and literature began to focus on comedy as a feminist tool. There was a further increase in popular and academic writing that discusses women and comedy in the 1990s. Much of this literature argues that women’s comedy is inherently subversive. However, it often focused narrowly on the differences between men’s and women’s comedy. For example, Regina Barreca, a frequently cited expert on women in comedy, refers to a “feminine tradition of humour” (Barreca, 1991, p. 11), and writes, “for
most women, humor occupies a different space emotionally and socially than it does for men. For most women, humor is something we aren’t sure how to use, because we’ve been told it’s something we haven’t got” (Barreca, 1991, p. 11). And In Women and Laughter, Frances Gray (1994) argues that “humour remains a male construct, which women have borrowed, rather than a new framework for permanent and joyful change ” (p. 17) As well as treating women as an essentialist category, this literature tends to be colorblind. Nancy Walker’s (1988) A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture included a section on “minority humour,” but Katelyn Wood critiqued it for “refus[ing] to investigate the particularities of Black women’s humour as she places [W]hite humourists as the standard throughout her book. Women of colour thus become further marginalized within humour and performance scholarship” (Wood, 2014, p. 9).

The scholarship focusing on women in comedy tended to characterize all uses of humour by women as universally subversive (e.g., Francis Gray (1994); Nancy Walker (1998); Regina Barreca (1991); Kathleen Rowe (1995); Joanne Gilbert (1995). However, as Dickinson, Higgins, St. Pierre, Soloman, and Zwagerman (2013) point out in the introduction to Women and Comedy: History, Theory and Practice, women’s public use of humour is not inherently feminist or subversive. It is an oversimplification to characterize all women’s use of humour as such. Expanding on this point Zwagerman, in “A Cautionary Tale: Ann Coulter and the Failure of Humour” (2013) analyzes Ann Coulter’s use of humour as an example of jokes that reinforce racist, sexist, and ableist logics. He writes that “Coulter thus emerges as a problematic case for the study of women’s humour and a counterstatement to some of its fundamental claims” (Zwagerman, 2013, p.171). Part of Zwagerman’s claim is that Coulter herself is not a feminist. In fact, she derides feminists as ugly, and “endorses the gender roles of patriarchy, [and] is often exactly the sort of woman traditional patriarchy would want her to be” (Zwagerman, 2013, p.177). As Zwagerman argues—the social locations and perspectives of the comic and her audience must be considered in identifying and analyzing the political and cultural work of
professionally funny women. As Dickinson et al (2013) and Zwagerman (2013) point out, it is important not to present women as a monolithic category.

Despite the tendency of some scholarship focusing on women in comedy and treating women in essentialist terms, the category woman is particularly useful for comedy studies. Comedy researchers maintain that the professional practice of live stand-up remains relatively hostile to women, and that audiences employ a “patriarchal repertoire” in their viewing of live stand-up comedy (Auslander, 2008; S. K. Cooper, 2019c; Kalviknes Bore, 2010; Lockyer, 2011). Participants in my study confirmed this perspective. Additionally, research that focuses on women as laughing subjects is relatively recent. Prior to the 1990s, as Helga Kotthoff (2006) points out in her article “Gender and the State of the Art”: “The humorous activities of females in high comedy, mass media comedy, and every day banter have neither been adequately portrayed, nor researched with suitable categories…. Up until fifteen years ago, female humorists were almost completely absent from literary humor anthologies” (Kotthoff, 2006, p.5).

Throughout this thesis, I engage with the literature discussed in this section by drawing on critical comedy studies and intersectional feminist theory to expand and enrich the analysis of contemporary stand-up comedy.

**Foregrounding Women Comics’ Thoughts on Feminism and Comedy**

In addition to the academic scholarship reviewed in the previous sections, I pay particular attention throughout this thesis to the words spoken by women comics as cultural-theoretical provocateurs and analysts in their own right. That is, rather than treat the research participants whom I interviewed as passive subjects who need to be explained by academic scholarship, I regard them as productive agents and thus place their words on the same level as the words produced by academics. In this section, I relate how my interlocutors themselves think about feminism. I then turn to more detailed analysis of how they regard a key comedic device, namely incongruity.
Women Comics Defining Feminist Comedy

I am sick and tired, OK. of men underestimating me just because I am 4' 11". Every single man thinks they can kick my ass. You can't. Do you want to try, sir? [directed at man in front row. He responds with a simple 'no'] Now every man in the room is afraid of me because I challenged the alpha. North American feminists, you're doing it wrong. You're trying to talk to men. Men don't hear arguments, men hear power. See how I defeated this man? Girls, ladies, do like I do. Every time you are talking to a man, at the back of your head, be sure that you can kill him. Every woman at least once in our lives we have to take a man down. At least once, down! It empowers us more than a Dove commercial. Ladies, if you're here tonight, if you never took a man down, we can make this happen. If you need help, ask for me. (Zoccoli, 2018)

The stand-up comic assumes a position of epistemic authority and affective and discursive power relative to her audience. She claims to know what is funny; through her use of incongruity, she claims to know what her audience expects (or knows); by taking the stage, she claims to know what her audience will find funny; she claims to know something about herself and the worlds we inhabit. She foregrounds her lived experiences and presents her identity through her own perspective. This is an empowering position because the speaking subject defines herself and describes her experiences through her own language. As a comic, she assumes the role of speaking subject rather than sexually desirable object or disgusting abject. Her voice is amplified and she is commanding attention for her wit, an act that destabilizes the male gaze. These features render her act subversive.

Drawing on the range of perspectives on feminism articulated within the interviews I conducted, as well as feminist, critical race, queer, affect, and Marxists theorists, this work puts forth a description of feminist comedy. In so doing, I contribute to the growing body of researchers who are examining the cultural and political work of stand-up comedy and the emerging field of critical comedy studies. Not all of the features of the description are present in every iteration of feminist stand-up, but collectively they emerge when women take the stage and become funny, laughing subjects. The features that I develop in this thesis, and that I explain
more fully in subsequent chapters, include: recognizing and elevating a multiplicity of women’s voices, generating pleasurable embodiment, deconstructing dominant discourses, and punching up. I argue that these aspects of comedy raise feminist consciousness—variously coined as the “personal is political” (Hanisch, 1970), the “personal is structural” (Ahmed, 2017), or “The personal is also fucking funny” (M. Vardy, personal communication, 2019).

For many women, the implicit rejection of the White male gaze that emerges through standing up as a speaking subject is a radical act. Joanne Gilbert writes that,

By the very act of standing onstage speaking about any topic and getting paid, a female comic is empowered rhetorically and economically [...] Does her behavior change existing power structures in any way? Perhaps not visibly—not immediately. No single joke is likely to precipitate the decline of prevailing ideologies. Still, given the inherently subversive power of humour, jokes may be a good place to begin. (Gilbert, 1997, p. 318)

In addition to the rhetorical and economic advantages that Gilbert references above, feminist stand-up comedy, and the affirming laughter it generates, affirms that women are knowing subjects: that we understand and have something to say about our lives, our relationships to hegemonic discourses, to one another, our bodies, our feelings, and so on. The funny comic claims a position of discursive and affective power. She is speaking about a topic of her choosing, in her own words, and, ideally, generating intense affect: laughter. In generating laughter, she is exercising her control over an audience (Horowitz, 1997), and experiencing and generating embodied pleasures that persist beyond the occasion of laughter (Griffin et al., 2015; Scott, Lavan, Chen, & Mcgettigan, 2014; Fry, 1994).

The proliferation of women’s voices in stand-up comedy is an important aspect of feminist comedy. The pluralization of perspectives and subject positions makes generating and reinscribing dominant social scripts, including stereotypes, more difficult. Those who have access to White, heterosexual, able bodied, male privilege are culturally received as universally appealing. There are so many textured representations of their varied inner lives and outward
expressions. We have a rich history and bountiful catalogue of developed, complex White male characters to draw on. Conversely, marginalized subjects are not often represented multidimensionally in North American arts and media.

The uneven and unequal scales of repertoire function as an index of the uneven and unequal scales of public value and meaning. But this condition of limited publicity is also what produces the subcultural pleasures of “making do” and making space, of building repertoire in hidden, unexpected and relatively untrackable ways. As a researcher, this condition is at once a source of pleasure and a source of worry about what it means to be “comprehensive.” Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson, in their revisitation of raising feminist consciousness, argue that “the lack of grassroots knowledge-production is problematic for social movements, for academic feminism, and for radical politics and theory more broadly (Firth & Robinson, 2016, p. 344).

Live feminist stand-up comedy performed by women reminds us that “[w]e all have something to say. […] It's just that we've been hearing the same narrative for a very long time” (D. Joseph, personal communication, 2017). Indicating the painful effects of such erasure, Spender writes that, “to be without representations of one’s experience, to be deprived of an encoded heritage or valued culture is to be oppressed; it is to be existentially denied, to be an outsider, invisible, the other” (as cited in in Remlinger, 2005, p.236). The autobiographical nature of stand-up comedy, and the carving out of spaces for women to share their lives and experiences with one another, facilitates a diversity of representations of women.

Feminist comedy redistributes power. In addition to giving space and amplifying the voices of marginalized populations and raising feminist consciousness, another mechanism with which feminist comedy redistributes power is to “punch up.” In comedy, the term “punching up” means that the comic is not going to make fun of someone (or something) who is afforded less institutional power. Comic Aba Amaquandoh elaborates on this point in response to the question, “Do you think there should be limits on what comics joke about?”:
Yeah, I think that the things you don't have any experience in. For example, I am physically abled, I am a cis woman, I would never make a joke where a trans woman is the butt of the joke, or a disabled person is the butt of the joke, because that is not my experience and I have privilege over them. It could be considered a joke but at the end of the day it is a low blow; I am punching down. [...] I think that using those low blows as a way to get people to laugh is just really enforcing that hierarchy and enforcing that people continue to be oppressed. (A. Amaquandoh, personal communication, Nov 19th, 2018)

Comedy producer, comic, and host of SHADE, Anasimone George shared a similar perspective.

She responds:

I think if it's not in your lane, and it's not to your truth, then don't joke about it. Like I'm not going to go make a joke about Syrian refugees. I'm not a Syrian refugee. It has nothing to do with me. Unless I'm punching up in that case—I don't know how I would write a joke that’s like super sweet about refugees right now, but as long as you're punching up and not down, that’s all that matters. Otherwise, why are you doing it? (A. George, personal communication, November 27, 2018)

In punching up, feminist stand-up comedy denaturalizes dominant discourses. Returning to Ahmed’s definition, another way we can say this is that comedy reveals familiar patterns. The act of denaturalizing, making strange, and so forth are long-standing power moves in the cultural field.

I posed the question: “do you identify as a feminist” to every comic I interviewed. Most said yes, although there were some notable qualifications. Several interview subjects, for different reasons, did not feel represented by contemporary discourses of feminism or did not feel that it was an important part of their identity. Others felt that, by virtue of their social location, their work was inherently feminist.

Ana Marija Stoic identified as a feminist, but notes that it is not a significant part of her identity or of her performances as a comic. She voices an ability to discern contexts within which it becomes important to proclaim that she is a feminist, and contexts wherein it becomes less meaningful or necessary. She states that she is a feminist:
mainly for political reasons, and if anyone ever asks me I will say ‘yeah’, but it's not a label though that is very important to me. It is just something that if something that if anybody ever asks me, I'll be like ‘yes, 100%’ because I am. It's like, ‘are you a queer person?’; yes 100% I am, but it's not something that is that important to me for my identity unless it is coming under persecution. But it's not. Nobody is threatening me. With my parents, my sexuality is a part of my identity because they have a hard time with it and they would reject it, but it isn't with most other people because they don't really care. (A. Stoijic, personal communication, 2018)

Similarly, Zoe Brownstone regards the aims of feminism as important, but not reflective of her position as an upper-middle class, young Jewish woman. She acknowledges that her social location has afforded her privileges and believed that she does not have valuable contributions to feminist discourses or practices:

I identify as Jewish. I identify as an egalitarian. I don’t like what the word feminist has turned into. and the like baggage that comes with it. Typically when I am talking with women, I feel comfortable calling myself a feminist, but like, on stage, with men, I don’t because it's become this bad word, and I don't want to brand myself that way. I think that like I also don't think it's my conversation to have. I have never struggled […] I think women of colour and visible minorities, women with disabilities, it's their fight, and I stand behind them, and that is worth fighting and yelling about because so many marginalized women are invisible. Ignored. Thrown under the bus, and that is horseshit, but I have never had to fight that, so I don't count myself in that category. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Anasimone George, agrees in part with Brownstone’s sentiment, namely that as an intersectionally marginalized woman, she is “absolutely” a feminist. She goes on to say:

Of course, yeah. I identify as an intersectional feminist, not like I have an option. If you don't identify as a feminist, you should probably ask yourself why. People always say: I’m not angry, I'm not political. You don't have to be. Just be aware of your privileges and your surroundings, and make space for those who don't have privileges. (George, personal communication, November 27, 2017)

Brownstone’s responses reflect popular representations of feminists as angry women whose tendency to call out instances of sexism ruin the fun for everyone. This may inform her
disinclination to be regarded publicly as a feminist. One comic I interviewed thought that it was becoming trendy to identify as a feminist and foresaw problems with this. She states that,

I am worried that like with the trendiness of feminism especially, we're gonna start to see a lot of ganging up. We already are, I mean in the stand-up community definitely. In the broader community, you know, it's not a solution to tell people to shut up. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

In this description, which reflects popular rhetoric that frames comedy as a sacrosanct realm where “freedom” must reign at all costs, feminism can be problematic because it threatens the freedom of comics to make fun. This take resembles the responses to Daniel Tosh’s rape joke (which I discuss further in chapter 3), for example, when Louis C.K. announces on the Daily Show that feminists and comedians were natural enemies. Throughout the interview with me, Brownstone indicates that she would like to be regarded as a comedian, not a *female* comedian. She argues that women in comedy are not taken as seriously; they are regarded by their audiences as a subset of comedians whose appeal is limited.

Comic Hoodo Hersi likewise qualifies her identification as feminist, but for reasons that diverge from the ones listed above. She responds:

You know what's so funny is yeah, in many ways I do. I would say I do because it is reflected in my behavior. I do feel for sure I mean things are getting better now, much better now, but for the longest time, my goodness, feminism was so exclusionary, that I did not identify with it. If anything it was like, it felt like a group of White women were keeping other women of colour out. So like a lot of times people will talk about the wage stuff but then they won't talk about how it varies racially. White women get paid the most and then Black women, then it's the Native women, you know what I mean? (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Comic Daphney Joseph likewise regards feminism as having symbolic boundaries that interfered with her sense of belonging. Joseph perceives ‘feminist’ as a title awarded to the educated classes who studied and could cite texts and attend conferences. After stating succinctly describing
feminism as the belief that men and women are deserving of equal rights, Joseph called herself a feminist. She explains:

I didn't before, cause I thought I wasn't allowed 'cause I didn't do all the feminist research. I find it's a lot of competition, who's the biggest feminist? It seems to me like if you read more books, you're more of a feminist. I am not into this shit. Can I have the same right as him? Alright. Bring it back to basic things. It's not how many books you've read or how many conferences you've been to. Do you think I'm allowed to be here? A Black woman? I have two struggles. People hate two facets of who I am. If they know more about me they'll probably hate a third one. Yeah, I'm a feminist. Don't we all want everyone to be equal? I hate that it's such a heavy term now, 'cause someone like me felt like maybe 'I'm not 'cause I haven't done the research.' I can't even name you ten great feminists. I'll name ten women in my family. It shouldn't be harder than that. But it is. (D. Joseph, personal communication, November 28th, 2017)

In this quote, Joseph articulates a powerful reminder that comics are generating theory. Chanel Ali affirms that women is an important analytical frame for studying stand-up comedy. She reports that,

I feel like comedy is probably made me more [of a feminist] because it's made me realize [that] we're fighting for minutes way harder than men. A lot of stand-up comedy clubs are owned by men, a lot of managers are men, a lot of them are White men, and in any industry it's natural to want to help people who look like you or who sound like you or make you a little more comfortable, so I feel like we always have to speak up and recognize, like hey, this line up shouldn't just have all men, shouldn't just have all White men. There are voices and perspectives in here that we need to hear and that are just as important as this one that we have heard a billion times. I think the entertainment business has just helped me realize, you have to really like stand hard for equality or something a close to it as you can get. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

Through interviews, observations, and autoethnography, I find that feminist comedy compels joyful, vital shared laughter amongst those whose experience it wryly expresses. This laughter dissolves the boundaries between mind and body, between our body and the body of another. Sometimes, we can't help but laugh. The flow of such a potent affect changes us. We become lighter and happier through shared, joyful laughter, and we are more connected to one
another. We begin to recognize that our experiences are shared, and that the personal is structural. Laughter reorients us to systems of privilege and oppression.

Incongruity as Comedic Device and Feminist Intervention

Contemporary theorists, and practicing comics, have generally agreed that incongruity is a fundamental part of humour. Incongruity is a significant theoretical frame for my research; it holds that jokes must retain an element of surprise: there is some interruption of where one thought the joke (or idea) was headed. In order for this to work, audience and comic must have a shared or overlapping interpretive repertoire in order for the joke to work.

At the level of a joke, and at the level of a comedic performance, incongruity provides a formal structure for social critique and for revealing invisible ideological structures. Incongruity provides a mechanism for disruption to happen at the technical level of a joke. In addition to structuring the joke, we can see incongruity as implicit in the structure of stand-up itself. There is an incongruity between the marginalization of a subject and their elevated voice and position relative to their audience in a comedy club. There is incongruity between the institutional power denied to them and the power they hold over a laughing audience, between the alienation of being othered and the joy of laughing with others. Put another way, the performance of abjection on the stage is likewise incongruous. Rather than being like a corpse—which Kristeva (1982) describes as “a decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution” (p. 109)—this figure is animated, is speaking into a mic, and is, by turns, killing and animating their audiences.

Most scholars have agreed that most forms of joke telling include incongruity as an element of humour (Critchley, 2002; Kuipers, 2005; Morreal, 2011; Veale, 2015; Wright, 2006). Walker and Dresner (1998) point out that incongruity is a comedy strategy women employ in order to reflect on and denaturalize their roles in society. They write that, for women:
Incongruity has been a major device for decoding they myths of the patriarchy. By exposing the discrepancies between the realities of women’s lives and the images of women promoted by the culture…American women humorists have targeted the patriarchal social system…The use of incongruity in humor by women as a means of targeting attributes and behaviours prescribed for them by the dominant culture is an act of rebellion. (174)

Importantly, practicing comics share this perspective. When I asked them what they think makes a good joke, virtually all expressed some variation of the following:

• I think a lot of it is surprise. I think it’s just trickin’ them. For me, that’s what it is. They think I’m gonna say one thing, and then I say another thing that you weren’t expecting and then you’re gonna laugh because you were surprised. (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018)

• Um, I don’t know. The element of surprise, I think. Sometimes definitely, yeah, I think if you’re able to take it in a direction that the audience doesn’t anticipate, that always seems to go really well. Yeah, I think if you can do something unexpected. (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)


Comic Chanel Ali elaborates further to say that even when the audience agrees with you and the premise of the joke, and finds it amusing, the will not laugh unless you have surprised them. In her words:

I say that all the time to comics all the time and they don't really understand it, and I am like, no this room didn't like you because they didn't think that you were clever. The things that you were saying, they were nodding, like ‘yeah, no I saw where you were going’. I can read that on a crowd right away—when they get the premise or the punch line before you even get there. A crowd wants to be misdirected, they want you to be like ‘look over here!’ and then you get ‘em over there. They want that. It's like that is the artistry that they respect the most. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)
Incongruity is a comedic device that skillful comics use to generate laughter. But it is also an analytical construct that can further the analysis of feminism and comedy. Consider Zwagerman’s (2012) argument that incongruity theory is particularly useful in understanding laughter from a critical perspective:

Incongruity theory acknowledges that humour is not an unchanging essence, but a way of seeming. It is relativist, its potential does not reside in things or ideas or people, but in the relationships between them. As such, it will inevitably be determined by culture. (p.)

So too with laughter: Its meaning emerges relationally. Who laughs at what, when, and why changes the meaning and implications of the act and can render it more or less pleasurable or painful, affirming or denigrating, abrupt or sustained, spontaneous or forced.

When laughter itself is incongruous, it can change the meaning of a speech act. You may be familiar with the experience of telling what you considered to be a funny story: recalling some encounter, some interaction, a significant or banal life event, finishing the tale, delivering the punchline, looking expectantly at your audience only to hear them say, with a somber, pitying expression, “I am sorry that happened to you.” When I recently received this response, I felt a jolt, confusion accompanied by a mix of emotions. I thought, “How could I have been so wrong about my own experience?” The absence of laughter precipitated a reorientation to my experience. It was jarring. A similarly disturbing event: sharing an experience that has pained us, where we understand ourselves as vulnerable, that reveals something about our emotional landscape that we tend to conceal, and working up the courage to make its utterance possible, finally saying it aloud, expecting sympathy but being laughed at. This is humiliating. Yet comedy has the revolutionary potential to enable a transformative articulation of some suffering, some humiliation, some shame. Zijderfield (1983) writes that “it is through the exchange of jokes that shocked emotions in embarrassing situations are often made bearable…emotional experiences which are hard to express verbally are thus made collective and communicable” (p. 45). We may
disclose our pain for a laugh. A laugh that, according to comic Zoe Brownstone, says “You’re ok” (personal communication, May 5th, 2018).

As evidenced in the above discussions of feminism in comedy and incongruity, the women comics who I interviewed for this thesis are productive agents who are actively generating and producing intersectional feminist analysis. I use several methods to gather data that they and others provided. After a brief discussion of methodology, I conclude this chapter with an overview of the remaining chapters.

**Methods and Methodology**

I recorded the audio from performances of 32 women-identified comics who agreed to participate in this study, and conducted in-person, semi-structured, hour-long interviews with 13 participants. I analyzed the stand-up routines I was audience to by drawing on elements of feminist critical discourse analysis, performance studies, and feminist ethnography. Using several types of methods enables an in-depth understanding of complex cultural phenomena; it is to examine a problematic from multiple perspectives and through multiple frameworks. It is to surpass the limits presented by each individual method. As Hale notes, the benefit of drawing on multiple methods is the “potential to expose unique differences or meaningful information that may have remained undiscovered with the use of only one approach of data collection technique” (2010, p.22). Thus, my pursuit of a feminist critical discourse analysis (of transcribed comedy routines) is enriched by the semi-structured interviews that I conduct with comics who develop and perform the routines. Autoethnography helps to surface the situatedness of this research. Performance studies provides a language and framework for understanding and contextualizing the cultural phenomena I examine. Marxist inflected contemporary, intersectional, and French feminisms facilitate a nuanced approach to understanding the cultural and political work that feminist comedy does.

The crux of my methodology is to elevate and analyze the political and cultural work of contemporary live stand-up comedy as performed by women. As Firth and Robinson write:
Feminism needs a process of grassroots knowledge-production involving a diverse range of different women (as well as or instead of academic, media, or political figures) to construct a viable sense of a commonly oppressed group which is not simply a projection or construct of a particular author or speaker. (Firth & Robinson, 2016, p. 345)

I understand the stand-up comedic performances as vital acts of transfer, which transmit “social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice behaved behaviour’(Taylor, 2003). Furthermore, following Taylor, I understand that embodied performance “makes an entire spectrum of attitudes and values. The multi-codedness of these practices transmits as many layers of meaning as there are spectators, participants, and witnesses”.

The body plays a significant role in stand-up comedy. The comic stands up in front of an audience while speaking to them. The body too is a cultural text (Bordo, 1990). Performance studies theorist, Philip Auslander writes that:

In performance, physical presence, the body itself, is the locus at which the workings of ideological codes are perhaps the most insidious and also the most difficult to analyze, for the performing body is always both a vehicle for representation and, simply, itself. (Auslander, 1997, p. 90)

As a researcher, I attend to the body too as a site of analysis, not only as it appears on stage, but I am interested in the spontaneous laughter that emerges from an audience; it acts as a literal and figurative shaking up of bodies, and of the feminine ideal. I draw on reception studies and critically examine my own role as audience member. I work to locate myself as researcher, audience member, and producer of feminist comedy shows as a founding member of the Hysterics Collective in order to surface the ways that my social location and cultural lens informs how I decode embodied performances. I also foreground my social location so that this work can be critiqued by those who have experiential and other tools to deconstruct or build upon what I present here.
I enact key elements of feminist ethnography, including interviews and participant observation. I recognize individual comics’ experiences as socially organized. I therefore take into account individual comics and their experiences while exploring how they are situated within broader social relations and cultural contexts (Perry et al., 2006). While I am studying women in comedy, I do not consider gender or femininity as an “endpoint of analysis, but rather as an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power” (Visweswaran, 1997, p. 616).

Collecting Data: From recording the audio to checking back in

I used an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder to record both the interviews and live-stand-up performances (with consent of the performers). I manually transcribed all of the interviews using ExpressScribe transcription software. Immediately following each interview, I reflected on and summarized the experience in a notebook, identifying aspects that would not be captured by the audio. This includes the extent to which I felt connected to, trusting of, and trusted by the interviewee, whether I thought that they were ‘on’ or open, or both, and why I thought this. I remarked on where the interaction landed on the spectrum between friendly and professional, and so on.

Once I transcribed all of the interviews, I manually coded them using NVivo software. I reread the interviews, and through the development of my theoretical framework, began to draw on responses that I could put into conversation with the theory I had been engaging. I was especially attuned to responses that complicated my understanding of comedy and/or countered the theoretical assumptions I had entering into these discussions.

I conducted in-depth interviews, or what Robert Burgess refers to as “conversations with a purpose” (2002) that lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to 90 minutes. They took place in locations chosen by the comic in Toronto, most often in a café or restaurant. I conducted two interviews by phone at the request of the comic. For these, I used the recording software ‘TapeACall’. These interviews were semi-structured. I had a list of questions that I wanted to ask
each participant. This list changed slightly over the course of the interviews as I learned more about the practice of live-stand-up comedy from its practitioners.

I began each interview by briefly explaining my research and offering to answer any questions. I then asked each participant to describe their entry into performing live stand-up comedy. I wanted to know what compelled them to pursue stand-up comedy, and learn about how they got started. I asked similarly open-ended questions that would allow participants to guide the conversation. I recognized my interviewees as knowing subjects, and I did not want to restrict or limit our conversation. Following, Patricia McNamara’s writing on feminist ethnography, I note that:

> Once trust and credibility have been established, these must be solicitously maintained; the role of the participants, who are effectively co-researchers in feminist ethnography, should be continuously affirmed; likewise, the researcher must collaborate with participants, both from the outset and throughout the research process, in determining what is reported and how the findings might be disseminated. (McNamara, 2011, p. 175)

As such, I was in contact with comics throughout this process. I invited comics to engage in the research process to the extent that they were interested and willing. I recognized that, for example, the interviews we conducted were not an objective representation of these women, but rather a document that reveals limited insight into a particular point in time, a particular dynamic, or thought process: “An interview cannot give us a fixed or fixable truth about particular identities or particular categories or particular social worlds, though it can, paradoxically, tell us about the complex processes of producing oneself and being produced as “having an identity” and “belonging to a particular category.” (Davies & Davies, 2010, p. 1152) Thus, I made transcripts available to comics for participants’ review. I invited them to clarify, edit and/or elaborate on their responses. Toward the end of this process, I sent out a final email to all participants reminding them that I would be defending my thesis soon, and thanking them for their contributions. I disclosed that I either quoted them directly from their interview responses, and/or
cite an aspect of their performance, including, but not limited to analysis of a joke or routine. I wanted to provide an opportunity to participants to review their interview transcripts a final time, decide if they would like to be named or use a pseudonym, pose questions about how I included their work in this document, and/or my findings.

In this email, I also included one last question. I limit my focus to women-identified stand-up comics. I asked how they would like to be referred to. ‘Comics’ is a gender-neutral term, and so does not work to identify gender when I am referring to women-identified comics. ‘Women identified comic’ began to feel cumbersome in my writing. I was leaning toward the term ‘comediennes’, but suspected, based on what I learned through interviewing comics, that some would reject this appellation. I was correct. I received two emails almost immediately expressing opposition to the term. Zoe Brownstone writes:

> Just about the word comedienne, I absolutely hate it. I was an actor before being a comic and enjoy this work more. A part of that is because the title does not gender me. Women identifying comic might be clunky but if you have to make a distinction (at least in my case) I would much rather that than comedienne! (Brownstone, personal communication, October, 2019)

The word ‘comediennes’ has since been excised from this document.

With the consent of performers, I audio recorded roughly 35 hours of stand-up material; however, I saw several comics perform on more than one occasion, and so some of this audio was repetitive. I did not transcribe all of it. I listened to the recordings and made notes, intending to draw out significant pieces. I decided which jokes to include based on several factors.

I prioritized the routines of women whom I had interviewed and could therefore further contextualize the performance; however, I did not exclude other performances that I find remarkable in one way or another. I paid attention to the jokes that I had remarked upon in my research notes, and I highlight sets, routines, and jokes that received a notable audience response, either by laughing or by not laughing (an unlaughing response). I also prioritized jokes that “stuck to my skin”, those which remained with me, and that I thought about long after the performance
(Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2009). I paid attention to jokes and routines that I did not understand—jokes that received a response that I felt alienated by. I selected jokes that I regarded as feminist. During the interviews, I asked comics what their favourite joke to perform was, and I asked them to explain why. I prioritized these jokes as well.

As an audience member, I took notes that recorded elements of the performance that would not come through an audio recording. I made notes on the attire and cosmetics that comics use, as well as their manner of speaking (the rhythm, volume and so on of their speech patterns and other vocalizations), the way their bodies moved and took up space on the stage, and the way that they looked at and oriented their bodies towards an audience. I note the stage presence of the performers, whether they appeared confident, nervous, or somewhere in between. I note their volume, how they moved on stage, whether or not they directly addressed the audience, laughed at their own jokes, and appeared to be having fun. I wrote down jokes that received notable audience responses: animated or quiet.

For example, quite often comics in the feminist comedy scene will identify themselves as queer, and then say something like “as if you couldn’t tell” while gesturing toward their attire or hairstyle. One comic at the SheDot comedy festival made direct eye contact with particular audience members while on stage. I heard other audience members describe their discomfort in response to their gazes being held in this manner. It was felt as an aggressive act that underlined her satirical, cutting approach to comedy. The physical stance of comics on stage is also worth recording—how close they stand to the edge of the stage/ the audience, how they lean toward or away from the audience, how much of the stage they traverse, whether or not they remain still, etc.

Throughout this experience, I kept a research log to describe how I participated in the circulation of affect. I made note of the ways I felt about my own embodiment in relation to the stand-up sets. Hearing and witnessing disruptive and/or normative accounts of embodied idealized and grotesque femininities brought aspects of my own embodiment into clearer focus.
On occasions, I was hyperaware that I was a White cis gendered middle class passing woman, for example (I discuss this more in chapter 5, ‘Making Sense’). This process entailed locating myself and my body, and a reflection on the ways that I participate in and resist idealized and grotesque femininities.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 2 presents a genealogy of women in comedy. I select and focus on particular performances, and performers, that enable the intersectional analysis of gender, shame, pleasure, and power to make sense of contemporary stand-up comedy. I discuss the work and reception of early stand-up comics Jackie “Moms” Mabley and Jean Carroll, who are often ignored in mainstream histories of comedy and women comics, and trace their contributions to the field through to contemporary performances. I focus on strategies, such as costuming and emasculating the male body, that women comics develop to assume positions of authority and make their audiences laugh. Starting with the earliest women in comedy and ending with recent Netflix specials, Chapter 2 provides the history of the present that situates the remainder of the thesis.

In Chapter 3, “Cracking Up”, I focus on laughter as a technology of power. I examine the discourses around humour, specifically what it means when people say things like: ‘that’s not funny’, or ‘it was only a joke’, or ‘lighten up’. I consider why people are so invested in audiences laughing at jokes, and why people are often so taken aback when audiences laugh at something not intended to be funny. I argue that this impulse to control laughter— either through generating it or minimizing it— reveals laughter’s potency. Therefore, I consider: what does laughter do? Why are we afraid of it? No one wants to be laughed at, or made fun of, and yet when we intentionally elicit laughter, we are animated and revitalized. In the case of the latter, it’s the absence of laughter that kills us. Ultimately, I argue that laughter is a potent form of vital energy that can be wielded to resist hegemonic discourses and (re)animate those who are abjected through them.
In Chapter 4, “Making Fun,” I examine the production of intersectional feminist laughter. I locate the cultural practice of stand-up comedy in the feminist comedy scene in Toronto. I draw on Marxist analyses to argue that stand-up comedians perform immaterial labour. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri identify two kinds of immaterial labour: affective and analytical. For Hardt and Negri, analytical labour is “exemplified in linguistic or intellectual activity” while affective labour “produces and changes emotions” (Peters, 2018, p. 468). Stand-up comics, as writers and performers, perform both analytical and affective labour. Examining stand-up comedy as an autobiographical performance that trades on notions of ‘authenticity’ in the context of modern capitalism, I draw attention to the inequitable working conditions that women in stand-up comedy are subject to. I also draw attention to the economies of affect and capital that intersect to produce precarious labour conditions along with revitalizing affirming laughter.

In Chapter 5, “Making Sense”, I explore the role of social identities and relationships in the meaning making processes that attend live stand-up comedy events. I focus in particular on the power dynamics that emerge through the comic’s position of epistemic authority (she claims to know what is funny, and cites herself as one whose perspective and cultural analysis is valid) and of affective power (she will make an audience laugh, or elicit other affective responses, like disgust or anger, depending on the performance of the joke and the audience who reads it). In this chapter, I consider the social location of women and how hegemonic heteropatriarchy positions us as the butt of the joke and seeks to abject and eject women from the performance space of comedy, relegating us to the eternal audience.

In “The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter” Willet, Willet and Sherman (2012) encourage feminists to seek out and incorporate pleasure in forms and acts of resistance, and to enjoy it. The authors made a case against the efficacy of reason alone in securing a more equitable social structure and point to the effective power and potential of humour, asking:

Might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change?
Or, to turn the question around, what devices are more explosive in the social sphere, more discomforting to our conventional modes of thought, more invasive of our quasi-private store of associations, than the well-placed joke, the display of wit, or the well-honed use of irony? (Willett, Willett, & Sherman, 2012, p. 218)

Similarly, Hennefeld, Berke, and Rennet (2019) write that “When emotion holds a higher purchase on knowledge than science or rational debate, laughter plays a vital civic function: to signify truth against the rampant spread of disinformation” (Hennefeld, Berke, & Rennett, 2019, p. 138). The professionally funny women I engaged with throughout this research are heeding this call. They are making fun, speaking truth to power, and animating resistance. Those who have control over a laughing audience are in positions of power. Stand-up comics can kill, or crack up hegemonic heteropatriarchy.

In this thesis, I aim to contribute to the growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that prioritizes understanding the sociocultural implications of feminist comedy, and seeks to understand the factors that contribute to its production and reception. Feminist comedy is a powerful tool that furthers the aims of intersectional feminism. It may be imperfect, but it feels good. It encourages us all to be our best selves, to participate in the free circulation of affect, to crack up systems of oppression, and to make sense of our experiences, raising feminist consciousness.
Women in Comedy: A Genealogy of Shame, Pleasure, and Power

Popular forms of media are useful for understanding how groups of people are represented in public discourse or what norms and ideals for behaviour exist in a particular time and place. (Esterberg 2002, p124)

Frances Gray (1994), in her influential text *Women and Laughter*, points out that although contemporary stand-up most clearly links to minstrelsy, vaudeville, burlesque, and night club acts, “the lone joker is a much earlier figure in western culture. We know him as the Joker, the Trickster, or the Fool” (Gray, 1994, p. 116). She also notes that “there have been female fools. Mary Tudor, for instance, had a woman fool called Jane…but history has preferred to mythologize her father’s fool Henry VIII’s Will Somers. Jane is yet another of those women denied the chance to be part of a female comic tradition” (Gray, 1994, p. 117).

While conducting research on contemporary stand-up comedy performed by women, I slowly began to learn more about the long history of professionally funny women in North America. Funny women I had not previously heard of. While the focus of this thesis is contemporary live stand-up comedy, it became increasingly important to me to situate this practice in relation to the women who have come before, whose skill, work, and contributions to stand-up are often marginalized or overlooked.

While this chapter prioritizes the role of women in the history of comedy, it is also an attempt to bring the discussion to different social relations than male-female binaries. This history is not exhaustive, and it does not include the majority of women-identified comics who have contributed meaningfully to the development of contemporary live stand-up comedy and who others have sidelined in histories of the same. In their manifesto for a new cultural studies, Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuck write that we study the “culture that sticks to [our] skin” (Jenkins, McPherson, & Shattuc, 2002). Our bodies are dynamic sites of cultural production and
identity formation, and our skin is the porous membrane through which our bodies interact with one another and the world. Some things that stick to my body would not stick to others. The themes, topics, and joke that I discuss in this chapter are those that stuck to my skin, and as such are not a comprehensive history. Rather, I draw out themes that interest me and set up the chapters that follow. This work contributes to the discussions and variable archives of women comics.

**Comedy as Revelatory**

Comedy is revelatory. It reveals something about the people who perform it, and the audiences who engage with it. Throughout this thesis, I treat the comics I discuss as cultural theorists in the sense that they offer rich analyses of gender, race, sexualities, embodiment, identities, relationships, and more. Their sets reflect their lived experiences in interesting and divergent ways, and through them the comics resist, reframe, reinscribe and/or expose latent, oppressive ideologies and logics. They also articulate the felt and experienced material effects of these logics. Since constructions of gender are geographically and historically contingent, excavating comedic performances of gender in distinct contexts can uncover the constructed nature of these gendered identities and the ways that women from different social locations have experienced, resisted, reframed, and/or pursued gendered norms. Through analyzing the cultural and political work done by women-identified stand-up comics, we can learn something about the hegemonic norms in which they were situated. In Foucauldian terms, this chapter is a genealogy of women in comedy, a “history of the present” (1970).

Genealogical investigations seek “to illuminate the contingency of what we take for granted, to denaturalize what seems immutable, to destabilize seemingly natural categories” (Dean, 1994, p. 2). I examine the specific histories of women in comedy by presenting their performances in relation to the discourses of hegemonic femininity that they operated within. These historically specific constructions of gender can tell us something meaningful about the dominant discourse that these women were confronting.
This chapter has two parts. In part one, I focus on the strategies that certain comics took to engage with dominant gendered and racialized norms. From the earliest recognizable stand-up comics to the 1970s and 1980s, these include costuming, the subversion of motherhood, the emasculation of men, and the political pluralization that came with second-wave feminism. In part two, I turn to the ways in which comics have treated the corporeal body as a site of comedic material. Starting with the tradition of “dirty” women Jewish comics on the vaudeville circuit, and going through to Netflix specials, part two treats themes of pleasure, shame, desire, ambivalence, power, and knowledge.

Articulating the Oppositional Gaze

Several researchers contributing to critical comedy studies point to Black queer comic Wanda Sykes as an exemplary figure when it comes to articulating her oppositional gaze. Linda Mizejewski (2014); Katelyn Wood (2014); Cynthia Willet, Julia Willet, and Yael Sherman (2012); Shawn Bingham and Alexander Hernandez (2009); and Katherine Cooper (2019) all refer to the subversive work of Sykes and her “scathing critiques of race relations” (Thomas, 2015, p. 169). Wanda Sykes’ material interrogates the stereotypes of Black Americans, giving voice to the oppositional gaze and reflecting from her situatedness as a Black, queer woman. For example, in Sykes’ 2009 I’ma Be Me HBO special, she decodes the language that the media uses to describe Michelle Obama—she points out that when journalists wonder when they’re going to see the “real” Michelle Obama, they are actually referring to a Black stereotype—an angry woman who throws her partner’s shit on the lawn and yells at him to “take care of yo’ babies” (Sykes, 2009).

Through her comedic stand-up routine, affirming the comic’s role at critical theorist, Sykes explains how the media’s fascination with the “real” Michelle Obama refers to her Blackness, and to intersections of Blackness, femininity, and class as they exist in the white imaginary. Journalists, citing dominant social scripts, are perplexed by Obama’s calm, sophisticated, wholesome demeanor, by her comfort in the roles of lawyer, mother, and First
Lady. Sykes tells her audiences, “Well, you’re not gonna see that from Michelle Obama. And we all don’t do that” with a look of disdain at her audience. “That” refers to the behavioural stereotypes of the Sapphire. At this point in her routine, Sykes’ theatrically performs a caricature of the angry Black woman. Mizejewski defined the Sapphire in contrast to the Jezebel figure. The former emerged in the nineteenth century “as the nagging, scornful, [B]lack woman pictured in relation to the [B]lack man she dominates…the Sapphire is primarily an emasculator” (Mizejewski, 2014, p. 168). Sykes continues her set with,

And I happen to know for a fact that during the campaign, she had rods implanted in her neck so she is incapable of doing that. You can see that sometimes she wants to … and then [mimes Michelle’s imagined desired to act in ways that would reveal her Blackness and further delegitimize her role as First Lady]. (Sykes, 2009)

Sykes goes on to say that,

It’s like everybody just waiting for one of those rods to snap and for her to get pissed one night and throw all his shit out on the white house lawn. ‘Fuck you, Barack. ‘You ain’t shit. You ain’t shit.’ Michelle’s mother comes to the door. “Baby, please, Michelle, ‘you gonna get that boy impeached. ‘Please, baby. ‘Get in the house. Get in the house. White people are looking at you.’ (Sykes, 2009)

In these bits, Sykes draws on popular white imaginings of stereotypical Black figures and mocks them. She reflects on the popular media’s inability to imagine a diverse range of experiences and lived realities for Black women. She plays around with the internalization of the White gaze and articulates a counter-frame (Feagin, 2010). Sykes ‘looks back’ at and deconstructs the popular discourses of Blackness in North America. She points to the ways that some bodies are so immediately read from dominant perspectives as signifying in ways that have nothing to do with the subject’s experience. In so doing, she is deconstructing racist discourses.

The work of Wanda Sykes is remarkable, and much of her material and comedic performances are worth discussing. However, in this section, I turn to Jackie “Moms” Mabley
and Jean Carroll, both of whom are routinely left out of histories of stand-up comedy. Both of these figures, like Sykes, describe the workings of power as they experience them. They were the first women to perform stand-up comedy; they both articulate and denaturalize the gendered norms they experience.

Jackie “Moms” Mabley (1894 – 1974), born Loretta May Aiken, was the first stand-up comic (Wood, 2014) in the modern sense. Popularly known as Moms Mabley, she was among the first comics of any gender to have a solo performance act. Mabley became regular in Black theatre revues in 1930s Harlem. She opened for the orchestras of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Cab Calloway at famous venues like The Cotton Club and The Savoy. In 1939, she became the first woman to perform at the Apollo. She had 28 LPs and acted in four films, playing herself in two of these (Nesteroff, 2015; Wood, 2014). Until the 1950s and 1960s, Black comedians remained segregated, performing in a network of Black-owned nightclubs and theatres throughout the country known as the Chitlin' Circuit. Despite the significant racism she faced, Mabley gained significant material wealth. Toward the end of her 50 years as a performer, in the 1950s, Mabley gained opportunities to perform a sanitized version of her early Chitlin’ Circuit work to more mainstream audiences (Nesteroff, 2015). Even so, there was no doubt of the racism she experienced. A year before her death, the New York Times quotes Mabley as saying, “There were some horrible things done to me. I have played every state of the union but Mississippi. I won’t go there. They ain’t ready” (1975).

Another early stand-up female comic, Celine Zeigman (1911 – 2010), later changed her name to Jean Carroll. Along with Mabley, she was one of the first modern stand-up comics (Overbeke, 2012, 2018). She started performing in vaudeville as a dancer and later worked with Marty May in an act called “Marty May Annoyed by Jean Carroll” (Nesteroff, 2015). In the 1930s, she and her future husband, an acrobat, performed together in an act that consisted of dancing and funny asides that she wrote (Fox, 2010; Nesteroff, 2015; Wollman, 1991). Carroll
continued performing on her own when her husband was drafted to fight in World War II. This was remarkable—other women in comedic acts mostly performed sketch comedy, character, or song parodies (Nesteroff, 2015b; Overbeke, 2018). By 1945, Jean Carroll had played more presentation houses than any other comic, male or female. Her material, focused on her everyday life, and her rejection of idealized versions of motherhood, set the stage for comics like Diller and Rivers. Carroll performed on the Ed Sullivan show nearly 30 times and also starred in her own sitcom.

Both Carroll and Moms Mabley were remarkably successful for decades, and this success translated into significant wealth. At the height of her fame, Carroll reports that she could name her price, and Mabley was also reportedly quite wealthy (Wollman, 1991; Wood, 2014). Despite these women’s significant successes, authors often cite Phyllis Diller as the first female comic who did not sing and dance as part of her routine (see, for example, Kohen, 2012). Stephen Silverman, who wrote Funny Ladies: The Great Comediennes of the 20th Century, had not heard of Carroll until after the publication of his book (Overbeke, 2018). He later planned to produce a documentary about Carroll’s life, but the project did not come to fruition (Overbeke, 2018).

Neutralizing Costumes
In this section I focus on how Mabley and Phyllis Diller (1917 – 2012) use costumes to reject the male gaze. I also examine the ways that costumes helped them to cement their epistemic authority and rhetorical and affective power. They both wore costumes to neutralize the threat of speaking critically from their subject positions.

Starting in her 20s, Mabley donned her signature grandmotherly costume to neutralize the threat of speaking as a Black woman in the early 20th century United States. Though she herself was young, by speaking as a grandmother, Mabley was able to expose White supremacy, gender inequity, class dynamics, and sexuality in blunt, confrontational ways that would otherwise be risky for a young Black American woman. Within the White public imagination and pop cultural representations, the White grandmother is elderly, frail, naïve, asexual, and therefore not a threat
(Mock, 2012). However, within Black American cultures, grandmothers are often imagined as strong matriarchal figures who are repositories of knowledge (Laymon, 2018). Further, Black women had/ have a bit more liberty to talk about class and sex bluntly. Thus, Mabley’s costuming as a maternal elderly woman neutralized her ideas for White audiences, even though she was critical of White supremacy and the South. The grandmother costuming may have legitimated her perspective for Black audiences. This persona enabled Mabley to become “comedy’s primary voice of the civil rights movements” (Nesteroff, 2015, p 185) from the 1930s through the 1950s. Mabley took up this costume as part of her persona as Moms Mabley, but she left it behind on the stage each night. A 1962 Ebony magazine profile of Mabley titled “Behind the Laughter of Jackie Moms Mabley” reports that, when not in costume as Moms, “Mabley is a striking figure in tailored slacks, matching sports shirt, Italian shoes, horn-rimmed glasses—and teeth. She looks utterly sophisticated” (as quoted in Mock, 2012, p. 18). This onstage repudiation of the (White) male gaze at once rendered her invisible (the male gaze does not usually see a post-menopausal woman, whom people often identify as sexless), while simultaneously bringing her hypervisibility by virtue of performing on a stage and making a spectacle of herself. Her neutralizing performance of an elderly woman enabled this critique of the prevailing racist norms. Consider this bit about returning to the South as a Black woman that foregrounds the strategic work that costuming can do:

I didn’t want to go, but you know, my children are down there... And I tried to pass, you know? For anything except what I am, you know? And some of my friends from Montana, my children out there, sent me a cowgirl outfit. So I wore that the whole time I was there. I wouldn’t wear nothing but this cowgirl outfit. They were nice to me! I was surprised. They didn’t treat me bad at all. In fact, they called me after Will Rogers’s horse: Trigger! Everywhere I go, they say ‘Hi Trigger!’ At least I think that’s what they said! (Mabley, 1969)

Wood (2014) writes about this act as an invocation of the apparently ignorant, happy Black subject who is unaffected by the violence of the South. The “at least I think that’s what they said”
is a wink to her Black audience, an acknowledgement that she, and they, know that mishearing “Trigger” was strategic. Mabley pretends that she has a strategy (cowgirl drag) that allows her to imagine that she has been called Trigger rather than the racist term it rhymes with. She can pretend not to hear the racism even though we know that she has heard it. Moreover, she lets her audiences know that being mistaken for an animal (a horse) is safer than being the human target of anti-Black racism. Humour and costuming, in this sense, is a strategy that, like gender performance in Butler’s terms, has cultural survival at its end.

Phyllis Diller began performing toward the end of Mabley’s career. Like Mabley, Diller affects a persona for her performances that is less desirable within a heteronormative framework in order to mitigate the sexually objectifying force of the male gaze. John Limon (2000) writes that Diller “had to be more or less repulsive” (p. 54); that she could have called herself “Phallus Diller” with her “sharp nose, sharp chin, ophidian hair, and infinite cigarette holder” (p. 55). In another reading, Diller’s fright wig resembles snakes, and her laughter at the expense of the emasculated Fang evokes the figure of the laughing Medusa. In this light, Diller represents the experiences of women as stand-up comics, laughing at those who are too afraid to look at her. In addition to rejecting the male gaze, Diller occupies the phallic standpoint: she has subjectivity and agency within a patriarchal culture.

Diller understood her acceptance on the stage as conditional and felt that she could not be anything other than self-deprecating in order to be popular, successful, and get bookings. She has acknowledged that “I had to dress funny, I had to cover my figure – and I have an excellent figure – or I couldn’t make any body jokes” (quoted in Mock, 2012: 20). By preemptively cloaking the body in accoutrement to repel the male gaze—the fright wig, the false teeth, the loose fitting garments—Mabley and Diller relinquish the responsibilities that attend male desire, and they evade the contradiction of being both an object of desire and a speaking subject with desire. Phyllis Diller’s over-the-top application of make-up, hair styling, and clothing expresses a self-conscious and deliberate manic or excessive style that exposes the construction and materiality of
gender. Similarly, Mabley's grandmotherly figure places her beyond all expectations of how a young woman should perform. They are free to be funny.

**Subverting Motherhood**

Jean Carroll performed on stage dressed in formal evening wear. While she may have looked the part of an idealized hegemonic femininity, she uses other strategies to play upon the normative gender expectations that prevailed in the socio-historical context in which she worked. In particular, she explicitly subverted expectations about motherhood. Consider these jokes she told on a record from the 1950s:

I have a little girl. A rotten kid. I love kids, I used to go to school with them. Children sometimes can be very testing, ya know, like I heard one woman say when her son was three months old, she could’ve eaten him up, and now she wishes she had. My mother kept telling me what a wonderful thing it was to be a mother. Finally came the big day in my life, I had my baby. Oh, I was so happy. I couldn’t wait to send her to camp. But I waited until she was old enough, she needed other children, she could adjust, she was a year and a half. It cost me 4,000 bucks and she learned how to make a wallet. (Carroll, 195-)

The incongruity between a doting mother and one who sends her toddler to a sweatshop struck Carroll’s audiences as funny. Carroll makes fun of idealized motherhood through her attire as well as jokes like these. She was an attractive-woman wearing glamorous evening wear intervening into a form that “world weary men leaning on microphones in smoky night clubs” (2010) primarily inhabited. Women who took the stage in nightclubs were singers or showgirls. Unlike Mabley and Diller, Carroll dressed the part expected of her as a woman, but she told jokes instead (Mizejewski, 2014). Perhaps this is unthreatening coming from a Jewish woman who from an “outsider” position is not seen as representing hegemonic American femininity Here is another sample of her material:

Love! Does anyone know what love is? That’s a moot question. So I asked Moot. Moot was my first boyfriend. I was crazy about him. Our romance was one of those triangles. You see, he and I were both in love with him. Then there was Jack. Oh, let me tell you how I met Jack. I was standing on a corner—as usual. We
went out, and lemme tell you something, he was a real sport. Money? Money meant nothing. Nothing! He didn’t have any. I shouldn’t make fun of him. After all, he’s so sweet. Nothing bothers him (Carroll, as cited in Nesteroff, 2015, p. 80).

Those familiar with Phyllis Diller will recognize this style of comedy. Several reviews of her performances note her rapid-fire delivery, barely stopping to accommodate the laughs of her audience, which she did not acknowledge (Fox, 2010; Overbeke, 2018; Wollman, 1991).

**Emasculating the Male Body**

In some of her comedy routines, Jackie “Moms” Mabley discursively renders the male body useless. In ways that anticipated Joan Rivers, Mabley describes the inadequacy and vulnerability of the male body and characterizes it as a source of labour rather than pleasure. In Mabley’s routine, the Black male figure is not the sexually voracious hypermasculine subject that anti-Black racism depicts (Gilroy, 1993). Moms Mabley preferred younger men, a propensity that became a significant feature of her act. Performing in 1960, at 60 years old, she joked, “If you see me with anyone over 22, he must be one of my relatives” (as cited in Mock, 2012 p. 17). This proclivity for young men also diminished the threat of her sexuality because the pairing of a young virile Black man with a grandmother who was missing her teeth was highly unlikely—it was funny in its incongruity, and so caused no significant threat to the prevailing order.

Rather than the appreciation of and admiration for a husband as provider and protector, Mabley recounted a back-and-forth with her Black male partner who, for her, had become a burden who has no sense of his own impotence and consequent complete reliance on her:

He looked at me and he said, “Tell me, just tell me, where you gonna find another man like me?” I said, “In the graveyard.” He said, “What man can you find that will treat you like I do?” I said, “Hitler.” He said, “If I should die what would you do?” I said, “Laugh.” He said, “I ain’t gonna argue with you. I’m going upstairs. I’m going to bed.” I said, “You gonna have to wait a while ‘cause I don’t feel like carrying you up the steps” (as cited in Wood, 2017, p. 95).

Mabley’s own laughter, and the laughter of her audience punctuate this bit, which Mabley recorded at the Sing Sing all-male maximum security prison in New York City. Her voice, when
speaking as her partner, becomes feeble and weak sounding. When expressing her part, her voice is loud and clear.

In this bit, Mabley neutralizes the threat of the Black male body as she neutralizes her own body. She does this in a White supremacist world that saw and still sees Black masculinity as so threatening that it must be met with lethal violence. She likewise represents the sexuality of the younger Black man as both desirable, and, through his affiliation with a Black grandmother, less threatening to White women. While performing at Sing Sing, she refers to the inmates throughout as her children, rhetorically enacting a kind of maternal care and protection. Mabley performed these acts at Sing Sing Prison annually around the Christmas holiday season. Katelyn Wood (2014), in her analysis of these performances, argues that Mabley performed heterosexuality in a way that “exposes, destabilizes, and denaturalizes compulsory heterosexuality and ‘proper’ performance of femininity for older Black female bodies” (p. 88). To state publicly and explicitly as an economically independent, Black, single woman, that she enjoys sex with younger men, but not motherhood, situats Mabley outside hegemonic femininity, as do her pointed critiques of White supremacy.

This emasculation of the male body is taken up by comics Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Phyllis Diller’s routines often includes references to her husband Fang. On the Ed Sullivan show in 1969, Diller tells the following jokes about her husband Fang:

- “You know, the lights have gone out with dirty old Fang. The last time there was a gleam in Fang’s eye, there was short in his electric blanket.”
- “His breath is so bad, the dentist works on his through his ears.”
- “He’s such a coward that when I take him to the dentist, they have to strap him in the chair, give him a shot of Novocain, and a balloon! And that’s in the waiting room.”

In her autobiography Like a Lampshade in a Whorehouse: My Life in Comedy (2005), Diller writes: “Just as I was the antithesis of the happy and attractive fifties housewife, so Fang flipped the image of the capable husband who was king of his castle, and I soon realized he was a
beloved character” (Diller, 2005, p. 100). She goes on to say that, “No one knew I was living with an agoraphobic sex tyrant who couldn’t socialize and rarely held down a job. And not until the year of my retirement would I be aware that my stage act was actually a form of therapy. Boy, did I need it” (p. 100). This quote implies that while Diller did not publicly discuss her tyrannical husband, her rhetorical emasculation of him served as a kind of therapy. In Chapter 3, “Cracking Up” as well as in Chapter. 5, “Making Sense”, I discuss the restorative power of laughter.

Jill Dolan, in her discussion of the lesbian performer, argues that objectifying the male body is a performative strategy that allows the performer to avoid objectifying herself. This strategy upends the terms of heterosexual desire. Dolan writes that the queer performer “does not offer herself as a passive object”, but rather, like Mabley, Diller, Carroll, and Rivers, who stand-up and make fun of their (imagined) inadequate male partners, their “refusal to play the game leaves the male spectator nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as sexual object” (Dolan, 2012, p. 67).

**Pluralizing the Personal**

With the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, activists increasingly criticized comics like Phyllis Diller who had achieved mainstream popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, for her characterization of herself and other women as undesirable (e.g., mothers-in-law). Diller’s response in an interview was as follows:

> I care about my career and my work—whatever makes people laugh. I’m not trying to make any point. My feeling about life has nothing to do with my work onstage. I don’t care if it’s anti-feminist. I don’t know what that means. I want to be funny and get as many laughs as possible, and I do it however I can without bad taste. The young girls are into women’s lib and the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]—I don’t want a message onstage. I may offend them. I know I have offended some. But I can’t let that affect my work. (as cited in Horowitz, 1997, p. 49)

In contrast to Diller’s self-deprecation and disavowal of feminism, in the 1970s and 1980s women in comedy and elsewhere began to articulate their subjective experiences in many
different ways, often with explicitly feminist language. The comedy boom in the 1970s and 1980s is marked by an influx of women into professional stand-up comedy. Attention to this period thus demonstrates an interesting variety of comedic performance styles and material while it also brings into focus the intersecting discourses of hegemonic femininity, masculinity and comedy. Many women who performed in the 1970s and 1980s rejected the strategies (of costuming or self-deprecation) enacted by the women who preceded them. For example, Comic Sandra Bernhard said that she:

never really did jokes. I always did stream of consciousness reflections on my life and culture and pop culture and music…I also interspersed my act with singing, which was also very weird, because it wasn’t really singing like in a lounge show …somewhere between a Broadway musical and a rock-and-roll venue. (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 139)

Comics in the late 1970s and 1980s reflected the broader turn to androgynous dress, wearing slacks and button-up shirts. Furthermore, ideas around what it meant to be feminine and what people expected of or considered attractive in woman was (as always) shifting. In short, the cultural subversion of the norms women were expected to adhere to, opened up the repertoire that women comics could adopt.

Live stand-up comedy was wildly popular, and there were more and more women performing live stand-up comedy. In the 1980s in San Francisco, Paula Poundstone notes that:

On a Monday night I could go to three clubs and perform. I could do my five minutes or my ten or whatever it was in three different places, if I could manage either to get a ride or get public transportation quickly enough to scurry from one place to the next. There were enough audiences to do that. (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 159)

Comedy, yet again, was changing in form and structure, and it was increasingly popular. Women were steadily infiltrating the scenes in New York, Chicago, and LA. The first comedy clubs opened in the 1970s, giving stand-up comics their own spaces to perform, separate and distinct from variety shows or opening acts for musicians. Comedy was becoming something to seek out
on its own. The growing popularity of stand-up, the opening of comedy clubs, and the growth of
cable television began the process of “multiplying and amplifying the female voice” (Kohen,
2012, p. 118). Rick Newman, a male comic who opened one of the first comedy clubs in 1972
recalls that, “At that point there was virtually no stand-up comics. You had your Phyllis Diller on
TV, and Joan Rivers, and there was Totie Fields at that point. They were like, your father’s
comedians. They weren’t our comedians” (Kohen, 2012, p. 119; note that the audience was “your
father” and not “your mother”).

The infamous Comedy Store also opened in 1972. Mitzi Shore soon took over from her
husband. She revolutionized comedy by imposing fifteen-minute sets and set the aesthetic for
comedy clubs by painting the walls black (this practice remains in fashion today). Prior to this,
there was virtually no stage management. The owner’s friends would get onstage and ramble for
40 minutes or more. Under her management, Mitzi’s tastes dictated who performed and for how
long (Kohen, 2012; Nesteroff, 2015).

The inroads made by second-wave feminism, which had a significant effect on the form
and content of the material that women addressed in their stand-up sets, also changed the physical
structure of comedy clubs. More specifically, in a move that was controversial for some, Shore
opened up a small room on the second floor of the club exclusively for women comics in 1978.
Boosler would not perform there: “Not me” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 141); Boosler, whose
stance is reflective of participants I interviewed for this study, did not want to be a “woman
comic,” but rather, a comic.

Others were more ambivalent; Sandra Bernhard, for example, felt that “women could be
more themselves [in women-only spaces] and they weren’t under the pressure of following a man
who was doing really tacky, sexist, racist humour” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, pp. 136–137). The
upstairs room, called the Belly Room (a name that discursively reinforced the association
between women and the body), also functioned as a waiting room. If there were overflow
audience members, Comedy Store workers sent them upstairs to wait and then retrieved them

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when space opened up in the main room. This happened mid-set and was a disruptive reminder that women were not “real” comics.

This spatial separation of women comics illustrates the complexity of second wave feminism. The carving out of spaces predominantly for marginalized populations, in this case women, or “womyn” a spelling that removed “men” and as such displaced the primacy of the male figure, both disrupted and reinforced power dynamics. As Bernhard (mentioned above) and other comics believed, the Belly Room provided an alternative space where women were, ideally though perhaps not actually in this case given the room doubled as a waiting room, performed for and with audiences prepared to celebrate the elevation and increased freedom of women. Emily Levine thought it was “wonderful” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 136). This room constituted a “separation from masculinist” spaces (Browne, 2009). However, it also reproduced the male/female binary where male comics were the norm and achieved greater success.

Some women comics were openly engaged with the implications of second-wave feminism. Merrill Markoe recalls that:

In those days [the late 1970s], I remember wrestling with ideas like, “How can I be a girl and not have men hate me on stage” because there was a lot of discussion about how women stand-ups could be “threatening.”...It was a big issue, so I remember trying to work around it. Did I need to wear a dress to look sufficiently vulnerable? Or would a dress make me too vulnerable and therefore insubstantial and not funny? Or if I wore pants onstage as I usually did, would that make me too masculine and therefore make the old “threatening” alarm bells start to ring? (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 130)

On the other hand, despite the fact her work advancing the aims of feminism, Boosler told The New York Times in 1987 that

When asked if I’m a feminist, I’ve always said I’m just a human being trapped in a woman’s body...for my generation, the ones who really changed things were [male comics] Robert Klein and Richard Pryor...Like all the young men who were starting out at the same time—people like Andy Kaufman and Jay Leno and Richard Lewis—I picked up from there. I never bravely set out to change things” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, 141).
As Boosler cites male comics as her inspiration, so too did other women who achieved mainstream success as comics. Rosanne Barr, for example, cites Lenny Bruce as the comic who influenced her (Willett, Willett, & Sherman, 2012), and Phyllis Diller cites Bob Hope as her mentor despite sharing many comedic strategies and rhythms with Jean Carroll (Horowitz, 1997). Comics I interviewed for this study were as likely to cite men as their favourite comic as they were to cite women. No one cites women exclusively, but several exclusively cite men.

In the ‘80s, more opportunities for women to reach a wider audience came, in significant part, through the advent of cable television. Rita Rudner notes that “cable didn’t have any money, so if they put a microphone in front of a wall and hired someone that they didn’t have to pay any money to, they had very cheap television” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 156). Because of this, national exposure was accessible in ways that it was not when appearances on The Tonight Show were the primary means of being on television. Through the 1970s, however, Johnny Carson remained powerful, and his management of comics who performed on his show is well-documented (Kohen, 2012). Men like Carson were gatekeepers who would admit a select few women as comics. Carson demonstrates his adherence to disciplinary gendered norms when he claims, “We will never have a writer who is a woman,” (as quoted in Kohen, 2012, p. 150), and to Rolling Stone in 1979:

A woman is feminine, a woman is not a hustler. So when you see a gal who does stand-up one-liners, she has to overcome that built-in identification as a retiring meek woman. I mean, if a woman comes out and starts firing one liners, those little abrasive things, you can take that from a man…. a little too aggressive for my taste (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 150).

Carson prioritized the male gaze and masculine audience here. It is not that women are not funny—it is that the audience invested in male perspectives and power rejects the women-identified comic enacting affective power over an audience, assuming an aggressive stance, and assuming a position of epistemic authority. This dynamic disrupts the power relationship between men and women and as such, those who are invested in hegemonic heteropatriarchy experience it
as unsettling. An unsettled affective state, unless sufficiently resolved through the joke, does not often permit laughter (with, though perhaps it allows laughter at).

In the 1970s and 1980s, comics began to reject explicit self-deprecation. The multiplicity of women’s voices generated a multiplicity of performance styles. Some, like Paula Poundstone, rejected telling a series of jokes and opted for a story-telling or improvisational style. Robin Williams recalls her lying on the floor and free-associating as her set. Claudia Lonow describes Poundstone as a “fucking computer” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p.) who could recall everything that happened to her in a day and improvise material based on her everyday life. One anecdote that has stuck with me is a description of Lotus Weinstock’s set. If people were not responding to her with laughter, she would say, “Wait one second,” and play a recording of herself saying, “You are a very lovely girl. Your mother loves you. The fact that they are not getting the humor is not you!” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 137) Joanne Astrow said, “Nobody had ever seen anybody do anything like that” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 137).

Elaine Boosler performed stand-up in the 1970s and 1980s with Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David and became the inspiration for the character Elaine Benes on the show Seinfeld. She presents a style of comedy that marked a departure from some of the self-deprecating tactics of Rivers and Diller before her. A 1979 New York Times article written by Anna Quindlen (mother of comic Maria Krovatin) begins with the following:

Elayne Boosler, age 26, with her Farrah Fawcett fluff and her Bain de Soleil tan, does not make jokes about how ugly and old she is [she was, of course, neither]. Elayne Boosler, who has gone in six years from waiting tables to the Johnny Carson show, does not make jokes about what a failure she is. Elayne Boosler, who for some time was “the girl” in a clutch of funny men, does not make jokes about how female she is. Nor does she go for the laughs of self-deprecation; she goes for the laugh of recognition. Her jokes have happened to everyone (Quindlen, 1979, paragraph 2)

When Elayne Boosler performed on The Tonight Show, Johnny Carson instructed her to tell the following joke: “I’m so ugly, I can’t make a nickel on a battle ship” (as cited in Nesteroff,
This humour, reminiscent of Diller’s (e.g., “So wrinkled I had to screw my hat on”), which constructed Boosler as remarkably undesirable, was not reflective of her style of comedy, nor of the broader 1970s comedy scene. It was not reflective of how Boosler thought of herself, other women, or her stage persona. Rather, her humour explicitly refers to her sexual relationships with men outside of a conventionally domestic, marital context. For example, she had a joke about her apartment being so empty that when she would bring men home, she would enter and, with feigned surprise, call out “I’ve been robbed!” (As cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 120)

Through these jokes, Boosler rhetorically situated herself outside of the marital domestic sphere that Diller and Rivers discursively remained within. While on stage, they did not locate themselves as the career comics they were; instead, their comedy refers to their roles as wives and mothers. By contrast, Boosler dressed and acted like a young, single, professional woman whose home reflected her “bachelor” lifestyle, complete with casual sex partners. She was not a beleaguered wife or mother. In Boosler’s own words: “I’m not Joan Rivers! I am a liberated woman! Yes, I’m having recreational sex! I’m not going to get married! I’m making jokes about men, and it’s not my husband!” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 147).

This style of humour was unacceptable to the old guard; after refusing to perform the joke provided by Carson, he did not invite Boosler back to The Tonight Show. Carson reportedly said, “I don’t ever want to see that waitress on my show again” (as cited in Nesteroff, 2015, p. 147), “waitress” supplanting her actual profession (a comic) and a metonym for a lower-class, female servant belonging in the kitchen. In her 1979 interview for the New York Times, Boosler confronted how difficult it was to perform this kind of humour. She explains,

I’m the only one who doesn’t do that [self-deprecating humour], and you pay for it because people don’t like you to rock the boat. I don’t do it and Lily Tomlin doesn’t do it either but Tomlin isn’t even a comedian, she’s a gift from God. It’s funny because in my real life I put myself down all the time. But not in the act (as cited in Quindlen, 1979).
As I discuss further in Chapter 5, prior to the 1970s, performers employed self-deprecation and other tactics to mollify the audience and settle their discomfort in relating to a woman-identified comic in ways that they had not before and that interfered with normative ways of performing gender and power relations. Foregrounding one’s inadequacies as a sex object enables their comic identity. But that changed in the 1970s and 1980s.

Her contemporaries admired Boosler and sought to emulate her. She integrated political opinions into her sets. This kind of humour was exciting for comics who saw themselves in Boosler’s work and felt that her style enabled them to transgress the protocols of femininity as they intersected with comedy. Comic Merril Markoe describes Boosler as “doing the unthinkable” by being a “smart sexy woman” with “a lot of political opinions about stuff other than ‘I’m so flat chested my husband won’t sleep with me’” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 212). Similarly, Carol Leifer describes her reaction to watching Boosler in the following way:

Wow, there’s a woman like me who’s not doing stand-up from the reference point of us versus them. Women versus men. And it wasn’t what female comedy had largely been up to that point, which was, “Oh, my husband this….” You know, Phyllis Diller with Fang, or Joan Rivers talking about being a wife and mother. This was comedy coming from a young single woman. (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p. 120)

Boosler made important contributions to the comedy that defined the 1970s and 1980s. Contemporary feminist stand-up comedy, when comics take up and express political positions through their humour, reflects the work of Boosler and others that, indeed, one can trace back to Mabley and all those who follow her.

**Summary**

Deirdre Heddon asserted that live performances by marginal subjects “represent the already lived in order to beckon us towards, urge us to imagine, or compel us to create the yet to be lived” (as quoted in Pelle, 2010, p. 34). Furthermore, there is a cathartic release in laughter; while people are laughing, they temporarily relinquish other affective states:
As long as we laugh, we are not in the catastrophe, we avoid it, we have put off the inevitable. The shock of laughter contains a sense of triumph at escaping. When nothing else seems possible, laughter offers a way out, which cannot, however, be sought but either occurs itself or not at all. (Quoted in Horlacher, 2009, p. 43)

This evokes the trickster figure, whose playfulness and cunning prevent its annihilation and compel its interlocutors to defeat their own oppressive and violent aims. To relay stories to a laughing audience is to have one’s resiliency recognized and affirmed. This is the position Mabley achieved. Through the development and performance of her jokes, Mabley is not “on the outside of discourse looking in” (Hooks, 2001); rather, she is recoding Black misinterpretation of White language to signify strategy rather than ignorance, resilience rather than defeat. Through these imagined entries into and unscathed departure from the South, Mabley speaks truth to power.

Contemporary Black comics perform comedy in ways that reflects on the work Mabley has done. One significant theme that emerged while I was coding transcripts of stand-up performances was ‘encounters with white ignorance’. Through stand-up comedy, comedians describe interactions with White men and women, or they performed these interactions while on stage. They interrogate the White gaze and make fun of it. The gaze or the White frame becomes the joke. In this sense, comics denaturalize and objectify oppression, which creates space for critique.

These anecdotes generally expose white ignorance and racist attitudes. I have coded several jokes as encountering white ignorance. Here is one illustrative joke:

I hate summer…White people just ruin it for me, you know. You guys do this thing where you go to the park and you lay down for ten hours and you get a little tan and you come up to your only Black friend, and you're like, ‘oh my god, lift your sleeve up, we're getting so close!’ Don't do that! Don't treat me like a Colour Your World swatch. I'm not into it. You’re like, ‘Oh, we're the same! hahaha!’ ‘Are we the same? Are we the same, Sarah? Can you easily get a job? …We're not the same. We're not the same (Anonymous, 2018).
In this set, the Black comic describes being objectified as a paint swatch and takes down the rhetorical framing of equality or “sameness” between White and Black women. She highlights the structural inequalities, pointing out the economic advantages of being White, and “easily get[ing] a job”. This comic employed rhetorical strategies to engage to and connect with her audience that differ from Mabley’s use of a costume. Additionally, she performed this joke at an event that celebrated women of colour. Her immediate physical environment, and the subcultural alternative space she performed in, enabled the celebration of the oppositional gaze.

Mabley’s articulation of strategies, even if imagined, provide insight and strategies for change. She imagines that her Black audiences might feign ignorance in order to move through a violent space, to laugh collectively in recognition of White inadequacies, and to renew the spirits through collective laughter—that sharing of joyful and liberating affect.

The ability to see oneself as seen by the dominant culture is important for members of marginalized populations, and this is evident in contemporary stand-up comedy performed by women. This skill enables the comedian to connect with and make sense to her audiences (Daube, 2010; DeCamp, 2015; Pérez, 2013). Because the comic assumes a position of relative power to the audience—she is speaking into a microphone and her voice is therefore amplified—she is claiming epistemic authority, both because she is claiming to know what will make an audience laugh and that her version of events is authoritative. Furthermore, she is claiming affective power—she will affect her audience. Once she becomes successful, she capitalizes on this power and receives payment for her work. This position may be threatening to the dominant culture, and the successful comic develops a keen a sense of how her audience will read her, of what her body will signify to them. This insight enables her to play with her audiences and generate positive affect.

In her autobiographies, and throughout her career, Diller refers to male comic Bob Hope as her mentor. Like him, she attended to the structure and timing of her jokes and aimed for 11 laughs a minute. Likewise, in the tradition of vaudeville comics, Diller made mother-in-law jokes
that did not refer to her actual mother-in-law. This is the style that Diller took up throughout her career. She established a premise and then fired as many related jokes as she could to maximize her laugh-per-minute count. These jokes reproduced discourses that sustained the thin feminine ideal and framed fatness as a grotesque; in the cultural context that Diller performed within, they were familiar and intelligible as jokes, and as such, rendered her intelligible as a comedian.

It is tempting to imagine that Mabley subverted norms while Diller capitalized on them. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say they both engaged the norms of the day in the way that they could, exposing what those norms were, and, perhaps most importantly, articulating their perspectives and getting laughs.

**The Body as Site of Knowledge, Power and Comedy Gold**

In the first half of this chapter, I discussed strategies that female comics use to engage with the dominant gendered norms in ways that elicited laughter. In this second half of the chapter, I turn to the theme of the body. I examine how female comics treat their body’s corporeality as a source of desire, pleasure, shame, ambivalence and knowledge.

**Sexual Desire and Bawdy Jewish Humour**

From the 1940s into the 1960s, the “dirty” female Jewish comedian was a prominent figure in popular entertainment. Perhaps the most famous woman performing in this tradition was Sonia Kalish (1886 – 1966), known publicly as Sophie Tucker. Like many comics at this time, she began her career in blackface in the early 1900s, reportedly because her then-manager thought that it would make her more acceptable to White audiences because she was a large woman. After two years on the vaudeville circuit in blackface, she performed successfully without it and never went back (Nesteroff, 2014). She became known for her joyful acceptance of embodied pleasures; one of her most popular songs was titled, “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love.”
Tucker’s songs, sung in both Yiddish and English, foreground her embodied pleasures and desires. One of her songs includes the lyrics “If I wanna have some fun, if I get bothered and hot, I phone one of those young tall dark handomes I’ve got; so it costs me a twenty or a fifty, so what?” (as quoted in Mock, 2012, p. 16). Jill Dolan (2001) argues that the solo Jewish performer Deb Margolin performs a kind of Jewish excess, that marks her as affectively outside normative [W]hiteness. Her insistence on charting her own desire, and on calling attention to her own body as a locus of sexual, emotional, and spiritual feeling, also rejects a respectability that would disallow her to speak in the first place (p. 476).

This description resonates with the solo performances of Sophie Tucker. Tucker’s bawdy performances led the way for later Jewish comics like Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Patsy Abbott, who sung and performed similarly blue comedy in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of this material circulated underground through “party records” that sold hundreds of thousands of albums until the 1970s and (Mizejewski, 2014; Mock, 2012; Nesteroff, 2015). Barth, Williams, and Abbott, following Tucker, foregrounded their sexed bodies and sexual desires in their humour. Their performances were largely burlesque, musical, or both. Despite not falling within the category of stand-up, they informed traditions of stand-up comedy. The amalgamations of grotesque and ideal femininities that they performed were complicated by the intersecting forces constructing race [Jewish and Black] and gender in early 20th century North America).

Early 20th century Jewish comics gave voice to bodily desires through their musical and comedic, sexualized burlesque performances. Notably, women’s singing voices were taboo for Orthodox Judaism. The role of cantor (who sings the prayers on the bimah [stage] in the synagogue is a male role. Through their articulations and performances of illicit pleasures and bodies, these performances helped to foster what would become stand-up comedy. They took place at the same time as male Jewish comics made jokes made at the expense of Jewish women that drew on stereotypes of the Jewish mother and the Jewish American Princess (Hammerstein,
2017; Antler) “Jewish women rejected the stereotypes of the Jewish mother and Jewish American Princess, and replaced them as ‘strong-minded, willful women, always ready to offset their opponent with a cheeky remark’” (Hammerman, 2017, p. 66).

Whereas male Jewish comics joked about nagging women, including Henny Youngman’s signature line, “Take my wife—please,” Sophie Tucker, Belle Barth, Totie Fields and others, worked with their over-sized body parts to “conspire to ridicule men and render them powerless” (Hammerman, 2017, p. 66). These women, before Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers represented commercially successful comedy in the 1950s–1970s, did not self-deprecate. Mock, quoting Bronski (2003), writes that,

> While pragmatic about their aging bodies, their material was never self-critical like that of Diller and Rivers. [Their songs made use of the] language of the(ir) street, often Yiddish: “[P]enises were schlongs or schmucks, vaginas were ‘knishes,’ and they had no problem using words like ‘bitch,’ ‘faggot,’ or ‘asshole.’ This down-and-dirty vocabulary gave them a public language in which to talk about sex” (as quoted in Mock, 2012, p. 22)

Early Jewish women-identified comics took pleasure in their own bodies. They did not signal shame. Instead, they punctuated their performances with their own joyful laughter. They were making spectacles of themselves and, importantly, having fun. These aspects of their performances influenced the trajectory of stand-up comedy performed by women and of comedy that I regard as feminist throughout this thesis. Supplanting shame with pleasure, foregrounding the body, and having fun are key features of contemporary feminist stand-up comedy.

### What it Feels Like

In this section I discuss Joan Rivers, Amy Schumer and Ali Wong. Although they all include corporeality in their sets, they do so in different ways. Rivers and Schumer tend to accept the body as a source of disgust, whereas Wong rejects disgust and celebrates the power of inhabiting her body on her own terms.
Comedy theorists often cite Joan Rivers’ (1933 – 2014) performances—especially her performance of intimacy with the audience in their definitions of contemporary live stand-up comedy (Brodie, 2008; Daube, 2012; Gilbert, 1997; Limon, 2000). Through her acts, Rivers takes on the role of an intimate friend, there both to commiserate about being a woman in a patriarchal culture and to impart wisdom about what it feels like to be a woman, to have to perform femininity in ways that never quite measure up, and consequently to experience exclusion from normative femininity. This style facilitates an affective connection with an audience—we feel like the performer is inviting us into her confidence. It also legitimizes women’s experiences of sexism. Rivers confirms that we are not feeling inadequate because there is something wrong with us. Rather, society makes us feel inadequate because the expectations for women are outrageous.

Consistently asking, “Can we talk?” Rivers affected the protocols of an intimate conversation among women and performed them publicly. Her refrains, “Oh, you don’t know!” “Can we talk?” and “Grow up!” signal a kind of shared understanding and desire to lay the self bare, to “get real.” The private lives and conversations among women are displaced here—they are not occurring around a kitchen table while children are playing in the background (Diller and Rivers each had children), but on a stage and into a microphone.

“Can we talk?” implies that the conversation is about to “get real.” It signifies a departure from the casual conversation one might engage in with an acquaintance or an audience full of strangers. “Can we talk?” calls upon an interlocutor. Rivers is asking for engagement, for an “us.” This is an important dynamic between audience and performer. The experiences of the comic must resonate with her audience. The audience must at least regard her as an authoritative representative of the kinds of experiences she is disclosing. This epistemic authority is necessary in order to affect an audience. An audience is willing to be affected by someone whom they believe in (i.e., who they regard as capable of making them laugh, of knowing what they will find funny, and of authentically representing their material).
Rivers tells the audience how she *feels*, unlike Diller, whose primarily focus was how she (or her mother-in-law, whom she describes as “King Kong with an overnight bag” [Diller, 1969]) looks or acts and not the affective states that accompanied these characterizations. Rivers also focuses on her appearance, but rather than punctuated, rapid-fire, one-liners, Joan Rivers is asking her audience, “Do you know how it feels?” “You have no idea,” she jokes. “My gynecologist examines me by telephone” (as cited in Lockyer, 2011, p. 116). She invites her audiences to share their bad feelings, which, through the comedy act, she transformed into the pleasure of shared knowledge.

Comedy and film theorist Linda Mizejewski (2014), in *Pretty/Funny*, characterizes Rivers’ work in the following way: “Rivers became famous with comedy focused on the inequities in marriage and women’s need to manipulate their way to power and money in a man’s world” (p. 35). Rivers also aims to generate knowledge, to help women understand their own bodies more intimately. She asserts that women can be embodied, knowing subjects even when they are undesirable as bodies or objects:

Let me tell you something, and that’s why I’m glad I had the chance to discuss this. Because our mothers don’t tell us. If our mothers told us, you would feel better. Do you know what I mean? If my mother had said to me, “Joan, when you get old your vagina’s gonna drop but it’s a good thing, because you can have sex in the bedroom and still watch TV in the living room.” Because if you don’t know, it’s trouble (as cited in Mock, 2012, p. 13).

Rivers recognizes this unexpected shift in her own body as information that “our mothers don’t tell us.” Instead, she relies on her own embodiment as a source of knowledge. She knows something, and her body is the source of this knowledge. Through her comedy routine, Rivers is sharing and reflecting on her embodied knowledge.

Later, Amy Schumer (born 1981) made a similar joke. In hers, the focus was on the way the vagina smells, rather than how it looks. She joked:
We’re so worried and ashamed. Our moms never sat us down and said, “Okay, honey, one day, you’re sometimes gonna have homeless pussy. Lights out.” Like, no. They don’t tell you. And that’s just the fucking nature of it. And it’s like, we’re so embarrassed. I know some girls who won’t let anybody go down on them (Schumer, 2017).

When women share publicly what they had to learn privately it raises feminist consciousness; it is a coming together to share and generate knowledge that will enable others to understand and recognize the processes and material changes that bodies undergo. This was the aim of the second-wave feminist movement that included publications like Our Bodies, Ourselves (1969). However, the women’s health movement was developed by, about, and for women. Diller, Rivers, and Schumer developed their comedy for a mainstream audience that includes men. Whereas many of the comics discussed in this chapter foreground their bodies and embodied femininities and experiences, Rivers makes explicit her aim to help women know themselves, to prevent their surprise at their own bodies. However, in so doing, she naturalizes the idea that as women age, for example, they become disgusting. Her comedy, as with Schumer’s, reproduces discourses of femininity that characterize the female body as disgusting. The knowledge that Schumer and Rivers aim to share hides within and upholds hegemonic femininity. Although Joan Rivers does not denaturalize idealized femininity in this sense, she reflects on how it feels to have a woman’s (aging, sexual, sexualized) body within a patriarchal culture. Performing one’s emotions in the public sphere is important feminist work.

Performing much later than Rivers, Ali Wong (born 1982) describes how it feels to have a miscarriage without knowing how common it is. The tone of Ali Wong’s sets is radically different from both Rivers and Schumer. Most notably, with respect to her rejection of shame, Wong shared:

I’m 33. Girl, when you’re 33, you’ll know plenty of women who have had a miscarriage. It’s super common, and I wish more women would talk about it so they wouldn’t feel so bad when they go through it. When I told my mom—she’s from a third-world country, and when I told her I had one, she was like, “Uh,
yeah. Where I’m from, that’s like losing a pair of shoes. It’s whatevs, OK?” (Wong, 2016)

Wong’s humour, and her routine on having a miscarriage, seems more in line with sharing knowledge with the aim of mitigating the suffering of those who experience this sometimes-traumatizing event. She is not rehashing descriptions of the female body or embodied experiences as abject. Instead, she wants to generate knowledge and understanding of these experiences—to encourage women, to share their experiences and to understand that they are shared, not singular. Schumer, in her Netflix special, describes the popular response to an image of her posing in her underwear:

I learned the word you don’t want people to use when a nude photo of you goes viral. “Brave.” Um. Can you imagine? You take your clothes off in front of someone for the first time, and they’re just like, “Damn! You look mad brave right now. Whoo-ee! Shorty looks empowered!” Like, no! As if I’m standing there, like, “I am brave!” No, just fuck me” (Schumer, 2015).

This is similar to a joke made by Wong in her *Baby Cobra* special:

But I’m not gonna be one of those crazy pregnant ladies who tries to get all back in shape right after they get pregnant. No. Hopefully, if you see me in a year, I will have the kind of body where, if I do a nude scene on television, people will commend me for being courageous. For doing it. (Wong, 2017)

Again, we can see the differences in the performance of shame and pride in these sets.

**White Feminist Comedy and the Privilege of Ambivalence**

Early in her comedy career, Amy Schumer’s Emmy-winning comedy show *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-2016) regularly showcased performances of (White) grotesque femininities and provided feminist readings of the excessive, insatiable, man-eating female body. I rely on Mary Russo’s (1994) theorization of the grotesque female as an excessive and unruly figure in order to understand the ways in which comics embody and perform grotesque femininities. The female grotesque refers to the abject, secreting, unruly, cavernous aspects of body. As a comedic strategy that distorts idealized femininity or is at least incongruous with it, the grotesque can expose and undermine the apparatus that upholds oppressive ideologies.
One such sketch features Schumer as a White, heterosexual woman whose White, male partner initiates cunnilingus. After warning him that it takes a really long time, she sheepishly concedes to receiving cunnilingus. One scene shows her male partner entering her cavernous vagina. Once inside, he finds a lantern, map, and the skeletal remains of a previous lover who had failed to emerge from this death trap. When it cuts to her, the viewer sees Schumer reading a book entitled *Long Russian Novel* and then voraciously consuming takeout food (while on the phone with the restaurant complaining that she has not received her request for extra sauce). Eventually, once Schumer has climaxed, her partner exits her vagina with the demeanour of a weary explorer, complete with beard and greying hair, and he leaves her apartment immediately. The show depicts her climax as otherworldly, complete with bright, white light blinding her lover and accompanying music. This conceptualization of the grotesque, excessive vagina resonates with Freudian characterizations of women’s sexuality as a dangerous dark continent. It plays with bourgeois European androcentric notions of female erotic pleasure as threatening to the male subject.

In this sketch, Schumer’s character is flouting sexist standards of femininity by expressing and satiating desires that people conventionally encourage women to repress (especially if they overlap): hunger, lust, anger. Schumer’s performance offers an embodied fantasy of the female grotesque that overturns the naturalized affects of shame, disgust, and ridicule of the female body—the affective mechanism for regulating femininity. It also reveals the female body and sexuality as creations of a male-centered imagination.

Relatedly, Schumer joked that:

I know some girls who won’t let anybody go down on them. They’re just like, “No, I don’t know what’s going on down there.” I’m like, “What?” Like, I will forward your mail. Go. Head on down. Head on down to Puss Town. And—and if that’s not your thing, fine, you know? If I ever started dating a guy, and he was like, “You know what, it’s not my thing.” I’d be like, “That’s fine.” And then I would invite him to go hiking at Red
Rocks, and I would push him off a fucking mountain. Just—
(Schumer, 2015)

Schumer attributes some of these preferences to the shame that women feel in relation to their vulvas: what they look like and how they smell, suggesting that if we knew our vulvas smelled awful, we would be less ashamed of them or more prepared to deal with them. Even in this imagined alternative universe in which women need not be ashamed of their bodies, the vulva is associated with homelessness, uncleanness, dirt, and filth.

The idea that vulvas are disgusting (just by virtue of being vulvas) and often smell like homelessness, or as Schumer joked, “on its already best day [groans] my pussy smells like a small barnyard animal, ok?” (Schumer, 2015) could be interpreted as naturalizing women’s shame about their bodies. It puts forth the idea that our bodies smell awful, and that it is important to accept this premise in order to enjoy receiving oral sex from men. However, this joke also removes the taboo of talking about the way our bodies smell. It abjects the shame projected onto women and through articulating it in a comedic context, neutralizes the power of shame. It opens space for admitting that we might take pleasure in the way our bodies and the bodies of our lovers smell or that we may take pride in the way our pheromones attract sexual partners largely through scent. It might also introduce women to shame that we didn’t know we needed to have.

Consider how this characterization compares with that of Ali Wong; rather than feel admiration for the hero performing cunnilingus, Wong describes feeling empowered and powerful:

Oh, my God. I just feel like I’m absorbing all of that privilege and all of that entitlement. You know, just right there, through the money hole and just. And then also, he’s so vulnerable down there. I’m, like, “I could just crush your head at any moment, white man! I could just kill you right now! Crush those brains! Colonize the colonizer!” You know? (Wong, 2017)

Wong does not perform embodied shame. She desires embodied pleasure and assumes a powerful, knowing relationship to it.
The Maternal Body as Source of Knowledge

Contemporary stand-up comics are celebrities. Ali Wong sells “Trap his/her Ass” and “Jungle Asian” T-shirts and other merchandise on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. She stars in the animated Netflix sitcom *Tuca and Bertie*, and she played a lead role in *Always Be My Maybe* (2019, co-written and co-produced by Wong). At the time of writing this thesis, Wong is on a book tour for *Dear Girls: Intimate Tales, Untold Secrets, and Advice for Living Your Best Life* (2019).

Wong’s two Netflix specials aired on Mother’s Day weekend two years apart. She is pregnant in both of them; the maternal body and its protruding form is in the foreground. Wong’s performances mark a significant departure from Rivers’ 1972 performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, in which Ed Sullivan and producers of the show prohibited Rivers from mentioning her pregnancy or using language that describes her embodied experience. Rivers recalls:

> On the Ed Sullivan Show, I couldn’t even use the word “pregnant,” can you imagine? I was eight months pregnant, I was a house, and I couldn’t say the word “pregnant.” Instead I had to say, “pretty soon I’m going to hear the pitter-patter of little feet” (as cited in Kohen, 2012, p.)

Wong’s work signifies a shift in how the boundary between public and private is symbolically inscribed on women’s bodies. Wong’s body, and the ways that it serves and limits her, is central to her material. In both specials, she wears a tight, short dress and positions herself in ways that are sexually and viscerally evocative. She leans forward into the audience, eyes wide, eyebrows raised, legs spread and knees bent in a position reminiscent of birthing or excretion. For one joke, she squats and mimes wiping herself after a “boring, repressed shit” with cheap toilet paper that falls apart (Wong, 2016). After describing the luxury of the housewife who defecates in her own home with nice toilet paper, she also mourns her inability as a working woman to smell her vulva with abandon. Wong mimes repeatedly forcing her fingers into her vulva and then smelling them:

> Every time you scratch yourself, all you can think about is, “When can I smell my fingers? When can I smell my fingers?
When can I discreetly find a way to smell my fingers?” Nature made you urgently curious to protect you, ‘cause you gotta check that it’s all good in the hood. If it’s too funky, you need to see a doctor. Your fingers are your first WebMD. (Wong, 2016)

With bits like this, Wong foregrounds her unruly, pregnant body as a good rather than shameful thing. She wants to smell her fingers. She expresses pride in her body’s capacity to communicate its needs. She does not present this as a disgusting urge; rather, it reflects a healthy desire to form an intimate epistemological relationship with her body, to discern how well it is functioning. She is proud of what her body can do and of the knowledge that it holds.

This foregrounding of the pregnant or maternal body is a risk. Imogen Tyler (2009) writes about the theoretical life of abjection and cites multiple studies demonstrating that the maternal body is more likely to die from murder than from any other cause. This research also concludes that this body can “trigger new instances of violence” (p. 88) within intimate relationships that were not previously violent. The studies Tyler cites, as well as anecdotal evidence offered by “many midwives and health care workers,” suggest that “the sight and meaning of the pregnant body invokes a specific and targeted physically violent response” (p. 89). Wong’s act consistently humanizes her grotesque, maternal body and articulates the pleasures and pains that emerge from it. More than this, she elevates her body to an epistemologically, politically privileged site and a privileged site of pleasure.

Wong uses images of power to represent her body’s capacities. She likens her breastfeeding nipples to Leonardo DeCaprio in The Revenant after a bear attack. She expresses neither shame nor passive maternal bliss. When others warned her that she would defecate while in labour, she responds by rejecting the expected shame, stating, “Yeah, I look forward to it. I’m all backed up from holding in my shit at work” (Wong, 2016). Through these and other jokes, Wong makes space for the ambivalence most of us feel about embodied human experience. She highlights the complexity of being a mother in novel ways and rejects the maternal/erotic binary in public discourses of motherhood and maternal bodies and desires.
Note the contrast between Wong’s discursive framing of the vulva and Schumer’s. The former appreciated the scent and lamented that fact that her vulva was producing less slime:

Do you remember when you were 18 years old, and your pussy was just sopping wet all the time? All the time, you just took it for granted that you could just reach your hand down your pants at any given moment, you throw up the peace sign afterwards, and there would be that snail-trail in between your fingers. Oh, my God, it was so juicy. (Wong, 2016)

Schumer’s sketch mentioned above lampoons characterizations of the vulva, or female sexuality more broadly, as unknowable. Like the dark continent, it is dangerous and mysterious. Heteropatriarchal discourses of sexuality seek to “colonize” (Smith, 2003) women’s sexuality by claiming ownership of it through simultaneously casting it off and objectifying it. By contrast, Wong is neither ignorant nor scared of her body. She shares her confidence with her audience, along with strategies for interacting with one’s body in order to understand and appreciate it. The dark continent, in her set, becomes instead the male prostate. She encourages women to work toward mastery of pleasuring their male partners anally. This is a powerful position to inhabit: to help one’s partner explore the ways that their body can experience pleasure in violation of heteronormative scripts. She warned that:

You’ll get a lot of “No! No! No! No, please! No, really, I don’t–No! I don’t! I don’t! No!” They get all squirmy wormy because…they’re scared. They’re scared that if you stick your thumb up there and succeed, and they like it, that then, it might mean that they’re gay. And I like that fear. That shit turns me on, you know? Especially when that fear metamorphosizes into pleasure (Wong, 2016).

This quote plays with male anxiety and their relationship to a dimension of sexual pleasure that is culturally imagined as homoerotic. By foregrounding male anxiety around their own anal penetration, Wong is surfacing an alternative sexual script. She implicitly rejects the stereotype of the naïve, young, passively receptive feminine partner who looks to the masculine knowledgeable partner for sexual education. Wong rejects the shame-filled passivity of aging women. In contrast to the abjection that Rivers recounts, Wong will not become corpse-like, rather, she will “live to
like a billion.” (Wong, 2016) In the joke cited above, Wong assumes the position of authority on sex and pleasure. It is a powerful move that resists Asian sex doll stereotypes in particular and feminine passivity in general.

Karen Shimakawa describes the category of Asian American as something that is “both produced through and in reaction to abjection” and as a category that both “describes” and “calls that category into being” (As quoted in Pelle, 2012, p. 22). Wong consistently recounts her excessive, changing, consuming, excreting body, and yet one does not get the sense that she is ashamed or afraid of it. She defies death:

I’m guaranteed, like a turtle from the Galapagos, OK? We all know the phrase “black don’t crack.” Well, Asian don’t die. We don’t die. Especially the women, we live forever. And you know why we’re such bad drivers? Because we’re trying to die. We’re like, “Yeah! Let me see how invincible I really am!” (Wong, 2016)

Wong changes the meaning of bodily changes. Rather than signifying decay and mortality, they are signals of vitality and power. The female body, and the particular body of this Asian woman, is a site of superpowers: pride and pleasure.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Scholars have often discussed Rivers and Diller together because of the ways that they foreground their unattractive, sexed bodies and because of their overlapping mainstream successes (Horowitz, 1997; Kohen, 2012; Mock, 2012). Critics describe both Diller’s and Rivers’ humour as self-deprecating. Though Rivers was highly self-deprecating, she presents herself both onstage and off in ways that conformed to prevailing feminine beauty norms. Unlike Diller, she presents herself as hyper-knowledgeable about what it takes to be beautiful by dressing like a diva. Diller wears a fright wig that demonstrates her apparent inability to successfully perform conventional femininity.

Rivers and Diller engaged with heteronormative discourses and frameworks of desirability, and they frequently spoke about how their bodies were undesirable within these
frameworks. Rivers distanced herself from her own “natural” body by talking about the lengths she went to artificially make herself attractive by surgery. Both Diller and Rivers underwent multiple cosmetic surgeries in order to more closely resemble their ideal forms, prompting Diller to joke, “If I get one more face lift, it’ll be a caesarean” (Diller, 2005).

In this chapter, I have introduced some ways that women have engaged with and performed variations of hegemonic and grotesque femininities. Since its earliest incarnations in the figure of the court jester to performance on the minstrel and vaudeville stage, stand-up comedy has provided a space for marginalized populations to talk back to the dominant culture with relative safety from the violent sanctions that govern more serious interactions (Weaver, 2010). Stand-up comedy, because it is connected with identity and marked by autobiographical performances, elevates individual experiences of intersecting privilege, oppression, and resistance. Stand-up performances play with, crack up, and denaturalize critical and hegemonic conceptualizations of race, gender, ability, and sexuality. In these staged performances, comics reveal their experiences of the workings of culture and distributions of power. As such, they contribute to feminist epistemologies that are enriched by the multiplicity of women’s voices and experiences.
Cracking Up: Laughter as Feminist Intervention on the Stand-up Stage

Introduction

Overwhelmingly theory is bodily, and theory is literal. Theory is not about matters distant from the lived body; quite the opposite. Theory is anything but disembodied. (Haraway 1992, p. 299)

When I was young, I mistook the sounds of laugh tracks on television for real laughter. I believed that I was listening to other viewers laughing in their homes while we watched the same shows. The laughter signified to me that although we were in different places, we were participating in a shared experience, and so we were connected. I listened closely when I could (when I wasn’t laughing myself) for strange laughs, which delighted me. I was happy to hear what I thought at the time was hysterical laughter—laughter that persisted, continuing after the rest of us calmed down. Laughter that I perceived of as out-of-the-ordinary, or out-of-control, made me feel like I was privy to something revealing. I tried to imagine the person who might laugh like that, and what they might look or act like. I tried to understand what I missed when the laugh track went on without me.

Later, when I was older, I mentioned believing this to my mother. She asked me why I thought I couldn’t hear other household sounds coming through the television. It never occurred to me that I might. It never occurred to me, either, that laughter could be produced, or that I was being manipulated by prerecorded displays of affect. I thought laughter was something different, involuntary, powerful enough to cut through. Through this experience, I learned both how shared laughter is a powerful social force through which I felt connected to others as a social being, and how laughter could be used to manipulate people. These are the themes that I explore in this chapter.
As I show below, through interviews with stand-up comics, laughter is an essential element of stand-up comedy; without it, the show dies. The comics I interviewed spoke about the vitality of laughter as a force that animates them, their show and the audience, and is life-giving. This is the sense in which Limon (2000) describes laughter as “more than the value of a routine; more than a determinant of the routine (its rhythm influencing the comedian’s timing or its volume or its direction); it is the arteries and veins of the routine’s circulation” (pp. 12–13, emphasis added). In this chapter, I extend Limon’s metaphor of laughter as “arteries and veins” to consider laughter as blood.

Laughter flows as blood through the veins and arteries within individual bodies, and connects social actors within the social body. Laughter animates and empowers social actors, and its absence can be alienating or deadly. Treating laughter as blood opens up an analysis of power. Just as the exchange of other bodily fluids, as in sex, is subject to disciplinary power, who laughs, where, when, why, and how much is also subject to social control (Rubin, 1984). Taking an in-depth look at laughter as a vital medium, then, provides the means to understand the situated and contextual ways in which life-sustaining oxygen is pumped into heteropatriarchal norms. But more than this, I argue that laughter has the potential to serve as a meaningful feminist intervention—one that, importantly, is fun. Of course, not all laughter is indeed fun or feels good. Yet, in response to live, feminist stand-up comedy performed by and for women, laughter can displace affects like shame and disgust that serve abjection. It can generate pleasure and animate resistance.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. Part One introduces Kristeva’s (1980) theorization of abjection and Russo’s (1994) work on the female grotesque. I put these foundational works in conversation with contemporary intersectional feminist theorists, and I draw from interviews with stand-up comics to discuss the embodied experience of shared, feminist laughter and the animating force it brings to abjected subject positions and unruly women. Having discussed the
abject, joy and the social bonds that can be produced through laughter, I then, in Part Two, turn to an analysis of seven different specific ways in which the power of laughter is surfaced.

**Abjection, Joy, the Unruly Body, and the Power of Shared Laughter**

**Abjection.**

Kristeva’s (1982) theory on abjection provides a frame for understanding how the feminine ideal functions as a position from which to exclude and oppress. It also helps to explain how laughter can undermine the oppressive force of this ideal. For Kristeva, abjection involves “a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem but are not quite, alienable—for example, blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse” (Limon, 2000, p. 4). Abjection produces and defines the subject within the symbolic order against what we would be rid of (Kristeva, 1982). However, the distinction between the body and its detritus is ambivalent: We can never finally be rid of those parts of ourselves (vomit, feces, blood). The body’s detritus compels this psychic worrying of not being able to finally rid oneself of these aspects. This process extends from the individual embodied subject to the body politic comprised as it is of proper and worrying parts.

Identities and bodies are cast off from what is imagined as the true, clean, pure, and stable identity at the core of the body politic, or individual body. The desire for this identity, according to psychoanalytically informed theory, originates in the crisis of differentiation from the mother. Disconnected from the mother, the infantile self is unmoored. Through its connection with this crisis, the maternal body represents threat and longing; it is both repulsive and appealing. The infantile self longs for a stable identity unthreatened by the leaky, unreliable, messy matrix of feminine embodiment. But no body can measure up to this ideal of stability, containment, and purity. The embodied self has boundaries that are unfixed and porous, it leaks, the uterus regularly sheds its lining, hair falls out, ovulation precipitates vaginal discharge, lungs cough up phlegm, wounds fester and produce pus, hair falls out and skin sloughs off, and food we ingest becomes excrement. Still, in order to be discursively represented as whole, “the body must
bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 102). Female embodiment in general, as well as racialized forms of feminine and masculine embodiment, imagined as more mired in matter, closer to animal existence than the heady world of the symbolic order, is subject to the most intense regimes of discursive disciplinary power. It also poses the greatest threat to that power.

Mary Douglas (1966) argues that the detritus we cast off through abjection, but can never be quite rid of, remains a threat. Our stable, pure sense of self is threatened by the abject. Disgust and other similar affective responses enable our distance from what is disgusting. Douglas writes: “Its stickiness is a trap, it clings like a leech: it attacks the boundary between myself and it […] I remain a solid, but to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity” (Douglas, 1966, p. 38). Thus, to affiliate oneself with funny women is to become sticky ourselves, and to risk staying stuck. Yet, laughter shakes up fixed boundaries—we cannot keep the other out while we laugh.

To become affiliated with what is abject, with what others perceive as disgusting or repulsive is to become so ourselves; “the threat posed by the bodies of others is registered on the skin” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 33). There is a stickiness to that which disgusts us. Like dirt, it clings to the skin, and it is difficult to distinguish ourselves from (Douglas, 1966). The rejection of contact with the other affirms and reifies the boundaries between subjects. In Sister Outsider, Audre Lorde describes her experience as a child on public transportation in New York City. She perceives the hatred emanating from a White woman and is afraid that there might be a cockroach in between them:

I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us—probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me….and suddenly I realise there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn’t want her coat to touch… I am afraid to say anything to my mother because I don’t know what I have done. I look at the side of my snow pants secretly. Is there something on them? (Lorde, as cited in Ahmed, 2004, p. 33)
The affective rejection of the Black subject reinforces the social boundary between White and Black bodies. The White woman does not say anything. A series of looks and facial expressions conveys her horror. We can use Ahmed’s (2004) analysis of this event to understand the ways that affective responses are fundamental to processes of abjection. The White woman reads the body of the Black child as a contaminant, both to the purity of her own body and to the social body, which her hatred works to expel. While disgusted by the idea of coming into contact with the Black body, the White woman stares, emphasizing the ambivalence toward the abject which remains present. In her fixed gaze, we can see that she “find[s] it hard not to take another look” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85). Ahmed (2004) writes:

> The emotion of hate aligns the particular white body with the bodily form of the community—the emotion functions to substantiate the threat of invasion and contamination in the body of a particular other who comes to stand for, and stand in for, the other as such. In other words, the hate encounter aligns not only the “I” with the “we” (the White body, the White nation), but the “you” with the “them” (the Black body, Black people). (pp. 32–33)

Hoodo Hersi performing at a Yas Kween event, told a joke about being abjected from both White and Black communities. This position is one of self-negation. The abjected figure is placed in a position where it becomes difficult to claim knowledge. In Hersi’s words:

> I remember for a few years in high school and I didn't know I was Black, OK. I know this is weird. This is how it happened. First day in gym class right all the girls are getting undressed, I get undressed, right. I take off my hijab and all of the girls see my hair for the first time. My hair is long, right, So I remember all the girls just like swarmed me and they start petting me like I was a dog. They were like, ‘we didn't even think you had any hair! We thought you were bald this whole time. Like maybe you had cancer, but you were still cute, you know what I mean. Fashionable, ya know.’ One of the Black girls came up to me, she was like, ‘uh your hair is real nice, like you look like Jasmine from Aladdin, so you gotta check in with the Arabs now, you’re not one of us.’ So for like a few years I couldn't say [N-word]. It was a really dark time. (Hersi, 2018)
Hersi jokes that she did not know she was Black for several years, expressing the non-knowledge of the abject position. In this set, however, she assumes a position of epistemic authority: she knows she is Black, and that she is Muslim; she knows what her audience will find funny. Her laughing audience knows this too, and their laughter demonstrates their knowledge. They grasp the meaning of the joke intellectually and bodily. Laughter conveys an embodied knowledge. Their laughter signals that they get it.

Marginalizing discourses and the gaze that casts off others are deeply disorienting and alienating. Yet, I argue that laughter can be deeply subversive, creating the space to shift perspectives, achieve raised consciousness, and reconnect with embodied pleasure. Shared laughter draws attention and generates shared pleasures. The comic who is killing reanimates her audience, bringing new life to the site of those whom the dominant would rather leave for dead. The comic herself is hyper-animated, basking in the audience’s approval, buoyed by the affirming and uplifting presence of laughter.

To laugh with is to undo the boundaries that exist between social actors. To laugh as an audience is to affirm the comic. When the comic is a woman who is performing non-normatively, she is categorized as dangerous though patriarchal frames. As such, the audience may want to neutralize the threat she poses, and they may experience an impulse to abject or to objectify her. For audiences who are invested in normative frameworks, to accept, enjoy, or celebrate non-normative behaviour is dangerous.

**Bodies Knowing the Joyful Power of Laughter**

Taking inspiration from the comics I study, I emphasize the significance of the body in feminist discourses. In particular, I highlight the embodied, affective, and social pleasure of laughter in discussions of intersectional feminism. It feels good to laugh when we do not force it, when it emerges spontaneously, when we share it. Comic and performer Aba Amaquandoah shared in an interview that,
I feel like laughter definitely connects people. It is kind of a physical way of saying, ‘yes, I see you, I hear you, what you’re saying makes sense, and I appreciate it’. I think that, I don’t know the science of it, but I think that when people laugh together it really is community building and not necessarily for the long haul, but for those 15 minutes that they are sitting together and laughing, it really does feel like you’re closer to people in the world. (A. Amaquandoah, personal communication, February 4th, 2018)

Drawing on these interviews, theorists, and my own experiences in the feminist comedy scene, I argue that shared, involuntary laughter is an embodied experience that reorients the subject to her body and connects her to those she laughs with. This reorientation is a joy; it is pleasurable, it is a radical turn away from shame and disgust. Laughter intervenes into processes of abjection and cracks up the discourses that sustain and demarcate the ideal. Pleasure is a potentially radical way of experiencing embodiment, both our own and that of the material situation in the world. A comparison of sexual pleasure and the pleasure of laughter highlights the discipline and control of each; a body shaking with pleasure can crack up the social regulation of the feminine body. When we let go and give in to laughter and/or orgasmic pleasure, we are at least momentarily free from the corset of idealized femininity to take pleasure in our bodies.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous (1980) writes, “Let us imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is, a transformation of our relationship to our body (and to another body)” (p. 97). According to Cixous, this laughter will liberate us from the limitations imposed by phallogocentrism—the male-centered, patriarchal, symbolic order. She called for women to write themselves, to resist the limited range of desires and subjectivities assigned to them by the patriarchal symbolic order. Writing will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her way from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty. (Cixous, 1980, p. 841)

Writing ourselves and expanding the discourses of femininity has material effects. The current and future bounds of femininity are established by those who have discursive control. Through
stand-up comedy, standing up on a public stage, saying out loud that “I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs” (Cixous, 1980, p. 846), and inviting the audience to sing along has implications for how we understand ourselves and what we can feel and express. The subject who feels embodied pleasures and rejoices in her desires, even if they deviate from the norm. or even if others consider them out of bounds, will find little ready-made space for the expression of such pleasures and desires. She must make space for the unheard song.

The “primitive” polyvocal, vulgar song of a successful stand-up comic’s audience is grotesque, transgressive, dangerous, and, for some, described as “better than sex” (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018). In Laughter: Notes on a Passion, Ana Parvelescu writes:

> Only children laugh “heartily.” The civilizing process has pruned laughter to a moderate size: we laugh moderate, civilized laughs. Open mouthed, loud, extravagant, passionate laughter, what Norbert Elias calls “full throated, side-splitting laughter,” is condemned by the Western polite world as indecorous, primitive, and vulgar. (2010, p. 22)

Sex too is more or less socially acceptable depending on its proximity to socially sanctioned (heteronormative, monogamous) variations. One is expected to repress sexual desires if they are on the outer edge of what Gayle Rubin (1984) called the charmed circle. Susan Bordo (1993) describes the general rule “governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger—for public power, for independence, for sexual gratification—be contained, and the public space that women be allowed to take up be circumscribed, limited” (p. 171). An unruly woman does not restrain herself—rather, she expresses, shares, and fulfills her appetites and desires. As a result, she becomes grotesque.

Laughter, like orgasm, links to the irrational lower body and can mark the woman as grotesque; it is difficult to contain or categorize. More than one comic I interviewed said of experiencing their audience’s laughter that “it’s better than sex” (Joseph, personal
communication, November 28th, 2018) or “it’s better than any sex I’ve ever had, it’s better than any food I’ve ever eaten” (Z. Brownstone, May 5th, personal communication, 2018). Bobker (2017) elaborates on the connection between sex and joking, climaxing and laughing:

The stigma of humour, like that of sex, has been intricately woven with its designation as an irrational impulse and with gendered and racialized notions of embodiment. Moreover, there is a shared double standard regarding both laughter and sex: both have been imagined, paradoxically, as things that men have to cajole “respectable” (implicitly [W]hite, cisgendered, pretty, heterosexual) women to do, and at the same time, as things that transgressive women instinctively want to do, in excess. (p. 5)

The regulation of laughter and sexual pleasure connects to heteronormative assumptions about femininity. Both orgasm and laughter are a sort of climax, a response to an arousing stimulation. I might fake either to please another or to align myself with a partner. In laughter, and in orgasm, my body convulses and shakes, and there are similar vocalizations. I feels out of control; there is a connection between unrestrained pleasure and its subsequent vulnerability. I exposes my neck as my head flings back in ecstasy. Through expressing my pleasure, I expose what pleases me, what I want, what has the power to amuse and arouse me. I might be ashamed of what I have laughed at or what turned me on, but my responsive body betrays me.

The same kind of oblivion and knowledge at the height of pleasure occurs in both laughter and orgasm. Limon (2000) writes that,

the specific benefit of laughter is obliviousness. In this respect, laughter has a strange intimacy with pain [or an orgasm]. Laughter, like pain, is incorrigible: Pain is the thing about which I cannot be wrong. It is not merely the intensity and the embodiment of laughter, but also its unfalsifiability, that obviates the world. (p. 104)

Similarly, Elias (2017) writes that “all energies are absorbed in the enjoyment of the present. All other activities are interrupted; we do nothing else; we laugh” (p. 283). Comic Nour Hadidi (personal communication, April 5th, 2018) compared the laughter she has received to acceptance:
I also think that a lot of comics have a void in our lives, and comedy fills that. ‘Cause laughter feels like acceptance and you’re making a group of strangers like you. You’re winning them over. It feels warm. It feels like a hug. People have likened it to taking heroin. It’s addictive. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)

The acceptance one feels for performing the versions of themselves that, in other contexts, might be socially cast off, read as disgusting, excluded, and so on, is radical. Chanel Ali explains, “I definitely do think it’s a powerful force. I don’t know how the body works, but I know that when I laugh, it genuinely makes me feel better” (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018). The shame and alienation one might feel in relation to one’s own body or others is mitigated.

Anasimone George, producer of SHADE (a monthly comedy night for people of colour in Toronto), shared, “Sometimes I do feel uncomfortable in my body, but then when I hear the laughter, I’m like OK, cool” (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017). While laughing, the audience, can do nothing else. While it happens, it can be an unmitigated joy.

Comic Zoe Brownstone describes the ability to make people laugh as “a gift from God,” or:

> a service to provide to someone to relieve them temporarily, you know laughter is like, I am forgetting everything, I am abandoning the struggle of being alive, and like I am doing it right now, like I can’t help it kind of, it’s similar to being inspired where it’s like something is coming from the outside and dropping and it just drops. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Nelu Handa, comic and producer of Yas Kween (a weekly night of comedy for women of colour), likewise attributed the ability to compel laughter to an otherworldly force:

> It’s the best feeling in the world, I think, mostly, but there’s something about an audience, getting an audience to laugh, ya know, like saying something just the power of words, it’s so magical, the power of like how you deliver it and like just holding court and being like that, just being able to bring that for people, being able to, like, unite people in that way is, it’s a beautiful thing, yeah. And I am very responsive to it. (N. Handa, personal communication, February 4th, 2018)
Comic Chanel Ali performed this joke, which she felt to be her most raw or revealing. Here, Ali draws on the intimacy of laughter and, in her performance of a jealous lover, likens the intimacy of shared laughter to sexual intimacy:

I am 29 I am going to be thirty in a few weeks. Thank you, I need your support more than you know. I am still learning a lot about myself even though I am going to be thirty it wasn't until this year that I was able to admit that I was the jealous type. I am one of those women. But not in the traditional sense, more so in the sense where I don't like it when my friends tell me about their other funny friends. I worry about that shit. It can even be said as an aside, like, ‘Chanel I was at work the other day, talking to Jenny, you would love her, she's so funny’. I'm like ‘woahhh ohh. What you trying to say? What, you like Jenny's jokes? Does Jenny make you laugh? ’cause I remember I used to make you laugh just fine. I remember one time I made you laugh so hard, you cried a little. and then you peed a little. I didn’t tell nobody. I didn’t tell a soul. Does JENNY make you pee? no. I don't think she does. No, if Jenny is so funny, just tell me where Jenny lives. Let's just go to her house right now and see if she makes me laugh.’ You know what's sad? Is that that's the realest joke I have, that's me breaking the barrier letting you know who I am. I get jealous! (Ali, 2018)

Ali demonstrates the similarity between making an audience laugh and making a partner orgasm.

In asking “does Jenny make you pee” Ali evokes the fluids that might leak out of us in sex, and the loss of control we experience when we open ourselves to being affected by a lover. She highlights the affective power of the comic or the lover who elicits this pleasure, and the epistemic authority. The comic, or the lover, must know how to affect her partner/ audience.

At the time of our interview, Ali considered this her favourite joke to tell. When I asked what joke she enjoyed performing the most, she responds:

I don't know, that's hard. I think I like them all. I think lately my joke about being jealous, about me being jealous when my friends tell me about their other funny friends. I have been enjoying that one so much 'cause it is really, really honest. It's a really true feeling that I have sometimes and it took me a long time to be able to like write that joke and perform it so honestly, and people always like it, they like to hear maybe a little vulnerability, ya know. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)
Through these sets, comics recontextualize their experiences. These experiences may be disclosed with fear or shame, and/or they may elicit disgust or anger in other settings. Yet, in the Toronto feminist comedy scene, they generate laughter as they are retold. In so doing, they invite their audiences to share in the pleasures of embodiment, to temporarily stave off suffering, shame, and other negative affective states and to take pleasure in their bodies instead, thereby resisting normative social scripts that limit the expression of pleasure and desire. May we all gain freedom from the forces that render us unseen and silenced, that would leave us abject, disgusting, and grotesquely isolated. May the reanimating powers of full-throated belly laughs touch us all.

**Cracking Open: Leaking Shame and Erupting in Laughter**

Within the realm of feminist stand-up comedy, and of performance more broadly, boundaries can shift (Dolan, 2001). Comics speak in front of audiences as speaking, knowing, laughing subjects, and as such they expand what audiences can say and know, do and become. The comic can help an audience to feel, through laughter, what it already knows or suspects. Ahmed argues that emotions highlight collective and individual bodies. That they are “not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’, but that they define the contours that define the multiple worlds that are inhabited by subjects” (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 25).

Locating the sources of our pleasure and knowledge in our embodiment yields rich and diverse expressions of femininity; all women have bodies, but not all women relate to them with the same normative orientations. Yet, to experience pleasure in them is to resist (temporarily) the normative orientations of shame, alienation, and disgust.

Rowe (1995) describes the unruly, excessive woman:

That the unruly woman eats too much and speaks too much is no coincidence; both involve the failure to control the mouth. Nor are such connotations of excess innocent when they are attached to the female mouth. They suggest that the voracious and shrewish female mouth, that both consumes (food) and produces (speech) to excess, is a more generalized version of that other, more ambivalent conceived female orifice, the vagina. (p. 22)
The failure to control the mouth represents a failure of the rational, human aspect of the woman who discursively affiliates with the lower body and its animalistic drives and desires (hunger, lust). Laughter, too, represents a failure to control the mouth. *Hysterical* laughter is irrational. When involuntary laughter erupts, it is animalistic; performing idealized femininity becomes impossible at the height of laughter. In an interview, neuroscientist Sophie Scott describes laughter as an uncontrollable, animalistic vocalization:

[Laughter] can just feel like it’s issuing forth from us. And we can make sounds when we’re laughing like that that probably, all other things being equal, we’d probably prefer not to make. It can be extremely, well, very animal. And it is animal. It’s linking us. It’s exactly the same way that other animals make sounds. (Scott, 2019)

Shaken free (if only momentarily) from the disciplinary power of the ideal feminine, the feminine grotesque is transformed from a site of shame and abjection to a site of embodied pleasure and articulate power.

**The Social Power of Laughter**

There is a curious affinity between scientific literature on the biology of laughter and affect theory when it comes to the embodied experiences of and effects of laughter. More specifically, scholars drawing from affect theory and biology both discuss how laughter intimates intimacy, and how shared laughter connects us to one another.

From a biological perspective, the more hilarious we find something, the harder we laugh, and the greater the intensity of our laughter, the more engaged our bodies are (Griffen et al., 2015). There are physiological benefits to laughing. This recognizable feeling is verified in scientific literature. In “The Biology of Humour”, William Fry writes that

The consequences of mirthful experience are beneficial to physiologic system function and health. Benefit to the cardiovascular system is easily recognized. The heart is exercised in its increased frequency of beat; circulation is enhanced, with resulting increases of oxygen transport, improved distribution of bloodborne nutritional elements and intensified immune responsivity. (1994, p.116)
These effects linger, and post-laughter,

greater social and psychological animation frequently persists. This animation is manifested in many ways, including conviviality, bouts of wit and further laughter. An elevated level of mental and emotional interactivity develops between people who have been laughing together, reflecting the infectiousness of this exhilaration. This animation may persist for extended periods, building on itself, infecting all participants with gleeful intensity. (Fry, 1994, p.119)

The more we laugh, the more likely we are to continue laughing. Drawing on affect theory, Tzachi Zamir writes, “the pleasure of embodied laughter progressively establishes the mood that comedy ultimately aims to achieve, while the pleasurable mood itself engenders a greater propensity to laugh and enjoy” (Zamir, 2014, p. 188). Similarly, Teresa Brennon’s work on the Transmission of Affect likens affect to an atmosphere, and writes that “the ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual” (2004, p. 1). In the space of the comedy club, this is strikingly clear. If the atmosphere of the comedy club is animated, audience members are more likely to laugh. The more audience members there are laughing, the more affective the atmosphere becomes.

Neuroscientist Sophie Scott et. al, (2014) writes that we should take laughter seriously because

Laughter is more than a positive emotional expression: its social use may extend to the management of affective states within interactions. Laughter is one of the positive emotional expressions which are expressly linked to a physiological reduction in the stressful reactions to negative emotions (e.g. fear, anger, disgust) in a way which help to ‘de-escalate’ negative emotional experience, with a positive role in both the short-term state of relationships. (p.620)

I understand laughter as an affect (which I discuss further in the following chapter, “Making Fun”). As we have seen with laughter,

Affects not only vary according to time and circumstance – that is, they are historically and culturally different – each affect is also never solely a part of a body to begin with. It is always a
part of an encounter. These affects not only vary according to time and circumstance – that is, they are historically and culturally different – each affect is also never solely a part of a body to begin with. It is always a part of an encounter (Seyfert, 2012, p. 31).

Brian Massumi notes that “laughter and anger are perhaps the most powerful affects” because of their ability to interrupt an event, to interrupt meaning (2015, p.8). I extend this to consider the ways that laughter can interrupt or crack up feelings of shame or disgust. Following Sara Ahmed (2010) and other feminist theorists, I emphasize the “stickiness” of affects (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010). Ahmed writes that “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (Ahmed, 2010, p.29). Through the transmission of affect, or the experience of being affected, the body is not “simply touched on the outside, but is affected from within” [emphasis in original]” (Seyfert, 2012, p. 39). And Ted Cohen writes that intimacy has two constituents: “a shared set of beliefs, dispositions, prejudices, preferences, et cetera—a shared outlook on the world, or at least part of an outlook” and a “shared feeling—a shared response to something” with jokes, the two amplify one another (Cohen, 1999, p.28). As I discuss in Part Two, the affect of shared laughter is not universally available. For example, the degree of access women have to the ideal feminine makes a difference to their experiences, and those who are rejected from the realm of the ideal feminine have an entirely different experience.

**Situating the Power of Laughter in its Multiple Contexts**

Outside (and within) the comedy club, laughter emerges in an astounding variety of contexts (e.g., Kuipers, 2009; Provine, 2015): the nervous laughter puncturing a tense exchange, an uncomfortable silence, or preceding an important conversation; the cruel, menacing laughter of enemies in the school yard following some humiliation; warm, encouraging laughter a stumbling toddler provokes from a caregiver; torrential laughter that erupts among intimate friends at some outlandish, yet resonant, performed caricature or callback to a prior shared laugh; the acute pleasure that overflows into mirthful giggling; the maniacal laugh of a villain before the dynamite
is set to explode; the desperate laugh of someone receiving the last straw, a cut off notice; and
laughing that comes from witnessing laughing. Sometimes laughter stands in for agony, intense
suffering, or confusion. Sometimes we laugh because we want what you just said to be a joke:
“You can’t be serious.” People source laughter from despair as regularly as from joy. We laugh
when we do not know what else to do, when we are falling apart (also cracking up). Commenting
on these variations, Minors wrote that:

   The laughter is an illusion since there are always only endlessly
   proliferating terms of laughter, their only point in common being
   their physical manifestation; however, a physical manifestation
   that can stand in for a whole variety of feelings, ideas and
   intentions. (as cited in Horlacher, 2005, p. 20)

In this chapter, I grapple with the messiness of laughter, and attempt to discern the effects
of shared, feminist laughter as it arises in the comedy club. I argue that this laughter can
overcome or undo abjection, and laughter can connect people socially to create a form of shared
intimacy. For this reason, the study of laughter is a study of how power works. However, the
fluidity of categories such as woman and grotesque complicates a straightforward reading of
power or relief from sexual repression. There are variations in how subjects assigned these roles
constitute the joke, i.e., who becomes the butt of the joke and why. Gendered oppression is not
monolithic: an analysis of laughter must account for the varieties of experiences, bodies, and
subjectivities through which individuals identify as women and the qualitatively and
quantitatively different ways they receive discipline for expressing their desires. So too we must
consider the variations and intensities of joy that emerge when women are relieved from their
efforts to contain themselves.

For the remainder of this chapter, I draw from observation as an audience member and
my interviews with comics to examine sites in which this power surfaces in specific ways. In
addressing the questions of who or what is being animated by laughter, who is being objectified
by laughter and who is being made abject by laughter, I find a range of answers. In each case, we
can see a different way in which laughter, as the lifeblood that animates comedy, either gives or drains life. I discuss my findings under the following section headings: Exclusion and Annihilation, Just Kidding!, the Power of the Unlaughing Response, Laughter out of Place, Disgust Shame and Pride, and Fat Jokes. In each of these sections, I draw from interviews with comics and my experience as an audience member to single out specific facets of how laughter and power are connected in different ways. The section that concludes this chapter, The Power of Live Audiences Laughing Together, brings the discussion back to the transformative power of stand-up comedy that some comics who I interviewed intentionally try to harness.

**The Experiences of Being Laughed At: Exclusion and Annihilation**

Henri Bergson, writing about laughter in 1900, argues that humour is a social corrective. According to Bergson, one laughs at the individual who has become mechanized, too rote in their beliefs or behaviours: to laugh at someone is to loosen them up. Bergson (1900) writes that “in laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate and consequently correct our neighbor” (p. 7). While Bergson theorized laughter as a progressive tool, this humiliation can extend in either direction, punching up or down. The effects of laughter shift according to the context: when someone makes fun of a subordinate for failing to toe the line or when people call upon institutions to change. Consider these jokes from Elayne Boosler in the 1970s: “The Vatican is against surrogate mothers. Good thing they didn’t have that rule when Jesus was born,” and “These guys say they’re against abortion because birth is a miracle. Popcorn is a miracle too if you don’t know how it’s done” (as cited in Kohen, p. 119). These jokes make the rigidity (and ignorance) of the Vatican the butt of the joke; they emphasize the absurdity of mystifying the processes that lead to birth: sperm and egg meet, they embed in the lining of the womb, and the mother gestates and labours. Attributing this process to the supernatural obscures the work of biology and women. Women know this intimately and celibate men not at all.

During an episode of NPR’s *Hidden Brain*, the host, Shankar Vedantam, played a clip of Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony about Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulting her as a teenager
implicated rhetorical it) focused other’s and animating There our

importVuendtam, 2019). The clips included Ford’s statement that “indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the uproarious laughter between the two, and they’re having fun at my expense” (As quoted in Vedantam, 2019). The guest on the show, Neuroscientist Sophie Scott, responds in a way that resonated with theories of social abjection. The subject who is being laughed at, necessarily excluded from the bonds of the laughing subjects because of the power differential (here between the two young men and Ford) and the institutional dimensions that prevent women from speaking about the sexual violence enacted against them, is made abject. Scott remarked that this kind of being laughed at is:

One of the worst sensations. You know, if you realize not only are people laughing and you’re nothing to do with it but actually, no, hang on, they’re laughing and they’re laughing at you, it’s just sickening. It’s a horrible feeling because it’s one of the most basic things we care about as humans. We’re social primates. Who we get to hang out with, who talks to us, whose – what social network we’re part of, that really matters. And when you get this absolutely clear example not only are you excluded from this group, but they would care so little to have you be part of them that they would mark you out as being worthy of being laughed at, it’s almost – it’s extraordinary. (Scott, 2019)

To find that we are a joke or an object of derision can be alienating and destabilizing to our sense of self and to our social relationships (Scott, 2014, 2019; Smith, 2009; Proulx, 2018). There are differences between laughing with and laughing at. To laugh with is to share in the animating flow of laughter, to break down the boundaries between bodies, and to feel affirmed and connect to those whom we laugh with. To laugh at is to behave as a vampire—to deplete the other’s source of power. It induces shame—one who is being laughed at closes in on herself, is focused on escape and survival. It is to objectify the subject of your derision; it is to turn them (or it) into a joke.

**Just Kidding!**

One of the central premises of this thesis is that comedy is never just a joke. The rhetorical strategy: “it was just a joke” is an appeal for exoneration. It might mean: “I can’t be implicated by the racist/sexist/homophobic import of what I just said—this kind of utterance
belongs to a different realm, one where social sanctions do not apply”. It is a “get out of jail free”
card that locates the joke as an extraspatial, extratemporal utterance whose possible effects are
laughter, a failure to “get” the joke, or an absent or flawed sense of humour. However, jokes have
material effects(Cox, 2015; Mallett, Ford, & Woodzicka, 2016; Pérez & Greene, 2016;
Woodzicka, Ford, & Ford, 2010).

In their studies on sexist humour, Mallett, Ford, and Woodzicka (2016) find that people
are more likely to tolerate sexism under the guise of humour. Its proponents, who are prepared to
say, “Just kidding,” complicate the work of the one opposed: “The just in just a joke serves
double duty meaning not only, but also fair, as in all’s fair in love and comedy” (Cheng, 2017, p.
532). Robyn K. Mallett, Thomas Ford, and Julie Woodzicka (2016) conclude their study with the
following:

Although the content of the message is the same—that women
are not equal to men—the humorous nature of a sexist message
decreases confrontation. Further, for those holding sexist
attitudes, sexist humor increases tolerance of subsequent
occurrences of sexism. (p. 282)

An earlier study by Mallet, Ford, and Woodzicka (2010) shows that those who displayed hostile
sexism argues sexist humour funnier and less offensive than those who displayed benevolent
sexism. Furthermore, enjoyment of sexist humour influences the ways that people “think about
women and perceive discrimination against them, as well as their willingness to engage in subtle
sexist behaviours” (Mallet, Ford & Woodzicka, 2010; see also Kochersberger, 2014). This is to
say that we are affected by the jokes we tell and when we deem something as funny, we often fail
to take it seriously.

This finding is supported by qualitative research that argues, “the ‘just humour’ defense
is a typical viewer strategy to avoid considering the ideological implications of entertaining texts”
(Perks, 2012). Similarly, Rockler writes that respondents in his study believed that “If the
producer intended only to create a film for the purpose of entertainment, then it was unreasonable
to analyze it critically” (as cited in Perks, 2012, p. 300). Simon Weaver finds that racist jokes shore up racist discourses, while Pérez writes that comics present themselves as “‘not racist,’ even as they say racist things” (p.479) and the carnivalesque frame of comedy prevents critical examination of humour, emboldening “genuine racists” who can likewise appeal to the “it’s just a joke” argument. (Pérez, 2013, p.499)

**That’s Not Funny: The Power of an Unlaughing Response**

Declaring “That is not funny” is not to say that “I do not have the implicit knowledge required to understand this joke.” Nor is it to say “I anticipated the punchline, and therefore was not sufficiently surprised.” It does not mean “Your articulation of that sentiment does not relieve the pressure of trying to contain it.” Rather, it declares “I do not agree with the premise of the joke. I am not affiliating myself with the sentiment you are expressing.” Power circulates through laughter; it affirms and affiliates, distances and judges. Witholding laughter can be an act of resistance.

To illustrate this point, I revisit Gadsby’s bit about lesbians and laughter that I cite in the introduction.

I should quit. I’m a disgrace. What sort of comedian can’t even make the lesbians laugh? Every comedian ever. That’s a good joke, isn’t it? Classic. It’s bulletproof, too. Very clever, because it’s funny. Because it’s true. The only people who don’t think it’s funny are us lezzers, but we’ve got to laugh, because if we don’t, proves the point. Checkmate. Very clever joke. I didn’t write that. That’s not my joke…. It was written, you know, well before even women were funny. And back then, in the good old days, lesbian meant something different than it does now. Back then, lesbian wasn’t about sexuality, a lesbian was just any woman not laughing at a man. ‘Why aren’t you laughing? What are you? Some kind of Lesbian?’ Classic. ‘Go on. You gotta laugh. Lighten up. Stop taking everything so seriously! Fucking learn to take a joke. You need to lighten up. You need a good dicking. Get a cock up you! Drink some jizz! You know?’ Actual advice? It’s counterproductive. (Gadsby, 2018)

While Gadsby refers to lesbians rather than feminists, the two are rhetorically similar in this context, as demonstrated by Gadsby’s reference to lesbianism as “any woman not laughing at
a man”. Gadsby’s joke refers to the popular characterization of women as the eternal audience to the male (comic). Researchers have addressed this stereotype extensively (Cooper, 2019; Finney, 1994; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Gray, 1994). And yet, as an interpretive frame, hegemonic femininity still affects how audiences interact with humour. In other words, women tend to regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as laughing audiences (or laughable objects.) (K. Cooper, 2019; S. K. Cooper, 2019a; Kalviknes Bore, 2010). Gadsby’s bit also alludes to the potency of laughter to disrupt or lubricate the workings of power. Through laughter, the audience affiliates herself with the jester and affirms the premise of the joke; an unlaughing response symbolically rejects the premise and the jester (Farmer, 2001; Gilbert, 1997; Willett et al., 2012).

Deviance from hegemonic femininity, expressed in Gadsby’s performance as failure to laugh at a man’s attempt at humour (which is also, perhaps, an attempt at power), is threatening in this context because it rejects both the underlying premises (lesbians do not have a sense of humour), and it deflates the would-be comics’ power to affect their audience. Unlaughter rejects the knowledge claims made by the comic: That they know what is funny, they know what their audience will find funny, and that they know something about the topic of their humour. Making an audience laugh is powerful act; an unlaughing response thwarts the attempted exercise of power.

This deviance is also interpreted as a turn away from heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality, in this construction, entails being sexually and affectively available to hegemonic masculinity: ready to laugh, and ready to please (Rich, 1980). The lesbian and the feminist are discursively similar—both have been culturally imagined as deviants who reject men and lack a sense of humour.

There is an ongoing cultural fiction that feminists do not have a sense of humour. Unlaughing feminists are culturally imagined as man-hating lesbians, what Sarah Ahmed refers to as a “kill joy” (Ahmed, 2010, 2017; Bobker, 2017; Gray, 1994; Kein, 2015; Tomsett, 2017; Willett et al., 2012). Smiling and laughter are features of normative gendered performances, as
demonstrated by the frequency with which women in public are asked to smile (Cheng, 2017; Ahmed, 2017). But what is seen from heteropatriarchal norms as an absence of a sense of humour is better understood as the power to withhold laughter. Consider Francis Gray’s (1994) analysis:

the cliché ‘she lacks a sense of humor’ is applied by men to every threatening woman when she does not find the following funny: rape, big breasts, sex with little girls. On the other hand there is no imputation of humourlessness if she does not find impotence, castration, and vaginas with teeth humorous. (p. 1)

Although Grey was writing in 1994, audiences and comics alike continue to hail women as lacking a sense of humour when they fail to appreciate rape jokes. In response to an audience member who called out, “Rape is not funny” during his set, comic male comic Daniel Tosh joked: “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by, like, five guys? Right now?” (Tosh, 2016)

Through this “joking” speech act, Tosh reaffirmed his sexual power over the heckler, a woman whom he called girl, discursively infantilizing and trivializing her perspective. She was humiliated and disciplined for speaking out against the reproduction of rape culture. Proulx (2018), in her investigation of contemporary rape jokes and their relationship to shame, compared the threat of rape, framed as a joke, to rape itself: “Much like the act of rape itself, by telling a sexist rape joke, Tosh asserted his dominance through his status as a member of the dominant group in society (a White, heterosexual male) and his power as the sole performer on stage” (p.188).

Commenting to John Stewart on Tosh’s response to the perceived feminist heckler, Louis C.K. (before his public fall from grace) declares feminists and comedians mortal enemies. Going for less of a laugh, journalist Lindy West (2013) posted a video of herself reading the responses she received to her writing about American comedy’s rape problem. In response to West’s writing, online comments read “Why is it almost all women who hate men are the most unfuckable ever” (as cited in West, 2013), repeating the idea that feminists are angry, ugly women who hate men. Unsurprisingly, one commenter called upon West to “lighten up” by
writing, “Jesus Christ, this woman is about as fun as dry rape!” (as cited in West, 2013). These responses clearly express the commenters’ patriarchal opposition to having their senses of humour called into question. We identify strongly with what we find funny; we respond viscerally to challenges of our humour.

Writer and comic Kate Clinton explains that “men have used humour against women so long—we know implicitly whose butt is the butt of their jokes, that we do not trust humour” (as cited in Willet & Willet, p. 220). Laughing at a joke indicates that we understand and that we agree with what the comic has implied, that we get it and are onside. Scholars have remarked on the tendency to call on those who institutionally receive less power to laugh—to do the work of smoothing over an interaction, of making nice.

It is not just women who must feel compelled to take it and eat it: It is anyone institutionally less powerful, including men, when they are in such position. People express structural power in such incidents. Incidents add up to environments and toxic atmospheres. (Berlant, 2017, paragraph 6; see also Cheng, 2017; Grey, 1994; Kuipers, 2009)

Rather than perpetuate the tired trope of the humourless woman, we can instead view this dynamic as the exercise of power through the withholding of laughter. Withholding laughter condemns the joker—both for telling the “joke,” and for finding it funny. But this too is situated: it is often marginalized individuals whom others exhort to laugh, to lighten up, to have a sense of humour, or in other words, to uphold and affirm their exclusion from dominant culture (Cheng, 2017). Those who lack institutional power and withhold laughter risk further oppression.

Consider again Tosh’s joke, understood through Bergson’s (1900) work on laughter, and how it functioned as a social corrective. In this case, the woman who points out a problem becomes the problem (Ahmed, 2004). Although Bergson was hopeful that laughter would compel progressive tendencies, differential powerful positions influence how we wield this tool for social correction.

Failure to laugh, or “humourlessness”—a charge often directed at the systematically oppressed, social activists, or feminists— is accusatory. It aims to undermine the interlocutor (or
audience) as too serious, as an outsider who does not “get it” and subsequently will not “get in.” Furthermore, it assumes the subject is unable to determine or recognize what humour is—what is and is not funny. Following this pressure to laugh, to “take a joke,” others take the subject’s acquiesence as proof that the oppressive speech act has not actually done harm. As Ahmed (2017) writes, “We have probably all heard arguments that justify power relations through the claim that this other is in fact ‘not hurting’ [laughing] or might even be ‘content,’ or ‘happy.’” Alternatively, declaring “That is not funny” has significant social and cultural implications.

By withholding laughter, audiences can refuse to actualize the joke, which makes the comedian no longer a comedian. Limon (2000) explains that “audiences turn their jokes into jokes, as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it. Stand-up is all supplement” (p. 13). This adds to the emotional tension and potential for surprise and relief. The comic’s “desperation” for a laugh can mean that the comic is relatively unconcerned with which material works but cares only that they get a laugh. The circulation of laughter is connected to power. Withholding laughter (refusing to laugh at a joke we don’t find funny) is an act that reveals the power dynamics of an interaction. As with all forms of power, it is a privileged few who are free to publicly joke and laugh with ease (Cheng, 2017).

In fact, it is only the privileged few who receive public space to express intense emotions.

**Laughter Out of Place**

One isn’t free to laugh just anywhere; involuntary laughter, like other emotional outbursts, is assigned particular environments within which it becomes appropriate. To laugh outside these spaces is a punishable offence. Sometimes, to laugh is a violation of a space. Laughter out-of-place can be perceived as maniacal, cruel, or unruly. To laugh within spaces that are deemed sacred or serious is to call attention to oneself. In a courtroom, for example, the state establishes protocols that determine who can speak (the defendant, the witness), in what order, for how long, and from where (the stand, the floor). To laugh while on trial for a crime, or even to smile is to convey that you are not sufficiently attending to the weight of the situation or honoring
the roles of those with whom you are engaging (e.g. the lawyer, the victim, the public, or the judge). William Cheng cites the example of pharmaceutical CEO Martin Shkreli who, while on trial for raising the cost of a life-saving drug 5000 percent appeared to smirk throughout the court proceeding. The public took Shkreli’s smirk as continued justification for their fierce vilification of him. “Here, just the look of suppressed laughter—no less so than any sound of laughter—sufficed to cement Shkreli’s reputation as “the most hated man in America,” racking up accusations of immaturity and douchery to boot” (Cheng, 2017, p. 531).

It is not only the spaces we are in that condone, facilitate or prohibit laughter. Readings of our embodiment regulate laughter too. Social convention holds some bodies as already unruly and, as such, their laughter is interpreted as more dangerous. Cheng writes that “because minoritized individuals bear higher evidentiary loads for propriety, mirthful outbursts can sound amplified to suspicious or envious ears (2017, p.530).

In August 2015, a group of 11 women, 10 of whom were Black, were removed from a Napa Valley Wine Train for laughing. Lisa Renee Johnson, a member of the group, used the hashtag #LaughingWhileBlack as she live-posted the experience (Monk-Payton, 2017). No one complained about the women’s laughter, but they did not have to. The maître d’ perceived that “people’s faces were uncomfortable” (as cited in Cheng, 2017, p. 530).

People who endure systemic oppression may have, as Cheng points out, fewer reasons to laugh; they also “tend to be the ones who are most exhorted to gain a sense of humour, to take a joke, and to laugh things off” (Cheng, 2017, p. 530). And yet, as the #LaughingWhileBlack hashtag demonstrates, when laughter does not serve the institutionally privileged, it is regarded as threatening.

**Disgust, Shame, and Pride**

I discuss how power works by examining its affective dimensions. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2004) explains that disgust serves as a mechanism to distance oneself from what one regards as disgusting. One identifies the experience of feeling sick with the
object that gives rise to it. “I feel sick,” Ahmed (2004) writes, “You have sickened me, you are sickening” (p. 85). It becomes the fault of another—like excrement, “they” are disgusting. As with Kristeva’s (1982) account of abjection, Ahmed notes that disgust is deeply ambivalent. What is disgusting is also desirable or attractive: it demands attention, and “we find it hard not to take a second look.” Yet this affective state of disgust also brings forth rage “that the object has gotten close enough to sicken me” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 85). Disgust and rage are responses used to quell or displace the ambivalence that generates this psychic worrying, further casting off that which one has found disgusting.

Emails that Margaret Cho receives as a racialized, queer comic exemplify rage and disgust. Born in San Francisco to Korean immigrant parents, Cho has publicly identified as queer. Cho’s radical messages and her gritty, unfiltered discussion of sex and desire throughout her sets are destabilizing for normative readings of marginalized social actors. In her performances, Cho has threatens the social logics that prop up White supremacist heteropatriarchy. Describing her first sexual experience with a woman, she joked in I’m the One that I Want, “I went through the whole thing thinking, am I gay? Am I straight? And I realized, I’m just slutty. Where’s my parade?!” (Cho, 1999). She speaks from a liminal position and rejects easy categorizations.

Cho’s comedy was meaningful and revolutionary for her fans; it was destabilizing for populations invested in oppressive logics. Understood within Kristeva’s (1982) and Ahmed’s (2004) analytical frames, the hate mail sent to Cho underlines the discursive connections between filth and bodies, especially sexually “deviant” “foreign” bodies that threaten the boundaries of idealized femininity and the imagined purity of national identity:

- “A disease to this nation. A cancer upon our country. I can only pray that you will be defeated and destroyed for the good of all”; 
- “Go back to your native land you overweight fisting lesbian”; and
- “Went to your website and soon discovered that you are queer too” (Pelle, 2010, p. 30).
The vitriolic, visceral responses shot out in response to Cho’s performances are reflective of, and attempt to reproduce oppressive notions of idealized femininity. Critics experience Cho’s body, sexuality, and politics as monstrous, as something we should fear and eliminate (Pelle, 2010). A queer, Korean American body standing up on stage and speaking out loud threatens White, patriarchal conceptions of femininity along Orientalizing stereotypes of Asian women.

In a similar vein, Cho recounted the time a radio show host asked her what she would do if she “woke up beautiful—blue-eyed, blond, five eleven and one hundred pounds” (as cited in Mizejeweski, 2014, p. 123). This articulation of femininity underlies its racialized, embodied dimensions. In posing this question, the host assumed both that Cho is not beautiful, and that she, along with the audience of the radio show, recognized the hierarchy of beauty where the tall, thin blond is at the top. This measure of beauty and the given height-to-weight ratio is literally impossible to achieve, a point Cho made in her response: “I wouldn’t get up because I’d be too weak to stand” (as cited in Mizejeweski, 2014, p. 123). Furthermore, because Cho is a Korean American woman who is unlikely to be born with blond hair and blue eyes (and who was in fact born with black hair and brown eyes), this exchange reminded her of the ways that others socially exclude her from the bounds of idealized femininity, or at least from the category of “American.”

While Cho’s performances can disrupt idealized femininity, creating openings for alternative ways of imagining women and other queer subjects, violence and other efforts to discipline and shame are predictable responses from those threatened by the dismantling of norms.

Often, we recruit subjects targeted by shame into reenacting it. Cho writes about feeling ashamed of her body and her sexuality because of the expectations imposed by the dominant culture (as cited in Mizejeweski, 2014). She has struggled with eating disorders and drug addictions. Shame, though related to disgust, cannot be wholly attributed to the other. It turns inward; it is bound up with how one feels about oneself in relation to a present or imagined other. Shame arises as a response to being framed as “disgusting.” Shared affective states like shame circulate and reinforce cultural assumptions and normalized orientations to the politics of
propriety. Furthermore, they serve to maintain power relations: to be disgusted by a grotesque form facilitates its abjection; to feel ashamed of transgressing sanctioned femininity is to uphold its ideal. And yet to laugh with the grotesque, and to become grotesque oneself, through this laughter, is to destabilize the ideal.

In her act, Cho has consistently resisted normative readings of her body and identity. She has resisted oppressive discourses. In her stand-up special Notorious C.H.O., she describes her guardian angels, two of her best friends from high school whom she describes as tough drag queens:

Alan and Jeremy would get in fights in school every day, and they would kick ass. It was like crouching drag queen, hidden faggot. ‘I do not need anybody telling me who I am! This is a fucked-up school, I hate this school! I be walking down the hallway, they call me names, they call me a faggot. They call me a sissy. I say, “Oh yeah? You forgot I’m also a model and an actress, so fuck you too!” Alan and Jeremy believed in themselves when no one else did, and I found that extraordinary.” (Cho, 2002)

Cho found self-love a powerful tool of resistance. In this bit, she describes her guardian angels as refusing to be defined by their oppressors. They expand the ways that they are interpellated by yelling them out: “I’m also a model and an actress!” At the end of her set, Cho told her audience that to love yourself, to believe in yourself when others consider you a despised minority is a revolutionary act:

I have self-esteem, which is pretty amazing because I am probably somebody who wouldn’t necessarily have a lot of self-esteem because I am considered a minority. If you are a woman, if you are a person of colour, if you are gay, lesbian, transgender, if you are a person of size, if you are a person of intelligence, if you’re a person of integrity, then you are considered a minority in this world. And it is gonna be really hard to find messages of self-love and support anywhere. Especially in women’s and gay men’s culture. When you look in the mirror and you think, “Ugh, I’m so old,” “I’m so fat,” “I’m so ugly,” don’t you know that’s not your authentic self?…. For us to have self-esteem is truly an act of revolution and our revolution is long overdue. (Cho, 2002)
On her podcast *Chosen Family*, Montreal-based trans comic Tranna Wintour describes this set as the first inclusive message she had ever heard: “It was everything that I needed to hear at that point that I wasn’t hearing from anyone else” (Wintour, 2017). It was indelible for many of Cho’s queer fans.

**Fat Jokes.**

Susan Bordo (1993) argues that the body is a cultural text implicated in the rejection and reification of idealized femininity. Social relations are inscribed on the body. Bordo writes about the tangible ways that women are made subject to the terms of femininity: Contemporary Western culture prevents women from taking up too much space and encourages them to serve others, to deny their own appetites for sex and food. In short, cultural norms work to render them docile within the practices, institutions, and technologies that intersect to produce the conditions for femininity’s practice. Bordo (1993) writes that “the firm, developed body has become symbol of correct attitude; it means that one ‘cares’ about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting will power, energy, control over infantile impulse, the ability to ‘shape your life’” (p. 193).

Similarly, in “Fighting Abjection,” Le’a Kent (2001) writes that “the fat body is never portrayed as effective, as powerful, or as sexual” (p. 135).

The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) repeated the idea that fat women are read as abject; she writes that fat women live in a “fat abhorring world of images” and that others perceived fat women as “concentrating and representing ‘a general sense of the body’s offensiveness’” (p. 217). Kent (2001) writes that combating this sentiment and enabling women to take pleasure in their fat bodies requires “undermining the process of abjection that makes fat women’s bodies synonymous with the offensive, horrible, or deadly aspects of embodiment” (p. 130). I argue that generating, and sharing in, involuntary laughter can serve as a reorientation to the fat body.

The abjection of the fat woman expresses the social judgment that the she has failed. Such a woman is at fault for her fat body; she has “let herself go,” failed to contain her expanding...
form, to manage her desires for food, which are representative of her desires for sex (Stukator, 1997; Bartky, 1998). Stukator (2001) went on to argue in Bodies Out of Bounds that comic representations of the fat woman as spectacle sometimes work to contain the threats posed by this figure. In other cases, however, the fat woman is “able to lay claim to her desire and pleasure” thus unleashing the “laugh of the Medusa” (Stukator, 2001, p. 199). Stand-up comic Barbadoro, performing for several years, said this of being fat: “You can play against it, you can play it up, but you’re going to have to address it one way or another” (as cited in Friedman, 2014). The social coding and decoding of the body have implications for the content of a stand-up act (in Chapter 5, I further discuss intelligibility as a subject or object of humour and performative identities). Similarly, Jackie Kashian has begun her set with “I am overweight. You may consider that addressed” (as cited in Friedman, 2014).

Comic Carolyn Nesling told this joke during her performance at the SheDot comedy festival in May 2018:

So normally if I gain a little weight it kind of gets me down. I feel a little down about myself, but I realized that I am so close to my rock bottom weight. So like ten more pounds and I am there, like that was the weight that I was like if I ever see that number on the scale, oh boy, it's time to turn this around. We're gonna do it. So I think I am just gonna keep eating and then as soon as I see that number on the scale—so this is what I think happens, so the scale hits that number and then I have to have like a very small mental breakdown and then uh I take an Ambien and I wake up and I have 45 000 Instagram followers, a Vitamix, and my own line of plus-sized active wear. (Nesling, 2018)

In this joke, Nesling’s approach is similar to Joan Rivers’—she describes how she feels about being considered too fat: “it kind of gets me down”. She also shares an experience familiar to many women: that of approaching the number on a scale that we regard as too high.

Sharing her feelings about her body while performing at a festival that celebrates women impacts the reception of this material, and the quality of laughter it receives. She is engaged with a community who may not be laughing at her for being fat, but perhaps laughing with her at the
routes available to fat women who want to become socially recognized and valued—dominant discourses of femininity demand that they recognize that their bodies are excessive and do something about it to become “healthy.”

Later in her routine, Nesling rhetorically connected her weight to overeating, evoking the grotesque figure who fails to control herself, who consumes too much:

I sort of struggled with like food my whole life. I have always been a bigger girl and people say that you can't be addicted to food but, let me tell ya, um, you absolutely can. I am completely out of control around food. Um. I would say my life is like requiem for a dream if it was about bagels. It's very scary. The thing is when food is kind of your drug you are sort of like, you kind of accidentally eat things that are ya know, it just sort of gets, whatever gets scooped up in the cyclone, just. And I am not just talking about like part of the wrapper on your burrito. Like, we've all done that. Um, but have you guys, has anyone ever eaten baking chocolate? It's not for eating; it's for baking. It tastes expired. Um, but when you're mid binge it tastes like the only good thing that's ever happened in your wretched life… We live in a society and we are so privileged, it's like I can get my fix any time of day anywhere I want I can eat whatever the hell I want, it's terrible! But also it's kind of like, like the worst consequence if I eat all my roommate’s baking chocolate I will wake up to a passive aggressive note that says ‘please respect the baking cupboard’. If I were transported back to the paleolithic era, and we lived in cave people times, this couldn't be a thing that I could do. Imagine I just came home drunk one night and binged an entire bison, and then I wake up to a passive aggressive cave drawing of uh me herding all the village children to the river to drown them lest they starve. My point is I am just really grateful to be living in 2018. I try and remember that when I am puking up baking chocolate. (Nesling, 2018)

Both Nesling and her audience laughed throughout this bit. As an audience member, I perceived Nesling as enjoying herself, and the audience as affirmative. Some called out, ‘yeah!’ and cheered in response to her question about baking chocolate. Audience members may share in her experience of overeating, or feeling out of control. Nesling reports that she likes to “say things [on stage] that are oddly personal or uncomfortable, but I enjoy finding how I can make a joke from it” (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th 2018). Similarly, comic Ana-Marija Stojic states that stand-up, “should 100% feel fun, otherwise it's like why are you doing it? There
are really, unless you love it, unless there's fun in it for you, the road is so long and so
disappointing, it doesn't make sense to pursue it (A. Stojic, personal communication, 2018).

During interviews, I asked each comic what her favourite joke to perform is, and Nesling
refers to the one cited above. She explains,

It just always gets a little bit of a laugh at least. It's one of the
things where like I will be laughing about it when I am up there,
and I know it's so dumb to be laughing at your own jokes, but
like it is so much fun up there, and especially telling jokes like
that that are such nonsense, it's so silly, and I think I like that
joke ‘cause that is really my sense of humor. That’s my comedic
sensibility in a nutshell, a joke like that where you are like, what
are you talking about? But it works. That is my favourite joke
right now. (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2018)

Nesling goes on to say that this joke marks a turn in her writing and performing. When she began
comedy, her jokes were more absurd, and she has since moved toward “talking more about
myself on stage” (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2018). It is complicated to sort
out what happens when we reveal our insecurities about our bodies. Is it empowering to talk
about being fat on stage? Is it only empowering if the jokes are not self-deprecating? Here is a
complicated example provided by Anasimone George:

I love, one of my favorite things [is to play with insecurities
onstage]. I am very self-conscious about my arms. I get it from
my mom, like, we have really big arms. I hate it, it's so annoying,
like I can’t fit into normal shirts, and it's not like I work out or
anything, it's just fat, it just dangles. And one time I was on stage
and I was like so self-conscious ‘cause I was wearing, like all my
arms were showing, I usually wear like long sleeves or sweaters
‘cause I hate my arms. And I was like everyone's here,
everyone's looking, and so I just started shaking my arms and the
audience loved it, and I was like: this is great, we went from
being disgusted by my body, to appreciating how weird that
moment was. (A. George, personal communication, November
27\textsuperscript{th}, 2017)

Notably, George and Nesling are not performing the self-negating shame that is projected onto
the bodies of the abject. They are sharing their embodied experiences, which off the comedy
stage may be marked by shame or disgust, with their audiences. Nesling is describing eating as
something that is both out of control, and feels good. In Lauren Berlant’s reading, “to live for one’s snack is to live by the rhythm of one’s own impulse for pleasure” (Berlant, 2011, p. 135). Perhaps the pleasure is amplified by consuming more than we know we’re supposed to.

George describes a reorientation to her body, which she arrives at by exposing her arm—about which she felt disgust and shame—to her audience whose laughter imbues her with a vital, shameless perspective. The circulation of laughter precipitated an altered state of being; joy supplanted shame. In Nesling’s set, she is joyfully describing something we might otherwise associate with shame—overeating. Both of their performances yield pleasure; they are having fun, and so are their audiences. Nesling laughed throughout her set. So too did her audience.

Nesling is speaking about her own life from her own perspective. While Nesling’s joke plays with dominant discourse of fat bodies which are used to abject them, her laughing, joyful presence on stage undermines the rhetorical framing of the consuming woman who likens baking chocolate with “the only good thing that’s happened” in her life. The laughter she and George receive is animating, and has lingering effects. Laughter is the opposite of shame. It is a joyful form of embodiment. Joyful embodiment, and the physiological benefits that attend laughter, counteract shame and interrupt processes of abjection.

Comics play around with grotesque femininities while on stage, confirming that there is space for resisting shameful responses to excessive embodiment, to feeling (or being read as) too fat or too ugly. These routines reveal that we, as audiences, are not alone in our experiences of and/or resistance to oppressive norms. Furthermore, feminist stand-up comedy offers imaginative alternatives to dominant social scripts. Turning toward laughter and away from shame is empowering, and it is fun. Ultimately, enriching and diversifying the discourses that constitute femininity (and that femininity constitutes) affords women increased social power. Increased social power, in turn, will enable greater influence or control over the discourses that shape identities. However, there is always a risk of reproducing oppressions while celebrating moments of liberation.
Elaborating on this point, comic Ashley Moffatt (personal communication, April 4th, 2018) describes her experience as a fat, queer woman who needed only to walk onto a stage to be laughed at. Before she lost 100 pounds, her stand-up sets focused on her body, which others easily coded as excessive and grotesque. Wearing nothing more than a swimsuit, Moffatt would rub her stomach on stage and push her chin into her neck, performing actions and contorting her body into positions that would make her appear “gross” (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018). In turn, some audiences likely read her body as disgusting—a reading which she encourages and facilitates—and laughed at her as a disgusting castoff residing in the liminal space of the stand-up comic (Limon, 2012).

In an interview I conducted, Moffatt reports, “When I was big, sometimes I used to just have to be like [mimes coughing], and people would just like lose their shit. It was kind of sad.” (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018) However, she further notes that “it was fine because it was working [i.e., audiences were laughing]” (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018). Comic and audience are in it together, connected through laughter and annihilated in its absence.

This demonstrates an ambivalent relationship to laughter. It is affirming and animating for the comic and her audiences; yet in one reading, this laughter hinges on the dominant idea that the comic herself, as a fat queer woman, is grotesque, her unattractive features exaggerated. The laughter distances members of the audience from the performer; they may even have been laughing in relief that they are not similarly disgusting. Alternatively, they may laugh in anxious fear that others might, in fact, also read them as disgusting; or they may laugh with pleasure or surprise that the fat body is strutting across the stage and delighting in how gross it is. Others may enjoy the violation of a dominant norm, namely, that the “gross” features of the human body should be shamefully concealed. As Kuipers (2006) remarked, “The polysemy of a joke makes it impossible to say with certainty which function it fulfills or what the joke teller meant: humour is
by definition an ambivalent form of communication” (p. 9). Without delving more deeply into the psyches of the audience members, it is difficult to say.

In any case, the stand-up comic is both laughing and laughable, and she experiences the laughter (the end she sought in telling or becoming the joke) as a reward. The potential affective responses of disgust, shame, or anger were, in these instances, displaced by communal laughter. Moffatt and others pursue the pleasure and affirmation that laughter conveys at any cost.

**The Power of Live Audiences Laughing Together**

The laughter that is shared among live comedy audience members is qualitatively different than solitary laughter, even when it emerges in response to the same stand-up material. For one thing, laughter proliferates in groups. We are less likely to laugh when we are alone even when we have found something funny (Provine, 2016; Scott, 2017; Zamir, 2014). Proximal bodies are affected by laughter; laughter does not easily circulate when there are too many gaps in the room. To encourage laughter, comedy producers often direct audience members to the front of the room, to fill seats in between one another before placing themselves at a distance (near the back, or in empty rows). Henri Bergson (1900) argues that:

> You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. Listen to it carefully: it is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive ramblings, like thunder in a mountain. Still, this reverberation cannot go on forever… Our laughter is always the laughter of a group. (p. 11)

In contrast to an individual viewing experience, an audience member who attends a show with friends may still laugh as a result of the joy circulating through the room even when she hasn’t found something funny. Laughter is contagious (Provine, 2016). Because the live performance potentially has greater impact, there is more risk involved in attending a live comedy show—we are affected in ways that individual, screen-mediated viewing does not usually permit,
especially if we are alone when we view it. In the comedy club, we expose ourselves through our own laughter, and we are affected by the laughter of others and the laughter that we share in.

The drive to make an audience laugh is the defining feature of stand-up comedy. The practice of stand-up comedy does not make sense without a laughing audience, and the development of stand-up routines likewise becomes a meaningless endeavor without a real or imagined audience. In fact, the audience contributes to every aspect of a stand-up routine from the initial apprehension of an idea that will become a joke to every element of its performance on stage. The imagined audience affects the translation of an event or idea into its articulation and performance once the comedian reaches the stage. Through their responses, the audience helps to determine which features of a routine the comedian emphasizes, prolongs, or scraps; what jokes she will tell when and in what order, what volume and accompanying affect will she use, and so on (Scarpetta & Spagnolli, 2009, p. 176).

Some comedians have few objectives besides just getting a laugh. However, producer and comedian Anasimone George aims to move beyond making an audience laugh with her work. In her words,

\[
\text{I think it’s one thing to do comedy ‘cause you love making people laugh, and that’s super cool, but it needs to be a little deeper than that. My rule is if you’re not educating people or inspiring people, why are you doing it then? Like I think that comedians who just go up onstage and write funny jokes—like I love seeing that, it’s so goofy, it’s so great, but if you could like turn that funny joke and make people think about something so important, that’s even cooler. (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017)}
\]

Comedians also specify the kind laughter they seek to produce. Hoodo Hersi explains that:

\[
\text{There are different kinds of laughter, like a nice easy laugh that you can get from a crowd. A more successful kind of laugh is when it’s unexpected, you’ve completely caught them off guard, and um, you’ve changed their minds like on anything, in some way you have forced them to challenge their own bias. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 3rd, 2018)}
\]
A laughing audience must ultimately realize these secondary aims. A comedian does not often compel audiences with jokes they do not find funny, nor does she affect the audience if they do not regard her as an authority. In the following chapter, I examine the work it takes to generate shared, feminist laughter.
Making Fun: Stand-up Comedy as Labour

Introduction

When I saw Carol Zoccoli perform for the first time at Yas Kween, the audience was hysterical. Although I attended the show alone, and my role as researcher tended to inhibit my engagement with performances, when I listen to my audio recording of her performance, my own laughter rings throughout. In hearing my own laughing response, I laughed again while I transcribed her set. It wasn’t just me—the whole audience was in a frenzy. This excerpt is from the beginning of her set:

I am from Brazil. I’ve been living here for four years. It’s very hard to speak English. [To members of the audience] You’re doing great. Congratulations, you’re killing it. I’ve been training with an accent coach, but I don’t want to lose my accent completely because I have broken English. If I don’t have an accent, people will think I’m just dumb. Believe me, it’s better to hear, ‘go back to your country!’, than ‘go back to school!’ I learned English by myself, and music helped me a lot, but I have to say I was very disappointed when I started to understand what pop songs lyrics really have to say. All I do is win?—Sometimes you lose. Sometimes you have diarrhea. Don’t lie to me…. A guy tried to grab me in the subway a couple of weeks ago. He didn't know he was in danger. First of all, capoeira. Second of all, my friends, you see this angel face, but you don't see my past. (Zoccoli, 2018)

While this transcription still reads as funny to me, it does not strike me as especially so. As a reader, I find it difficult to imagine just how hilarious Zoccoli’s live performance was, and why we were all in stitches. For one, it is impossible to know that Zoccoli was quite animated, and that she had a commanding presence; midway through her set, after describing her violent response to a cheating boyfriend (and, from my perspective, disgusting—at one point, she describes deliberately vomiting in his mouth), she asked the audience, yelling: “That’s my past. WHO
WANTS TO DATE ME?!” When no one volunteered, she screamed out, “I SAID, WHO WANTS TO DATE ME?!”

More than any other routine I watched, this set made me think of the work that goes into performing stand-up comedy. I regard Zoccoli’s energy as an important part of her success in generating laughter, and I thought: Not only did she have to write and develop this material, she had to deliver it. In order to deliver it, she needed to secure a spot on the stage. What happens when she’s tired? Ill? How often does she perform, and how well is she compensated? Thinking through these questions formed the early stages of this chapter.

As I argue in Chapter 3, shared laughter can act as a meaningful feminist intervention. As such, I regard stand-up comics as feminist labourers. Here, I explore the work required to produce such animating laughter. Through interviews with comics and comedy producers, as well as drawing on my own recent experiences with the Hysterics Collective, I investigate the work of comics who, like Zoccoli, generate joyful laughter through their production and performance of stand-up comedy—work that I refer to collectively as making fun.

I argue that the labor of stand-up comics in this study furthers the political aims of intersectional feminism and reintroduces fun to feminist labour, counteracting the old dictum that feminists aren’t funny. However, the work is precarious. Because it is often, or just appears to be, fun, or a ‘labour of love’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2010), the work of intersectionally situated comics and other creative laborers is insufficiently remunerated. It is less likely to be taken seriously as labour.

Within the economies of affect that operate in the context of feminist stand-up comedy, laughter is the most valuable resource. It is the primary aim of stand-up performances. As I argue in the previous chapter, shared laughter animates. In agreement with Katelyn Wood’s (2014) claim that laughter “is a vital component of feminist and anti-racist community building” (p. 7), I argue that laughter is empowering and animating.
However, the production of such laughter within modern capitalist frameworks is precarious. That is, it is marked by “existential, financial, and social insecurity” (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018). As Butler and Stoyanova Russell (2018) point out:

> Creative industries—including stand-up—are a privileged site of analysis around discussions of precarity to the extent that employment tends to be project-based, contracts are short term, job protection is limited or non-existent, career trajectories are unpredictable, income is low and unequally distributed, unionization is rare, and social insurance is patchy at best. (p. 1667)

In this chapter, I describe the ways that these economies, affect and capital, intersect, sometimes reinforce, and sometimes threaten one another.

Through interviews with working comedians, my own recent experiences with the Hysterics Collective, and drawing on Marxist feminism, I explain the material and immaterial labour of contemporary stand-up comics and producers in the Toronto feminist comedy scene. As a result of this research, I found that the work of making fun is affectively productive and rewarding, in spite of some of the affective costs to the comic (it is not always fun) and the material costs to the comic (it is barely, if ever, financially sustainable for the comic or comedy producer). Comics describe the material and psychic effects of working within contexts that allow more creative freedom and less financial reward, as well as the financial and emotional strain of this work. For most of the (relatively young) women I interviewed, performing stand-up is labour taken on in addition to other full or part-time labour. Although comics report experiencing two distinct benefits through their labour: (1) the self-affirming benefit of engagement in non-alienating labour and (2) the reward of audience approval, these benefits are hard-won. Through this analysis, I demonstrate the need for freer and more equitable working conditions for comics.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. I begin by situating stand-up comedy as a subcategory of creative labour within modern capitalism in the Canadian context. I describe the material labour conditions, outline industry standards, and focus on the work of producing feminist
comedy. Additionally, I highlight the work (and training) required to get into stand-up comedy. In section two, I set up a theoretical frame informed by contemporary Marxist feminism. I clarify how I understand and use the terms *emotional labour* and *economies of affect*. I then turn again to the comics themselves, elevating their experiences as labourers who are affecting and affected by their audiences through the circulation (and/or) absences of life-sustaining laughter.

I discuss the production of feminist monthly comedy events *SHADE* (produced and hosted by Anasimone George), *Yas Kween* (produced and hosted by Nelu Handa), both hosted in Toronto; and, to a lesser extent, three events put on by the Hysterics Collective (of which I am a member) in Kingston. I then move on to discuss the work involved in performing stand-up comedy. This includes training, development of material and performance skills (reading the audience, etc.), and securing spots onstage in the first place.

**From Theory to Labour**

My attention to the work of stand-up is inspired, in part, by Viviane Namaste’s (2009) “Undoing Theory.” Namaste argues that in order to adequately understand the performance of gender by transgender and other queer subjects who engage in drag performance (onstage or as sex workers), people must pay attention to the labour of the performers on pain of ignoring the lived realities of those whose stories are used to advance certain cis feminist theories of gender. She critiqued feminist theory that neglects the economic realities that marginalized subjects must negotiate in their performances of gender. Namaste has been particularly critical of Judith Butler’s failure to attend to transgender and other queer subjects’ experiences of gender work in the entertainment and sex industries and their intellectual work in theorizing gender while using them as paradigmatic examples that prove her theoretical claims about the genesis and performance of gender. Part of Namaste’s objection is that Butler’s focus is on seeing transgender and genderqueer subjects as simply *doing gender*, rather than (also) doing other things (e.g. economic activity). In addition to highlighting labour as an essential category in feminist analyses, Namaste also advocated strongly for the inclusion of marginalized women in the
production of knowledge. Others must recognize their participation in knowledge producing practices and include them in the community of those for whom they produce knowledge.

Although “Undoing Theory” focuses primarily on the work of Butler, its central critique is more broadly applicable. Indeed, Namaste directed it toward Anglo-American feminist theory more broadly. Further reasons to attend to the labour of stand-up come from other important sources as well. Intersectional feminists especially point out that people must include the lived experiences of women and their material conditions in viable feminist analyses (Ahmed, 2006, 2018; Crenshaw, 2013). Therefore, the impetus for this chapter is twofold: to attend to the labour and the working conditions of comics and to acknowledge the expertise of the comics who perform this labour. In the third chapter of this thesis, I theorized the radical effects of shared, feminist laughter. In failing to contextualize such laughter and engage its practitioners, this work would be guilty of likewise failing to attend to the material conditions of labourers who generate this laughter.

I also want to point out here that people often task marginalized labourers with the work that would ostensibly promote equality through diversity, though they often do not benefit from this labour. Within institutions that claim a commitment to diversity, for example, people regularly task minority staff with doing the work (Mirza, 2006). In their introduction to a journal issue on complicating narratives of diversity within institutions, Ahmed and Swan (2006) writes:

Given that diversity work is given less value than other kinds of work within organizations, being stuck “with” diversity could become a way in which Black and Minority Ethnic staff get stuck in organizations, spending their time doing work that is undervalued and under resourced in terms of pay, power, time, financing, and commitment, and can lead to increased stress and few promotion prospects. (p. 98)

These authors went on to indicate the ways that the language of, and labour associated with diversity is designed to make the institution appear (rather than to be) inclusive. I raise this point to make a connection between the labour of minority staff within institutions and minority
performers within the context of stand-up comedy. Producers may invite marginalized performers to perform on shows so that the show can receive credit for being inclusive without actually doing the work required to become so. Handa and George report similar perspectives, saying, “It’s such tokenism with people of colour. To get them onstage, it’s like, ‘Oh, we got to get the Black guy onstage’” (N. Handa, personal communication, February 2018). And “There’s also a different vibe if you’re a woman of colour, sometimes you’ll feel like you’re tokenized” (A. George, personal communication, May 2018).

**Material Labour Conditions: The Precarity of Pursuing and Performing Stand-up**

She agreed to do this like 12 minutes ago, so god bless her right. That’s what women of colour do! We grab on to opportunities and we don’t let them go. We just GRRR, get ‘em, right! Let’s keep this show going. Good! (Handa, 2017).

I went and I got enough laughs to keep going, and yeah, ever since then I have just been doing it, and I really, really enjoy it. It’s this great thing. There are times when I feel like it’s a blessing and a curse ’cause it feels so natural to do it, then it is also kind of a curse because of all of the work and the instability that comes with just doing comedy. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 4, 2018)

**The Canadian Context.**

When it comes to the economic viability of stand-up comedy as a career, it is worth considering the geography, demographics, political economy, and cultural policy of the Canadian context, which affords comics fewer opportunities for paid employment than the United States. Canadian cultural and international economic policies in the global neoliberal entertainment industry create extra barriers for stand-up comics as workers, with respect to market access, international competition, and inadequate recognition and respect for their intellectual property, along with unpredictable working conditions and unclear industry standards.

Several comics note that there were far more opportunities in the United States for paid work, and a few of them regularly travelled to the States for work. There were more occasions to
appear on network television and thus reach greater audiences. An article in *NOW Toronto*
magazine cites one male comic who was moving to the United States in order to pursue comedy.

A comedian’s normal course of upward mobility is writing on or creating a TV show, but with a whopping total of two broadcasters to pitch to in this country, thousands of us need to fight over the scraps that are left over after legacy acts and their children take their share. (Johnston, 2017)

There are late-night shows, comedy clubs, writing opportunities, etc. that do not exist in Canada. Stojic, repeating a sentiment shared by several comics, explains that in order to make money, a comic must:

Be a jack of all trades. You have to be your own manager, you have to be thinking about the business side of things, your long-term and short-term goals for yourself as a business. A lot of people don’t make it work, especially in Canada. A lot of people, people I look up to, have day jobs….In the States there are like a bazillion [broadcasting companies]. The lack of competition means that everything happens very slowly here. No one is afraid of someone else picking things up. Things take months to a year to never. (A-M. Stojic, personal communication, March, 2018)

Similarly, Toronto-based comic Hoodo Hersi responds:

I go up [to Los Angeles in the summers] to [practice stand-up] because I just feel like it’s more opportunity over there, like, Comedy Central. The last time I was there, I did a show and there were Comedy Central executives in the crowd. I didn’t know that until later, ‘til I was offstage, but like that kind of opportunity doesn’t really happen in Toronto. And if it does it’s in very like, it’s in a very sort of, on a small scale. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Hadidi, too, reflects that,

I do feel like in Canada, unfortunately like, you know it’s very hard to make a living. You know in the states you could get a late-night credit, tour the colleges, and like clubs, or there are so many other writing shows. There’s not as many shows here, and there’s a lot of good talent in Canada but I don’t feel like there’s a system for us to make money and a name for ourselves off of our hard work compared to say the States or England. A lot of Canadian comics move to England and they make a living touring Europe. They make their bills and they make good
money. They’re not necessarily famous or stars, but if you don’t necessarily want to be, or you could be a star in the English system. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)

Adding to stand-up comedy’s precarity and distinguishing it from other performance work, the Canadian Government does not recognize it as an art form. This means that granting bodies, such as the Canada Council for Arts, do not fund comics in the same way that they fund performing artists or musicians. They must pay for their own travel to and from festivals and other performances and do not receive writing grants or residencies. Additionally, because the government does not consider comedians artists, it is difficult to find statistical information on stand-up comedy in Canada. Different research organizations that provide statistical insight on the arts in Canada include comedy with theatre or acting as art forms. For examples, see Hill Strategies Research report entitled “Arts, Culture, and Heritage Participation in Canada’s Provinces and Largest Census Metropolitan Areas in 2016” and the Ontario Arts Council’s “Statistical Profile of Artists and Cultural Workers in Canada.”

Successful comics in Canada who have recorded and sold albums or their live shows can generate a significant portion of their income from royalties that they receive when the radio airs their material. Ashley Moffatt, Toronto-based stand-up comic signed with Yuk Yuk’s, for example, was earning roughly $20,000 annually in royalties from Canada Laughs, a Sirius XM channel that has played 100% Canadian comedy content since its inception in 2005. However, following an agreement between Sirius XM Canada and Just for Laughs announced in early 2019, Canada Laughs would become Just for Laughs Radio. The latter would transition to playing content from its own festivals and events, which it owns the rights to (and therefore does not have to pay royalties out to comics whose work they showcase). Comics worried that this channel would play primarily American content, further limiting economic opportunities for comics in Canada. Comics interviewed by Global News and other outlets report that they were set to lose upwards of 50% of their income. For Moffatt, this percentage was much higher.

**Industry Regulations and Collective Bargaining**

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Industry standards for stand-up comedy are unclear even when compared with conditions for other emotional labourers or other sectors of the arts and entertainment industry. While negotiating fees with artists as a member of the Hysterics Collective, we found that the absence of guidelines or regulations impeded comics’ ability to procure a living wage from their labour. Some comics hired managers to negotiate terms of contracts, but even these professionals seemed at a loss when attempting to establish certain fees. There were no regulations to call upon when requesting a certain fee.

In addition to securing an accessible venue free of charge, my status as graduate student afforded our collective the opportunity to apply to funding bodies affiliated with the university. We applied for and received several grants, as well as some funding from our affiliated departments and other groups who fund progressive events in Kingston. This means that (for our first event) we were able to pay comics performance fees in line with Canadian Artists’ Representation/Le Front des Artistes Canadiens (CARFAC).

Accessing funding through the university enabled our collective to pay comics a CARFAC fee. In addition to the performance fees, we covered travel expenses and accommodations for comics for one night in Kingston. Over time, these offers became more formalized with clearer language. “Travel expenses,” for example, proved too vague and we received receipts for car insurance payments and snacks purchased en route. These requests demonstrate the lack of standards and subsequent uncertainty and precarity surrounding compensation for comics. Even when we created formalized contracts modelled from CARFAC, they were only for a singular gig. In order to continue finding work, comics generally worked to cultivate relationships with producers, colleagues, and audiences.

Stand-up comedy, for my interlocutors, is precarious labour. Precarious labour is characterized by limited social benefits, lack of control over labour processes and conditions, and uncertain wages (Lewchuk & Dassinger, 2016). The gig economy, where “the dominant forms of employment are short-term contract work, freelancing and self-employment” (Lewchuk, 2017, p. 130)
403), a significant element of the stand-up comedy scene, also characterizes precarious labour. For 
*Yas Kween, SHADE, The Crimson Wave*, and events hosted by the Hysterics Collective, the set list does not repeat. Although (especially in smaller comedy scenes like Toronto and Kingston) comics may become regulars on a given show, it is in the show’s best interest to change the set list so that audience members will continue attending. This means that the work of securing a spot on a show is ongoing—it is not a given, and comics must be in regular contact with several producers at any given time. If a comic regularly says “No” or backs out of a show at the last minute, producers are less likely to call on them again. This leaves little room for managing emerging life events, including mental or physical health conditions.

For comics, the next gig is not guaranteed. Comics must hustle to get on shows, and when they do, they often do not receive payment for their labour. Certainly, open mic events do not pay, and for most other shows, aside from the club circuit (Yuk Yuk’s, Absolute, etc.) where tickets are more expensive and there are drink minimums, comics receive very little monetary compensation. Toronto based comic, comedy writer, producer, and actor Nelu Handa, who produces and hosts monthly comedy event *Yas Kween*, finds that after paying the venue and herself, she was unable to pay comics at all. At the time of our interview, she shared that “whatever comes through the door after I cover the costs, I will usually pay it out [to comics]. It is usually about $20.00. I obviously don’t know what other people around town are paying people, or if they’re able to” (N. Handa, personal communication, February 4th, 2018).

Through the interview process, I did not ask in explicit terms how much money comics made. I asked if it was economically viable, and most answered that it was not. Comics in their first few years of comedy do not earn a living wage through their work. Often they do not have writing credits, and are not signed on with established comedy clubs like Yuk Yuk’s. Most comics work more than one job to sustain their work as comics. Hersi explains that performing stand-up, or the gig, is one facet of the job, and a comic must hone other skills in order to achieve financial stability.
It is [financially unstable] but I have a day job [as an elementary school teacher]. I am tired all the time. I am tired all the time. But the good thing is, I can say “No” to certain things that won’t move my career forward, and I can spend more of my time writing, developing something, you know—all the other sides of comedy. Because it is a business, on some level, it really is a business, so there are all these other things that you should be doing. It’s not just about going to gigs, going to mics every night of the week. If you do that, you are basically digging a hole for yourself. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Comics also describe cycles in comedy. They achieved successes that would make them feel as though they had “made it,” only to find that such success fades quickly, and there was still work to do. Comic Nour Hadidi quit her day job after one such success, though later felt demoralized. In her words,

I quit my consulting job a year ago. I got an offer to write on a TV show, so I wrote on the Beaverton on the Comedy Network for two weeks, and then I kind of had a good summer where I got into a bunch of festivals and I did a tour out west, and then I got another job writing for a TV show in Halifax, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. So I have been back since, I haven’t had a job since February 2018, so I am looking for part-time gigs, nothing that is finance related, maybe just minimum wage things, I have never done that before, but that’s comedy, like, it’s hard and I feel a bit, I am feeling a bit tired, and I want to take a bit of a break from it and live life, because I feel like I have made so many sacrifices for it, ya know, I just feel like I want to take a little bit of a step back and like, it’s hard cause I used to live on my own and now I have roommates, comedy life, you don’t make as much money, you don’t have a stable life, every night is different, every show. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)
Starting Out and Developing Skills.

If you really wanted to get good at basketball: Come on, let’s play, but here’s the ball and you can only play for five minutes. It would take forever! It would take you forever to get good at this thing, and that is how comedy is. It’s like somebody hands you a mic and they’re like, you have a couple of minutes, go try your little thing that you wrote and if it doesn’t work, well come back next week, maybe we’ll give you another five minutes. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

Securing gigs as a stand-up comic takes work. It involves determination and unpaid labour. At the beginning of their career, comics seek out open mics and perform for as much time as allowed. Although there is no formal feedback, the audiences’ responses clearly indicate whether or not they enjoyed a performance. Toronto-based comic Nour Hadidi provided a thorough description of the process she took finding work in stand-up. Similar descriptions came up in several interviews. I have included her description in full below:

See, the way it works in stand up is you keep doing these amateur open mics, start to meet other comics, they put you on their shows. Then you want to get into the club system because a lot of big headliners from other cities come in and there’s more prestige when you start, so you know a big headliner with a Conan [credit, meaning a comic who has appeared on a late-night show] will come in and you’ll want to do an opening spot, but I was never passed [chosen to do an opening spot]. So, before I moved to Toronto, I actually took 2.5 months off my bank job and I went to New York, and I just did open mics, yeah, and I did a sketch writing class at [Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre].

At open mic nights, you’ll be like, ‘Hey, Jimbo can you watch me? I want to start doing weekends,’ and so he’ll be like, ‘You’re not ready, you’re not ready, you’re not ready.’ So, I wanted to go [to NYC] and get better and come back and be ready to do weekends. Weekends at The Works [a comedy club in Montreal, where Hadidi lived at the time] back when it was open, they were legendary, they were packed, the audiences were amazing. Comics would come into town from outta town. You just wanted to be on the weekend show. So I did that, and so going to NY made me realize that I need to move to be, if I want to take comedy seriously, I’ve got to move to a bigger city like that and grind it out and get better, and I did get better when I came back. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)
Only one of the comics I interviewed started performing at open mics with no previous experience in the performing arts. Most of the comics completed some formal education associated with comedy. For example, several graduated from the two-year Comedy: Writing and Performance program at Humber College. The tuition fees amount to $6,011.56 for two semesters. The two-year course is four semesters in total. From the website:

Humber’s Comedy: Writing and Performance diploma program helps you hone your craft while gaining an understanding of the commercial side of the industry. Our faculty is comprised of seasoned, award-winning professionals who are active in the comedy industry. You’ll learn stand-up, improvisation, scriptwriting, sketch comedy and all other aspects of the craft. In addition, the program’s strong alumni network supports graduates through reunion shows, business opportunities and continued coaching. The program features many mainstage class shows; weekly Humber student shows at Yuk Yuk’s Comedy Club, and Comedy Bar; and an organized showcase at Second City Toronto for scouts, directors and agents with students included on the basis of merit. Our graduates are ready to embark on an exciting career in one of North America’s fastest growing industries – arts and entertainment. (Humber, 2019)

This training encourages some comics to stick with stand-up comedy. For example, Toronto-based comic Carolyn Nesling, who at the time of our interview had been performing for nine years, describes how the Humber program “forced” her to perform stand-up, and though she,

never really thought that I would be that into stand-up, but then I started doing it. I found that I really enjoyed it, and was kind of good at it. So I just kept doing it, and that was that. (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Others took courses through the Second City Conservatory. A few completed degrees in the dramatic arts at the University of Toronto, York University, or Queen’s University. Second City requires auditions before they accept applicants into their program. The conservatory, which focuses on improvisational comedy, has six levels ranging from Advanced Improvisational Scene Work and Ensemble Work to Creation, Rehearsal and Performance of a Revue. Second City also offers stand-alone classes, including ones on stand-up and public speaking, as well as drop-in sessions, and has locations in Toronto, Chicago, and Hollywood.
Producing Feminist Comedy

In this section, I consider the conditions of labour from the perspectives of feminist comedy producers. The work involved in producing a comedy night, like most artistic productions, is actively concealed from the audience. Much of it happens behind the scenes before the night begins. In this section, I draw on my work as co-producer in the Hysterics Collective as well as on interviews with several independent comedy producers in Toronto, Ontario, most notably Anasimone George and Nelu Handa who created, produce, and host SHADE and Yas Kween, respectively. SHADE and Yas Kween are wildly successful. During its first two years, SHADE sold out every month. Though on a slightly different scale, in a much smaller venue, Yas Kween is also well-attended, regularly selling out. For a more detailed description of these events, refer to Chapter 1.

I attended these shows regularly in 2017 and 2018 and interviewed both Handa and George, along with 11 additional comics whom I watched perform at one or both of these shows. In addition to the official interviews (where comics signed consent forms and agreed to have the interview recorded, transcribed, and cited in this thesis), I had many conversations with comics and audience members during this time. These interviews, combined (to a lesser extent) with audio recordings of the shows and my own experiences producing comedy in Kingston, Ontario, form the substance of this section.

I outline the processes involved in producing a live stand-up comedy event. I weave together the experiences of George, Handa, and myself as producers. There are differences in the work that we each had to perform in order to establish successful, recurring comedy nights. Our own roles as members of comedic communities (and the geographies of the communities that we developed these shows within) informed the tasks we had to complete and the processes we have had to establish. The communities and spaces that supported our labour determined the kind of work that we needed to do. This will become clear when I describe the processes. By moving in between accounts, weaving together our three perspectives, I hope to provide a multivalent
description of the processes involved in producing intersectionally feminist, live stand-up comedy events. I proceed by providing general accounts of the labour involved. Where available, I include details shared by Handa, George, and myself to clarify the ways that our processes and aims have differed and the varied support we received.

**The Hysterics Collective.**

Increasingly throughout the course of this research, I wanted bring the feminist comedy I was enjoying in Montreal and Toronto to Kingston. I spoke to several of my friends who were excited about the prospect of watching live, feminist stand-up, and so we formed a collective that would begin producing the kinds of shows we wanted to see in Kingston. While imagining the comics we would bring, and the fun we would have, we worked to establish ourselves as an organization that could secure sufficient funding for this project. Our processes were non-linear, and we learned as we developed.

We began thinking about a name and mandate. We chose *The Hysterics Collective* as a reclamation of the Freudian notion of “characteristically feminine” hysteria as irrational behaviour resulting from some trauma or repression associated with the absent phallus—the original stand-up organ. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders considered Hysteria a serious psychological condition until 1980. Prior to Freud’s psychological account of hysteria (as connected to penis envy), philosophers and medical professionals advanced the hypothesis that hysteria resulted from the wandering womb—the uterus that travelled around the body interfering with the subject’s ability to exercise control or reason. This idea of the travelling womb is funny to us (collective members) now, and so our taking up the name Hysterics is a bit of a joke. It is also a call for hysteria. We want our audiences in hysterics and we want to laugh hysterically ourselves.

Choosing a name is significant. It demonstrates to comics and audiences what kind of comedy they can expect to see. Anasimone George similarly chose a name through conversation with friends. She recounted:
Shade comes from the Black gay community. It’s a word that describes throwing an insult at someone in a shady manner, and I often do that a lot...and my friends are like, “Ooh, shade,” and I thought that that would be a great name for an event because I want it to be super catchy, but I also thought we all come from different walks of life, different shades; basically, it’s like throwing shade with different shades from different paths. (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017)

There is something playful and celebratory in both of these accounts. So too with *Yas Kween!* a celebratory and affirming call. Once we had a name, The Hysterics Collective developed a provisional mandate that we would use both as a guiding principle and as a means of introducing ourselves to the comics we wanted to work with, to audiences we wanted to reach, and to funding bodies we sought financial support from.

Each of these names demonstrates the creative agency afforded to producers, which is part of why comics are willing to work under such precarious conditions. As producers, we have invested ourselves in creating something meaningful that reflects our own perspectives and shared values. Butler and Russell (2018) refer to the values of imagination and self-expression that are inherent in creative labour and “which serve to obscure, and at times, justify—highly precarious conditions of employment” (N. Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018, p. 1668) The success of these ventures, demonstrated by the audiences who regularly seek them out, and the comics who ask to perform with them, indicates social affirmation of the perspectives and values that they are rooted in. Comedians whose values reflect those of SHADE, Yas Kween, or The Hysterics Collective, and are granted freedom of imaginative self-expression are keen to participate in these performances even when they are not receiving a living wage. I return to this discussion of freedom of expression in the second half of this chapter.

**Setting the Stage: Planning Behind the Scenes**

The labour involved in producing an event involves reaching out to various venues and finding one that fits, that will accept your show, and that is not too expensive. The venue is an important factor in the performance and reception of stand-up comedy. Sophie Quirk discussed
the “science of the room” and argues that the physical aspects of the room, including the furniture, layout, and décor, affect how the audience feels and behaves. After Mitzi Shore painted the Comedy Room black in the 1970s, it became an aesthetic norm (Kohen, 2012; Nesteroff, 2015a). In such a space, there is little to distract the audience from the comic performance. The Bad Dog Theatre and the Comedy Bar are both painted black. In Bad Dog Theatre, there are brightly coloured string-lights strewn around the room, giving it a casually festive air. The Comedy Bar has two separate rooms for comedy shows. In each of these venues, the performance room is separate from the ticketing booths and bar services. This means that there are few distractions throughout the set—something that comics identify is important for the success of their sets.

Smaller venues are more intimate, and provide more opportunity for audience engagement. In small performance spaces, members of the audience, even those at the back, are closer to the performer, and to the other audience members than they would be in a stadium (Lockyer, 2015). However, Sharon Lockyer writes about the appeal of large arena venues for stand-up comics, citing the large audiences (and proliferation of laughter they generate) as well as more opportunity for physical comedy (because there is more room for the comic to play with their bodies on stage) (2015). This is true for SHADE. The Rivoli Theatre is a large venue (relative to small rooms at Bad Dog Theatre and Comedy Bar), and producer Anasimone George makes good use of the stage, highlighting comedy as a spectacle. There are often balloons on stage, filled with helium and spelling out “SHADE”. The event often begins with a drag performance, reminiscent of vaudevillian or music hall theatre (Nesteroff, 2016). The large venue also contributes to framing stand-up performance as an event.

This resonates with my experience of attending SHADE, which felt like more of a theatrical spectacle than performances at the Comedy Bar or Bad Dog theatre. The Rivoli Theatre was set up with small tables, encouraging audience interaction. Additionally, unlike the other two
venues, there was a bar inside the theatre where patrons could order food and drinks. This was not disruptive to comics given the size of the room, the lighting, and the height of the stage. George reports that all she could see from the stage was a black mass (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017). Furthermore, she reports being unable to hear the audience, save for some of the laughter (personal communication, November 27th, 2017).

After researching various venues, George decided to host her first show at the Comedy Bar, a venue beloved by most of the comics I interviewed. She explains,

Comedy Bar is pretty cool for producers who are just starting because it’s kind of affordable. Other bars expect you to put down a lot more money or reach a certain bar minimum, so I was like, “I’m not gonna take that risk.” (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2018)

Generally, comparable venues in Toronto charge $250.00, but venue management can waive this fee if the event generates a bar minimum, usually between $1,000.00–$1,500.00. After selling out with waiting lists for the first three months, SHADE moved to the Rivoli Theatre to accommodate larger audiences. Then, for the next year, SHADE continued to sell out every month.

Producing a comedy show involves negotiating the cost of renting the venue and of the tickets. It involves determining what percentage of the ticket sales will go to the venue (some online ticketing applications take 3% of ticket sales when paid by Visa) and what percentage will go to the performers and the producer herself. Producers must coordinate with sound technicians to ensure that the music requested by the comic plays at the appropriate time during their set. They must consider the lighting, props, and so on. As a Queen’s University graduate student, I was able to book a local venue called the Grad Club, located on the Queen’s University campus and funded, in part, by graduate student fees. As a graduate student who paid into these fees, I was able to book the venue free of charge for our events. Members of our collective remained at the front door, welcoming audience members and collecting cash, and so our ticket sales were not
subject to the fees associated with ticketing applications or the venue. For one event, we sold tickets with Universe, an online ticketing program; however, we found it too cumbersome and returned to selling tickets exclusively at the door.

My role as a graduate student afforded me institutional support and financial security. Through the university, I received funding to travel to Toronto and interact with comics. I had access to email Listservs and social media accounts that I used to share the events the Hysterics Collective planned. Our collective members were not relying on income from these events. This was a labour of love that we volunteered our time to produce because we were in positions to do so.

**Economies of Affect and Economies of Capital**

**Collective Feelings: Affect and Emotion**

Academic attention to the role of affect and emotion has advanced feminist theory and politics (Åhäll, 2018; Ahmed, 2013; Gregg, 2009; Oksala, 2016; Proulx, 2018). Scholars have identified various contributions the *affective turn* has made to critical theory, while being critical of some aspects. For example, importantly for this chapter, affect theory provides a means of identifying and recognizing an immaterial and often invisible form of labour that is often (but not only) performed by women (Oksala, 2016; Weeks, 2011). Methodologically, Åhäll (2018) argues that affect theory prioritizes feminist knowledge and enables articulation (and theorization) of the ways that marginalization “makes itself felt at the levels of affect and emotion” (p. 37; Ahmed, 2013). In the comedy club, shared laughter gives the felt impression that audience members are alike in their orientations toward the implicit meanings represented through jokes.

In other words, affect theory helps us understand and articulate the social and political effects of emotions. In the introduction to *Affect Theory Reader*, editors Seigworth and Gregg write that the real powers of affect reside in “affect as potential: a body’s capacity to affect and be affected” (p. 2). Throughout this thesis, I examine how comics and audiences affect shared
laugher and how shared laughter affects them. This chapter continues this examination of being affected and affecting in the context of precarious labour in the creative industries.

I refer to economies of affect and emotional labour, and although I maintain that the distinctions between affect and emotion are porous, I think that, given my discussion of laughter, it is useful to differentiate between what is meant by each here. Eric Shouse (2005), among others, has made clear demarcations between feeling, emotion, and affect, writing that “feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal” (p. 2). He contends that feelings are sensations we can compare to other experiences we have had (which is why they are biographical) and identify or name them accordingly. Emotions, he clarified, are expressions of feelings and can be fake or authentic. Drawing on Massumi, Shouse defined an affect as “a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential [which is] always prior to and/or outside of consciousness” (Shouse, 2005, p. 4).

Shouse’s description of emotions is in line with Hochschild’s articulation of emotional labour. In The Managed Heart, Hochschild focuses on individual feelings that arise within a dynamic interaction: While engaging with a passenger, the flight attendant feels something that they may or may not express—the emotion that they express may be genuine or forced, and as such, alienating or authentic.

Shouse’s (2005) definition of affect is useful for understanding economies of laughter. I describe laughter as an affect that erupts both intensely and involuntarily, before one has time to think about why they are laughing, and circulates through audiences and comics, affecting all present in ways that evade clear, immediate articulation and sense-making. Furthermore, laughter is embodied and calls attention to our embodiment, another trait generally assigned to affect. However, I resist the sharp distinctions made between affect and emotion.

Åhäll (2018) cited feminist theorists who point out that choosing affect as a focus of study over emotions gives the false impression that academics are doing something new, thereby
dismissing the work of feminist theorists who write extensively on the political life of emotions. She demonstrates that,

The problem is that by prioritizing affect over emotion, a feminized “personal” epistemology is rejected. The insistence on affect as something different from emotion in this way risks reinforcing a binary, gendered logic between a mobile, impersonal, masculinized affect and a contained, feminized personal emotion. (Åhäll, 2018, p. 40)

To extend the critique of the distinctions referenced above, I point out that laughter, although meeting the criteria for affect, is also biographical, and thus people can read it, in Shouse’s (2005) definition, as a feeling. Our senses of humour and occasions of laughter connect inextricably to our personal and shared histories. Blurring the lines between emotion and feeling, laughter can be both genuine and fake. There are various reasons that one might laugh when they have not found something funny or suppress laughter when they have. This does not mean, however, that those feigning laughter are becoming alienated from a true inner self, only that they have chosen to “mediate, shape, and manage” (Oksala, 2016, p. 125) their emotions in a way based on the relational context.

I use economies of affect, then, to refer to the circulation of laughter and emotion in the context of intersectionally feminist stand-up comedy. Emotional labour refers to the invisible, relational labour comics engage into secure work, survive the precarity of their working conditions, and make us laugh.

Emotional Labour

Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the term emotional labour in her seminal text The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling. Hochschild’s analysis was an anti-capitalist critique of the commodification and consumption of emotions. Drawing on Marx’s theory of alienation, Hochschild argues that workers performing emotional labour “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7) and differentiates between authentic and alienated
emotion. When inducing or suppressing a feeling to appease a client for the benefit of a company one works for, the worker “can become estranged or alienated from as aspect of self—either the body or the margins of the soul—that is “used” to do the work” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). The examples in her text include flight attendants and debt collectors; the former is more likely to induce positive emotions, and the latter negative emotions, both of which the customer commodifies and consumes through their interactions with the workers.

Although this is a useful framework for understanding emotional labour, comics are, in a sense, independent labourers working inside a recent formation of labour described as creative industries. In the independently produced comedy events I study, producers have imposed few limitations on the content and form of comic performances. The comic reports benefiting from performing the best versions of herself and feels affirmed when audiences enjoy these performances. Furthermore, the emotional labour that comics perform extends beyond a client-employee dynamic. Instead, comics must cultivate relationships with a variety of employers, colleagues, and audiences. I elaborate on these relationships below.

In thinking through the role of the comic within economies of affect, I take guidance from more recent Marxist feminist analyses of emotional labour that have been critical of modern capitalist distinctions (implicit in Hochschild’s [1983] work) between the authentic self (which holds one’s true, real emotions) and the public or performing self (which must abide by the dicta of an employer). These analyses include Joanna Oksala’s (2016) articulation of feminist resistance to the commodification of affective labour and Katherine Weeks politicization of work in The Problem with Work. I am especially interested in analyses that resist modern capitalist determinations of the individual as “a subject of unique, irreducible, and essentially private emotions” (Arruzza, 2014), which I find particularly salient for understanding the affective labour of stand-up comics both on and off the stage. Arruzza’s interpretation of the individual subject within modern capitalism notes that,
On the one hand: as modern capitalist subjects, we are interpellated to recognize our “true” emotions as expressions of our inner and most authentic self. On the other hand: these emotions are detached from us and constructed as interchangeable and measurable things that can be commodified—exchanged in the market and sold as skills. (as cited in Oksala, 2016, p. 295)

This perspective is interesting in the case of stand-up comedy, in which people believe involuntary, authentic laughter is a true expression of what we find funny. What we find funny reveals, though imperfectly, some of our implicit beliefs and affiliations. The comic works to produce this laughter, and the more often this positive affect erupts, the greater its frequency and intensity, the more likely the comic is to receive remuneration for her work. The ability to generate this positive affect becomes a marketable skill. Audiences are willing to pay more for comics whom they believe (or know from experience) will make them laugh.

**Relationship Building**

Every woman in the scene that I have interacted with is like so welcoming and supportive, and everyone just wants to like. You know we do these shows to showcase other women and other talents, there’s no real competitiveness there. I feel like at any level ya know, everyone is just happy to have you here. I never felt like it was hard to get into. If you’re a woman in Toronto and you do comedy, you are part of the female comedy scene. It’s nice. I really like it. (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th, 2019)

And then you get good there and come to Toronto, and everyone’s like: “Who’s that bitch, what’s this about, where does she come from?” It’s better to get good somewhere else and then come here and be good already. People are the worst here. (anonymous comic, personal communication, 2018)

When it comes to emotional labour, writes Osaka (2016), what people are selling is relationships. I draw on this idea to review the relationships that people commodify in the context of stand-up comedy. In the feminist comedy scene I explore in Toronto, comics cultivate and maintain relationships onstage and offstage in order to secure gigs and to help circulate the positive affects that are conducive to laughter. Behind the scenes, relationships between the host
and the performer and among the performers were crucial to securing work. In this section, I outline some of these relationships and explain why they are important in the context of live stand-up comedy.

**Relationships of Power and Precarity**

Comedy producers determine who will perform, in what order, for how long, and for how much money. They must have a sense of which comics’ sets complement the others’. One of my roles in the collective was like that of a curator. I was responsible for inviting comics to perform and for selecting comics I thought would work well together. With input from collective members, I decided which order the comics would perform in and who would headline. Initially, I reached out to comics with whom I had already established a relationship. I was appreciative of the time that comics had spent with me during our interviews and wanted to invite these comics to perform first. I was also invested in bringing comedians whose comedy I enjoyed and so reached out to comics that had both made me laugh and had granted me an interview. In this case, comics benefited from their relationship with me. This underlines the emotional labour comics perform—of cultivating and maintaining relationships—in order to increase their likelihood of finding work.

Brownstone describes the requirements for starting out in comedy and revealed the importance of relationships between performers and producers:

> Mostly though, in the beginning it was like, you go to a show, and then you meet a producer, the producer of that show, and you know, be nice to them, and you network with them, and then they’ll introduce you to other producers. That’s how I got started…I produce my own show, and that is a really effective way of getting booked and meeting people, ‘cause like all of a sudden people are bugging you for spots, and I don’t know, it’s a relatively harmless community, so there’s not a real like, I am nervous to meet this person. It’s like no, you want something from me, and I want something from you, so like let’s just get into it kind of thing. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)
For these reasons, the cultivation and maintenance of good relationships within the comedy scene is incredibly important. The comic must give the impression that they are prepared and happy to work, that they will generate enough laughter, and that they will accept the terms of the arrangement (typically low pay, potentially last-minute calls, and so on). One comic reports ignoring ongoing sexual harassment from a comedy booker who was simultaneously offering her gigs in comedy festivals:

Then this booker sent me a message that was like “I have a crush on you,” and I wrote “lol” ‘cause I thought we were friends, and then he sent me a photo of his erect penis in front of a picture of me. And then he just kept sending these things, and I was like, woah. Then I got booked on that festival, and it was weird. I had this like Facebook thread with him where he was like saying all these sexual things to me and sending me photos and I was ignoring him. Then I had this email thread with him, which was like work stuff, which was crazy because I had to respond to that. So, I was responding to him in this professional way with all my scripts and stuff, but at the same time he’s sending me like all this gross stuff on Facebook and I’m not answering. I get there, and he’s telling me how pretty I look and all this stuff, and I was like so fucked up about it, and he was the last person I saw before I went onstage, and he was telling me that I looked hot and stuff. (anonymous comic, personal communication, 2018)

These findings are in line with those of Butler and Russell (2018), who authored “Precarious Work and Emotional Labour in Stand-Up Comedy.” They report that comedians must both “project an image of positivity to demonstrate a willingness to work for little or no pay and curry favour with promoters” and “suppress feelings of anxiety and frustration” (p. 1671). Although they report this emotional management particularly in response to the anxieties that emerge from financial insecurity, there are heteronormatively gendered dimensions to the emotional labour performed by comics. This is especially true because most comedy bookers in Toronto are straight men. Several comics report negative experiences working with male comedy bookers, hosts, and producers.

However, although Butler and Russell’s (2018) study shows that “comedians do not rely on well-connected peers for providing them with access to work. Instead they cultivate a
professional relationship directly with each employer they wish to work for,” the comics I interviewed disputed this view. Through interviews and my experiences as a producer, I found that not only are the relationships with producers important, but comedians also rely on one another to manage the precarity of their working conditions. For example, most of the comics I interviewed did not have a car or their own private means of transportation. Moffatt told me that, because she owns a vehicle, she often carpoolsi with others to sets out of town (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018). In fact, for each of the Hysterics Collective-produced events, at least three comics would travel together in one vehicle. For the first event, one comic drove all five performers; for the second, one performer drove all but one of the performers. For the final event, three drove together, one came from Montreal, and another preferred the train.

Similarly, when touring or traveling to new cities, comic Ana Marie Stoicj (personal communication, March, 2018) reports that comics are generally willing to share accommodations (e.g., opening their home or providing a couch to other comics).

**Working Together**

Comics have an ambivalent relationship to the networks that they develop within the comedy scene. Whereas some comics refer to others as “friends” and report that they enjoyed meaningful relationships with other comics as friends and roommates, others report relating to others as colleagues.

Yeah, there’s a lot of great people in the scene, yeah, and it can feel weirdly cliquey at times, but I think that’s just anything in life, which is kind of weird and unfortunate. After having gone to LA and New York and being more hungry, like over there I was like, yeah I love Toronto, ‘cause it’s not too small of a scene, and it’s not too too big, and there isn’t too much industry here, so people aren’t really cutthroat. They’re cutthroat, but, actually, they’re a little bit competitive but I wouldn’t say they’re cutthroat. You go to LA and you really start to see really ugly sides of people (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Many comics in this study describe engaging in supportive relationships with other comics. While inviting comics to perform at Hysterics Collective events, there were a couple of
occasions where comics requested to bring a friend who would also perform or, in one case, could potentially drive from Toronto to Kingston. In these instances, comics were invested in the success of their friends within the comedy scene. Sometimes comics announced appeals to hire other comics onstage. During one set, comic Nour Hadidi called out, “Also, book Carol, she’s really funny. We went for a pizza date, we went for pizza last week, but she is vegetarian, just in case” (2017).

I asked interviewees to name some of their favourite comedians, and several listed their colleagues, for example, one comic named “Chantel Marostica, and Courtney Gilmour, and Martha Chaves, and Carole Zoccoli. There is so much talent here, it’s stupid” (anonymous comic personal communication, 2017). Another describes, “The true like heroes for me in comedy are the women in Toronto who have been doing it for twenty years, like, Martha Chaves is a fucking powerhouse, Sandra Battalini is insanely funny and talented” (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018).

While planning the third Hysterics Collective event, we found that relationships between comics, if ruptured, could significantly damage the career of a comic who finds herself ejected from the scene. We secured one comic for our final show, someone with whom I had interacted previously and who had generously put me in touch with other comics in the Toronto comedy scene. She encouraged her peers, who until that point had not responded to my emails following our initial meetings, to grant me an interview. However, we found ourselves unable to secure any other performers for this event and could not understand why. More than one comic agreed and then cancelled. Another asked if she could phone me to discuss something sensitive. During this phone call, she divulged that she, and others in the comedy scene, were unwilling to perform with this comic for personal reasons (that did not involve abuse or other potentially illegal actions). There are no structures in place to protect this comic from a rupture in her personal relationships.

Siebart and Wilson explain that “the lower end of the labour market is particularly susceptible to such conditions since it is where aspiring professionals cluster and try to
accumulate contacts, reputation, skills and experience by any means necessary” (as cited in Butler & Russell, 2018). In industries where contracts are often informal and verbal, comics rely on one another for information about shows, venues, and producers. They count on one another for transport to and from gigs out of the city. In short, they are dependent upon the networks that they build and which enable their success.

Despite the emotional labour involved in performing friendship (on- and offstage) with potential employers and building networks of support within stand-up comedy, this labour is ambivalent: For some comics, it results in enduring and enriching friendships and collaborations. This is especially true when members of the community report shared aims, that is, supporting women in comedy and establishing spaces where their working conditions are freer and more equitable. As we have seen, it is also exploitative.

**Hosting and Performative Friendships**

Comics I interviewed who both produced and performed comedy tended to host their own comedy shows. Both Handa and George host their own shows. This is also true for other comics who produce shows. Brownstone co-hosts *Laugh Your Butt Off*, Coko Galore hosts *Black and Funny*, Marie Sotto hosts *The Surreal Life*, Norman and Beaulieu co-host *The Crimson Wave*, and Hoodo Hersi co-hosts *The Ebony Tide*. This means that these Toronto producers are the first to appear onstage. The Hysterics Collective opted instead to hire a host for *Just a Joke* (and all subsequent shows). Our collective members are neither comics nor entertainers, and we understood the work that goes into hosting an event was beyond our skill sets. A host must be comfortable onstage and make the audience comfortable as well. Both George and Handa thoroughly enjoy being onstage, and hosting a show secures unfettered stage time for a comic, which increases their chances of success.

Hosts and producers are invested in the success of each of the comics who perform; with each comic who generates laughter, the affect-laden room becomes increasingly conducive for additional outbursts—laughter feeds off of laughter. A successful host, whether she is also the
producer of a show, works to contribute to the overall circulation of positive affect by warming up an audience. The audience is more likely to laugh if they feel comfortable or experience a positive affective state. In part, staged performances of support and friendship generate positive affect. The host builds up the comic who is about to perform, keen to bring about excitement.

At SHADE and Yas Kween, it was rare to see a comic take the stage without first hugging or receiving some other friendly physical gesture from the host. In my handwritten notes taken during performances, the first time I referenced these gestures was when I noticed their absence, so normalized was their presence. I reacted to what I characterized as an impersonal stage entrance, which meant that there was a lack of physical affection. Beyond these physical performances of intimacy or friendship onstage, hosts introduced the comics with exceedingly positive language. As I witnessed during comedy events produced by the Hysterics Collective, this is true even when the host and comic met one another only moments before the show. Hosts model the language used in these introductions from admiration, friendship, or both. Some examples include:

“Next up for our final act is a duo that have performed at festivals all across Toronto. Put your hands together for Yas Kween, wonderful people, FAVOURITES. Favourites. Geeze Louise, you’re all favourites” (Handa, 2018).

Uh, I love her so much, she’s so funny, uh please follow her on Twitter it’s pigeon fancier it’s hilarious. All of you are like, I have a very unique sense of humour, I will laugh at anything except straight White men. GIVE IT UP! FORR ISABEL ZAW TURN. (George, 2018)

Comics sometimes reciprocate by asking the audience to “give it up for the host” or pointing out how important the work of hosting and producing such nights is. Comic Alia Kanani, who regularly performs on Yas Kween, began a set by saying,

I was on my way over here on the subway, with another comic and we were talking about how amazing this show is. Give it up! This is the two-year anniversary. I love it, I love being here, every time I am here, it’s so good, it’s so good. You gotta celebrate women. You know. (Kanani, 2017)
Hosts want comics to arrive onstage to cheering, establishing a receptive and affirming environment to the comic by promoting the circulation of positive affect through the room and those within it. My own experience attending comedy shows confirms that laughter flows more easily in a room that has been primed this way. The felt presence of positive affect increases the likelihood of laughter. Comic professionals affirm this idea and disclosed it in the interviews I conducted.

**Self-Affirming Labour**

[The stand-up stage] is the best platform to say what you want. I think that is the best way to get all those thoughts out. It’s also a little like you’re the only one talking with a microphone so people are really listening to you. Really paying attention in a way that someone in a conversation would not because they are thinking about their grocery list or something. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

“Look how much these people love them. That’s what I want” (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018).

In this section, I want to explore the dimensions of affective labour that comics report as affirming. Early on in this chapter, I wrote that comics report two distinct affective benefits they receive in performing stand-up comedy: the self-affirming benefit of engaging in non-alienating labour and the positive audience responses. I describe intersectionally feminist comedy as self-affirming and non-alienating (though precarious) because comics report feeling affirmed by their audiences. As I discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 3, receiving laughter affirms and animates performers. The desire to elicit laughter can result in self-deprecating humour or self-abjection. However, a less ambivalent affirmation arises when the comic is able to perform a version of herself that she regards highly—her “best self.”

I did a show last night, and there was only like maybe 30 people in the room, but it was like, I had them, and that is a really very powerful thing to experience as like a, just a normal person. I have never been elected to office, like I am just a regular person, but to be able to make people really laugh is like a gift from god. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)
Comics report a freedom to:

Be up there and just sort of like say whatever nonsense comes to mind. Because it’s an individual exercise, you’re not relying on another person onstage, and I mean it’s so self-indulgent, I get to just go up there and kind of say whatever the hell I want, and sometimes other people laugh and it’s just really fun. (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

**Making Fun and Performing Comedy.**

I like you guys, you’re having fun. You’re here to have fun, aren’t ya?!

We’re all friends here! (Handa, 2017).

To return to the idea of making fun, it is important to note that the role of the comic (who is beholden to the producer, who is beholden to the landlord, who in turn is beholden to the liquor companies) is to make fun for her audiences. She wants them to have a good time. This is an affective economy where the laughter that circulates through these events is rewarding and relationship building. The comic must develop a relationship with her audience in order to ease them into laughing.

Comics are invested in their relationships with audiences. This is an ambivalent dynamic. As I mention throughout this thesis, and as I will further flesh out in the next chapter, comics depend on a laughing audience for their success. This means that their primary goal is to make the audience laugh. They must develop emotional skill sets for reading an audience, including empathy. Comics must develop their capacity to read the audiences they are interacting with. In an interview, when asked to elaborate on why she refers to empathy as an important trait for a comic, Chanel Ali responds:

Even in the act of telling jokes, doing comedy, you have to read people’s emotions. I am looking at a crowd and watching what they are taking in and watching how they reacted to that last word or that last line and deciding if I am gonna change my direction. Sometimes I’ll start to tell a joke and I’ll be like, you know what, I am actually gonna abandon this because I can tell that you guys are with it but not really within the way I want you to be, physically. Mentally I have to be there and be aware of
what’s happening or else you’re just shouting at a room, you’re shouting at dark spots and spotlights. Yeah, and you gotta feel it. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

Although it does not always feel fun to perform onstage, comics, like other emotional labourers, are invested in naturalizing their work—that is, making it look fun and easy. For the labourer, making fun must not appear arduous, or the fun dissipates. Doing a good job as a stand-up comic depends on making the effort involved invisible. If the act appears contrived, if the audience can see how hard the performer is working, it is less fun (for both the audience and the comic). At the same time, there is much to gain by taking a closer look at stand-up comedy as a site of affective economy.

Although comics may not feel like telling jokes (or the pressure to be funny may feel burdensome), as labourers in an industry committed to making fun, they understand themselves as primarily beholden to their audiences’ desire for fun. And so, they perform fun even when they are not having it. Brownstone, like many of her peers, criticized comics who do not do this:

I hate when comics get up onstage and they’re like, “I am in a bad mood. I am gonna do my jokes, but I am not gonna enjoy it.” It’s like: “Get the fuck off the stage, let somebody else on who wants to be up there.” There are nights when I don’t feel it, and I don’t want to be up there, and I have to bring my A-game and not really be my truest and most authentic self. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Moffatt’s perception of her role, echoed by other comics I interviewed, is as follows:

I am doing a job. I want everyone to have fun, and if they aren’t having fun, then I have failed at my job. I want to work on myself as a performer. If it’s not going well, if I am upsetting people, I have failed. I hate all these guys who are like, “You can joke about anything.” Well, yeah, you can, but good luck with it, you know. It’s supposed to be fun for people. You can’t please everybody, but you can like go out of your way not to offend people. (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018)

Here, Moffatt pointed out that the aim for a comic is to ensure that everyone is having fun. In this same interview, she pointed out that people may have hired babysitters to attend your show, and they are counting on you, as the comic, to help them enjoy their evening—to have fun. As I
discussed in Chapter 3, comics report feeling positively affected by laughter. Research, especially in psychology, sociology, and feminist theory, has provided compelling evidence to show that creating humour and seeking the pleasure it generates has positive effects (see Ahmed, 2018, 2002; Daube, 2017; Wharton, 2009). Wharton (2009) finds that even when a comic does not enjoy their performance, if the comic wants to feel the emotions she is performing, the likelihood of emotive distress or self-estrangement is low. Indeed, the laughter a comic receives is affirming and animating; as the comics I interviewed express, it feels like love.

**Self-Expression.**

I feel like my stage personality is pretty much just me. It’s just me when I’m on (C. Nesling, personal communication, May 5th, 2018).

Ideas of authenticity or a true self are thematically significant in understanding the self-reported roles and aims of comics (Gilbert, 1997), as well as desirable traits identified by audiences who describe their favourite comics. In fact, authenticity emerged as a point of discussion in many of the interviews I conducted; it is also present in public discourses around humor and articulations of personal senses of humour (Kalviknes Bore, 2010; Kuipers, 2009). Comics identify authenticity as a central component of their material. Stand-up comics almost always perform as an extension of themselves. In the interviews I conducted, several comics refer to their onstage persona as the “best” version of who they are. For example, Hersi agreed that,

It is for sure a heightened version of who you are, only because I’m not gonna tell you a joke every 20 seconds if we’re having breakfast. If I am doing that then there is something wrong with me mentally or emotionally if I feel the need to be on the spot all the time. Yeah, so definitely like a heightened version. You really are the best version of yourself when you do it. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Adding to this, stand-up material tends to be autobiographical, and as such, the audience and comic feel that their relationship is intimate (Gilbert, 1997; Mizejewski, 2014). There is a sense that the comic draws on her own experiences (though the comic may exaggerate or
fabricate the actual events she describes) and as such, presents a perspective that expresses and illuminates features of the world as filtered through the comic’s cultural lens.

Comic Nour Hadidi, for example, echoing sentiments expressed by nearly every comic I interviewed, explains that “the kind of jokes that I write are just things that have happened to me” (personal communication, April 2018). When asked what makes a joke successful, she responds:

For me, honesty. The more honest you are, the more people are able to connect with what you are saying. If you write what you think is funny, other people will think it’s funny, but if you write what other people think is funny, you’ll never win, so be honest to yourself, and be honest in what happened to you, and that will make it more relatable, and that will make the audience like you more. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)

In the interviews I conducted, many comics responded to questions about what makes comedy or jokes work with references to honesty and authenticity. They describe their writing processes as reflections on their day-to-day lives. Brownstone asked herself,

how do I get the person that people like in real life, my friends, my family, how do I get that person onstage? Because a lot of the time I’ll come offstage, and be like, that was good, they laughed at my jokes, but I don’t know who that person was, that was like a weird mutation of myself. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Relatedly, Toronto-based comic Marie Sotto said that,

I wouldn’t say [I’m different onstage]. I think people have pointed out that they notice that I am like, I am I guess more high-energy, or they can tell that it’s a performance when I’m onstage. Yeah, I feel like there is. I think it was Tom Hanks who was like being famous doesn’t change who you are, but it amplifies who you are. I feel like that’s very true. Unconsciously, like things about myself are amplified or like really embellished, and that comes with just being a performer, but I feel like that’s still a part of who I am, just walking around in everyday life. (M. Sotto, personal communication, May 7th, 2018)

Complicating this narrative of authenticity, however, is the fact that comics prepare and write in advance the experiences that comprise a routine. Comics perform and workshop their
routines in order to perfect them. That is, to achieve the most, or best, laughter. Comics carefully select jokes in order to realize a primary aim: to make an audience laugh. When a joke works, the comic reuses it, yet the comic is invested in presenting material as if it just occurred to them. Although there are components of a stand-up performance that mark it as a routine, the stand-up comedic frame gives the impression that sets are extemporaneous. Including phrases like: “How are you all doing tonight?!” “I’m [name],” “Thank you for being here,” and “You are a great audience” all surface the roles of the performer and audience. Additionally, comics regularly refer to past occasions where they have performed the same joke. For example, it is common to hear some variation of “I told this joke once before in X, and the audience responded in [an alternative manner].” Sometimes this is a set up for another joke. These are ambivalent, too. The comic may be interested in how her audience is doing. She is certainly invested in the circulation of positive affect. Although I intellectually understand that comics have previously prepared and performed their sets, they regularly fool me. For example, Chanel Ali told the following joke about her Uber driver:

Every time I get in an Uber, I’m like, how does this driver not know that he is my boyfriend? I mean, you picking me up from my house, now you are taking me to my comedy show, you just asked me how my day is going. You care about me. Come on, come on, come on now. Don’t front like we don’t go together, Kevin. Pick me up after the show. Bring snacks, ok? (Ali, 2018)

In her lead-up to this joke, Ali told her audience that the festival sent an Uber to pick her up. I found a video online of Ali performing the same joke with the same intro, and in spite of my role as comedy researcher who ostensibly knows that comics work on their material, I was surprised. This ability requires skill. In addition to feeling surprised, I felt almost like she manipulated me. Though it was fleeting and minimal, I felt disappointed—in myself, I think, for falling for it.

Although comics may repeat the joke, and may have fabricated or exaggerated elements of it, they maintain that they are sharing their perspective, only applying it to a situation that is
funnier than one they may have experienced. In this sense, they are being themselves onstage. In fact, they report being their best selves. However, sometimes audiences reject autobiographical performances. Hannah Gadsby, in her widely discussed Netflix special Nanette (2018), foregrounded questions of authenticity and self-expression as they intersect with stand-up comedy. In Nanette, Gadsby claimed that she is quitting comedy because in order to dispel the anxiety that she produces, she must limit her expression of self. She powerfully illustrated this point by sharing a story early in her act that elicited laughter and then later in her set revealing that she did not tell the whole story. In Gadsby’s words:

Do you remember that story about that young man who almost beat me up? It was a very funny story. It was very funny, I made a lot of people laugh about his ignorance, and the reason I could do that is because I’m very good at this job. I actually am pretty good at controlling the tension. And I know how to balance that to get the laugh at the right place. But in order to balance the tension in the room with that story, I couldn’t tell that story as it actually happened. Because I couldn’t tell the part of the story where that man realized his mistake. And he came back. And he said, “Oh, no, I get it. You’re a lady faggot. I’m allowed to beat the shit out of you,” and he did! He beat the shit out of me and nobody stopped him. (Gadsby, 2017)

About Nanette, Gadsby said:

It’s a show where I decided to see how people would react to a story that I have made funny—but also reveal that it isn’t really a funny story…That is what Nanette is—to show how much you have to adapt in order to make an audience laugh. (as cited in Krefting, 2019, p. 166)

I bring up Gadsby’s argument here because I think that it demonstrates the ambivalent role of affect, affirmation, and rejection in creative industries. Laughter is an animating force, but what if it is giving life to self-exploitation? In Gadsby’s case, she finds her comedy humiliating. She concealed some part of her perspective, her story, from the audience because it was not funny. She implicated her audience in this rewriting and her own internalized homophobia. I do not believe that this speaks to the limitations of stand-up comedy but rather the contexts within
which people create, produce, perform, and receive comedy. Gadsby also shows that it is possible to resist these limits.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The comics I interviewed for this chapter valued the freedom of expression and creative agency inherent in writing and performing their own material. When their material was well-received, comics were animated by the circulation of laughter. They report finding some reprieve from the exhaustion and burnout that marks their precarious and emotional labour (even if only temporarily). However, like Gadsby, comics were affected and alienated through moments of unlaughter, which early on in their careers, they interpreted as a fundamental rejection of who they were.

In the following chapter, I examine the conditions that enable freer and less exploitative social relations in the context of stand-up comedy. I analyze the role of the audience and theorize the emergent relationships formed between performer and audience. Butler and Russell (2018) argue that comics and other cultural labourers engage in self-exploitation in order to realize the intrinsic rewards of imagination and self-expression. This idea surfaced in the conversations I had with comics; they cite the freedom they received on the stage as a primary reason they enjoyed performing stand-up. Furthermore, comics and producers view their work as existentially, socially, and politically meaningful. They cite the value in seeing a diverse range of narratives and grotesque femininities performed onstage, and of expanding the ideas of what it means to be a woman and a woman in comedy.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sarah Ahmed (2017) writes about humour as a feminist tool, and says that, “Feminist laughter can lighten our loads” (p. 245). She went on to write:

> Lightening our loads becomes part of a feminist killjoy survival strategy. When we are dealing with heavy histories, lightening our loads becomes a shared activity. When we are dealing with norms that tighten the more we fail to inhabit them, making it difficult to breathe, loosening is sharing: because diversity work
is costly, we have to share the costs of doing that work. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 245)

The ability to laugh together requires sharing a perspective. We feel affirmation and rejoice when we can laugh without restraint at a joke because it resonates with our experiences and our perspectives, especially when others often deny, marginalize, and reject these perspectives. In closing, I return to Oksala, who argues,

feminist resistance to the commodification of certain forms of affective labour is not a matter of defending private authenticity against social reification, but rather an attempt to mediate, shape, and manage our affects through freer and less exploitative social relations. (Oksala, 2006, p. 295)

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on the conditions that enable freer and less exploitative social relations or, in other words, the conditions that enable the production and reception of feminist laughter. Additionally, I reflect on the role of the audience and the hermeneutic conditions that enable affirmation or rejection of women in comedy.
Making Sense of Feminist Stand-up: Critical Perspectives on Being Laughable and Becoming Funny

Introduction

Stand-up comedy is an exceptional site of analysis for its surfacing of questions concerning the legibility of the subject and the ideological and discursive structures that aid in the coding and decoding of autobiographical performances. Scholars argue, and comedians in this study confirm that stand-up comedy is a public performance of the private self. Comedians use their own names and may include references to their intimate partners, friends, children, or other aspects of their private lives in a confessional manner. For example, they may complain about their children, as in the following joke:

I do have two little kids. They’re good kids. They talk a lot. They’re mostly saying fantastic things, but I feel the volume, just the sheer volume that they’re talking at me is giving me cancer. I don’t know that for sure, I haven’t talked to a doctor, but when they’re both talking to me at the same time about two different things, I can feel a brain tumor growing, and that’s all I know. (anonymous comedian, 2017)

In comedy, we hear personal information that we can imagine sharing with a friend, but not with strangers: “I hope that none of you have ever suffered the indignity of having two delivery men arrive at your door at the same time. I don’t like the way they looked at me” (anonymous comedian, 2017). This is partly because, as Katherine Cooper points out, the comedic frame engenders a carnivalesque consciousness. Audiences are primed to expect deviation from prevailing norms (Cooper, 2019). Comedy has an anarchic thrust and subversive tendencies (Mizejewski, 2014; see also Bakhtin, 1965). In short, society tacitly grants comedians permission to behave in absurd or outlandish ways, to upend hierarchies and distributions of power, and in so doing to question the formation and performances of established social
identities. However, stand-up comedy is interactional; the performances of self are inter-subjective, co-constructed by audience and performer. Although the audience is primed to anticipate subversion, they may not grant the comedian license to upend gender or other norms. In order for the performance to work (and for the audience to read the performer as funny), the audience must trust the comedian and accept her position of relative power and authority.

Stand-up comedians claim positions of power marked by their control over the interaction, and they claim epistemic authority. They position themselves as reliable (and funny) narrators whose cultural analysis is insightful and worth hearing. Relatedly, they claim to know what will make an audience laugh. Comedians and audiences alike are invested in believing that the comedian’s interpretation of society is accurate and authoritative (Keisalo, 2018). Audiences are more willing to be affected by a comedian when they regard the comedian as a legitimate and trustworthy speaker (DeCamp, 2015). Through their presence onstage, comedians are implicitly stating not only that their perspective is authoritative, but that they know how to share it in such a way to elicit laughter. The audience must accept (or the comedian must convince them to accept) this premise before they are willing to open themselves up to laughter. The laughter affirms the authority and power of the comedian—she becomes an authority who has affected her audience.

Comedians aim to affect (and be affected by) their audiences, ideally through the production and circulation of joyful laughter. This laughter is self-affirming (in contrast to the self-negating effect of shame projected onto and felt by the abject). In order to claim this position of authority and exercise this power, comedians must be intelligible to their audiences as funny or laughing subjects, and the audiences must be receptive to and willing to be affected by the comedian (rather than seeking to objectify her or make her abject). For some, becoming funny is more of a struggle than being laughable. For audiences who are invested in upholding and reproducing hegemonic gender norms, the oppressed subjective perspective is threatening and destabilizing. In this case, the audience may respond with violence rather than affirmation. The
comedian, aware of this dynamic, may seek to make herself abject or to objectify herself first, to gain the normative audience’s acceptance.

When the comedian objectifies herself or makes herself abject as part of her comedic performance, the resulting laughter or disgust (or both) actualizes the objection or abjectification (or both) of the comedian. However, it can’t wholly do this since the comedian is still a speaking performing subject or agent—the opposite of an object. The process of objectification is thereby subverted to some extent. In one sense, the objectified comedian becomes the joke; the audience may see her as a dismissively laughable object (and therefore less threatening). However, as I will discuss, self-deprecation is a complicated performative strategy that may also enable an audience to access more of the comedian’s inner life and understand how she (and others like her) experience the intersections of privilege, oppression, and resistance relative to her social location. The abjected comedian produces a different response: The audience is disgusted by her. This too is ambivalent—the audience cannot expel the abject. Even as a threat, she continues to affect her audience from the margins. In each case, the joke precipitates an ontological shift that the laughter realizes. Bodies undergo change through their affective responses.

To make this argument, I begin by describing stand-up comedy as an autobiographical performance (Gilbert, 1997; Keisalo, 2018; Pelle, 2010). The connection between the identity of the performer and her material is an important one and informs her audience’s meaning making processes and affective responses (S. K. Cooper, 2019a, 2019b; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Lockyer, 2015; Mizejewski, 2014). I then reflect on the concept of the universal as it applies to women in comedy. In particular, I point out the ideological barriers women face in becoming intelligible as funny to their audiences and the effects of the audiences regarding them as laughable. I elaborate on the role of the live audience, and I focus on my own role as researcher and audience member in this dynamic, critically examining my own sense of humour and exploring how it informs my willingness to be affected by the comedy that I seek out. Following this, I focus on the strategies that comedians develop and use in order to become funny enough to
make an audience laugh with them, paying close attention to the comedic performance strategies of self-deprecation, abjection, and also affirmation or elevation. I emphasize feminist resistance to oppressive social scripts and the *counter frames* comedians and audiences read one another through (Chou, 2012; Feagin, 2010).

**Achieving Intelligibility**

Now guys, I love stereotypes ok, I love stereotypes ‘cause they make my life a better place. Maybe not when it’s time for equal pay, or finding a good man, but you know that stereotype about the angry Black girl? I love it because I can’t fight! Look at this [points to her nails and hair] I can’t fight! This is my real hair! Nobody knows that, you know, what I mean? I just have to say, “You tryin’ to fuck with me?! You trying to fuck with me?!”

(anonymous comedian, 2018)

Everyone just assumes that female comedians are just these gross old hags talking about their periods. So I don’t know, maybe we’ll surprise them. I’m not sure (A. George, personal communication, 2018).

Achieving intelligibility as a funny human is a prerequisite for making an audience laugh. However, as prominent feminist, queer, and critical race scholars have emphasized in their writing, both we and others differentially understand or recognize ourselves depending on the socio-cultural interpretive frameworks available to the interpreter and, depending on the context, are not always legible as *human*. We garner differential rewards and punishments for our expression of selves (linguistically, physically, affectively, or otherwise) depending on how closely we resemble or perform normalized identities (Ahmed, 2004b; J. Butler, 1990, 1993; Crenshaw, 1991; Ridgeway, 2009; Sedgwick, 1992).

Semiotics and communication theorists refer to an interpretive repertoire made up of beliefs and tools the audience can draw on in order to understand a performance. For Jonathon Potter, it is also part of the symbolic capital. However, for Barthes (1997), there exists a plurality of lexicons, or “a portion of the symbolic plane of language which corresponds to a body of
practices and techniques” (p. 160), in each person, contributing to the plurality of meaning in an image or text. This is to say that the reading of the subject is not certain. Our lexicons are “still being coded” (Barthes, 2012, p. 160), and non-normative performances of gendered identities contribute to this coding and recoding, expanding our lexicons and interpretive frameworks.

As soon as comedians arrive on stage, audiences meet them with varying degrees of intelligibility as women and thus as human (Butler, 1990). Comedians typically behave in a manner incongruous with hegemonic femininity. To begin with, they tell (and laugh at) their own jokes—a behavior in line with hegemonic masculinity (Gray, 1994; Lavin, 2004). Writing on women in comedy surged in the 1980s and 1990s, mirroring the popularity of stand-up comedy and the increase in practicing comedians. These writers demonstrate that conventionally, histories and theories of humour positioned women as laughable objects rather than laughing subjects (Freud, 1905; Gray, 1994). Gray’s (1994) early text on the subject, Women and Laughter, shows how popular representations of humour, as well as the studies by theorists and researchers who study humour, tend to situate women as the metaphorical exclamation mark—we laugh at the joke (or we are the joke). We do not tell the joke. Correspondingly, Francis Gray reports findings that reveal both men and women in heterosexual relationships value a sense of humour in their partner. For men, this means a woman who laughs at their jokes, and for woman, a man who tells good ones (Gray, 1994).

This literature emphasized the masculine nature of stand-up comedy. Reflecting on stand-up comedy audiences, Auslander (1993) writes that “just as traditional stand-up comedy seems phallocentric from a formal perspective, historically, it has also assumed a heterosexual male audience and a performance presented for the enjoyment of the male gaze” (p. 318; see also Gray, 1994). More recent studies in sociology and psychology find evidence that this idea persists: People regard women as the audience or the object of humour, and not the subject of stand-up. For example, Kalviknes Bore’s (2010), in a study on joke tellers, reports:
The seventeen interviewed women from the sample unanimously confessed that they could not remember jokes. In recent years, many women have told me, in almost precisely the same terms, that they “always immediately forget” jokes. Given the fact that women are supposed to listen to men’s jokes, this seems efficient: They thus become an everlasting audience. (p. 147)

Cooper (2019), in her more recent study of audiences of women’s stand-up comedy, reports that:

Audience members are primed to utilize a “patriarchal interpretive repertoire” (Bore, 2010). Male and female audience members suggested that “women’s comedy” is targeted to women audiences, whereas political humour and general topics are perceived as masculine areas…Not only did audience participants articulate how women’s comedy is more for women audiences, but this bifurcated consciousness arguably also applies to straight audience members not conditioned to adapting to the perspectives of the LGBTQ community. (pp. 112–113)

If it is the case that audiences employ a patriarchal interpretive repertoire, Judith Butler’s work is important. Butler writes (1990) that the “schemes of recognition that are available to us” do not permit all expressions of gender and desire. We must ask,

If I am a certain gender, will I still be regarded as part of the human? Will the “human” expand to include me in its reach? If I desire in certain ways, will I be able to live? Will there be a place for my life, and will it be recognizable to the others upon whom I depend for social existence? (p. 3)

I think we can apply these questions to the comedian realm. Stand-up comedians must be intelligible to their audiences as human—they depend on their audiences for their existence as comedians. As Butler (1990) points out, it is an ontological risk to deviate from normative social scripts. Because stand-up comedy is largely autobiographical, I am interested in examining staged non-normative gender performances and the audiences who seek them out.

The autobiographical material of those who speak from the margins can expand our cultural repertoires and lexicons for sense-making. Humour is a genre within which multiple meanings become available. The use of irony, satire, and incongruity, among other comedic strategies, contributes to the polysemy of stand-up comedy. John Fiske (1987) asserted that popular texts are inherently polysemic and that humour and irony increase the capacity for a
cultural text to convey multiple meanings, which, as Barthes (2010) argues when he declares the death of the author, shifts the reader from passive consumer to active interpreter.

Because the stand-up stage is culturally typed as masculine, “gender beliefs will bias judgements and behaviours more strongly in favour of men” (Ridgeway, 2009, p. 151). Additionally, audiences tend to interpret gender performances in line with their preexisting gender frames. However, as Cecilia Ridgeway argues, “even as people do this, the material changes make those more conservative gender beliefs harder and harder to sustain as meaningful representations of men and women in everyday life” (as cited in Ridgeway, 2009, p. 157). Material changes, in this case, include women standing up and making their audience laugh.

Although I did not interview audience members, recordings of live comedy sets include audience responses. It is clear from my research that audiences also use counter frames (Feagin, 2010) and actively reject comedy that is only intelligible within a patriarchal frame. There is a place for women in comedy, and by taking up space on the stand-up stage, women are becoming authoritative, powerful figures who mobilize and animate their audiences, further legitimating counter frames and resisting normative power relations.

**Stand-up Comedy as Autobiographical Performance**

I’m annoyed when people ask if I feel obligated to talk about being an amputee or “How do you balance writing that material with regular material?” she says. If I wanted to tell [amputee] jokes just to get it out of the way, I’d write hacky puns about hand jobs or whatever. Being an amputee is my life, and I need to talk about it. It’s funny how people think of it as a novelty act and then a guy goes up and does 15 minutes on how crazy his girlfriend is and no one’s like “Oh, it’s the Crazy Girlfriend guy!” (Gilmour, as cited in Smith, 2018)

Stand-up comedy is a performance style intimately connected with the identities of its practitioners. Jewish male comedians who performed in night clubs in the mid-20th century are typical reference points when considering the turn toward a more “authentic” or autobiographical comedic performance. This time period is when comedians like Lenny Bruce, Carl Reiner, and Mel Brooks performed sets that used “I” language rather than referring to “a fella”; they
ostensibly describe their own lives and relationships rather than repeating prewritten material about wives and mothers-in-law they did not have (Daube, 2010; Limon, 2000; Nesteroff, 2015). It is difficult to make clear distinctions, temporally or otherwise, between the autobiographical humour that Daube (2010) refers to and the comedy performed by women before and after this period. For example, Phyllis Diller, who began performing in this time period, incorporated personal material into her sets, yet she also made mother-in-law jokes and has claimed that her material does not reflect her life (Horowitz, 1997). Here is a sample:

How do describe her? Jell-O with a belt. When the old bat sits down it takes the whole mess five minutes to settle. Last time she bought a girdle, U. S. rubber went up 8 points. You know what it says on her bra? Wide load. She spent the day at Disney Land, they thought she was one of the rides. If you get on an elevator with her, by god, you better be goin’ down. Her idea of a good time is to go downtown and burn out all the escalators. She got a waterbed for Christmas. You know what’s in it? Lake Erie. She picks her nose with a shoe horn. She looks like the Good year blimp in heat.

Matthew Daube (2012) maintained that stand-up comedy is “a historically significant performance modality that first emerged in the United States post-World War II,” that showcased the “individuated everyman” (pp. 57–58) and became a “site of rebellion and taboo where the avant-garde could signal their opposition to society’s structure” (p. 64). He cites (mostly) Jewish, heterosexual male comedians who acted as cultural critics who developed their own material and spoke from their own perspectives—key features of contemporary understandings of stand-up comedy

Daube (2012) argues that stand-up comedy transitioned in this time period as Jewish male comedians began to merge their public and private selves, in part through foregrounding their ethnic backgrounds. He cites Joan Rivers, who explains that,

audiences nowadays want to know their comedian. Can you please tell me one thing about Bob Hope? If you only listened to his material, would you know the man? His comedy is in another America, an America that is not coming back. (Daube, 2010, p. 63)
Daube points out that this increased self-expression allowed for a more meaningful relationship between the comedian and audience. We see this dynamic today, reflected on by Mizejewski (2014) in *Pretty/Funny* and referenced by comedians I interviewed who said that the audience just wants to “know you” (A-M. Stojic, personal communication, 2018).

Following Katelyn Wood (Weaver, 2007; Wood, 2014), I find evidence of these features of comedy in performances by Black and Jewish women performing in the early 20th century. Like Daube, I narrow in on stand-up comedy that functions as incisive cultural analysis. I regard comedians as cultural theorists whose readings of sociocultural norms, as interpreted through and told from their own perspectives, comprise much of their stand-up material (Gilbert, 1997; Lee, 2004; Mizejewski, 2014; Pelle, 2010; Wood, 2014). For example, consider the work of Moms Mabley, who began performing in the early 20th century and whose material was critical of White supremacy and anti-Black racism, or Jewish comedian Jean Carroll, both of whom spoke as “I”. As discussed in the background chapter, although Mabley adopted a stage persona, this character helped her to disarm her audiences and articulate her critical perspective on the intersections of race, gender, and class in America (Wood, 2014). In this sense, Jean Carroll started performing with her soon-to-be husband in the 1930s and performed solo when he went to war. She wrote most of her own material. Milton Berle reportedly said, “She was one of the great female stand-ups. She played to who she was, and that’s why the material counted” (Wollman, 1991). In short, we see evidence of the elements of stand-up comedy that Daube (2010) identified as central: rebellious performances and personal or autobiographical material that forged meaningful connections between comedians and their audiences. This is evident in part in the wealth both Carroll and Mabley acquired as performers—audiences loved these comedians, and theatre managers were willing to pay them substantially for their work (Wollman, 1991; Wood, 2012).
The Real Comedian and the Female Comedian

In popular and academic discourses of comedy, there is a distinction made between the female comedian and the real comedian—just as there is with discourses about filmmakers or politicians. This distinction rests on the idea that the male comedian represents the universal experience, or the view from nowhere, whereas the female comedian is a niche performer with limited appeal. In the classic *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1971) articulates this view and writes that “she is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is inessential in front of the essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the other” (p. 6). This section explores what it means for others to read a comedian as woman in the context of live stand-up comedy and the conditions in which non-normative womanliness comes to make sense.

Universal Humour

I’m not really one to let things go ever. This is a general policy, I never heal from things or move on. I think if I was a man, they’d say I was romantic, but I am not, so it’s a personality disorder. Whatever. (anonymous comedian, 2018)

One of the aims of this dissertation is to problematize the notion that there is such a thing as universally appealing humour or a particular comedian whose appeal is universal. In North American culture, this figure takes form (in imagination and representations) as a White, straight, able-bodied male. It is central in our phallocentric language: “man” stands in for human and “woman” for the other (Cixous, Cohen, & Cohen, 1976; de Beauvoir, 1971).

Politics of respectability, and the discursive framing of women’s experiences as belonging to the private realm, have meant that women’s experiences, especially ones related to the embodied, the visceral, the sexual, and the appetitive, are not visible to the public. When women share these experiences publicly, some audiences read them as “women’s issues,” or “indecent” and “vulgar” and thus only potentially interesting and relevant to other (similarly-
situated) women. Pearl Williams, at 47 years old, provided a funny reframing of indecent during a comic performance when she told the audience:

I own a vibrator. A French Poodle. And I went out and bought a roto-rooter. Ah ha ahhahaha A looong roto-rooter. I can lend it to two broads standing behind me. Definition of indecent: if it’s long enough, hard enough, and in far enough, its indecent. (as cited in Mock, 2012, pp. 14–15)

The negative reception of women’s experiences is in contrast to the reception of White men’s experiences, which are conventionally understood to have resonance with all human experience—to be universal (Gray, 1994; Kalviknes Bore, 2010). Referring to the pushback on Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Wanda Sykes, in her HBO stand-up special I’ma Be Me, asked her audiences,

Isn’t funny that the only time your race or gender is questioned is when you’re not a White man? See, I think White men, they get upset, they get nervous. Like, a minority or another race gets a little power, it makes them nervous. (Sykes, 2009)

Several comedians whom I interviewed strove to achieve recognition as a comedian rather than interpellation as comedian or female comedian, which they find to be professionally limiting. Spaces, like the space of the comedy club, serve and benefit those who made them and who are their target audiences. Institutionally privileged subjects remain at ease in spaces and places designed to suit their needs and further their aims; furthermore, they are intelligible as experts whose ideas and values are prioritized and held as standard. To enter these spaces from the margins often involves confronting the ways that others prevent marginalized subjects from achieving success in a particular practice; it involves beginning to recognize that the features of a space (an institution, a room) do not accommodate the needs and desires of all (Ahmed, 2006, 2017). Furthermore, creators of a space may not recognize or understand some needs and desires as legitimate.

Comedy producer and host Anasimone George notes that “women have been introduced on stage as like the hot piece of ass, or like the person [that the male host is] gonna fuck with or
something” (personal communication, 2018). Stojic describes similar experiences: one where she “was second last to go on, and there was a bunch of sexist and racist and homophobic material and I felt very uncomfortable” and another where a host told her, “Oh, don’t worry about it, you’re a woman, we’ll just stare at your boobs” (A-M. Stojic, personal communication, March, 2018). Contemporary Toronto-based comedian Daphney Joseph describes feeling limited by the appellation “woman” and reports wanting to perform in productions that did not invite women only to perform:

They’re great, I don’t want [comedy nights for women, including Yas Kween] to stop, but I am not limiting myself to that, or else this is not my voice. I am not here to just be a funny woman, I just want to be funny. I want everyone to laugh at what I say. (D. Joseph, personal communication, November 28th, 2018)

Similarly, Brownstone shared that,

I’ve never really identified as a woman. That sounds really weird, but like, ya know when I hear about like co-ed rooms, or safe space rooms, or women-only rooms, I just want time. I don’t care, I don’t really care, I don’t want to be the best female comedian. I want to be the best comedian period. You can put that in writing! (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

In professional settings, when women are successful, their White counterparts consider them as less likable. The Blair Center published a report in 2017 (based on the 2016 Blair Centre Poll) confirming that “modern sexism” continues to prevent the likability of women who deviate from hegemonic femininity. This report, entitled “The Impact of Modern Sexism on the 2016 Presidential Election” shows that men and women do not believe that female workers are less competent, but that when women are in positions of power, or when they are successful in their careers, White men and women consider them to be less likeable (African American men and women and Latinas “were not significantly influenced by modern sexism”). The authors defined modern sexism as:
A contemporary form of sexism based not on a belief in female inferiority, but rather on resentment or hostility towards working women themselves. Modern Sexism, in other words, does not measure whether a woman is capable of being successful but whether she will be liked and trusted as a working woman. (Maxwell & Shields, 2017)

Although I do not want to extend the findings of this report beyond their scope, I think that there are important implications for stand-up comedy, a profession that men have historically dominated and, as I argue, requires audience trust and acceptance.

Stand-up comedy provides a rich environment for this hostility to develop because, in addition to being a male-dominated field, comedy is often antagonistic. As Sherzer (1985) suggests, a joke perpetrates two kinds of aggression: one for the group or individual the comedian is making fun of and the other for the audience, whom the comedian is “testing” about their knowledge of the topics that the comedian is covering humourously (as cited in Scarpetta et al., 2009). It is also important to note that:

“Modern Sexist” attitudes—these beliefs that women are too quick to complain about sexual harassment, women want special favors for being women in the workplace, that feminists are not fighting for equality, but dominance, and that discrimination against women is a thing of the past—are not only held by a large percentage of American women, but also dramatically influence their votes. (Maxwell & Shields, 2017)

In the context of stand-up comedy, an audience votes through their laughter, other vocalizations, and displays of pleasure and approval, such as hollering, cheering, smiling, clapping, and so on. Again, the language used here, “dominance,” is part of the structure of stand-up comedy. The comedian makes the audience laugh; she kills when successful. Audiences who are invested in their patriarchal frame may not accept this power relation.

In comedy spaces designed for the dominant culture and the reproduction of normative ideologies, it becomes a liability for others to regard someone as a female comedian, rather than as a comedian. As such, some comedians dress in a manner that neutralizes their femininity on stage. As an important indicator of gender, what to wear on stage is a complicated question for a
comedian. Which features of the feminine body to highlight or mute in order to gain success as a comedian influences how women dress and behave on stage. To dress in a stereotypically feminine manner is to highlight the discrepancy between the non-normative gender performance implicit in stand-up comedy and the feminine ideal, signalled through dress. Iliza Schlesinger, a popular comedian with several Netflix specials, had this to say:

Being somewhat attractive, I go onstage in a zip-up hoodie, because I actually have huge boobs. And it would be detrimental to the act to come onstage in a low-cut shirt, because that’s what you’re going to be looking at the whole time. And it’s hard to be physical. I get that. My guy friend’s like: “Why don’t you dress up?” and I’m like, “because I’ve seen the way you look at me when I wear heals and a short dress. That’s not what I want when I’m onstage.” (as cited in Kohen, 2013, p. 295)

Similarly, while explaining that it’s important for her to dress in a manner that she feels most comfortable in, contemporary Toronto-based comedian Zoe Brownstone highlighted why it is detrimental for audiences to read a comedian as a woman first: “I’ve tried a couple different things like, yeah, like really doing my makeup and really doing my hair, and really like making a physical effort, but it just takes away from the jokes” (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018). Jokes and humour are discursively situated in the masculine, public realm, and so audiences coding a comedian as a woman delegitimizes the woman’s authority as a comedian for members of the audience who are (implicitly or otherwise) invested in upholding dominant gender norms.

Some comedians are invested in emphasizing their bodies in ways that disrupt feminine stereotypes. Ali Wong, for example, has achieved great commercial success with her two Netflix specials, an animated sitcom, book, and extensive merchandising. In each Netflix special, she wore a tight fitting, short dress that accentuated her pregnant body. Comedian and comedy producer Anasimone George, whose aim with her comedy and attire is to disrupt audiences’ expectations of her, regularly wears tight-fitting and low-cut outfits. She appears glamorous on stage. Additionally, SHADE events have recently showcased drag performances to begin the
evening. These shows elevate excessive material femininity and make it hypervisible. They present it as glamorous and fun, though not as natural or without work. On stage, George regularly discusses her attire and the work it takes to achieve feminine beauty standards. She begins one set by reporting: “These Spanx are cutting off my blood circulation. How much cellulite are you getting in [a photo an audience member is taking of her]? I don’t know how cheap this material is, so you might see a lip. Or both. I think I feel one moving” (2018). George expresses in an interview with me that:

I wanted to feel what I thought was sexy to myself…if I am getting on a stage, I wanna look amazing. And all the reviews I got from these anonymous male writers were like: “No one cared about your jokes, they were just focused on your outfit.” I was like, just let me wear whatever I wanna wear. So I always try to dress up ‘cause people think especially when I get up on stage and I’m dressed up in my skirt and make up or whatever…people are like, “Oh, this princess is about to get up and tell us some shitty jokes,” and then I just go for like whatever it is that I talk about and people are like, “Mm didn’t expect that from that 5’3” elf that just danced on stage in her glitter.” I think it’s just what you make it. (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017)

Ultimately, these strategies—to either neutralize the subject by aligning with a more neutral or universal subject position or to disrupt what it means to be feminine—are more or less successful depending on the context of the performance and its reception.

In semiotic theory, making sense requires a shared repertoire and verisimilitude which, according to Barthes et al., face crisis with non-normative or disobedient signifiers—what Barthes (1997) called “uncertain signs” (p. 156). The audience who employs a hegemonic “gender frame” (Ridgeway, 2009) may feel unsettled by George’s non-normative performance of grotesque femininity—a sexy, confident, and queer woman of colour who is speaking on stage. However, this crisis of meaning opens up space for change, or what Mizejewski (2014) refers to as “the flow of the possible.”
Live Comedy Audiences

In this study, I also focus on the live comedy audience. Although our contemporary context enables individual (repeat and binge) viewing of comedians’ sets through sites like Netflix, Crave, YouTube, and more, I foreground the affective spaces of the live comedy club. The affect that circulates through the comedy club “sticks to the skin.” Our shared affective states change us. As such, to enter the affect-laden space of the comedy club is to become vulnerable: as audience members, we risk being affected, we risk being exposed, and we risk being changed.

We can make informed (yet imperfect) assumptions about an audience by the comedy they actively seek out and what they laugh at. We learn something about ourselves and another through the kind of comedy we enjoy. William Cheng writes (2016) that,

When our bodies are assaulted by our own impulsive laughter, we show our cards and lose our moral credibility, leaving no leg—nothing—to stand on. If you snicker at a comedian’s racist joke, it becomes that much harder for you to scramble onto high ground because, listen, you laughed; the evidence is in the vibrations, right here…Yes, you may argue after the joke that you were laughing cynically and knowingly at the structural racial injustices that fuel such cruel comedy, but by this point you’re necessarily on the defensive, carrying the burden of proof. (p. 534)

I am interested in considering what we can learn from the shared project of pursuing feminist comedy and joyful laughter. To attend a Yas Kween show in Toronto, for example, a potential audience member will have to purchase a ticket in advance or take her chances at the door. She must travel, sometimes in the freezing-cold Canadian winter, to the show. If she does not find a comedian funny, she is not able to disengage as easily as if a screen mediated the performance and she could turn it off. To attend a live performance is to expect or desire to be powerfully affected. Rebecca Krefting (2012) points out that:

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 unfavourable responses from the audience, leaving only a stream of cackling
patrons not necessarily laughing at the joke just performed. (p. 146; see also Krefting, 2019)

Whereas leaving the performance is an option, producers and hosts ask audience members to remain in the performance room until designated breaks so as not to distract the performer. Furthermore, if she leaves mid-set, an audience member risks drawing attention to herself. The comedian is likely to call out an audience member who leaves the room mid-set. I have witnessed comedians directly addressing an audience member who was leaving and addressing the departure either by making fun of the faux pas or responding in a more self-deprecatory way (as in *I am not funny enough to captivate you*). The comedian holds us captive, in a sense, once the evening begins.

In casual conversation with my colleagues in Kingston, I learned that several women of colour avoided live comedy entirely because they were afraid attending a performance that would objectify or abjectify them—these women did not want to the comedian to make them the butt of a joke or discursively cast them off. Anasimone George repeated this view in an interview where she describes *SHADE’s* audience:

> So the reason those people come out is ‘cause they’re like, “This is the first time I’m gonna be able to go to a comedy show and not be triggered by something and not feel…” I don’t like saying offended because I think that that’s a word that reduces people’s validity um, everything’s offensive these days, everyone’s so sensitive, and I’m like—it’s not about being offended, it’s about the ripples of which you’re offensiveness takes, like when people start to think that that offensive joke is fine, it translates into actions, and it goes on and on and on. (A. George, personal communication, 2018)

They were unwilling to grant affective and epistemic authority to comedians without knowing beforehand that their experiences were intelligible to the performer. They were looking forward to the Hysterics Collective-produced anti-oppressive comedy night in Kingston. To laugh together is to share an intimate experience. When we laugh at the same joke, we feel connected through our simultaneous experience of intense embodied pleasure.
In this section, I draw on the growing body of work examining live comedy audiences in comedy studies, reception studies, neuroscience, and sociology. My analysis of audience reception is limited because I did not interview audience members. However, I interviewed comedians whose livelihood, figuratively and literally, depends on the laughter of an audience, and who have developed skills that allow them to read an audience and to respond in real time to the audiences they interact with. As such, they have become experts in audience reception. Furthermore, audio recordings of comedy nights and videos of the same found online reveal audience engagement. I was able to tell, when reviewing these recordings, which jokes audiences enjoyed and which fell flat.

Although I did not set out to do reception studies, and so do not have extensive data describing the audiences who sought out these performances, I did take notes. There were striking differences between the audiences of comedian performances at, for example, the Absolute Comedy in Kingston, Ontario and SHADE in Toronto, Ontario. Although the audiences of SHADE and Yas Kween were relatively similar (I read the audiences as relatively young, hip, progressive, people of colour, disproportionately women-presenting), and both were increasingly difficult to purchase last minute tickets for, fewer people attended The Crimson Wave, and the audiences were Whiter. In 2018, Hoodo Hersi and Brandon Ash-Mohammed took over hosting the weekly show, calling it The Ebony Tide for Black History Month. The third year I attended the SheDot festival (and its last year running), it had exceptionally small audiences. Producers and hosts asked us to move forward before most shows so that the comedian would not encounter empty seats and so that laughter could circulate more efficiently. One comedian, however, reserved the front row at the SheDot festival. Mid-set, she pointed out that when women reach their 30s and 40s, they become socially invisible. She gestured to the front row and joked that the seats were not empty, we just could not see the women sitting there (anonymous comedian, 2017).
Reception Studies

Before I was doing what I thought people wanted someone like me to talk about. I had this joke – “My dad finally let me leave the house,” and people would laugh at that, like “Oh, a Muslim woman that’s oppressed. We get the link. It’s funny.” But it was very cheap and lazy and also not applicable to me! Now I don’t really speak from that place because that’s not my life. It’s not authentic. Now I say the things I really want to say. (Hoodo Hersi, 2018)

Writing in 2009, Smith refers to a gap in humour studies and writes that “even studies of humour that analyze controversial material, like ‘ethnic’ jokes, ask ‘Should they be funny?’ rather than, ‘Are they funny? When, and to whom?’” (p. 152). Judy Batalion repeated this position in the introduction to The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences, which she edited in 2012. However, the past decade has shown a marked increase in academic attention to audience reception of comedy. Scholars have asked the questions Smith posited, “Are [jokes] funny? When, and to whom?” alongside additional, more complex questions that contextualize comedic performances and investigate important aspects of audience reception of comedy, including (but not limited to): the “liveness” of comedy audiences (Batalion, 2012); the effects of sexist humour, including rape jokes (Mallett et al., 2016; Pérez & Greene, 2016; Woodzicka, Ford, & Ford, 2010); the role gender plays in audience reception of comedians (Cavalcante, Press, & Sender, 2017; Cullen, 2015; Kalviknes Bore, 2010; Kuipers, 2009); the assumption of a patriarchal frame (Cooper, 2019; Krefting & Baruc, 2015); and more. This work informs my analysis and helps me to situate myself as an audience member as well as to contextualize the tactics that comedians develop in order to remain intelligible to their audiences as funny subjects, rather than laughable objects or disgusting abjections.

Matthew Daube’s (2012) line of questioning offers a productive starting point: He argues that the stand-up serves as “stand-in” for their audience. Put another way, the successful stand-up comedian represents the perspectives of their audience. If this is the case, we must ask “to whom this intimate exchange between comic and audience is available—which comics are allowed to
present their selves, and what role do critics and audiences play in this determination?” (Daube, 2012, p.70).

Recent work in contemporary humour studies indicates that the perceived (and actual) social location of a comedian heavily informs processes of meaning making among their audiences (Cooper, 2019; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Green & Linders, 2016; Lockyer, 2015; Mizejewski, 2014). When a comedian tells a joke, it is more likely to be interpreted as such (i.e., as potentially or actually funny) when audiences’ cultural frameworks include representations of women as potentially funny subjects, rather than primarily as laughable objects. Furthermore, a joke is more likely to elicit a laugh when the implicit meaning of the joke aligns with audiences’ preexisting ideological frameworks (Woodzicka & Ford, 2010).

Cultural theorists draw some important conclusions about the ways in which audiences interpret humour produced by women (Cooper, 2019). For example, several apply Bourdieu to investigate the connections between cultural capital and preferred comedy viewing as it intersects with gender and class (Claessens & Dhoest, 2010; Friedman & Kuipers, 2013; Kuipers, 2006). Drawing on this research, Katherine Cooper (2019), in “What’s So Funny? Audiences of Women’s Stand-Up Comedy and Layered Referential Viewing: Exploring Identity and Power,” elaborates on the decoding practices of audience responses to stand-up clips by Amy Schumer, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho. She finds that:

> Audience members were quite attentive to the comedian’s embodied identity, including their race and sexual orientation. This interpretive focus on the comedian’s identity is sociologically important to our understanding of how audience members construct meaning from comedy and how they determine what is funny versus offensive. (Cooper, 2019, p. 112)

Rebecca Krefting, comedian and author, focuses on the economic and political barriers to success for comedians. In her article “The Cultural Economy of Humour,” she argues that audiences in North America are not economically incentivized to buy in to the perspectives of women: “Audiences will affirm the perspectives and identify with (read: invest in and support,
laugh or otherwise respond favourably) comedians whose categories of identity correspond to ideal citizens, i.e., ‘[W]hite, male, heterosexual, able-bodied’ (Krefting, 2012, p. 142). And yet **Yas Kween** and **SHADE** regularly sell out. **SHADE** in particular has been expanding since it began two years ago: Anasimone George, its creator and producer, held the inaugural **SHADE Comedy Festival** in 2018 and hosts **Gay and Funny**, among other popular monthly events. Krefting went on to write that “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” (Krefting, 2012, p. 144).

What, then, can we make of the economic success of an event like **SHADE**? What are audiences seeking when they attend this event? How do comedians endear audiences to them?

During a set at **SHADE**, Chanty Marostica told the following joke:

> I do a lot of Yuk Yuk’s. I do a lot of straight White men rooms, and I’ll be like “as a non-binary person,” and a woman will be like grab her husband and be like, “What are they doing,” or “What is it doing,” ‘cause they wouldn’t gender me properly, right? So, “What is it saying?” and I’m like “I’M A LESBIAN, COME BACK, I’M STILL A LESBIAN I HAVE A VAGINA AND I LOVE IT.” (2018)

Note that Marostica told this joke prior to his transition. He no longer identifies as non-binary. Marostica’s telling of this joke functions in two ways: it demonstrates his experiences being unable to connect to straight audiences who cannot make sense of him through their cultural frameworks. Additionally, this joke indicates that Marostica recognizes that the audience at **SHADE** would affirm his perspective—and they did. This bit receives cheering and laughter. Events like **SHADE** complicate the perspective that women are not intelligible as professional stand-up comedians. The Hysterics Collective invited Marostica to perform at events (and he was willing to perform), but our scheduling unfortunately prevented this. This is also the case for interview scheduling. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the shared project of seeking out laughter.
**Researcher as Audience-Member: Becoming Affected When Coming to Know and to Laugh**

**Identifying Myself/ Being Identified.**

During a SheDot festival, Popular Toronto-based comedian Martha Chaves unexpectedly demanded to know who was studying comedy in the audience (note that I had asked the producers of the festival to forward my consent forms to performers I was unable to reach personally in advance). Once it was clear that she was referring to me, I reluctantly identified myself. She asked me how long I had been studying for and in what capacity. When I said it had been two or three years as a graduate student, she announced that my studies did not amount to much—she had been performing stand-up for more than a decade.

Chaves’ remarks bring up important questions: how has my role as academic researcher influenced my understanding of stand-up comedy and my appreciation and understanding of comedian performances? How do I situate myself in relation to comedians and their audiences? Do I regard them as objects of study, or as experts from whom I am seeking to learn?

My role as an educated academic researcher and my identity as a White, able-bodied, feminist mother limited my understanding of and appreciation for particular jokes, comedians, and routines. I did not have access to what Kuipers (2009) refers to as “humour specific knowledge” that would enable a more nuanced understanding of some of the material I was exposed to as an audience member at SHADE and Yas Kween. I lack the appropriate knowledge, history, and skills required for decoding and understanding implicit meanings in the movements, performances, and material of many of the comedians I watched perform. I regard comedians as social critics whose perspectives were missing from hegemonic discourses, and I largely accepted their position of epistemic and affective power.

However, I do not know how much material went over my head. I do know that, while I laughed a lot, there was much material that did not resonate with me and that I did not find funny. For example, I was initially surprised by the intense excitement and affirmation (through
cheering, exclamations of “Yes!” and laughter) of almost everything Anasimone George said onstage, even when it was not intelligible to me as a joke. Instead, I interpreted her sets as first-person narratives, generally amusing stories that she told about her life. Women of colour who cheered for her and laughed throughout the evening surrounded me. I immersed myself in the positive affect and enjoying the experience but also noticed that I did not connect as strongly to the performance, and as such, to the audience members, as I had felt during other routines. This reveals something about my expectations and taste in humour and also, I think, something about how George’s comedy realized the audience’s desires.

In an interview, George explains that:

My style of comedy is very conversational. I feel like I am sitting in a room with 200 friends. Telling them who I fucked last night. Yeah, it’s all life experiences and just like anything. Anything that happens in my day. (A. George, personal communication, November 27th, 2017)

When I asked George what she thinks makes a joke successful, she responds,

I can’t speak for everyone, but [for me] it’s definitely the buildup in your stories, and if you can take your audience on a wild ride and fit in a few punch lines along the way, instead of just being like “knock knock, joke,” then it’s just so enjoyable to watch too ‘cause your mind is following this whole story line like “When is she gonna stop?” and then the punch line comes out and it’s like so exciting. It’s like a long-awaited Christmas. (A. George, personal communication, November 27, 2017)

This came through during her performances. It felt like George was talking to her friends and that her stories were intelligible to and meaningful for them. The audience regards her as an authority and her experiences as a queer, Egyptian woman as authentic. Audience members regularly seek her out to share how much they enjoy her performances and how meaningful it is to see her staged performances of them. Through their shared laughter, both George and her audiences realized their own epistemic authority and affective power.

Comedians implicitly and explicitly called out my positionality throughout various comedy sets. The comedy I saw at SHADE and Yas Kween incorporated broad and incisive
critiques of racism and the White feminism that fails to resist it. Allusions to and specific referencing of “White feminist,” “White feminism,” and “White girls” were common, and some coded language referred to the same, as in one song that made fun of the “cool, cool girls” living in Toronto: “They day-drink in the park smoke cigarettes and have dogs that never bark. WHO CAN AFFORD A DOG?!” (Rahkee, 2018).

Because I often sat near the front and attended almost all shows alone, comedians sometimes called upon me to perform my White feminism, to stand in for a demographic. For example, one comedian performing at the SheDot Festival, in the midst of an extended bit about not receiving lead roles in plays throughout middle and high school, asked me (an audience member) what Disney princess I thought she would be able to play well. I panicked. I imagined that if I chose Jasmine, the princess I thought she most resembled, the comedian would read my choice as limiting, and I would be resigning her to playing one of the few princesses of colour. I thought if I chose Snow White, the reverse would occur—I would be failing to acknowledge her ethnicity and upholding an implicit hierarchy in which White iterations of femininity are more desirable. In the end, I said the Little Mermaid because she is the princess in the Disney movie that I had watched most often as a child. I can still recite whole scenes and long passages by heart (never mind the songs). I assumed that I was in for some ribbing in any case, and I told myself that I would not take it personally. It was uncomfortable for me, and the comedian called attention to my Whiteness, which, in intersectionally feminist spaces, links to ignorance—a sort of benign racism at best and a toxic entitlement fueled by White supremacy at worst.

**Taste and symbolic boundaries.** As research done by Sam Friedman and Giseline Kuipers demonstrates, cultural capital and education inform audiences’ taste in comedy (the same thus holds for my comedy tastes). Their mixed-methods studies find that different social classes draw symbolic boundaries on the basis of comedy taste (Friedman & Kuipers, 2009, 2013). The authors persuasively argues that comedy taste is related to cultural
capital and symbolic boundaries. In one study, respondents with high cultural capital, for example,

Express preferences for “black” comedy, where disturbing subjects are probed for humorous effect. By deliberately suppressing initial emotional reactions to “black” comedy, like disgust and offense, these respondents claim to reach a higher plane of appreciation. (p. 184)

Those with greater cultural capital sought out humour that was original and required more intellectual labour to unpack or get. Those with lower cultural capital enjoyed comedy that was more inclusive—that anyone would access or get. Comedian Chanel Ali confirmed this, sharing in an interview that,

If I do a show on the upper side of Manhattan where there is a lot of very fancy like millionaires, I feel like I can’t be too silly, like they wanna hear intellectual jokes, they wanna hear things that challenge how they think or they definitely don’t want to hear anything that they think for a second that they could have written. If the premise sound[s] simple enough they are very quick to scoff at it, like this is, “I’ll sit here in silence until you come up with something better.” (Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018).

Audience members also identify their own tastes as “objective” rather than informed by their experiences. Similar to the respondents, as an audience member, I felt justified and confident in my judgement of how funny or not a comedian was (Kalviknes Bore, 2010). The interpretation and affective responses to jokes always depend on the context the comedian performs them within and the audience who receives them. As Goltz writes,

Where we find and assign offense, humor, or pleasure requires critical self-reflexivity. Context, timing, audience, and our own investments in hegemonic systems of power and privilege enable and goad our laughs, and—as shown by the Steve-O moment—our offense. Our own values, beliefs, and expectations dictate reception. (p. 283).

In pursuing this topic, and in deciding which comedy nights to attend, whom to interview, etc., I perceived that I was pursuing an important kind of comedy with intersectionally
feminist political aims and radical effects. I had a thesis in mind and material that interested me. I wanted to see women saying interesting things about being women. In proposing this study, I wrote:

I will focus on women whose intervention into stand-up comedy denaturalizes the oppressive constructions of femininity—I am not interested in comedy that reifies normative ideologies or uncritically reproduces dominant discourses. I am not interested in the kind of comedy that ensures affective responses of disgust or shame in alternative expressions of femininity. Rather, I am seeking out socially critical comedians whose comedy, on the whole, aims to intervene into and denaturalize the feminine ideal, to raise feminist consciousness, and who encourage taking pleasure in the body.

I sought out comedy nights that were explicitly feminist and rejected comedy, often performed by men, that I thought to be problematic or insufficiently progressive. Thornton (1995), drawing on Bourdieu, writes that “interestingly, the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t” (p. 105). I understood feminist comedy in exclusive terms and made clear demarcations between it and what I have referred to as conventional comedy, which I view to be more in line with dominant discourses and less interested in questioning heteronormative White patriarchy.

Relatedly, Friedman and Kuipers’ finding that the “use and appreciation of humour is related to social background—gender, education, age, ethnicity, national background—in various ways” (p. 219) resonated with me and seemed evident in the conversations I have had with friends, acquaintances, students, and colleagues over the course of researching and writing this dissertation. “Moreover,” Friedman and Kuipers continue, “such differences are connected with more fundamental notions of taste, sociability, and personhood: by expressing your sense of humor, you show what you find important in yourself, in others, and in a social life” (2013, pp. 219–220). I felt that the popular culture I consumed expressed my feminism—that attending intersectionally feminist comedy nights revealed something, ideally, about who I was, or perhaps about who I wanted to be and how I wanted others to read me as a social actor.
Neutralizing Threatening Positions of Power

Reading the audience.

I am so blessed to get to do the shows at the Comedy Bar that I get to do, and I can say anything, and the audiences are like, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, we support you,” and like, great! And then [at other shows] you just say you’re a lesbian and people are so mad at you. So there are Yuks gigs that I do where I won’t say it. I’m like it’s so obvious. So it is very different, what I do for Yuk Yuk’s and what I want to do. If I am doing really really well toward the end, I’ll tell them I’m a lesbian and they love it. So there are Yuks gigs that I do where I won’t say it. I’m like it’s so obvious. So it is very different, what I do for Yuk Yuk’s and what I want to do. If I am doing really really well toward the end, I’ll tell them I’m a lesbian and they love it. But I’ll usually play it pretty safe. Like I’ll do impressions, I’ll talk about my family. Just stuff like that, but I won’t say that I’m gay, I’ll try not to talk about my period if I can help it. But I’ve got like 30 minutes on it. (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018)

If the comedian can successfully read their audience, they will be more successful. Feminist and critical race theorists, like Marxists, write on the perspectives of marginalized subjects whose embeddedness in dominant cultures enables them access to the perspective of the dominant culture in addition to their own. This double consciousness or “always looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (DuBois, 1903, p. 2) is particularly potent for comedians who capitalize on their ability to distill the prevailing norms into jokes that double as incisive critiques of the status quo.

Further enriching the cultural analysis offered by comedians is their unique position relative to normalized or dominant subjectivities. The systemically marginalized are at a particular advantage when it comes to understanding and articulating oppression: “The power to see while remaining unseen, the power to put others into discourse while remaining unspoken, is a particularly effective form of power” (Fiske, 2010, p. 60).

The live audience provides an immediate feedback loop for the performer. The encounter with an audience informs the comedian what the limitations of her performances might be; she learns what material will get a laugh and where. To put it another way, the comedian develops skills that enable her to read an audience, and through this reading, along with trial-and-error joke
telling, the comedian often tailors her set or routine to a crowd. She coaxes them into accepting her position of affective and epistemic power.

Through their research process, recording, transcribing, and analyzing stand-up sets performed by African American comedians in Los Angeles, Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) find that the comedians utilize particular strategies for determining how an audience would receive a joke before they made it. The authors examine the conditions that facilitate the audiences’ reception of sexist, racist, or otherwise potentially offensive humour and analyze the strategies that comedians used to gauge their audiences’ reception of such humour. They conclude that stand-up comedy is interactional.

Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009) identify three primary stages of the interaction: (1) starting the interaction, (2) transition to a new joke sequence, and (3) expanding the punchline. Each particular comedian enacts these stages in ways that suit them, their style, personality, and approach to comedy. At each stage, comedians receive information they need to gauge the mood and amiability of the audience and thereby determine how willing they are to laugh at potentially offensive humour. That is, they (inter)actively determine how the audience will receive a particular joke and what the joke means to an audience.

The stages of the process take various forms according to the audiences’ responses. For example, researchers find that comedians extended punchlines that received a positive response with pags (a series of short punchlines that rely on the same premise of the first one) that they had sometimes rehearsed and sometimes improvised. Some of the comedians I interviewed allude to or explicitly describe this sort of strategy. Moffatt, for example, performs regularly to a range of audiences, and she highlighted the importance of being able to read an audience and what happens when there’s a mismatch. She recounted:

Well, yeah, so I try all my new jokes at like Crimson Wave, and then I do a Yuks gig and I’m in, I don’t know, Collingwood performing to these people, who, I don’t know, they’re trying to sell timeshares to, and they just get up and walk out. That has
happened. I’m like, “I’m a lesbian,” and people are like, “I’m out!” (A. Moffatt, personal communication, April 4th, 2018)

Similarly, Brownstone explains that,

By the reaction [to my opener] I can tell if people are having fun, or if they’re like, “I can’t believe she said that.” I am not going to necessarily change my jokes, but I can decide how vulgar I am going to be, how slow I need to go, little things like that. (Z. Brownstone, personal communication, May 5th, 2018)

Some audiences are not going to laugh at your jokes. Hersi recounted an experience she had with an unlaughing audience:

We did this show and it was for literally middle-aged White people that live in a small town, so we’re talking a very particular kind of voice, and I just said my jokes, and there was one lady with a nice scarf, and she laughed and seemed the most like normal out of all of them. The rest of them were like, “Ugh we can’t really relate to any of those.” And part of me was like, yeah, I don’t, you guys aren’t gonna determine success in this business for me, so it doesn’t matter. (H. Hersi, personal communication, February 23rd, 2018)

Reading the audience is an important part of stand-up comedy. Comedians develop and employ strategies to ensure that their audiences are enjoying themselves that take time to develop, and because they must deploy these strategies in multiple settings with changing audiences, comedians are perpetually adapting strategies to be responsive to the mood, demographic, interest, and so on of their audiences. This skill is particularly important for comedians whose perspectives others do not regard as universal. Comedian Chanel tries to look at the audience before she performs. In her words:

I always like to take a peek at the audience if I can. I read them usually in terms of age. That’s my first thing: Is everybody in here at least close to being under 45? Or is it above 45? Because if so, then I am gonna take out some jokes that may be like heavy technology-based or something that I think they might not get, ya know? I definitely will take note if it is more men or women, racially if it’s a lot more Black people then I’ll tailor my jokes to things that I think come from the perspective of me being a Black woman specifically ‘cause I know they wanna hear about that. So yeah, I definitely will size up the crowd
almost always and try to, I don’t want to say alter my set but tailor it a little bit. But then I also like to go against the grain and say let’s see if all these old people can handle all this really heavy race shit. Let’s see if they can handle this super heavy dating app joke, ya know. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

Elise DeCamp’s research focuses on stand-up comedy in Midwestern America. In particular, she writes about the strategies “by which comedians gain audience favour… throughout even their more politically- and racially- charged material” (DeCamp, 2015, p. 2). DeCamp finds that when audiences are enjoying themselves, they are more receptive; controversial material can enter the “hearts and minds” of an audience so long as it slips “through the doors opened by the rush of pleasurable laughter” (DeCamp, 2015, p. 22). Similarly, Zamir (2014) points out that “the amused mood established by a successful comedy is like a pleasant cloud enveloping our experiences. It involves an inclination to regard potentially disheartening thoughts lightly, as well as a disposition to laugh and be receptive to other pleasures” (p. 177). Although this claim seems straightforward, DeCamp (2015) points out that it is “essential for understanding the potential ideological impact of comedy” (p. 23).

My research findings are in line with those of DeCamp (2015) and Scarpetta and Spagnolli (2009). Being funny is a situated practice that arises within an encounter between social actors. The successful practitioner understands the social environment it is happening within, including the cultural frameworks that audiences utilize to understand the comedian. In the interviews I conducted, comedians articulate strategies they employed to read their audiences and to get them onside. Comedian Ana-Maria Stojic explains that,

Say you’re working a crowd that’s mainly filled with middle class country bumkinds or something, and they have been laughing at all of the racial punchlines, every time someone is like, “Oh it’s because I’m brown, or something like that,” you’re like, “Ok, I understand you guys.” Then you can loosen them up and get them on your side essentially by saying anything about being a woman, or “because I’m a woman,” and they’re like, “Ahah yeah you are!” They just need to recognize you because they don’t normally see maybe a woman talking this way. And
then you can talk about other stuff and maybe catch them off guard, but you already have them so it will be easier essentially. (Stojic, personal communication, March 2018)

Stojic is pointing out that, at least initially, the comedian needs to connect with an audience by meeting them where they are. She must address the audience’s interpretation of her as woman in order for her set to be successful. This also speaks to the fluidity of social relationships. Although the audience’s immediate inclination may be to objectify or abject the comedian, the skilled comedian can attenuate this response. DeCamp (2015) interviewed a comedian who called this strategy the yellow jacket theory. Essentially, he likened deviation from the norm to wearing a yellow jacket. The comedian and the audience are aware of the yellow jacket, and if the comedian fails to address it, the audience may regard the comedian as too different or untrustworthy. Acknowledging the yellow jacket, or the elephant in the room, puts the audience at ease (DeCamp, 2015). There are many ways to address the yellow jacket.

**Abjection: Threatening the boundaries.**

It is a show that really celebrates comedy, women in colour, which is not the case outside these doors (Hersi, 2018).

John Limon (2000) in *Stand-up in Theory, or Abjection in America*, writes that “stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial. (Are they themselves or acting? Are they in costume?)” (p. 6). This liminal space, where the comedian is not really acting and not really natural, provides an opportunity for the comedian to play with his or her identity—to choose the elements of herself to highlight or excise. The comedian also invites the audiences to play with their reading of a comedian’s identity.

Abjection is also a strategy that the audience deploys to expel the comedian whom they feel disgusted by. Recall the discussion in Chapter 3 of audience responses to queer, Korean American comedian Margaret Cho. Sarah Ahmed (2004), in *Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others*, explored what emotions do; she suggested that emotions “define the
contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects” (p. 25). Referring to Butler’s (1993) notion of materialization, Ahmed went on to say that “it is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface is produced” (2004, p. 29). Disgust or rage erects boundaries between subjects.

Muslim comedian Nour Hadidi experienced the hateful construction of a boundary between her and her audience when a male audience member harassed her while she performed in Kitchener, Ontario. Hadidi, host of So Fresh N’ So Clean with Courtney Gilmour—both of whom we were lucky to have headline two separate Hysterics Collective-produced comedy events—incorporates her identity as Muslim into her sets. She makes fun of Islamophobia, telling jokes like, “We talk about Islam as if Scientology isn’t a thing,” and the following:

If you don’t want Muslims or immigrants in our country, then you shouldn’t be allowed to use anything that they contributed to society, like math, hummus, yoga, guacamole…So, you know, everything that gives White girls a personality. That’s my rule. (Hadidi, 2018)

Also, living in Toronto is such a mixed city I notice that I talk to myself a lot. Do you guys do that? Well I do it in Arabic so that way if anyone catches me, I can just pretend like I am praying, ya know? If you don’t like it, well guess what, you’re racist. (Hadidi, 2018)

In her set in Kingston, Ontario, Hadidi jokingly attempts to convert the audience to Islam and had a playful back and forth with a male Jewish member of the audience (initiated by Hadidi) which they both seemed to enjoy and which generated laughter from the audience. She tells him, “I am gonna call you Mohammed. That’s your new convert name. You don’t like it...?” He responds with, “My mom would hate it.” “Oh, you’re Jewish, right, right, right. We could solve the Israeli conflict in an instant!” Hadidi reports that she draws her material from her personal reflections and everyday life:

The kind of jokes that I write are just things that have happened to me. Like my latest set that I am working on is that I talk to
myself, how we all talk to ourselves. I talk about finding an apartment in Toronto cause it’s so expensive. I talk about how there’s a lot of interracial couples, but nobody talks about inter-weight couples. I have a bit where I talk about lotion. I have a Saddam Hussein joke. Like literally just anything that happens in my life. It is up to me to take that thing that I am thinking about and turn it into a bit. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)

Hadidi regularly jokes about modern dating, including one bit where she calls for an app that would let you know if you’re on a date or not: “It would be point based.” Here are a couple of successful bits:

I told my friend, I was like, “I like this guy, what do I do?” She was like, “You know what you’re gonna do, Nour? You’re gonna ignore him.” Well if I ignore him, he’s just gonna ignore me back. That’s called two strangers living in Toronto. (Hadidi, 2018)

I hate modern dating because I hate it when you’re talking to a guy, [and] at the end of the night he slips the girlfriend in. He does it so unnaturally, right. Like I am talking to this guy who I liked, and he knew I liked him, and then at the end of the night I said something like, “I love New York comedy,” and he said, “Oh, yeah, me and my girlfriend were thinking of going to the Hamptons.” I was like, “What?!” Ok. You know what I am gonna do now? Next time, I am gonna be like, “Oh, girlfriend? Well things are moving fast, but sure. Never been to the Hamptons.” (Hadidi, 2018)

Clapping, cheering, and laughter punctuated these jokes on dating. This is all to demonstrate the general feel of Hadidi’s comedy and its reception by Yas Kween audiences (where I recorded these two jokes). When performing at an event in Kitchener, a male audience member yelled out, “I have a joke about Muslims if you want to hear it” (Sharkley & Groleau, 2019). The man who yelled this rejected Hadidi’s position of affective and epistemic power. He rejected both her claim to know what is funny and her authority on being Muslim by claiming his own power—citing his own joke about Muslims. At the end of the night, he yelled out for a third time from the crowd stating that he “didn’t like Muslims” (Sharkley & Groleau, 2019). Of the experience, Hadidi shared in an interview with CBC that,
I think a lot of comedians experience heckling and I think a lot of Muslims experience hate, but when the two happen in person, that’s a rare occurrence and something that I was not expecting…That’s why for the first time ever, I cried on stage and it was such a scary moment. (Sharkley & Groleau, 2019)

The audience member’s experience of Hadidi as threatening temporarily abjected, or cast off, Hadidi from her position as comedian. The hatred of the audience member affected Hadidi and she could no longer perform as a funny or laughing subject, and instead she cried on stage. Islamophobic hatred interrupted the free exchange of positive, vital affect.

**Self-Deprecation: Constructing an Object of Ridicule.**

My body’s in such bad shape, I wear prescription underwear. Would you believe that I once entered a beauty contest? I must have been out of my mind. Not only did I come in last, I got 361 get well cards. (Diller, 1969)

I was down at the beauty parlour today for 7 ½ hours, just for the estimate! (Diller, N.D)

As I discussed in the introductory chapter, self-deprecation is a comedic performance strategy that comedians have utilized in varying degrees and in a variety of ways since the earliest days of professional stand-up. Comedians describe self-deprecation as a strategy that endears them to an audience. There are similarities and distinctions between self-deprecation and self-(and other) abjection. As we have seen, if the audience feels threatened by the exercise of power inherent in stand-up comedy, the audience may work to affectively or discursively cast the comedian off. In Chapter 3 I included a discussion of comedian Ashley Moffatt’s staged self-abjection where she deliberately emphasized the grotesque features of her body in order to encourage the audience to accept her position of epistemic power (I know that I am disgusting). Her grotesque performance was ambivalent: People read her excessive body as disgusting and thus abject, and yet she remained on stage, generating laughter from her audience, thereby exercising her affective power.

The abject is always present, threatening the boundaries we draw around our individual and social bodies. Self-deprecation is a similar strategy, yet it yields different effects. In contrast
to the ways in which abjection functions in the context of stand-up comedy, self-deprecation

objectifies the comedian. The object is discursively constructed as losing its power to affect (an audience). In The Mastery of Discourse, (1993) Susan Purdie explains that:

Thus the targets of joking become “objects” in *our* language because they are (constructed as) unable to make their effect in the world; sometimes we deny them discursive power because they are “de-graded” (by contamination, for example); sometimes it is their “irrationality”—which can be any kind of inappropriate discourse—that in itself degrades them from “potent” to “impotent.” (p. 92)

Bergson’s (1900) theory of humour, articulated in his text *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comedian*, describes the relationship between becoming a thing, or thing-like, and laughter.

He writes that:

The comedian is that side of a person which reveals his [sic] likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain correct. (Bergson, 1911, p. 87)

For Bergson, to laugh at is to (re)animate—to return the mechanized thing to a living subject (or, to reject the thing in favour of the subject). He argues that laughter is always the laughter of a group; it has a social function. It brings outliers back into the fold. As I discussed in Chapter 3, laughter, as Bergson conceptualized it, can both punish those who transgress social norms and those who uphold them. The social function of laughter depends on the context within which it arises. It depends on what (or whom) serves as the butt of the joke, or the object of humour.

One of the first stand-up comedians, Jean Carroll, in an interview with Jane Wollman, explains that,

In those days, the attitude was, “Let’s see how funny you are!” because I was a woman and wasn’t ugly and didn’t make an ass of myself up there. The trick was to get the audience—especially
the women—to feel I wasn’t a threat, and to get past men’s resistance that women weren’t and shouldn’t be funny. So I did a little self-effacing material. You mix your herbs and spices, and pretty soon people are relaxed and you’ve disarmed them. (as cited in Wollman, 1991)

Non-normative gender performances produce anxiety in mainstream audiences and a skilled comedian, upon registering the potential for, or presence of, this affective state, employs strategies that ease this anxiety and promote the comfort and trust that is conducive to the free exchange of positive affect, especially laughter. Sometimes this involves neutralizing the threat of the non-normative performance by objectifying it and thus limiting its power to negatively affect the audience. Given this interpretation—that to become an object (one that is intended to mitigate the threat of being a [non-normative] subject) is to disempower the subject—some comedians and feminist comedy theorists have rejected self-deprecation as a strategy that affirms oppressive logics and reproduces inequality.

Hannah Gadsby, most notably in Nanette, maintains that stand-up comedy functions to produce and resolve anxiety: A comedian unsettles her audience and then mollifies them. The audiences releases their tension when they laugh. Gadsby understands her role as comedian is to primarily concern herself with manipulating the emotional responses of the audience. She likened this dynamic to an “abusive relationship,” explaining, “I make you all feel tense, and then I make you laugh, and you’re like, ‘Thanks for that. I was feeling a bit tense.’ I made you tense!” I think it is important to point out here that making an audience tense does not need to be a deliberate comedic action or strategy. Some audiences respond to non-normative gender performances, for example, with tension (or other negative affects). However, the comedian (with the help of her audience) is still responsible for alleviating this tension.

In her Netflix comedy special Nanette (2017), Gadsby illustrated how humiliating it is to use self-deprecation as a means of alleviating tension is. In her words:

I don’t want to do [self-deprecating humour] anymore. Because, do you understand… what self-deprecation means when it comes
from somebody who already exists in the margins? It’s not humility. It’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak. And I simply will not do that anymore. Not to myself or anybody who identifies with me.

(Gadsby, 2017)

In surfacing the shame she experiences, Gadsby makes the audience complicit in her humiliation. She demonstrates to the audience that her self-deprecation is a tool she uses to manipulate them into laughing, and that she must do so only because they are uncomfortable with her queer identity and the abuse she experiences as a result.

As I mentioned in Chapter 2, researchers regularly cite Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers when it comes to understanding and rejecting self-deprecation; they often use the two as contrastive examples against a superior form of feminist comedy. Comedy theorist Philip Auslander, for example, writes that:

Whereas the personae of earlier comedians such as Diller and Rivers turn the anger and frustration of a life confined to domesticity in on themselves in self-deprecation, Barr’s housewife persona speaks out petulantly against husbands, children, and the social expectations and limitations imposed on women. (p. 119)

Gilbert cites Auslander in his influential work on self-deprecation as writing:

Clearly, whatever anger may be implicit in the self-deprecatory comedy of Diller and Rivers has been turned inward onto the female subject herself, rather than outward onto the social conditions that made it necessary for Diller and Rivers to personify themselves in this way in order to have successful careers as comedians. (Auslander, as cited in Gilbert, 1997, p. 318)

However, in taking a closer look at the work of Joan Rivers in particular, I aim to show that self-deprecation is a complicated strategy that does not simply reify normative identities and reproduce oppressive structures. It also exposes and denaturalizes them.

Joanne Gilbert, in her influential text entitled Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity and Cultural Critique, discussed autobiographical humour and outlined how it operates as a performance of marginality that allows the performer, who assumes the role of victim, to subvert
that role through the comedic cultural critique that happens when marginalized figures engage in self-deprecating humour. She argues that the terms that people use to denigrate women (bitch, whiner) become satirical through this process and bring into focus their absurdity and constructed-ness. This is a productive mode of interpreting and commenting on self-deprecation; it offers the possibility, and indeed provides examples, of self-deprecation as subversive and satirical rather than an embodiment or support of dominant ideologies.

Through Rivers comedic performances, she consistently describes herself as unattractive. More than a descriptive account, Rivers describes how it feels to have “no sex appeal”: “it kills me.” To be corpse-like, to be abjected, is the experience of failing to signify ideal femininity (in this context, to be over 21 and unmarried). She performs this set on the Ed Sullivan show in 1969:

I know what I am speaking about…If you’re not married, if you’re a girl, if you’re over 21, you’re better off dead. Do you know how that feels? [She yells at the audience] Sitting around my mother’s house, having a good time, living, eating candy bars, enjoying myself, but single! (Rivers, 1969)

In this bit, Rivers is claiming epistemic authority. She begins by asserting “I know what I am speaking about.” She goes on to describe her abjection, through and from her mother when the neighbours come over and ask: “‘How’s Joan? Still single? Heheh.’ And my mother would say ‘If she were alive.’ You know how that hurts?! When you’re sitting right there?!” Joan extends this failure to recognize the value of women who are not desirable to others; she is sharing her perspective and pointing out the ways that it extends beyond her. She is, in Ahmed’s language, revealing that the “personal is structural,” or, as earlier feminists put it, the personal is political. She says, “I feel sorry for any single girls today. The styles and the whole society is not for single girls. You know that. Single men, yes.” Rivers reveals disciplinary gendered norms that apply to “men” and “girls,” exposing their constructedness by emphasizing their absurdity, and she goes on to describe how she experiences them: “It kills me.”

Whereas even the framing of girls and men is infantilizing for women and upholds hetero
patriarchal norms, I want to emphasize the fact that Rivers is offering an analysis of gendered norms that points to the abjection of unmarried women—something that was highly relevant in the ‘60s, and something that she extends to all women, or girls. Her feminism here is not intersectional, it does not take into account the meaning of being a Black woman or a queer woman of any race. It focuses on something particular to women in the ideal demographic and the demographic for which she might pass as a member—White middle-class heterosexual women. Note that Rivers’ performance of Jewishness is a whole other subject. It also is highly layered. It both depends on Jewish stereotypes to get laughs from Jews and gentiles and also plays with the painful experience of living in a place and time and with an identity harmed by those stereotypes.

Rivers explains that dominant discourses did not regard men as corpse-like even when they are literally corpses; male cadavers do not compel the disgust and revulsion that women above 30 do. She joked:

90 years old, not married, he’s a catch. It’s a whole different thing. Isn’t that so? Yes, yes! [applause] It kills me! You have an extra man, bring him along! Bring him along. He’s 98, bring him! He’s dead, BRING HIM! We’ll prop him, just bring ‘im. We’ll say that he’s quiet. (Rivers, 1969)

Kristeva writes that “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” In this joke, Rivers discursively abjects the corpse; the corpse, and the patriarchal norms that prop him up, become laughable.

I argue that self-deprecation is a tactic that enables the denaturalization of normative codes and as such, disempowers them. Through their invisibility, gendered and other social norms are held to be natural and common sense. Self-deprecation not only grants the subject permission to speak, as Gadsby mentioned, it allows access to and a measure of control over discourses that sustain the marginalization of bodies and ways of being. It enabled performers like Rivers to describe how the inequality of the sexes makes the performer feel in ways that are intelligible to
her audiences (who are subject to similar forms of oppression). It tells the audience that the performer not only has feelings, but that she has something to say about them. As such, she not only feels, she knows something, and she is going to make others pay attention to that knowledge.

Self deprecation does not simply reproduce oppressive and marginalizing social relations; the self-deprecation within a comedic frame enables others to read their story differently. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler elaborates on the freedom of the subject to respond to the ways that others (mis)recognize them. She points to processes of resignification and the conditions that they require. When novel contexts reiterate words over time, she argues, the words’ meaning shifts, they become decoded and recoded. The comedian may briefly enter the position of object, but she does not remain there. Through self-deprecating humour, she may still affect her audience. The audience may have entered the comedy club with only implicit awareness of the stereotypes a comedian is taking up, but they may leave with insight into how the stereotype functions, how it affects those to whom it is applied, and how it makes the performer feel.

**Generating Joyful Laughter**

In this section, I describe the shared projects of pursuing collective, feminist laughter. I elaborate on the desire for connection and social relationships with those whom we share meaningful experiences. I discuss raising feminist consciousness. Women of colour, transgender, and queer comedians who perform at *Yas Kween* and *SHADE* give voice to the experiences they share with their audiences. Audiences seek out these articulations which, through shared laughter, become validated. Audiences and comedians alike rejoice in receiving recognition; they leave the experience changed, and their bodies remember the vitality of shared laughter.

Comedian Marie Sotto, answering the question, “Do you have a favorite joke you like to perform?” describes her material based off of her relationship with her Filipina mother. I asked her why she enjoyed performing this material, and she responded by saying:

> As a minority person who faces different intersections of oppression, it is really meaningful to have your experiences
reflected back at you, and like, *no, I actually am a person*, and that’s done through seeing an art form, and that is really an empowering thing. Yeah, so I feel like it validates who you are as a person when you see your stories being told by people like you. (M. Sotto, personal communication, May 7th, 2018)

Next, I describe how articulating shared experiences facilitates the circulation of laughter—an affirming, vitalizing affect that precipitates an ontological shift. Through laughing, the audience and comedian affirm their embodied knowledge. Affect studies shows us how the body can *know* something before we are able to articulate it. Shared, joyful laughter calls the self and others into being. We become a different kind of self through this laughter. Such laughter liberates the body from holding on to the tension of intersectional oppression. We become intelligible to and through one another in this process.

**Shared experiences: Where you from-from?**

When I moved to Toronto, I downloaded Uber, but I had to change my name on the app. I was getting a lot of questions: Where are you from, how long you been here? So I changed my name, now it’s Nora Henderson. Do you know what questions Nora gets? Yeah, nothing. It’s amazing. It’s the closest I’ve come to White privilege. (Hadidi, 2018)

While manually coding transcripts of comedy sets, I noticed that many comedians perform material that illustrated what I referred to in Chapter 3 as *encounters with White ignorance*. In Chapter 1, I reflect on the ways that telling jokes about their interactions with White subjects enabled comedians and their audiences to mock and crack up “[W]hite racial framing” (Feagin, 2010). In this section, I focus on the integrative effects of shared laughter. Women of colour and queer comedians cite instances of oppression in ways that members of the audiences who attend intersectionally feminist comedy nights affirm and recognize. They develop counter frames, which “enable[e] both individuals and groups to effectively counter recurring [W]hite hostility and discrimination” (Feagin, 2010, p. 159).

Sarah Ahmed’s (2004) work on affect and belonging is relevant for this section because it has explored the geospatial elements of belonging and the limitations that a space can impose on
one’s potential for action. She has drawn on Nirmal Purwar’s (2004) *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* to examine how and why certain bodies are entitled to spaces that they can comfortably inhabit, while others are perceived (and feel like) space invaders. She writes that,

In other words, while “the other side of the world” is associated with “racial otherness,” racial others become associated with the “other side of the world.” They come to embody distance. This embodiment of distance is what makes [W]hiteness “proximate,” as the “starting point” for orientation. Whiteness becomes what is “here,” a line from which the world unfolds, which also makes what is “there” on “the other side.” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 121)

Later, in *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed (2017) dedicated a chapter to “Being in Question,” which concludes that “we have many histories, many points of arrival, those of us who somehow find themselves not [universal]. A not can be the basis of a rebellion” (p. 134). One recurring theme that I heard comedians address was their experience of receiving the question “Where are you from?” See Toronto-based comedian Alya Kanani’s extended version below (from which she later developed a one-woman show):

A lot of questions about me, about where I’m from. That happens all the time. I don’t actually mind, I don’t mind it. When they ask where I’m from, what they mean to ask is like where you from-from, right? So when they ask me, I just go “Canada!” and watch the disappointment wash over their faces. I don’t like to be mean, but I like to be shitty, you know? There’s a little difference.

“Canadian, yeah, of course you are, of course you are. I respect that. And then your parents, are your parents...?”

Coolcoolcoolcoolcool. Like I didn’t know what they mean, right. but what they don’t know is that I’m a third-wave immigrant, right, so what they should be asking me is like where you from-from, right? Like 150 years ago, but you can see it, right? You can see it, you can see it, you can see it. That is not what they ask, so I’m like yes, let’s do this.

“Oh my parents? Of course, my parents are from Tanzania, in Africa.” “Oh, Africa...” “Yes, that’s right.” “Interesting, very nice. Very nice...both, you’re uh?” “Yes, that’s right, both my parents from Africa. Why?” “Well you don’t look that uh...” “Uh
huh, go ahead.” [emphatically nodding, laughing] “Just your features, they’re not, uh, they’re not very…” “You can do it, go ahead.” “You just don’t uh, you just don’t look that uhh [whispering] Black.” And people always whisper the word Black, ’cause they think that at a normal volume it’s gonna sound racist, you know?

Joking in the context of the intersectionally feminist comedy scene is a productive way of realizing the mobilizing power of injury (Butler, 2013). Through their joyful laughter and affirming cheers, audience members demonstrate that the experiences of the comedian are intelligible to them, that perhaps they have had similar experiences. The shared laughter that results from the articulation of these experiences validates the comedian’s position of epistemic authority and celebrates her power to affect her audience. They recognize her as knowing how to understand her experiences, recognize and expose the hegemonic ideologies at play in an interaction, decode oppressive language, and recontextualize an instance of “othering” into a joke that elicits pleasure.

The performances of these jokes both raised feminist consciousness and affirmed the women who shared these experiences. Laughter ratified Kanani’s interpretation of events. This affirmation is not only epistemic—while it legitimates the comedian’s knowledge of her own experiences, it is also embodied. The comedian and her audiences, through their shared laughter, become women who know what they experience and can recognize the naturalized, invisible processes of othering that are implicit in questions like “Where are you from?” This is in contrast to the non-knowledge experienced through abjection. In Living a Feminist Life, Sarah Ahmed (2017) defined:

Becoming feminist: how we redescribe the world we are in. We begin to identify what happens to me, happens to others. We begin to identify patterns and regularities…A sensation that begins at the back of your mind, an uneasy sense of something amiss, gradually comes forward, as things come up, then receding, as you try to get on with things; as you try to get on despite things. (p. 27)

Becoming feminist, for Ahmed, is also about re-inhabiting one’s past and one’s body:
[being on stage and interacting with a laughing audience] just uplifts you, it makes you feel like, I feel taller when I get off stage, and there’s been so many times when I have had a crazy day, and I have thought, man I don’t know if I can do it tonight, I don’t know if I can go up there and create this thing, and I have always been wrong, and I always can, and I am probably even better after a bad day because I am so excited to be in that moment, ya know. [A]nd comedy I think specifically stand-up comedy, really like it takes people’s stress away, even if it’s only like pockets of time, like moments of time, you can watch a crowd let go of everything that has been plaguing them for even a little bit. You know you can’t really think about that next due date or that next bill when you are really, really laughing, so watching like someone’s whole body and their posture relax as they are settling into a comedy show, and I am surrounded by strangers but we’re all laughing together connecting on this thing, it’s like this humanizing, beautiful thing. Sometimes I feel like a doctor I am like I fixed that lady, ya know. Like her hair looks better now after this show because she’s been laughing having a good time. [A]nd I love all aspect[s] of being a comedian. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have tried to highlight the role of social identities in the production and reception of live stand-up comedy. I argue that live audiences experience the space of the comedy club as intimate and authentic both because of the autobiographical performances of the comedians and the eruption of involuntary laughter from their audiences. To enter the space of the comedy club is to risk being affected and exposed. I began this chapter by outlining the ideological barriers to regarding women as funny. To regard women as funny is to accept their epistemic authority and affective power. It is to be willing to have our interactions with them change us. When their audiences do not consider women as representative of the universal human experience and furthermore assume that women are not capable of being funny, audiences who employ a normative interpretative frame may regard comedians as something laughable or disgusting. Comedians have developed strategies to connect with their audiences and to neutralize the threat that their position of relative power materializes. Self-deprecation is one such strategy. Dispelling the tension caused by non-normative gender performances, even if it is through self-
deprecation, enables comedians to benefit from the flow of positive effects, including vital laughter (and, in some cases, material success).
Conclusion

Can I actually connect with you? If it’s not through humour, then I don’t know what it could be (N. Handa, personal communication, February 5th, 2018)

Everybody likes the funny person (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

The professionally funny women I engaged with throughout this research are making fun, speaking truth to power, and animating resistance. I argue throughout this thesis that comedians have the power to affect their audiences in meaningful and destabilizing ways—through our laughing responses, we let go of the tension in our bodies; through the incongruity we grasp, our minds might be changed. Indeed, our interpretive repertoires can be expanded by the power of incongruity. In this way, comics give audiences the opportunity to recode cultural texts. As Aristotle said of incongruity, “the speaker says something unexpected, the truth of which is recognized” (Rhetoric, III, 11 1412b, quoted in Attardo 1994, 20).

In interviews, comics affirmed this perspective; many articulate the position that in doing stand-up comedy, they are doing important political work. In addition to the power of humour and laughter to animate resistance, the stand-up stage amplifies, elevates, and celebrates marginalized perspectives. As comic Nour Hadidi explains:

You can actually change someone with what you say, and that is why when you write something, and that's why we need to have more voices in comedy, ‘cause if I wasn't doing it, who else is gonna write a joke about the Muslim ban, you know what I mean? …What other Arab Muslim [comics] do you know? There's maybe two more [performing in Toronto], there's Iman, and there's Hoodo. and Hoodo's not Arab, she's Black Muslim. So making space for women and people of colour to do shows, and having those different opinions and points of view, and having people respond to that I think is so important. And I think also there is a lot of power. (N. Hadidi, personal communication, April 5th, 2018)
Hadidi’s point is expressed by several comics who regard their work as important because it intervenes into spaces, like the stand-up stage, where women’s voices have been marginalized or excluded. Marie Sotto expresses a similar sentiment when I asked her what her favourite joke to perform is:

I like some of the sets where I just talk about my mom. It's not me punching down on her, it's like her, it's talking about her lived experience as a Filipina woman, raising three kids and coming here and like, yeah, surviving all of the political turmoil in the Philippines and being a really strict Filipina mom. I like talking about that. [It’s my favourite right now] because I don't hear it a lot in stand-up. I don't think I have ever heard that. It's new because it's mine (M. Sotto, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

Chanel Ali recalls watching Wanda Sykes and feeling like there was room for her story.

I always thought she was funny. I thought she was bold and herself and her perspective as a Black woman I thought was so solid and refreshing—especially because she wasn't someone that was like the class clown and always knew that she was going to be a comedian in some respect. She was in the military and had this fancy job with one of those agencies. She kind of went out on a ledge and brought her perspective, and I just respected it so much. [It was] powerful, ya know. I was like ‘her story is amazing, she's out here just telling her story’. Maybe there is room up there for my story. (C. Ali, personal communication, May 9th, 2018)

We may leave a comedy show a different person we came in; we may, as Ali explains, recognize that our stories are important and there are spaces within which we can share them. I do not think this argument is hyperbolic or unrealistic. However, comedy must be considered in relation to the audience. While teaching a course on women in comedy, I screened Hannah Gadsby’s (2017) Nanette. A White male student came to my office following the class to discuss the special. He felt unsettled when Gadsby mocked his demographic. Comedy feels personal. While he sat watching the special with his colleagues, he thought the critical focus on White men was excessive (and excessively unfunny). Feeling unsettled compelled him to reconsider his approach to comedy. Before this experience, among friends, he had defended the comics’ right to
free speech, to make fun of everything and everyone. His experience as the butt of the joke, along with Gadsby’s deconstruction of stand-up comedy, helped him to reconsider his stance. This anecdote speaks to the power of humour to encourage us as social actors to rethink our previously held positions.

This anecdote also raises questions that surface the potential limitations of stand-up comedy, and of this research: Under what conditions, if not taking a course listed only in the outline as “Popular Cultures”, would this student have watched Nanette in full? It is widely consumed as a Netflix special, and as such can be easily turned off. Linda Mizejewski points out that, “people buy tickets to see a particular comedian not simply because they desire to laugh; they desire something the comedians make them feel and respond to (Mizejewski, 2014, p. 214). Who is buying tickets to see Nanette? Indeed, who buys tickets to explicitly feminist comedy nights?

**Limitations**

One significant limitation to this work is my own role as audience member. As I discuss in Chapter 5, “Making Sense”, my interpretation and analysis of stand-up performances is limited by my own interpretive repertoire. I did not interview other audience members, and do not know how the humour functioned, and laughter felt, for women whose interpretive repertoires, social locations, identifications, personalities, dispositions, and so on differ from my own. Additionally, while referencing and analyzing mediatized comic performances, I do not engage with laughter that circulates through digital mediums. While I focus primarily on live feminist laughter, it is clear that mediatized laughter is also politically salient and individually and collectively meaningful.

**Future Directions**

In this thesis, I discuss laughter from the perspective of researchers, comics, and myself as an audience member. This research would be enriched by interviews with a range of additional audience members. Learning more about why audiences’ were drawn to these events, and how
they felt before and after the performances would contribute to understanding the cultural and political effects of laughter. As I mention in the introduction, I sought out comedy that resonated with me. I was open to learning from and being affected by the performers. I wonder what the experiences of audience members who did not seek out feminist comedy would be, and how they might respond. Additionally, I wonder what else takes places within live audiences. Beyond laughing, what are audiences doing when they attend feminist comedy nights? How far does the performance extend beyond the stage? How do we establish and maintain important social and political affiliations? Identities? Performances?

Relatedly, what does laughter feel like when it is shared digitally? I did not explore this question, and future work on feminist laughter would benefit from addressing the function and experience of digitally shared laughter. While there is some scholarship on laugh tracks, the recorded laughter we experience (and participate in) while consuming recorded comedy specials, as on HBO, Netflix or YouTube for example is another rich site of analysis. The political and social bonds and boundaries that arise through mediatized laughter are significant and worth exploring.

To close, I want to share one of my favourite jokes. When my son was younger, and I would make some proclamation he did not like, he’d say “but, mom...”, and before he could continue, I would respond with mock anger, disbelief, or confusion: “did you just call me a butt-mom?” Early on, while he was young, he laughed and some of the disappointment he felt evaporated. Later, he would impatiently say, “and no, I did not just call you a butt-mom” before I had the chance to ask. These days, now that he is 14, I rarely repeat this joke; it’s become something else. Our relationship to the joke has changed over time. When we do remember it, it is a nice call back to these previously shared moments. Wren recalled this joke recently, and said “you hear a lot about dad jokes, but no one talks about mom jokes”. As more scholarship and popular attention focuses on women who are reaching greater heights of success in comedy, I
hope that North American popular culture imagines and represents women (and mothers) as funny subjects.
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