

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

“Pushing the Edge”: Challenging Racism and Sexism
in American Stand-up Comedy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

Katja Elisabet Antoine

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Karen Brodtkin, Co-chair

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In this dissertation I examine how stand-up comedians challenge racism and sexism in their performances. Stand-up comedy is among the least socially proscribed forms of public expression in contemporary US, and comedians often talk about “sensitive” topics (including race and gender) in direct and humorous ways. Some offer a social critique of hegemonic discourses; they “push the edge.” I argue that by looking at “edges” of hegemonic discourses of race and gender, and how comedians push them, we can deepen our understanding of how racism-white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity presently operate in the US, and how to challenge them.

I focus on comedians who challenge racism and sexism through joke material and in their affective and performative work on stage. Key ways they do so include: performing slavery as

anti-racist critique; targeting genocide and colonialism; challenging the “terrorist label” and racialized masculinities, and through female embodiment.

I conducted 18 months of ethnographic research in Los Angeles (LA and New York are the largest US sites for stand-up), focusing on male and female comedians of color, but also producers and managers. I attended over 130 shows and saw more than 550 comics perform live (including 30 core participants, whom I also interviewed).

In this text, I first show the discourses on race and gender that circulate in the comedy world and the US more broadly. With this, I also set up what comedians push against. I then introduce “the edge” and “pushing the edge” as concepts, using energy/affect, authenticity/sincerity, and performativity as analytical tools, before I show *how* comedians push the edges of race and gender discourses. I also discuss performances that “implode” and expose the core of hegemony.

These comedians’ work becomes part of broader anti-racist discourses through social media, film, and television. Their work shows that we need to pay more attention to affect and performativity in how we assess what challenges to hegemonic discourses look like and their impact. Stand-up comedy, then, provides useful analytical tools for making the often-invisible aspects of everyday anti-racist and anti-sexist resistance visible, and for attuning us to the subtlety of hegemonic violence.

The dissertation of Katja Elisabet Antoine is approved.

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To the best of the human spirit

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Setting the Stage
An Introduction to the Study and Work of Stand-up Comedy

“When are they gonna bring slavery back? I’m *tired* of looking for work! [pause]
Too soon?”
Byron Bowers

It’s around nine pm on a hot summer night in July of 2011. I’m heading to a show hosted and co-produced by Lebanese-American comedian Sammy Obeid at the Three Clubs bar and lounge in Hollywood. Three Clubs is on a somewhat empty and rundown stretch of Vine just north of Santa Monica Boulevard. A liquor store and some 99-cents-type stores are the immediate neighbors; all are closed at this time of night. The bar itself is hard to catch from the street. All you see is a small sign in cursive neon letters that reads “Cocktails,” and a stool with a robust bouncer perched on top in the dark next to an entrance door. The bar is dark inside too and pretty much empty. I can hear the sound of performing comics as I enter, and so I follow the voices through the bar and through a door to the right into a back room that has a slightly elevated stage centered against a long wall. With the entrance to the room right next to the stage, there is no way of being inconspicuous. I walk by, hoping to go unnoticed, and slide into a seat toward the back of the room opposite the stage. The back wall of the room is lined with bench seating, scattered chairs, and tables. More chairs and tables are arranged a step down, right by the stage.

Turns out I walked in on the pre-show open-mic session. The lineup for the evening’s real show is great, with several comedians I’m curious about. While I’m waiting for the show to start, I am able to chat with three of them, including the host Sammy Obeid, and they all agree to be interviewed for my project. The show is about to begin and Obeid takes the stage to get us started. “I’m a Middle-Eastern American,” he begins, “which sounds weird... many Middle

Easterners complain that after 9/11 nobody likes us anymore... [pause] I don't think they liked Middle Easterners *before* either! [laughter] After 9/11, a Mexican came up to me and said, 'Go back to your country!' Then a Middle Easterner told me the same thing. What was he, a self-hating Middle Easterner? Turns out he was a bit confused, he thought I was Mexican!" (the audience laughs). Obeid then announces that there is a case study going on and points at me. I motion my index finger over my mouth. "Oh! I'm not supposed to talk about that; it's a secret..." He kind of loses his momentum so I pitch in, "Go ahead!" "Oh, yeah?" he responds and people laugh. "Okay, we have case study here tonight on race relations in comedy. Say something racist and it will be written down forever!" His comment sets the theme for the rest of the evening in that almost all the comedians make a reference to my "case study." It was the one and only night during my fieldwork that I, the ethnographer, stole the show. I choose to open my dissertation with this account because it sets up comedians as the race theorists of my project by showcasing their awareness and strategic deployment of particular race-themed jokes for a particular audience and affect, a core theme of this project. It also crystalizes the potential impact of the ethnographer on her research environment and participants in a highly visible manner; an influence I subsequently carefully sought to avoid.

After warming up the audience, Obeid introduces the first comic, Rob Martinez, from the Bay Area. Martinez lets us know that he got married a month ago. "She met all the criteria on the list: funny, smart, beautiful, white..." (laughter and groans from the audience). "She is Southern white," he specifies, "from West Virginia." He says it was a bit awkward at the wedding because "every other family member asked me how long I've been in the country!" After a few more bits, Obeid is back on stage and addresses me directly: "Did you get that? 'White?' Write it down!" The hosting comedian is letting me know what the "racist" parts of other comedians'

performances are!

The next comic, Dave Burger, is white and sports a hipster homeless look with his unkempt braided pigtailed shoved under a large bean cap. He even jokes about his appearance. A comic standing behind my seat reaches over and asks for my name. He's Michael Yo. "You'll see! I'll do some racist stuff," he whispers. Through the evening's comedy telegraph, I'm now apparently looking for overtly racist jokes rather than those that challenge and critique... I turn my attention back to the comedian on stage. "We're talking about race," says Burger and looks toward me. "I have a new baby," he says, "she's half Black and half Jewish. My wife's Jewish [laughter]. Of course not! *I'm* the Jewish guy; I couldn't *be* more Jewish. I'm married to a six-foot Black woman with dreadlocks. I got pulled over for a '204' a couple of weeks ago. Don't know what a '204' is? 'Driving while white with a Black woman in the passenger seat and a mixed-race baby in Pasadena!'" We laugh. "Homeless" guy is making some good racial commentary!

Next is the young man who just approached me. Yo is of Black American and Korean descent. He starts by addressing "the lady in the back who's writing about racism," and says, "you're gonna get a lot of it!" He does a bit about his confusion from being mixed because his "Black traits" are countered by his "Asian traits." He also talks about how his folks met in Korea, "my dad fell in love; my mom saw a way out!" He mentions that his mom wouldn't let him play with Black kids. "But mom," said the young Michael, "*dad* is Black!" "No!" she responded, "he no Black; he has Ph.D.; he no Black!" (there's some scattered laughter). "If you laughed at that, you're a racist!" he concludes.

Michael Quu, a Pilipino man from New York, follows. He addresses the Indian contingent in the audience, all of whom sit against the sidewall. "Who's the doctor?" he asks and

waits. “If there are that many Indians, you know there is at least one doctor!” They all laugh and point toward the one guy in their group who indeed is a doctor (this made it even funnier of course—“positive” stereotype proven!). He continues, “Some of my Indian friends complain to me sometimes, ‘We are not all doctors!’ I don’t understand,” says Quu, “it’s a *good* stereotype to have! I’m Pilipino; we’re nurses... That’s like ten steps below doctors!”

Obeid is back on stage chatting with us, and before he introduces the next comedian he says toward me, “We’ve got some good race stuff coming up! Take notes!” Assad Motavaselli, a Middle-Eastern comic, is next. “I just moved to Santa Monica,” he says, “and my neighbor is a super-hot Asian chick! [To me:] Don’t write that down!” He does a bit on ordering his favorite beer, Negro Modelo, from a Black waiter. “I tried saying just Modelo, but the waiter asked, ‘What kind of Modelo?’ and listed several kinds except Negro.” Caught in a predicament, Assad anxiously says he blurted out, “I voted for Obama!” I wanted him to know, it’s my beer that is racist, not me! Please don’t write that down!” he implores me with false concern.

Monrok, an Indian-American comic, observes that she’s “never seen so many Indians at one show! And [East] Asians! I guess Barack *did* change some shit!” (some laughter). “Funny how when a Middle Easterner hosts the show, the white people leave. Any white people? [a man in the front row who *looks* Latino or Middle Eastern raises his hand] One! You don’t even look white! What are you? White Mexican? What kind of white person *are* you?! Any Black people? [she sees a Black woman in the back] One! Why don’t you sit up front? It’s 2011. Why are you sitting in the back?” The Black woman quickly retorts, “Ask the white person!” “Shit!” says Monrok, “I *love* Black people! They keep it real!” From there she goes into a bit about how talented Black people are and how they should have their own TV-shows, sports programs... schools, bathrooms..., et cetera. People laugh as they realize where the joke is going.

After a few more comics, Obeid is back on stage and looking toward me he says, “You got some good stuff!” Then he thanks us for staying with the show until the end and introduces the headliner for the evening, Darren Carter. Carter is a skilled comedian with a unique style and high energy. He starts his sets with a well-executed beat boxing routine, and it gets the room going right away. In the middle of it, out of nowhere, he calls out, “Black people!” and then to me, “Write it down!” People laugh hard, as do I. Later on in the set he throws in a “Chinese bitches!” followed by, “I want to make the list!” looking toward me. Darren tells a story about Cambodian girl scouts selling cookies. “Did that make it to the list?” he asks. I give him the thumbs up. He does a bit in mock-Asian about “Sam,” his web master who says, “I’m Sam, your web master. I take off my shoes before I enter your home page!” He also does a good Snoop Dogg impersonation. He says someone told him, “When you do Snoop Dogg, you look like him!” “Lady,” said Carter, “I’m white; I look like Snoop Dogg’s x-ray!” “How’s the case study going?” he then asks me. “You’re on the list!” I respond. “I made it? I don’t know, is that good or bad?” “It’s good!” I say. “All I heard is that there’s a case study!” he explains to the audience. He ends with an improvised joke-and-beat-box routine that has the audience screaming with laughter.

After the show I thank Obeid and laughingly tell him that I’m not supposed to influence the show, but clearly that got botched tonight. He assures me that the comedians would pretty much have done the same material anyway. I learned my lesson though; from then on I only approached comedians I wanted to solicit for participation *after* they had performed rather than right before...

The Premise

This is a dissertation about what stand-up comedians can teach us about how racism-white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity play out today in America, and how we can challenge these discourses beyond comedy.¹

Through my Los Angeles-based research I learned that comedians' work of challenging racism-white supremacy (and sexism and heteronormativity) involves a combination of three major considerations. One primary concern is content, as in what the jokes are about and how they are worded. A second consideration is performativity, the comedians' expressed forms of identity. And thirdly, comedians do a reading of how far they can push an audience (through a sense of energy/affect) in terms of challenging mainstream thinking. All three need to be tended to and "worked" for a successful performance. That is, comedians craft content (by developing jokes, adding or removing loaded words from particular jokes, determining which jokes to include in a set, etc.); comedians work their identities (by balancing expressions of authenticity and sincerity, addressing traits that set them apart in some way, etc.); and they work their audiences (by reading the energy in the room, making themselves relatable, saving more loaded jokes for later in the set, doing crowd work, etc.).² These three factors are interrelated in that the reading of the room impacts the jokes comics may choose to do and how they mark their identities for a particular audience. On some level, all skilled comics tend to these three factors (jokes, performativity, and the energy/affect of the room). However, it is only when they add an

¹ I use the combination term racism-white supremacy regularly throughout this manuscript because I wish to emphasize that the two are sides of the same coin. I will elaborate further on this in my discussion of the literature relevant to this project.

² A set is the entire sequence of scripted jokes and crowd work a comedian performs at any one time on stage. Sets are measured in minutes unless they're a full hour.

element of *social critique* that they “*push the edge*” of hegemonic discourses. Pushing the edge is the focus of this dissertation.

I argue that by looking at “edges” and how they are pushed, we can deepen our understanding of how racism-white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity operate in the US in the contemporary (non-)postracial moment, and of how to affectively resist the impact of these discourses. In challenging race and gender hegemonies by using affect and performativity, comedians effectively theorize these hegemonic systems as affective and performative phenomena (in addition to seeing them as structurally maintained, enacted through policy, and individually expressed through implicit bias, micro-aggressions, overt racism, misogyny, etc.). Through this process, they also highlight where today’s racial edges float around, revealing both new shapes of old forms and direct recycling of older formations. The work of comedians who push the edge becomes part of broader anti-racist discourses through social media, film, and television. Their work shows that we need to pay more attention to affect and performativity in how we assess what challenges to hegemonic race and gender discourses look like more broadly, and the ways in which these systems impact those who benefit from and are victimized by it. Attunement to energy, gaps, and the unexpected are some of the affective patterns that bear consideration. Stand-up comedy, then, provides useful analytical tools for making the often-invisible aspects of everyday anti-racist and anti-sexist work visible, and for increasing our ability to see the subtlety of hegemonic violence.

My initial objective was to study how artists fight racism. What does individual anti-racist work look like today among the producers and consumers of American pop culture outside of organized social-activist groups? Thoughts of anti-racist action typically evoke images of the Civil Rights Movement and the various ethnic rights movements it inspired in the 1960s and 70s.

Since then, the struggle against racism has largely disappeared from the limelight of the national stage, but continues in the work of both social justice organizations and artists. Contemporary social justice organizations challenge governmental policies and practices that adversely affect and disproportionately disadvantage individuals and communities of color in areas such as the environment, the legal system, education, and health services. White antiracist groups organize as allies of people of color and focus their work on countering white racism and privilege among white people. In relation to such groups of activists, artists stand out in their ability to challenge racism as a particular phenomenon in a directly observable, public, and provocative way.³

So why look at stand-up comedy for insights about race and racism? First, stand-up comedy presents an avenue for talking about race and racism more freely and critically compared to most other art forms and other public spheres.⁴ It is perhaps the least regulated or filtered of the performance arts in terms of what the artists can and do say on stage (with the music industry a notable exception). Second, comics speak about topics that are relevant to them, and for comedians of color that includes their racial and ethnic experiences. There's a lot of "race talk" (Pollock 2004; Myers 2005). Third, stand-up comedy relies on performers taking advantage of and poking at the discursive gaps, inconsistencies, and areas of friction in everyday life—all of which abound in hegemonic racial discourses—and their work makes these visible. Fourth, good

³ The #BlackLivesMatter movement that erupted onto the scene in 2014 after the much-publicized murders by police of two unarmed Black men (Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and Eric Garner in New York City), stands out as a new and forceful presence in this struggle as well.

⁴ Outside of performance circles, people sometimes conflate stand-up comedy, improv comedy, and sketch comedy. While they all aim to be funny, and skills in one genre can contribute to another, they are not the same types of performances. Among the three, stand-up is the most "naked" in that it consists of one performer alone on stage doing a combination of scripted and improvised material (the latter usually in the form of crowd work). Improv comedy is performed in groups and is completely unscripted, even though there are performance strategies that provide scaffolding for the artists to work with. Sketch comedy usually involves at least two performers in a sketch (although it can be a solo sketch), consists of shorter sets or stories, and is wholly scripted.

comics stay up-to-date with current events in American political life and pop culture, and many offer humorous critique from a race-conscious perspective. Fifth, comedians are keen observers of human behavior, and have a knack for homing in on the worst of what we have to offer, racism being one of the offerings. Additionally, stand-up comedy as an art form offers an observable dynamic interaction between performers and audiences suitable for social scientific analysis. Since stand-up comedy shows attract a racially and ethnically eclectic group of people, and audiences at different shows reflect diversity within those groups, ethnographers can observe naturally occurring interactions between comics and a broad racial and ethnic demographic that is not possible in many other social and cultural spheres.⁵ This type of study can also tease out the strategies comedians who talk critically about race employ so that audiences “get” it and find it funny. American studies scholar Rebecca Krefting specifically calls for,

Documentation of the strategies humor employs to curry favor and facilitate audience identification [that] would be useful to members of social movements seeking to co-opt cultural practices such as entertainment and artistic production and to advance causes and initiatives more effectively. [2014:237]

This project unintentionally answers that call to a considerable degree.

More broadly, anthropologists have argued that the study of jokes, humor, and mocking in everyday use gives insight, for instance, into social structures and relationships (Beckett 2008; Douglas 1968; Radcliffe-Brown 1940), ways of dealing with stigma (Black 2012), the negotiation of stereotypes (Queen 2005), how people respond to social inequalities (Carty and

⁵ I’m not suggesting that comedy audiences are always racially and ethnically diverse; they sometimes are and sometimes aren’t. What I *am* saying is that most comedians are likely to perform in front of a wide range of audiences, sometimes mixed, sometimes almost exclusively one racial demographic. In attending numerous shows, the researcher has the opportunity to observe all of these demographic combinations in relation to a particular comic’s material, which can reveal differences in how certain groups respond to certain comics and certain jokes.

Musharbash 2008), and the social function of obscenity (Douglas 1999[1975]; Seizer 2011).⁶ Stand-up comedy, then, presents itself as a prime site for learning about race, racism, and its contestations.

Once I ventured into “the field,” I quickly realized that gender and sexism were essential parts of this project too. This was not because I found a plethora of comics who challenged sexism.⁷ To the contrary, sexist and misogynistic jokes overwhelmed me with their ubiquity and vehemence. They are such taken-for-granted elements of sets that they are rarely marked as sexist or misogynistic. I found that sexism in stand-up comedy is largely treated as unremarkable. Comics who tell racist jokes, by contrast, often make comments that demonstrate their awareness of this. Comedians who offer a *critique* on race issues are a smaller pool within the sea of comics who tell plain racist jokes. Compared to that small pool, however, comedians who call out sexism and heteronormativity are like drops in the ocean. Very quickly, then, this project became about both race and gender, since I cannot offer a comprehensive analysis of one without including the other.

⁶ Within the anthropology of the US, my work articulates well with studies on performance and cultural production that use race and gender as analytical angles (e.g. Fox 2004 on class and country music, Jackson Jr. 2001, 2005 on the performance of racial identities, Kondo 1997 on theatrical performances, and Mahon 2004 on the cultural politics of Black rock and roll). Important interlocutors are also anthropologists whose work focuses on the US entertainment industry, reaching as far back as Powdermaker’s (2013[1950]) study of the Hollywood film industry and most recently, Sherry Ortner’s (2013) investigation into independent film production.

⁷ Some performers like to differentiate between the term “comedian” and “comic,” and argue that the first refers specifically to someone who has a career writing and performing jokes, and that the other refers to anyone who is funny or, alternately, to a comedic actor, that is, someone who does not write his or her own jokes and who does not perform in front of live audiences (excluding live studio audiences, who are often coached when to laugh). Most of the comedians I met, however, use the terms interchangeably. I follow their lead, so throughout this text the terms “comic” and “comedian” should be understood to refer to performers who do live stand-up. If I use these words in any other sense, I will explicitly state so.

The Academic Conversations I Draw on and Partake In

Several scholarly interventions have offered great insights and useful analytical tools in helping me think about the kind of work comedians do with regards to challenging race and gender discourses. Critical race theorists Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati's recent work on "*working identity*," which investigates "the 'double bind' of racial performance" in the American workforce, provides a frame for thinking about the performance of identity (or performativity) comedians do as part of their performance of comedy on stage (2013:1). Carbado and Gulati argue that people of color are not only subjected to racism as members of a particular racial or ethnic group, but also have to negotiate intra-group discrimination, whereby "racially palatable" members gain preference over those seen as "racially salient" in the eyes of employers (2013:2). Racially palatable employees are "indistinguishable from whites" except for the phenotypical traits that mark them as non-white (Carbado and Gulati 2013:2). Racially salient job applicants are those deemed "too black" or too much of something else that stands out as not racially belonging in white institutional spaces (Carbado and Gulati 2013:2). Racial minorities who work in these spaces have to make continuous choices in terms of how to present themselves and how to act, that is, how to work their identities. The authors assert that the same forms of identity negotiation take place with regards to gender, so that "Women work their identities as feminine or not. Men are expected to act like men. Gays and lesbians are viewed along a continuum of acting straight or not" (Carbado and Gulati 2013:3).

How to work racial and gender identities are considerations stand-up comedians also tend to (consciously or not) in their performances. Depending on the location, venue, and audience, comedians may choose to present themselves differently, or emphasize different aspects of self, in terms of what kind of racialized and gendered person they put forth. Contrary to the consistent

preference for racial palatability in white-dominated corporate America, comics may need to slide back and forth between racial palatability and racial saliency for “better fit” depending on the audience. A Black female comedian, for instance, is likely to present herself as more racially salient and project a certain type of femininity at a bar show in the hood, and as more racially palatable along with an equally palatable femininity at a corporate conference gig. While the boundaries of palatability are much more flexible for comedians, comics are nonetheless constantly engaged in working their identities in different ways on stage.

This identity negotiation that Carbado and Gulati discuss points to a conflict, or a gap, between how one *sees oneself* in terms of race and gender, and how one *performs* one’s race and gender in (white) public spaces, hence the double bind (2013:25). Their work links that of other scholars, who also investigate gaps and cracks and slippages in social and cultural life, with the race and gender work of stand-up comedians. Closely related to Carbado and Gulati’s work is philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler’s (1999) theorizing of gender *performativity*. Butler argues that gender identities are socially and historically mediated rather than essential gender cores that need expression (1999:180). Gender identities, as a result, exist and are reaffirmed through ongoing repetition; they are performative (Butler 1999:178). In the instances where we “fail to repeat” these reenactments, we create a discursive gap and that gap holds the potential for transformation (Butler 1999:179). The conflict Carbado and Gulati speak of with regards to working race and gender identities sits at the threshold of that discursive gap, where failing to repeat a racially palatable identity may uphold one’s racial integrity and challenge institutional expectations, but is also likely to incur a cost to the non-compliant. In chapter 2, I discuss how Butler’s work articulates with that of comedians and pushing the edge; here, I wish to emphasize her contribution to my thinking about the broader application of gaps with regards

to race, gender, identity, and performance. Butler shows that the discursive gap that emerges when expected gender identities fail to repeat is a space of limited agency. Similarly, Carbado and Gulati note this space for limited agency in racial identity negotiations (2003:1772). Comedians take advantage of the gap and the agency when they deliberately fail to repeat expected identities. Intentionally worked gaps can often be productive in terms of challenging the mainstream and also well received by audiences. Comedians sometimes also unwittingly fail to repeat, in which case the performance often “bombs.”⁸

Sociocultural anthropologist Anna Tsing (2005) also discusses *gaps* in her work on global connections between the multiple parties invested in the Indonesian rainforest. For Tsing, this means focusing on “zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak” (2005:xi). Gaps are inherent in this formulation, which suggests a negotiation of difference. In her elaboration on gaps, she characterizes them as “zones of... incomprehensibility” (2005:196). Linking the previous conceptualizations with Tsing’s, we could say that when a person of color or a woman works his or her identity in a way that fails to repeat, he or she enters a zone that is incomprehensible from mainstream perspectives. The performer becomes unintelligible. For comedians, this creates a sort of double bind. Anthropologist Jessica Cattelino discusses double binds as they pertain to First Nations’ exercise of sovereignty (2010:235-236). Sovereignty requires economic resources, yet when First Nations wield economic power, their sovereignty is challenged (Cattelino 2010:235-236). Cattelino presents this as a classic example of a double bind whereby “competing possible paths to overcoming [a] dilemma negate one another, posing a contradiction and leading to no possible resolution” (2010:236). For comics, the double bind in this case is such that, on the one hand, the

⁸ A performance that bombs is one where the comic is unable to connect with the audience and make them laugh.

gap is a doorway into the unexpected, and the unexpected, as we shall see throughout this manuscript, often makes for funny—the bottom line for comedians. On the other hand, comics need to make themselves intelligible, or relatable, in order for the audience to accept and “get” the jokes. Comics need to tap into the unexpected *and* make themselves intelligible. When comics find a way to successfully balance the two and perform in ways that offer some form of social critique, they “push the edge.”

Tsing also elaborates on the *friction* that is created in the gap. Friction is not necessarily a negative quality, “The effects of encounters across difference can be compromising *or* empowering” (2005:6, emphasis added). Friction, as a form of energy, can destroy or generate. Energy and its manipulation are central aspects of comedians’ work. In the comedic context I use the terms *energy* and *affect* as equivalents. Gaps are also affective spaces, energized and potent. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (1996) illuminates this dimension of gaps in analyzing the storytelling and talk she observes among rural miners in Appalachia. Stewart discusses the codes and logic of linear, rational thinking, and shows how story telling in the hills does not conform to this sanitized form of discourse. Rather, in the hills, people’s stories and talk “begi[n] and en[d] in the space of a gap between events and their meanings” (Stewart 1996:88). Her description helps situate the work of pushing the edge that stand-up comedians do more precisely. A lot of stand-up comedy, and pushing the edge specifically, takes place in that space of interpretation between something that happens and what the comedians make of it. If what they make of it is unexpected from the audience’s perspective, the odds are it may also be funny (although it’s certainly not a guarantee).

The *unexpected*, as historian Philip Deloria explains, “resists categorization, and thereby questions expectation itself” (2004:11). This opens up a space for critique that comedians who

push the edge put to good use. Deloria juxtaposes the unexpected and the *anomalous*, where “the naming of... [the latter] simultaneously re-creates and empowers the very same categories that it escapes” (2004:5). While we laugh at the unexpected, we laugh at anomalies too, argues Deloria, but then we laugh at the impossibility of the image we are seeing (2004:4). In one of his examples, people laugh at the image of a Native American woman in a beauty parlor from the 1940s. He argues that the chuckle the image provokes is precisely one that laughs at the anomaly, and in that process it also “reaffirm[s] the rightness of one’s broadest cultural expectations” (Deloria 2004:4). The anomalous, then, stands out in a way that reinforces expectations, whereas the unexpected opens up the possibility for transformation of those expectations. The anomalous and the unexpected are recurring themes in the analysis I do of stand-up comedy and comedians. The work comedians do when they push the edge adds to this conversation of discursive gaps and friction, the unexpected and failures to repeat, and the working of racial and gendered identities, by connecting all of these elements through affective and performative challenges to hegemonic race and gender discourses. This dissertation investigates *how* stand-up comedians do that.

My discussion of *what* comedians push the edges of has greatly benefitted from the rich work on race and gender by various scholars. Before I proceed, however, I wish to emphasize that my discussion of race and racism is purposefully US-centric. Not only does my research take place in the US, the racial discourses the comedians and I engage in are historically, socially, and culturally situated in a US context. This is revealed, for instance, in the racial and ethnic categorizations and stereotypes I present, in the historical and cultural references, in the intergroup and intragroup dynamics, in the speech patterns, and in the linguistic choices comics make. It is also readily apparent in my analysis, which draws significantly on theories that

emerged in and out of US-specific conditions. Having said that, much of my discussion of racism-white supremacy is sadly also relevant to how racism manifests outside of the United States, albeit there in modified localized forms.

Anthropologists and others who work on issues of race and racism convincingly argue that racism-white supremacy is a function of power. Sociocultural anthropologist Faye Harrison states that racism “involves social practices... that perpetuate an oppressive structure of power relations,” and that as a result, “racism can be reproduced and sustained in the absence of race-centered prejudice” (2005:9). Race scholar Philomena Essed adds that, “Without *access* to the power to actually harm the ‘other’ as a group, one may be guilty of pre-judgment... and of individual discrimination, but not of racism” (Essed 1990:11, emphasis added). Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg (1993) and linguistic anthropologist Jane H. Hill (2008) see racism as “a set of ‘discourses,’” using discourse in the Foucauldian sense as “sets of fundamental principles that organize the world” (Hill 2008:19). This perspective parallels Audrey Smedley’s idea of “racism as a ‘world view’” (1993:17), and Joe R. Feagin’s (2006) notion of a “white racial ‘frame’” (Hill 2008:19). They all conceptualize racism as a view of the world that makes common sense (see also Brodtkin 2004[1998]:179 and Pagliai 2009:576). Comedians who push the edge on racism-white supremacy play with all these elements in their work. They make fun of and challenge racist social practices, discourses and worldviews, as well as their common-sense undercurrents, in the way they work their identities, in the content of their jokes, and in the unexpected analytical twists and turns they take throughout a set.

Linguistic anthropologist Valentina Pagliai argues that by seeing “racism and racialization as interactionally constructed,” we can deduce that ‘racist’ is not just a state of being but an act of doing (2009:553). “Agency,” in other words, is “central to expressions of

racism” (Pagliai 2009:553). As I will show, pushing the edge *against* racism is also an “act of doing” in a performative and affective sense. Acts of contestation may not always take expected forms when comedians perform them; they don’t simply voice direct disagreement or condemnation. Rather, comics frequently reproduce that which they contest on some level. One example of this is the use of mock languages, which typically involves speaking mocking versions of “foreign” (i.e. non-English) languages, stereotypical accents in English, and verbal expressions that index people from particular racial or ethnic groups. Jane H. Hill, who has conducted pioneering research on the use of mock-Spanish, argues that, “in order to ‘make sense of’ Mock Spanish, [one must have]... access to very negative racializing representations of Chicanos and Latinos as stupid, politically corrupt, sexually loose, lazy, dirty, and disorderly” (1998:683). When comics use mock language, they rely on the assumption that the audience is familiar with the racist discourses the mock language codes for. Left as is, it is just plain racist. If the comics use mock language as part of a critique, they may also push the edges of those racist assumptions. Linguist Elaine Chun (2004) analyzes this dynamic in her work on Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho’s use of mock-Asian. Chun argues that Cho’s mock-Asian both reaffirms a racist and racializing discourse and, significantly, subverts that discourse and disempowers its use by non-Asian-identified others (2004:263). I elaborate further on Chun’s analysis of Cho in chapter 3. Other scholars have investigated the use of mock-Ebonics (Ronkin and Karn 1999) and mock-Filipino (Labrador 2004).

Scholars also situate racist practices and worldviews within an ideology of *white supremacy*.⁹ Although comics who push the edge typically do not use that term on stage, I find

⁹ Philip Deloria argues that, “Ideologies offer both truthful pictures of the world as it exists and falsely prescriptive understandings of the world as it might (or should) be” (2004:9). He suggests that ideologies help us make sense of and turn contradictions into belief systems shared by a wide spectrum of people

that it captures much of what they push against. In mainstream American racial discourses, racism and white supremacy are recognized as “bad,” but only narrowly applied to describe overt racists, like the Ku Klux Klan. White supremacy as an ideology, however, does not exclusively refer to racist white extremist groups, but to a logic that holds white as superior, normal, natural, and neutral, and where white superiority is unquestioned. Legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley (1989:1024n129), defines white supremacy as:

a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. [Harris 1993:1714]

White supremacy is a system where “white” sets the standard against which all others and everything else is (inferiorly) positioned and compared. It is a system in which we are all deeply enmeshed and socialized into from the day we are born. Legal scholar Barbara Flagg concurs and notes that:

Even whites who do not harbor any conscious or unconscious belief in the superiority of white people participate in the maintenance of white supremacy whenever [they] impose white norms without acknowledging their whiteness. Any serious effort to dismantle white supremacy must include measures to dilute the effect of whites’ dominant status, which carries with it the power to define as well as to decide. [1993:979]

I would add that this complicity applies to people of color too in that they also participate in the maintenance of white supremacy whenever they adhere to and reproduce discourses that stem from that ideology. White supremacy, then, is a much broader concept than acknowledged in mainstream discourses, and does not require adherence to overtly racist beliefs or racist

(2004:9). He concludes that, “Ideologies... are not, in fact, true, but, as things that structure real belief and action in a real world, they might as well be. Ideology is not simply an idea reproduced by individuals in and through systems of representation. Rather, it is a lived experience, something we see and perform on a daily basis” (2004:9, see also Comaroff and Comaroff 1991 for an elaboration on ideology, and Smedley 1993 for race in the US as a world view).

intentions. White supremacy, however, has deeply racist effects regardless of intentions. I therefore frequently use the term *racism-white supremacy* in this text in order to make the inextricability of the two explicit.

White privilege is one, typically “non-intentional,” expression of white supremacy. White privilege refers to the advantages people perceived as white have over people perceived not to be, solely as a function of race (regardless of class, gender, sexual orientation, or any other variable). White privilege can be expressed as entitlement, as taken-for-granted assumptions, and as blindness to the privilege itself and to the structural and individual racial oppression of others (see McIntosh 1989 for other examples of white privilege). Flagg refers to this blindness to one’s whiteness (and its privileges) as “the transparency phenomenon” (1993:970). The ability and option to be blind to race, to not think about it, is a white privilege—a privilege people of color don’t have. Many white folks also find talking about race highly uncomfortable (sociocultural anthropologist Karen Brodtkin calls this “an open secret” [2009:198]). Brodtkin’s work on environmental justice activism in South Los Angeles teases out a complex set of dynamics in which whites and Latinos working on the same side of a cause negotiate white discomfort through “race-avoidance” (2009:13). Discourses of color-blindness also fit into this race-avoidant behavior (for an in-depth exploration of color-blind racism and its premises see the work of Bonilla-Silva 2010, and also Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004; Brown et al. 2003, and Gotanda 1991). Brodtkin observes that “the absence of public discourse [about race] makes it hard to deal with...” and that when political and civic leadership stay silent on the race topic, it leaves a gap available for (positive or negative) exploitation (2009:39). Stand-up comedians who push the edge exploit that silent gap to poke at the premises that created it in the first place, and they too make audiences uncomfortable (subsequent chapters show how they do this while still

maintaining a connection with the audience and delivering a successful performance).

Sociologist Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) work on whiteness corroborates both Flagg's notion of white transparency and Brodtkin's observation of white discomfort and race-avoidance. Frankenberg considers the "usually unmarked and unnamed" practices of whiteness to be one of its defining features (1993:1). The other two dimensions she names are (1) that "whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege," and (2) that "it is a 'standpoint,' a place from which white people look at [them]selves, at others, and at society" (1993:1). Whiteness, however, is but one of multiple standpoints. Standpoint theorists argue that people who are marginalized in various ways have their own perspectives, or standpoints, that often challenge dominant views and knowledges (Harding 1992:442). Fundamental to standpoint theory is the argument that one cannot claim scientific objectivity without taking various positionalities into consideration. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway (1988) frames this in terms of "situated knowledges." Says Haraway, "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (1988:589). While Haraway speaks from a feminist perspective, her argument is inclusive of other non-dominant positions, like race, as well.

Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) addresses the compound effect of multiple non-dominant positions in her conceptualization of *intersectionality*. Intersectionality makes room for and recognizes that our experiences in life emerge from a multitude of positions and identities that we take on and are assigned. Crenshaw argues that intersectional experiences add up to more than the sum of their variables, and that ignoring these experiences in favor of those of people burdened by singular forms of discrimination not only excludes the multiply disadvantaged from consideration, but also ensures the failure of any redressive measures

(Crenshaw 1989:140). Additionally, while intersectionality is most frequently discussed in relation to those oppressed on multiple levels (with Black lesbian women as the poster image for the term), it should be noted that everyone (including white straight men) has intersectional experiences. Those intersections work to the advantage of some and to the disadvantage of others.

In order to understand how white supremacy operates in people's daily lives, we need to take marked and unmarked categories and intersectional positionalities into consideration. I found cultural theorist Sara Ahmed's (2006, 2010) work on affect and orientation helpful in thinking about positionality in the comedy show room specifically. Ahmed argues that how we perceive the "atmosphere" in a room depends on the "angle" of our arrival and, conversely, that depending on our positionality, "the atmosphere is already angled" when we enter (2010:37). The angled atmosphere, as Ahmed points out, "is always felt from a specific point" (2010:37). The point from which one feels the angled room is framed by one's "particular [social, historical, and political] involvements and relationships," and these in turn determine one's orientation to the room. She explains, "Orientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them" (Ahmed 2006:28). In the dynamic environment of the showroom, comics orient themselves not only to various objects (the stage, the microphone, the furnishings in the room, etc.), but also to the people in the room (both to the materiality of their bodies and to their social subjectivities). Their positionality affects their orientation to the energy of a particular room, which then affects their performativity (consciously or unconsciously) and the edges they are able to and choose to push in their performances.

A white straight male comic, then, embodies all the structurally advantageous intersectional positions available with regards to race, sexual orientation, and gender, when he enters the atmosphere of the room, *regardless of who is in the room*. This does not necessarily mean that the angle of the room affirms all those structural advantages at all times, but I want to bring attention to the fact that structural advantages are present even if an individual does not appear to benefit from them at a particular moment. The cumulative intersectional experiences of all others fall on a spectrum that combines structural advantages and/or disadvantages. Reframed in ideological terms, those at the intersectional zenith are the beneficiaries of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, and those who don't benefit from one of these are to a greater or lesser degree its victims.¹⁰

Media and cultural studies scholar Andrea Lee Smith links these three ideologies and argues that, "...white supremacy is constituted by separate and distinct, but still interrelated, logics" (2006:67). Smith imagines these logics as three pillars under the umbrella of white supremacy: Slavery/Capitalism, Genocide/Colonialism, and Orientalism/War (2006:67). The slavery/capitalism logic is the prototype for American-style racism whereby the devaluation of Blacks allows whites, many of whom are also exploited cogs in the capitalist wheel, to still feel superior and accepting of the violations they endure (Smith 2006:67). The second pillar, the logic of genocide/colonialism, "holds that indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must *always* be disappearing..." (Smith 2006:68). Smith quotes Kate Shanley (no citation given) who observes that, "Native peoples are a permanent 'present absence' in the US colonial imagination, an 'absence' that reinforces, at every turn, the conviction that Native peoples are indeed vanishing and that the conquest of Native lands is justified" (2006:68). Additionally,

¹⁰ To be a victim of oppression does not necessarily imply a victimized identity.

sociocultural anthropologist Jessica Cattelino points out that “indigenous peoples more commonly are associated with past tradition (or present-day socioeconomic failure and cultural decline)” both in scholarly work and in US public culture (2015:25). America’s Native population, then, is seen as belonging to the past and as absent in the present. American Indian comics are for the most part absent on the LA comedy scene, thereby eerily corroborating this logic. There are, however, non-Native comics who engage this logic in their comedy, and I present some of their work in chapter 3.

The Orientalism/War logic “marks certain peoples or nations as inferior and as posing a constant threat to the well-being of empire” (Smith 2006:68). Smith points out that, “This logic is evident in the anti-immigration movements within the United States that target immigrants of color. It does not matter how long immigrants of color reside in the United States, they generally become targeted as foreign threats, particularly during war time” (2006:68). She argues that framing white supremacy this way allows for a more nuanced understanding of its dynamics. Importantly, she points out that although people of color share a victimized position vis-à-vis white supremacy overall, we are also complicit in each other’s victimization in various ways when we consider the more specific dynamics of each pillar. I shall return to this particular aspect of white supremacy as it plays out in stand-up comedy in chapter 4. As far as Smith’s three pillars are concerned, I modify them slightly in my discussion and reframe them as logics of slavery, genocide/colonialism, and Orientalism, to more accurately reflect the particular edges the comics I work with push.

In critical theorist Edward Said’s (1979[1978]) first conceptualization of Orientalism, he provides three meanings. The first one is academic, as in scholarly work pertaining to “the Orient” (Said 1979[1978]:2). The second is more general, and he describes it as “a style of thought” that distinguishes between ‘the Orient’ and... ‘the Occident’” (Said 1979[1978]:2). The third meaning of Orientalism is “as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having

authority over the Orient” (1979[1978]:3). The latter two are most germane to my work here. The second meaning plays out in Middle-Eastern comics’ engagement with the terrorist label, which reflects an “us versus them” mindset where we, “the Occident,” are the belonging and familiar and they, “the Orient,” are the exotic and foreign. The third meaning is relevant because the deployment of Orientalist tropes in comedy often belittles, demeans, and demonizes the targets in ways that, intentionally or not, establishes tacit dominance and authority over them. Said’s work focuses on the Near East, but recognizes the Far East as equally constructed through a European Orientalist gaze. Andrea Smith also includes Latinos under this logic (2006:69). I will adhere to Said’s stricter application of Orientalism in my use of the term. I would also like to add, as Said makes clear in his work, that the construction of “the Orient” was originally a white male construction, the Orientalist gaze that of a white European man (1979[1978]:1).

Linked to the discussion on the three pillars of white supremacy is an understanding of heteronormativity and patriarchy as foundational to US imperialism and governance (Smith 2006:71). Specifically, Smith remarks that,

Any liberation struggle that does not challenge heteronormativity cannot substantially challenge colonialism or white supremacy. Rather, as Cathy Cohen (1999) contends, such struggles will maintain colonialism based on a politics of secondary marginalization where the most elite class of these groups will further their aspirations on the backs of those most marginalized within the community. [2006:72]

Ultimately, then, in order to understand and fight white supremacy, one must understand and fight heteronormativity and patriarchy. Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner elaborates on patriarchy as a system:

Although patriarchy is a system of social power, it is also a system of cultural categories and personal identities. As a system of cultural categories, it is grounded in a conceptual division of the world into two (and only two) kinds of gendered persons, “women” and “men”, defined as both different and unequal... Furthermore, the categories, which are defined as fundamentally and essentially heterosexual, function as both classifiers and identities. It is through the play of life by real people within patriarchal social formations that those categories/identities are reproduced. [2014:5]

The patriarchal dynamics of social power, categorization, binary gender conceptualizations, and heteronormativity that Ortner describes play out in stand-up comedy in explicit ways, which I explore in chapter 1.¹¹

The original beneficiaries of white supremacy, then, were white men with property—those who owned land and people (women, children, indentured servants, and slaves). Critical race theorist Cheryl Harris argues that whiteness, and “the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits” that come with it, in itself has become a valuable asset that whites will protect (and kill for) (1993:1713). Whiteness is a form of property (Harris 1993, see also Lipsitz 1998 for whiteness as investment, and Frankenberg 1997 for an investigation into the various dimensions of whiteness). In congruence with Harris’s claim, Karen Brodtkin’s influential work on the whitening of Jewish-Americans specifically ties the project of white supremacy to American capitalism (2004[1998]:24). Other scholars have also parsed out different links between whiteness, white supremacy, class, property, and capitalism (see Hartigan 1999, 2005; Jackson Jr. 2001; MacLean 2006; Roediger 1999[1991]). While this dissertation does not specifically focus on the political economy of comedy, the *value* of whiteness is nonetheless a pertinent element in my discussion of hegemonic discourses and at times also in comedic performances (late comedian Patrice O’Neal has a famous bit on the value of a pretty white woman).

Comedians don’t just reflect and comment on mainstream social discourses they observe in society more broadly, they also perform their own negotiation of being part of those discourses (whether by affirming or questioning them) on stage (I discuss this at length in chapter 1). Scholars have investigated various aspects of comedy, humor, and race as political and sociocultural phenomena. Linguistic anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2003, 2006a) has

¹¹ As I develop this manuscript into a publishable book, the biggest task on my to-do list will be to flesh out the connection between my work and scholarship on women and gender.

written about Black “urban” comedy in Los Angeles, and specifically about Black comedians’ responses to 9/11 and the (temporary) repositioning of Blacks above Arabs in the racial hierarchy of mainstream imagination immediately following the attacks. Anthropologist John Hartigan Jr. (2009) argues that social conventions of speech, and the tension between the oppositional categories of “group” and “individual,” determine what counts as “racial” in US public discourse. Sociologist Raúl Pérez (2013) studies how aspiring comedians who take courses in stand-up comedy are taught strategies for making racism “funny,” rather than offensive, within a discourse of color-blindness. And cultural studies scholars Ted Gornelios and Viveca Greene are editors of an anthology on the impact of comedy on various forms on media discourses and political realities in post-9/11 America, showing that comedy has both disrupted and maintained the status quo (2011:xxx). Rebecca Krefting’s work on “charged humor,” which she conceives as “intentionally produce[d] humor... that challeng[es] social inequality and cultural exclusion,” is closely related to my own investigation of pushing the edge albeit with different analytical focus (2014:2; see also literary scholar Albert Laguna’s 2010 work on Cuban humor, *choteo*, and its role in political critique and exile identity). Krefting looks at the politics and economy of humor, with an emphasis on the production and consumption of charged humor (primarily in terms of gender, but also race) (2014:6). Within that frame, my work explores the affect and performativity of charged humor, as well as identifies and unpacks the ideologies and discourses such humor targets, and shows its usefulness beyond comedy.

Those among us who have successfully challenged and extricated any white supremacist threads of thinking and living have often done so through self-inquiry, social analysis, and deliberate efforts. Another form of challenge is the act of survival itself. The survival discourse is particularly salient in American Indian contexts, but also among African Americans. It is my

position that these challenges, critiques, and inquiries are crucial to the struggle against racism-white supremacy. White supremacy continues to be reproduced and championed in ways that often “make sense,” in that they are perceived as normative by an uncritical mainstream populace and in national public discourses. To date, no one has successfully overturned white supremacy as a power structure in the Western world. “Victory,” then, may lie not only in the utopic vision of overturning this system of deadly oppression, but also in constantly nagging at it, calling it out, and staring it unflinchingly in the face.

Comedians’ America and the Dream

With its origins in Protestant religious beliefs, the myth of the American Dream has long been part of the conceptualization of America both in the United States and abroad (McGinnis 2009:62). Its general premise is stated in the Declaration of Independence, with its assertion of “unalienable rights’ that include ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness’” (Kamp 2009). Based on this proclamation, the Dream holds that, “All Americans, regardless of their background or origins, have a reasonable chance to achieve success through their own efforts” (Cohen-Marks and Stout 2011:824). For the better part of the 20th Century, this image of America as the “land of opportunity” has been proudly upheld by its US-born citizens, and fueled dreams of a better life among “less fortunate” people around the world (Ortner 2013:16).

Key to the American Dream are the beliefs that it is realized through an individual’s hard work and merit, and that these in turn lead to upward social mobility characterized by financial success and, in the entertainment industry, also by fame (McGinnis 2009:63). The emphasis on the efforts of the individual “diverts attention away from the role institutions play in this

construct of success or failure, ignores structural determinants, and fails to recognize the multiple ways the self is constructed” (McGinnis 2009:62). As Jessica Cattelino notes,

in the United States, the nation-shaping institution of slavery and the ongoing inequality of African-Americans call into question dominant American narratives of freedom and equality, and the distinctive forms of racialization experienced by this and other groups illuminates the complexity and salience of race in everyday life. [2015:23]

However, in the American Dream narrative, the difficulty and frequent failure in achieving upward social mobility by groups who are at a structural disadvantage is attributed to a lack of effort and a lack of merit on the level of the individual, wholly disregarding structural conditions and historical antecedents. This has most notably been the case for Black people in the US, but also for others who face discriminatory policies and practices on an institutional level. However, Sherry Ortner notes that, “for large parts of the white working and middle classes, as well as many immigrant minorities, [the American Dream] was embraced as an ideal, a ‘dream,’ of upward mobility, or at least material comfort, to which people could aspire for themselves and their families,” and that for many “this dream corresponded to real material possibilities generated by the post-World War II boom economy of the 1950s and 1960s” (2013:16). For some, then, the Dream came true.

A 2012 study by The Pew Charitable Trusts showed that as we neared the end of the first decade of the new millennium, 84 percent of American families earned more than their parents at the same age (2). When race was added as a variable, however, the study showed that only 66 percent of Blacks earned more than their parents’ families (whereas 89 percent of whites did) (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2012:3). Additionally, 53 percent of Blacks who were “raised in the bottom of the family income ladder” remained there as adults (compared to 33 percent of whites) (The Pew Charitable Trusts 2012:3). The American Dream, then, as it pertains to upward economic mobility, has been racially contingent since its first emergence in the American social

imaginary, and continues to be so today. Paraphrasing Malcolm X, for many Black people and other people of color the American Dream is an American nightmare (Breitman 1965:26).

The American Dream has direct ties to the genesis of “Hollywood” (henceforth Hollywood or the Industry) both in terms of the personal life histories of the film-industry moguls of the early 20th Century, and with regards to Hollywood’s racial projects. Almost all the early founders of major Hollywood motion pictures studios were either direct or first-generation immigrants. Many were also Jewish, which is significant in terms of Hollywood’s racial projects. While volumes have been written about the origins of the US motion picture industry, the point I wish to make here is that Hollywood was primarily created by people who were either immigrants or raised by immigrants, by people who were born poor or of modest means, but who through hard work, initiative, and a pioneering spirit reached the height of American success. Hollywood, then, has embodied the American Dream since its inception, and has inspired actors, performers, producers, directors, and other creative people to seek the fulfillment of their dreams here ever since.¹²

The founders of the Hollywood film industry were not only of poor or modest immigrant backgrounds, as I mentioned earlier, they were also mostly Jews—a group racialized as non-white according to the normative racial categorizations of that time. Back then prevailing anti-Semitism excluded the Jewish Hollywood moguls from climbing the ladder in white corporate America. Instead they “invented a parallel Jewish universe of bourgeois American whiteness different from the East Coast Jewish ghettos many of them had fled but also different from the

¹² In her groundbreaking ethnography on the film industry in Hollywood, *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* (1950), anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker confirms this long-standing correlation by noting that, “Hollywood is engaged in the mass production of prefabricated daydreams. It tries to adapt the American dream, that all men are created equal, to the view that all men’s dreams should be made equal” (39).

old-money whiteness to which they aspired” (Brodkin 2004:156). Hollywood was a racial project from the beginning in that it “interpret[ed] and reinterpret[ed] the meaning of race” (Winant 1994:139). “A [racial] project is simultaneously an explanation of racial dynamics and an effort to reorganize the social structure along particular racial lines” (Winant 1994:139). These early film magnates reinvented themselves in real life and reinterpreted the meaning of whiteness, of Jewishness, and of what it meant to be American, in their cinematic productions (Brodkin 2004:156).

The self-whitening and mainstreaming of Jews was not the only racial project in Hollywood in those days. D.W. Griffith, white co-founder of United Artists, was notable both for his revolutionary filmmaking skills in *Birth of a Nation*, and for his racist portrayal of Black people along with his support of the Ku Klux Klan in the same film. Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant note that, “[*Birth of a Nation*] helped to generate, consolidate and ‘nationalize’ images of blacks which had been more disparate... prior to the film’s appearance” (1986:63). In this racial project, then, “Black” was forcefully and cohesively presented as inferior, aggressive, deceptive, promiscuous, and lazy, and in direct contrast to “white” superiority, righteousness, morality, purity, and industriousness. These images of Blacks and whites gained immediate and long-term traction in film, and later also in commercial television programming. Versions of these images, as well as the dynamics of the relationship between them, are reproduced on and off screen in Hollywood today, albeit usually (but not always) in a less caricature-like manner.

Stand-up comedians are very much part of racial projects both in their reproduction and critique of hegemonic discourses, and in their negotiation of these discourses in their daily lives. While many of the comics I talked to spoke clearly and cynically about how the Industry works,

its bottom line, and its racist underpinnings, they also willingly participated in this enterprise and entrusted it with the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. Their dreams are part of the national ethos of America. For some, this dream will indeed come true, but for many it will not. Yet, as long as comedians aspire to be in the business, they have to ignore the poor odds and forge ahead as if their success is assured, in effect upholding the Dream.

In the preceding sections I have placed this research project in conversation with the scholarship that informs it. First, the discussion on performativity and what affectively working identities entails lays the foundation for unpacking the edge and what pushing it means. Second, in conceptually breaking down the system of racism-white supremacy, I paint the landscape of what comedians push against. And lastly, I present the broader cultural realm in which these racial projects take place from the perspective of the American Dream.

What, then, is this edge? What does it mean to push it? And why should anyone care? The edge emerged from comedians' constant "energy" references during my research, which articulated well with affect theory and conceptualizations of frictions and gaps. Performativity and "working identities" spoke to how comedians engage that energy as a way of situating themselves in relation to hegemonic discourses. When they challenge and critique the boundaries of those discourses, they push the edge. For those comics who push the edges of racism-white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity, their work reveals a dimension of anti-racism and anti-sexism that can contribute to both the analysis and practice of these everyday struggles beyond comedy.

On Tone and Language

Before I discuss the logistics of my fieldwork and the life of comedy, I'd like to address my style of "delivery" with regards to language and tone. To the extent possible, I want for this text to mimic how comics speak amongst themselves. Comics use a very honest language in the sense that they speak their minds freely and with little hesitation. They exaggerate for dramatic purposes, for sure, but they are not euphemistic. Many cuss a lot and use crude language. And most (except alt comics) are not very fond of "fancy" language. I try to stay true to this when I can, realizing that it's not entirely possible since we target different audiences. That being said, this manuscript is full of cuss words and sexually explicit language. Not only is it necessary in order to retell jokes and comics' comments, but I also wish to convey, as much as possible, the affective experience of my fieldwork and of hanging at the clubs. As part of that endeavor, I also allow myself to make statements as to whether jokes and performances are funny. While recognizing that what people find funny is subjective, comedians nonetheless confidently talk about what is and isn't funny in an often authoritarian manner. She's hilarious! That's funny! With my exposure to thousands of jokes during fieldwork, I too acquired that confidence. And in the comedic spirit, I wield it as I see fit.

With regards to racial and gendered slurs (and other profanity), I follow the lead of a number of anthropologists and other social scientists that work on issues of race and racism. I will spell out these words when I refer to or quote their use by others (Bonilla-Silva et al 2004; Collins 2004; Hill 2008; Jackson Jr 2001; Jacobs-Huey 2006a; Picca and Feagin 2007). For this particular research project, replacing such words entirely with euphemisms, or letters of the words with ellipses or asterisks is, in the first case, inappropriate and, in the second case, counterproductive. With regards to euphemisms, replacing the "n-word" for "nigger" would

suggest that a comedian indeed said “n-word,” and it would therefore be an erroneous quote. Also, if a comedian uses the explicit word as a form of contestation, then my use of an alternative and less offensive word compromises the very premise of the research. As far as replacing certain letters of the explicit words with ellipses or asterisks, I agree with Jane H. Hill’s position that:

with [these replacements], both writer and reader share a false comfort—we are not the sort of people who would ever spell these words out—that is immediately contradicted by what is silenced in a deep presupposition—we both know these words.” [2008:ix]

I will therefore neither use alterative spellings or words, nor omit letters from explicit slurs, as collaborators use them.

Also, throughout this text I spell Black with a capital “B.” I agree with Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) that, “Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun” (Harris 1993:1710n3). Cheryl Harris further notes that,

The usage of the lower case ‘N’ in ‘negro’ was part of the construction of an inferior image of Blacks that provided justification for and a defense of slavery.... Thus, the use of the upper case and lower case in reference to racial identity has a particular political history. Although “white” and “Black” have been defined oppositionally, they are not functional opposites. ‘White’ has incorporated Black subordination; ‘Black’ is not based on domination... ‘Black’ is naming that is part of counterhegemonic practice. [1993:1710n3]

With that in mind, the term “Black” fits my position on the issue, as well as the topic of this dissertation, “pushing the edge” of hegemonic discourses on race and gender.

The Setup / Funny Business

Comedic performers have taken the stage at least as far back as the times of medieval court jesters. In early American pop culture, circus clowns, minstrel show actors (whites and

Blacks), and humorists on the lecture circuit followed in that tradition (Mintz 1985). Later, in the 20th Century, stand-up comedy featured prominently in vaudeville, burlesque, and variety shows (Mintz 1985), as well as on the Black “Chitlin’ Circuit.” In the 1950s, comedian Lenny Bruce opened the doors for subversive comedy, followed by comedy greats like George Carlin, Dick Gregory, Joan Rivers, and Richard Pryor. Today’s comedians still mention these pioneers of modern comedy as sources of inspiration, along with more recent stars like Chris Rock, Dave Chappelle, Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, and Louis CK. Many of today’s famous comics do impromptu guest appearances at comedy clubs in New York and LA—providing more junior comedians (and curious anthropologists) with continued inspiration and opportunities for studying the stars in action.

I conducted my research from January 2011 through July 2012 at multiple comedy venues in Los Angeles. What is commonly understood as “Los Angeles” is in fact Los Angeles County. LA County is home to a population of roughly 10 million people (in 2014) (US Census Bureau 2015b), and consists of 88 smaller cities including the City of Los Angeles (ceo.lacounty.gov). Considered racially and ethnically diverse, LA County is nonetheless predominantly white (71.5%), but has a relatively large Black (9.2%) and Asian (14.6%) population (US Census Bureau 2015b). A whopping 48.3 percent of LA’s population identifies as Hispanic or Latino (US Census Bureau 2015b).

LA proper sits in a basin and is surrounded by mountains and valleys to the north, flatlands of urban and suburban sprawl to the east and south, and the expanse of the Pacific Ocean to the west. The breathtaking view from an airplane going in for a nighttime landing at LAX reveals a crosscutting spread of lights as far as the eye can see, with LA’s notorious freeways (i.e. highways) pulsing like huge arteries across the landscape. With its earthquake-

prone location, LA doesn't have much in terms of skyscrapers, although the city's Downtown area provides a decent urban skyline with tall buildings that stand out in an otherwise remarkably flat cityscape. A popular holiday destination, LA is known for its pleasant climate, celebrity culture, and Disneyland (although the park is actually in the City of Anaheim in Orange County). Los Angeles is of course also arguably the entertainment capital of the world when it comes to film and television.

I chose Los Angeles as the primary research location for a number of reasons. First, the city boasts numerous comedy clubs and other venues that offer comedy shows, a fair number of which present racially or ethnically themed shows on a weekly basis. Some clubs feature weekly evenings with a racial or ethnic focus, such as Monday "Latino Nights" and "Chocolate Sundaes" on Sundays. Other venues host occasional ethnically themed nights with, for instance, Arab-American or Iranian-American comedians. The city also attracts comedians of a wide range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and their performances attract a racially diverse audience. As the home of the Hollywood film and television industry, Los Angeles also attracts some of the best performers in the country. The other stand-up comedy mecca in the US is New York City. Comics typically say that you go to New York to hone your skills and to LA to get on film and television. New York presents a different landscape for comedians in that a large number of clubs and other venues are concentrated within a relatively small geographical area (compared to spread-out Los Angeles). This allows ambitious comics to hit up to five or more stages in one night in NYC, whereas LA comics hustle to get to three if they're lucky. Stage time is what makes you a better comic and working in New York therefore allows comedians to develop their art and craft more rigorously. New York is where you pay your dues. LA is where you come to get famous.

I chose Los Angeles over New York as my field site first and foremost because I was interested in learning about the dynamics between the comics at the clubs and the Industry, since film and television are primary vehicles for disseminating mainstream racial discourses. Additionally, because comedians in the US are highly mobile and frequent travelers, comics from New York and elsewhere who have reached a certain level of skill and exposure come through LA soon or later, and often several times a year.

When you work in the Industry, Los Angeles becomes “Hollywood.” This was something I experienced profoundly in my own crossover from not having any direct involvement with the Industry in my twenty plus years as an Angeleno, to being a participant in that industry, albeit from a researcher’s perspective. Prior to my fieldwork, Los Angeles had felt like a gigantic spread-out conglomeration of cities that provided a large degree of anonymity and space. As my fieldwork progressed, and I got to know more and more comedians, Los Angeles shrunk. One reason for this sense of a smaller LA was the fact that my movements, following those of comics, were concentrated within a smaller area of Los Angeles than my earlier image of the city encompassed. Most work that comics do, whether stage work or auditions, take place within an area bordered by the southern part of the San Fernando Valley to the North, Pasadena to the East, the 10 Freeway to the South, and the Pacific Ocean to the West. A few outlying venues in Ontario, Hermosa Beach, and Long Beach also come into fairly regular circulation for some comics. If they go further, they are perceptively “out of town.” So the geographical area comedians move within on a daily basis while *in town* is smaller than the Greater Los Angeles area.

Within this smaller LA, the concentration of comedians and other Industry professionals is obviously much denser than it would be if they spread out all over Greater Los Angeles. It is

so much so that when you work in the Industry, LA feels like a town. Within this town you can expect to meet people you know, or who know someone you know, anywhere you go. This happened time and again when I met with comics for interviews. At some point during our get-together they would invariably run across someone who was also in the Industry. This also happened when I was out on my own without the company of comics. As my time in the field progressed I increasingly ran into people I knew from the comedy world in some way. As a result, LA has become a place where it's difficult to be anonymous, and this is even more so for people who actually participate creatively in the Industry on a daily basis. For them, Los Angeles becomes akin to a gigantic set punctuated by stages in the form of clubs, studios, and audition locations. Their Los Angeles is the urban social and geographical landscape that provides the backstage for my research.

Three big clubs (“the big three”) dominate the Los Angeles comedy scene: the Hollywood Improv (“the Improv”), the Comedy Store (“the Store”), and the Laugh Factory. They have been around since the 1960s and 70s. The Improv and the Laugh Factory have clubs at multiple locations around the country. The Comedy Store has a club in La Jolla in addition to its original location on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. Comedians informed me that the Comedy Store has an “open policy” (“you can say whatever you want”) and is viewed as a “developmental” venue, where comics can try out new material and refine work in progress. The Laugh Factory produces more polished shows than the Store typically does, and is less tolerant in terms of offensive material, in theory if not in practice. The Hollywood Improv is more of a showcase venue, meaning it attracts Industry folk, so it's not the place for trying out new stuff unless you are already a well-established comic. At the Improv, comics need to show that their material can work for television (i.e. a mainstream audience).

Aside from “the big three,” there are several other clubs in the surrounding area, for instance, the Comedy and Magic Club in Hermosa Beach, the Comedy Union (a Black-owned club on Pico Boulevard close to La Brea Avenue), the J-Spot Comedy Club on Manchester Boulevard close to LAX (also Black owned), Haha Café Comedy Club in North Hollywood, Flappers Comedy Club and Restaurant in Burbank and Claremont, and the Ice House Comedy Club in Pasadena. Other venues include The Nerdist Theatre at Meltdown Comics on Sunset Boulevard, the What’s Up Tiger Lily? Comedy Show now hosted by Upright Citizen’s Brigade (UCB) in the Los Feliz area, and countless coffee shops, restaurants, nightclubs, and youth hostels all over the city.¹³

There are two main “scenes” in the comedy world, the club scene and the alternative (alt) scene. Most comedians aspire to work both types of rooms, but some stay loyal to one scene or the other (sometimes by choice because they are not as comfortable with the audiences of the other scene, and sometimes by necessity if they don’t get booked for the other type of show).¹⁴ Among club comics, to be funny is the be all and end all. As a club comic you have to make your audiences laugh. Alt comics certainly want to make their audiences laugh too, but they don’t

¹³ The single most memorable venue during my fieldwork was a place called The Pleasure Chest. When I first saw the name, I figured it was another West Hollywood bar that I hadn’t heard of before. The comedy show was \$7 with free parking and free beer! I arrived a bit early and entered what I first assumed was a gift shop of sorts, selling cards, lotions, candles and the like. I didn’t really look; it was more of an impression. I used the bathroom, which was very clean and stylish in black and red tile, and then I took my seat in the comedy section of the store. A corner of the store had been sectioned off with a red velvet curtain that hung all the way from the ceiling. Inside the sectioned-off area were black folding chairs in rows, a small stage, and a microphone. In the back corner stood a spotlight aimed at the stage. I sat down in the left back corner facing the stage. That’s when I started to take in my environment more closely. Oh my!!! Duh! What a naïve fool I was! A store named *The Pleasure Chest* in *West Hollywood*... Yes, I was in a sex shop. I could barely keep myself from laughing. Next to me hung a wall full of jock straps and creative alternatives in black leather with studs and straps, and penis holsters with holes in the middle. In the distance I saw a couple of saddles and one wall had a glass display of abnormally sized luminescent dildos in bright colors. This was indeed the most unusual venue my research had taken me to thus far (and since).

¹⁴ Comics often refer to performance venues as rooms.

necessarily feel like they need good punch lines in order to do so (nor do their audiences). Oftentimes alt comics try to be clever or intellectual, or purposefully weird, which may make audiences laugh, but not always because of a great punch line. Club comics frequently deride alt comics as lacking skills in the craft of comedy and for not being funny. Alt comics, on the other hand, often speak condescendingly about the club scene, which they view as less avant-garde (or not at all) and as pandering to the audience. The club scene attracts comics and audiences of all races and ethnicities. The alt scene is predominantly white with regards to both performers and audiences. The contemporary alt scene is also decidedly hipster and liberal, whereas the club scene is more eclectic in all aspects, although perhaps more socially conservative even if not necessarily politically so. Male comedians dominate at both.

Regardless of comedy scene, the dynamic between performer and audience is crucial to the understanding of the performance. While the comedian, as the speaker on stage, is in a position of command, the audience can either support or undermine that position. Audiences can shape the meaning of what the speaker says through their interpretation and participation, and it may differ from that which the speaker both intends and suggests with his or her talk (Goodwin 1986:283). I witnessed one such interaction when comedian Tony Baker was on stage and made fun of the apparent surprise of two inebriated women in the audience at the two-drink-minimum requirement. He enacted an improvised bit pretending not to need any drinks at all cause he had saliva. "I can swallow!" he said. At this the audience burst into laughter, insinuating a homosexual connotation back to the comic. Tony addressed that head-on, noting how a man cannot say anything anymore unless it is interpreted as gay, and everyone laughed. This unexceptional interaction demonstrates how audiences hold a certain amount of power vis-à-vis the comics and how they can use it to let the performers (and the analyst) know how they feel

about and interpret what the comedian is saying. It should be noted that audience members react differently depending on the composition of the overall audience and on seating arrangements (for instance, whether they are seated next to friends or strangers) (McIlvenny et al. 1992).

Communications scholar Max Atkinson also notes that there are “strong pressures on members of an audience to act in unison” (1984:18). Audience members who don’t act in unison with the rest of the crowd stand out. If they are hecklers, comedians have particular ways of dealing with them, which I will return to in chapter 4. But if they are just stray laughers, comics often indicate that they notice by making a comment, “Thank you!” or “Oh, you liked that, huh?” These interactions, as much as the jokes (if they’re good), create an atmosphere of belonging and enjoyment that buoys both the comedians and the audience members at a show.

*The Comedy Grind*¹⁵

Stand-up comedians work hard; contrary to how it may appear when they show up on TV to breeze through a five-minute set. They call it “the grind.” The creative process in stand-up is very public, which makes it unique among performance arts. Comics have to test their jokes in front of a live audience before they are finished in order to find out what works. Most comedians I’ve talked to “write on stage,” meaning they create and develop their jokes on stage rather than write them out in full beforehand. They usually go up on stage with an idea or premise they wish to explore. The audience’s feedback (whether of a “civilian” audience, i.e. non-comedians, or an open-mic audience of their peers) tells the comic what’s worth exploring further and what to drop. Sometimes comedians just go up and talk about what’s on their minds, and if someone

¹⁵ This section describes the daily work and career trajectory of comedians at the time I conducted my research. However, things change all the time; new venues open, old ones close; gate keepers get fired and hired; new forms of social media come on the scene and old forms become passé, et cetera. The descriptive narrative I present, then, reflects the conditions during my fieldwork.

chuckles they make a mental note of that and keep going. The next time they go up they've usually further developed the parts that got a chuckle. Is there a punch line in there somewhere? Each time a premise, raw-form joke, or particular wording gets a positive response of some sort, the comic will try to push that part. Comedians want to see how far they can go, how much laughter they can get out of a joke. Jokes get polished through the friction they encounter with a live audience.

When audiences resist a joke (by laughing a little as opposed to a lot), the joke may be too far off (i.e. anomalous—although, as mentioned earlier, anomaly can also lead to laughter) or not carry enough unexpected elements. This is assuming the audience likes and relates to the comic; if they don't, the joke may have nothing to do with why they aren't laughing. Their resistance typically leads the comic to modify the joke in some way. In other words, audiences co-construct the jokes (presumably unbeknownst to themselves). They let the comic know how far they are willing to be pushed at any given time. Figuring out how this interactive negotiation of discourse might take place outside of comedy, and what the results might be, seems like a worthwhile investigation for future projects.

To write an original joke is hard. To write a really funny original joke is even harder. And to write five, ten, thirty, or sixty minutes' worth of really funny original material is extremely difficult. To then go up and perform on a stage in front of a room full of strangers every night with the goal of making them laugh at your jokes, or jokes-in-progress, is a challenge most of us would decline. Only highly skilled and experienced performers can consistently “kill” (make the audience laugh a lot throughout a set) a room of any demographic. Yet, consistency is key to a career as a stand-up comedian for clubs will only book comics as headliners if they

know they will deliver. For most comedians it takes at least a decade to get to that level of consistency.

Comedians usually work on material at open mics. Open mics are offered at “the big three” and at many other venues around town. At the big clubs, open mics carry more clout and not everyone who wants to gets to go up. More famous comics work out at regular shows as well, not just open mics, but they’re typically at a stage in their careers where even their free-associative talk is funny. From the club’s point of view, as one comedian informed me, there is nothing to lose—a famous comic always generates buzz whether they bomb or kill, and buzz is always good. Comedians are expected to frequent open mics regularly during the early years of their careers. There is typically no entrance fee and also no drink minimum requirement for audiences.¹⁶ Open mics are usually free for the comics.¹⁷ The downside with open-mics outside of the clubs is that either they don’t attract a civilian audience, which means comics are mostly performing in front of other comics (many of whom don’t want to hear half-baked jokes, and are just there to get up and try out their own). Or the civilian audience that *is* present did not show up for comedy; patrons came for food or drinks and social time, and consequently may not pay a lot of attention to the comedian. They may even keep conversation while he or she is performing. That’s just part of the game. Doing open mics is real grind work because it is always unpaid, does not have a gratifying audience, and you need to do a lot of it in order to get to the next step. On the plus side, you don’t have to have any experience to do open mics or have polished jokes.

¹⁶ This varies though. If the open mic is at a restaurant, the venue may require patrons to order food and drinks for a minimum amount in order to be able to occupy a table for an hour and a half on comedy nights.

¹⁷ I know of one venue that charges the comics a nominal fee for stage time, though, but they can go up multiple times.

Along with open-mics, neophyte comics perform at “bringer shows.” Bringer shows puts the impetus on the comedians to fill the room. A comic may be required to bring five to ten guests in order to get a certain number of minutes of stage time (anything from three to ten minutes, with ten being very generous). If fewer than the required number of guests show up, the producer may reduce or even cut the comic’s stage time altogether. Bringer shows are often free to patrons, but still carry a two-drink minimum.¹⁸ Most comics don’t like bringer shows. Many have to hustle to get a sufficient number of people together for one show, since friends and family can only be expected to come and support every-now-and-then. Some comics also resent having their stage time depend on the number of customers they bring to the club. Of course, the truth is that all comics get stage time based on their ability to bring customers to the clubs. That is the business. A marquis headliner gets booked because they can put “butts in seats,” as several club managers told me. Comedians at bringer shows do not get paid for performing, but this is the case for most other shows in Los Angeles as well. This is because LA is considered a showcase town where Industry people could be in the audience any night of the week (this is true, but unlikely at a bringer show). Stage time gives a comic exposure and is therefore seen as valuable. Stage time *is* the pay. For these reasons, bringer shows feature mostly novice comics—comedians who have a hard time getting on stage elsewhere. Usually the producer of the show will invite a few more seasoned comics (who do get paid) to keep the energy in the room going. Once comedians start to get invited to do regular shows, they usually can’t wait to stop doing bringer shows. Some refuse to do them even at the start of their careers, as they find the arrangement exploitative and humiliating. These shows do, however, provide new talent with an

¹⁸ Food and drinks are the primary source of revenue for comedy clubs.

opportunity to try out jokes on stage in front of a civilian audience at a time in their artistic development when they may not yet have the skills required for an invited gig.

Another part of the grind is to establish a presence in social media. Twitter, Facebook, and increasingly Instagram, are musts for any aspiring comic. Not only are these prime ways of communicating with your audiences (e.g. advertising when and where you perform next, but also for testing out joke premises and, as we shall see, addressing controversies about recent performances). As you build your following, your online network also becomes an important marketing tool. Comedian Baron Vaughn points out that comics need to stay up to date with “the constantly new and evolving ways to use social media” (personal communication, 5/5/15). A comic’s online presence, that is, ability to promote, is a major consideration for club bookers. Comedian W. Kamau Bell says, “Managers ask me, ‘How many Facebook followers do you have?’ [They say,] ‘Keep your Twitter presence strong!’ ‘Keep Tweeting!’ Not, ‘Keep writing jokes!’” (interview, 7/20/11). My interviews with club managers confirm this. One club owner says that, “social media nowadays is imperative. I look for that. Web presence, social media, tweeting, podcasts” (interview, 7/20/12). And a talent producer concurs that “from a business stand point,” he definitely cares about a comedian’s social media presence because it translates into “asses in seats. That’s the bottom line” (interview, 7/25/12)¹⁹ A fair number of comics also take classes in acting, stand-up, improvisation, sketch writing, audition techniques, and screenwriting. These are costly, so typically only comedians who are serious about investing in their careers take on the financial expense. Acting and improv classes in particular seem most popular with the comics I interviewed.

¹⁹ Getting “asses [or butts] in seats” is the common term used to state the general struggle and objective for comedy clubs.

Because of the predicament of having to try out unfinished material on stage, Los Angeles also has an abundance of so called “workout shows,” shows that have as their primary purpose to give comedians stage time so they can work out their jokes. These shows are either promoted by the club or by independent producers, are listed on the club’s show schedule, and carry the same two-drink minimum requirements as any other comedy show. There is usually also an entrance fee, although typically less than for a regular show. Most audience members don’t know the difference between one show and another unless they are live-comedy aficionados. The format of a workout show does not markedly differ from a regular show, except in the quality of the jokes. This can at times lead to some tension between the comedian and the audience. The audience may feel the comics are “bombing” because they only made them chuckle here and there, whereas the comedians may feel they had a satisfactory set because they got useful feedback. Some comics let the audience know that they are working on stuff, which lowers the bar on the audience’s expectations. It should be noted, however, that comics can “work out” at any show they choose, not just at shows they know are “workout shows.” As they advance in their careers, they may choose to work on new material at a show where years earlier they would have brought their most polished jokes.

At some point, comics who persist on the open-mic circuit start to get booked on real shows (often workout shows) that are typically produced by other comics at smaller venues. These spots are still unpaid, but are a step up because they provide stage time in front of real audiences. Getting booked also means that other people in the comedy industry have become aware of the comic’s presence and talent. Shows present an opportunity for networking. Comics who are still young in their careers also spend significant amounts of time hanging around one of “the big three” for this very reason. Someone you know from the open-mic scene and smaller

venues may introduce you to the booker of the club, or to a more senior comic, or to the producer of another show, et cetera. And in Hollywood, like most other places, the importance of contacts and personal introductions cannot be overstated.

At this stage of the game, all but those with significant savings or supportive parents (not very many) also have a day job. Day jobs pay the bills, but they are rarely talked about. Most comics seem to loathe them. Day jobs are a daily personal reminder that you haven't made it yet. Having a day job therefore also carries a certain amount of stigma. Comics who are successful enough not to need a day job reportedly differentiate between themselves and those who have to work a regular job. Having a day job becomes a judgment of your skills and talent as a comic. Being outed as having a day job is therefore perceived as a shaming experience. One comedian I talked to only admitted to having had a day job once he could support himself from his comedy work. He recalled a particularly painful incident where he had to excuse himself from a social gathering with a very famous comic because he needed to go to work. He did not give this as a reason for having to leave at the time, but another comic exposed him, "He can't come because he has to go to work. He has *a job!*" The experience clearly still stung when the comedian told me about it, even though he now holds a highly coveted position in the Industry. Additionally, a practical challenge with day jobs is that they often require getting up earlier than comics naturally would after staying out at the clubs until two or three in the morning. Early shows start around 8pm and late shows begin around 10pm. By the time the second shows let out, it's around midnight. With added time for a wind-down drink at a bar and a late-night run to Denny's for junk food refueling, there simply aren't enough hours for sleep. There is therefore a tension between putting in effort at the job that gives you an income and putting in effort at the craft you hope will become your career. The compromise can go in either direction.

Working out jokes is a vulnerable enterprise regardless of what type of room you're in. Comedians take the stage knowing that their jokes may not be all that funny yet, but that they will still be judged as if they were meant to be. This can bring up artistic insecurities and self-doubt, especially when they bomb or "eat it." They all bomb; it is part of becoming a good comedian. In the beginning they bomb a lot, but they still have to find a way to get up on stage the next night. Comedian Thai Rivera says he limits himself to "feeling like shit for thirty minutes after [he] bombs"; after that he forces himself to move on (interview, 8/8/11). Others cannot shake the low until they have a good set, however long that takes to get. Some comedians react by blaming the audience in the room while on stage. Some complain off stage and throw their fellow comics under the bus in an effort to boost their own esteem. I know I'm better than both so-and-so and who-and-who on the lineup, cause they kiss the producer's ass or pander to the audience or only do hack jokes or (insert ill-regarded comedian behavior), and it won't be long before they will see how I kick their asses, et cetera.

Some use alcohol, weed, other substances, and sex as palliatives. Others bring forth a calloused, angry, or snarky attitude in their performances. It's an "I don't give a fuck" kind of attitude. This is of course a paradox; they are there precisely because they give a fuck—they are there for the laughter, feedback, and attention. Comedians I've talked to recognize this attitude as a form of protection. An armor of mild or strong disdain for the audiences (that can feel like they are out to judge the spectators) creates a protective emotional distance. Comedians who work a lot and have done comedy for some time may have a more mature response and even laugh at how poorly a particular set went. They know that highs and lows are part of the process. For others, the highs might fill them with exhilaration and bravado; the lows may plunge them into a state of questioning themselves and their artistic abilities. With time, bombing becomes a less

frequent occurrence, until at some point, for seasoned and highly skilled comics, it mostly becomes a thing of the past. Even so, for more seasoned comics, bitterness toward the Industry, career uncertainty, and the sting of unfulfilled dreams can seep into sets in ways that feel uncomfortable to the audience.

A comedian who doesn't have enough good material may try to compensate by doing more crowd work, but crowd work takes skills too and not all comics are comfortable bantering with the audience.²⁰ Crowd work is off-the-cuff and carries a risk element in that you invite audience participation without knowing what they'll lob at you. Some comics excel at this and find it thrilling, others are downright petrified. Another option, when the material is thin, is to fatten a set with hack jokes, drawing from genital, racist, and sexist themes. What makes them hack is that they aim for the lowest common denominator and are often predictable.²¹ Dick jokes are at the top of the hack list, joined by racist jokes about Asian drivers, Black people's credit scores, and Latina fertility. Sexist and misogynistic jokes round out this category. Sometimes they're all combined into one joke. Good jokes, however, are the product of taking stock of the real world and then imagining it differently in surprising ways. How can a funny real-life incident be turned into a joke? Is there a good punch line hidden in a frustrating personal interaction? How might one twist something the President said on TV so that it becomes hilarious? Imagination requires an open mind and a willingness to think outrageously (which

²⁰ I'm not suggesting that doing crowd work always means the comic does not have enough material. Most comics do some crowd work to put themselves in the room. DL Hughley is a great headlining comedian with plenty of material who does lengthy crowd work after his joke set *and* his jokes and crowd work are hilarious. Less accomplished comics, however, are sometimes more comfortable chatting with the audience than writing actual jokes.

²¹ Interestingly, racist and sexist discourses more broadly are also hack, where the highly predictable lowest common denominator is the exclusion and devaluation of people of color and women based on perceived individual and collective inferiority. In other words, racism and sexism are hack, just like the jokes that reproduce them.

does not mean it has to be offensive). Not all comics know how to push themselves in this respect and are then more likely to resort to themes they have heard before and to talk about them in trite ways—to go hack.

As a comedian's skill, reputation, and network of contacts build, he or she may start getting booked at bigger clubs, still unpaid most of the time, but they may occasionally get \$15-\$30 for a set, or \$25-\$50 if they're hosting. While stage time is great and necessary to build a stand-up career, the promise of exposure that may pay off down the line does not feed you or pay the rent in the present. But, starting to earn something is at least a step in the right direction. Part of the grind at this point may also include participating in podcasts, perhaps producing your own, being part of short web series and, for some, also fundraising your own projects on Kickstarter, and producing your own comedy show at a local coffee shop or lounge. Some comedians may also decide to try the college circuit at this point.

Colleges are a great, albeit exhausting, source of income for those comics who can get in on it. The National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) is a nation-wide organization with multiple regional subchapters that connects colleges and universities with lecturers, comedians, and artists who are interested in doing performances and speaking engagements (NACA). Comedians who are interested in going on the college circuit solicit a special college agent who only focuses on this part of their careers. In order to present their services at one of NACA's conferences (one national and several regional), a comic has to submit a clip and be accepted to a conference. If accepted, they can audition at that conference and start booking gigs. They set their own pay rates, which typically range from \$1,000 per night and much higher (not including airfare or local transport, but usually with accommodation). If they get bookings, their income can improve substantially compared to if they stay in LA and try to make a living. One

comic told me that there were many unknown millionaires walking among us as a result of working the colleges fulltime. The downside to doing the college circuit is a tremendous amount of air travel, driving, and many lonely nights in cheap hotel rooms away from home. While college gigs certainly are a step up from open mics and unpaid sets in town, they aren't "the Dream" of anyone's imagination.

Even if comics don't work the college circuit, they travel a lot as their reputation grows. Comedy clubs across the US need lineups for the weekends, and many LA comics jet around the country featuring and headlining at these clubs (the feature act is the act before the headliner; the headliner is the biggest act for the evening and with the longest stage time). Accommodations can be rather low-end, and some clubs have their own shacks (among comedians known as "the condo" or "comedy condo") for comics to stay in that reportedly often aren't very well maintained. Some comedians take pictures of seedy rooms in disrepair and post them on Facebook with tart comments like "Living the dream!" or "I made it!" Comedian Maronzio Vance, who has both a Special on Comedy Central and a recurring role on a TV show among his many credits, posted a comment on Facebook (7/20/11) during one of his out-of-town gigs:

I will not be broken. Even though the number of the hotel is TAPED to the door. I say TAPED to the door. I will go out and give the people of [name of city] a damn good show. But the number is taped to the door. I would cry but I think I have only one set of towels while I'm staying here. It's not about the stay. It's about the performance. Oh how I will have stories about how fucked up I use to have it. I can't wait to move up to SHITTY and leave FUCKED UP behind.

Other comedians who tour a lot echo his sentiments.

With a few years of experience, comedians may start showcasing for comedy festivals. There are a slew of them all over the country; the most famous and prestigious one is the annual *Just For Laughs* festival in Montreal, Canada. Comedian Jesus Trejo referred to it as "the Super Bowl of Comedy." If you actually get selected to go, it's definitely a good credit, but it won't

make your career the way it once could. I was repeatedly told of back in the day when comics got their big break at *Just For Laughs*. Today the rewards are more modest, but still, it's a pretty big deal to be invited to perform there. Many cities across the US also host comedy festivals of different kinds and attract highly skilled comics from around the country. The New York Comedy Festival, the Moontower Comedy and Oddity Festival and South by Southwest (both in Austin, TX), and the Bridgetown Comedy Festival in Portland, OR, are all highly renowned festivals that feature the cream of the comedy crop.

As comics pay their dues by working for free while improving their skills, they may get "passed" at one of the big clubs, meaning they are invited to join the club's regular roster of comics. Getting "passed" at a club is a significant step in a comedian's career and generates respect and congratulations from fellow comics and fans alike. At The Comedy Store, getting passed involves a ritual of inscribing the comic's name on the exterior wall of the club. This event often gets immortalized on Facebook to the cheers of "friends": "You're on your way!" "Congratulations!" "You're gonna make it big bro!" Getting passed usually also means getting paid for sets, but still in very low amounts. This process of passing comics has at times also involved allegations of racial discrimination, which I will discuss further in the next chapter. Being a regular at one of "the big three," however, significantly increases a comic's exposure to industry people and senior comedians with some power and influence. At this point, a comic may get noticed by bookers from late-night shows and eventually get booked for a TV gig. As I've mentioned previously, TV credits are important for career advancement. W. Kamau Bell notes that, "Clubs would rather book a less funny comic with TV credits than a funnier comic without credits" (interview, 7/20/11). Credits trump funny because credits get butts in seats; just

being funny won't do that, if nobody knows who you are. That's not to suggest that you *only* need credits to get booked, obviously a comic has to be funny too.

At this stage, medium- and big-name comics may invite you to open for them at a local show or to go on tour.²² This, in turn, can lead to scoring your own headlining gigs at comedy clubs around the country and landing on the marquis (but probably not in LA or New York). Around this time comics may also be selected to do a half- or full-hour Special on Comedy Central, Showtime, HBO, or Netflix. These are highly coveted gigs that immediately become part of a comic's stage introduction; "You've seen her on *Last Comic Standing*... Please welcome to the stage Aida Rodriguez!" "You've seen him on Showtime... Give it up for Maz Jobrani!" and so on. Getting a Special also solidifies a comedian's position as a headliner—the Special shows that the comic can deliver 30-60 minutes of high-quality comedy (or it may unintentionally show that they can't).

Throughout this process of building a career in comedy, comedians tend to go on an emotional rollercoaster. Depression, narcissism, and bottomless self-loathing that are "balanced" by ego-inflating arrogance are all par for the course.²³ Laugh Factory owner, Jamie Masada, recognizes the emotional toll of the trade and at one point offered free therapy for the comedians after shows at the club (Vankin 2011). Comics also complain about an inability to stay in long-term relationships and unhealthy lifestyles. Feeling depressed may be an "appropriate" response to their work, though, since the cruel truth is that most comedians who work LA's stages on any

²² When on the road, headlining comics often prefer to bring their own feature act. This eliminates some of the uncertainty of how a show will go and is much preferable to having a new comedian precede your set in every new city.

²³ The language is ethnographic, used by comedians I talked to, not my descriptors.

given night will not “make it.” Yet, in order to keep going, they have to believe that they are one of the select few who will.

Many comedians feel frustrated and discouraged with the pace and development of their careers regardless of their level of professional achievement. I have heard this complaint from comics who are six years in, ten years in, comics with no credits, comics with film- and TV credits, comics who tour regularly, comics who write on TV shows, and so on. Regardless of how much the comedians I talked to have accomplished career-wise, they always seem to feel that they should have done more. This surely fuels the inner drive that keeps performers going, reaching for the next thing, never being satisfied. Something needs to motivate them to go on stage every night, possibly in front of small or inattentive audiences, for little or no pay.²⁴

Although some comics in LA pursue stand-up for the sake of stand-up, many are in LA with the intent of crossing over into film and television as actors. Some prefer to do stand-up, but go on auditions for films, TV shows, and commercials, because “that’s where the money is” as comedian Chris James told me. Others do stand-up strategically as a way to get exposure to Industry powerbrokers and to work on their performance skills at low financial cost. Even those comedians who view themselves as strictly stand-up typically aim to get credits from late-night TV shows. During my fieldwork I never met a comedian (and I only heard of one), who was content with just hitting stages without an eye on building a broader career in film and television. Comedians’ efforts to break into film and television are not entirely one-sided though.

Hollywood also needs up-and-coming talent. While there is an overwhelming power imbalance

²⁴ Comedians need stage time to hone their craft, as I mentioned earlier, but they also need to be seen by Industry professionals (at least in a showcase town like LA). For both of these reasons, they will usually take any opportunity to go on stage, even if it’s for a small audience or one that is likely to not pay much attention.

between corporate industry and creative talent, the Industry, ultimately, cannot exist without talent, including new talent.

A fair number of comedians who work in LA and push the edges of race and gender in their material do at some point get TV exposure, and some may have ongoing commercial success in different capacities (working in LA is already the result of a selection process, hence the greater-than-average odds of succeeding). A significant number of the comedians I worked with, and others I saw perform, have been on TV and in films before or since my research took place. This suggests at the very least an occasional “interest convergence” between comedy that pushes the edge and the Industry, where (white) Hollywood’s financial interest converges with the comedian (of color)’s career interest.²⁵ However, comedy that pushes the edge on TV is typically served in small doses, late at night, and on cable television (cable serves larger doses of it than network television).

Regardless of the level at which a comic is grinding toward that coveted top of fame and fortune, the pressure to “make it” is constant. Comedian DC Ervin jokes about it on stage, saying that a relationship he was in ended because her folks didn’t like him being a comedian. ““Oh, I understand,” he told her, ‘the instability, always being on the road, and all that.’ ‘No, it’s not that,’ she said, ‘I showed them a clip of you on YouTube and they said, ‘Oh, he’s not gonna make it!!!’” “Making it,” for many, means to headline at theatres where audiences come specifically to see *you*, to book a TV pilot, get a recurring role on a comedy show on TV or to get your own show, and to be cast in films, all with increasing fame and fat pay checks. That’s the Dream. But getting there, as I have shown, takes years and years of grinding and betting against poor odds.

²⁵ “Interest convergence” is a concept used in critical race theory, first introduced by Derrick A. Bell (1972). It is “the idea that nonwhites achieve meaningful progress in America only to the extent that a particular nonwhite interest (for example, ending slavery) converges with an important white interest (for example, saving the Union)” (Carbado and Gulati 2003:1764).

Once a comedian's star starts rising, friends and colleagues want to latch on before he or she is even airborne. Comics lose some of them; meet new people, and often feel lonelier than ever. As one comedian on the road texted me one night around midnight: "I'm in a room full of people, but I feel completely lonely." The life of a comedian can take a heavy toll. Many end up divorced. Dave Chappelle just walked away from it all. Richard Pryor brought his stories of a hard life to the stage. Countless others overdose on drugs (e.g. Greg Giraldo, Chris Farley, Mitch Hedberg, and Jim Belushi). Of those whose star hasn't risen (yet), some have to live in their cars, couch surf with friends, double-bunk like freshman college students, and live on instant ramen noodles and other long-shelf-life items from the 99-Cent store. They are often haunted by the sense of panic and desperation that sets in when they start noticing "everyone" around them moving forward toward the Dream, and they realize that they may be one of the many who are left behind, the pitied ones, the one's who aren't going to make it—the detritus of the Hollywood Dream Industry.

The Craft (Methods)

I started my fieldwork by taking a six-week "Introduction to Stand-Up Comedy" course at M.I.'s Westside Comedy Theatre in Santa Monica, CA. The course, taught by a comedian, centered on writing jokes, developing premises, and learning basic performance techniques, and culminated in a showcase for family and friends. Later, I also enrolled in an eight-week beginners' course on improv comedy at Upright Citizens' Brigade (UCB). Above all, and for the duration of my research period, I attended comedy shows all around Los Angeles. Initially, I went to shows at "the big three" scoping for comedians who might talk about race. Shows with an "ethnic" lineup often have names that suggest as much, and I knew that comics of color were

more likely to talk about race since it is part of their daily lives. I chose not to limit my research to comics of one race or ethnicity, but rather to one particular phenomenon—challenges and subversions of racism—the expressions of which crosscut mainstream racial and ethnic categories. Once I saw a performer who did material that was provocative and critical in the approach to joking about race, I solicited him or her for participation in my research. If the comic agreed, I then followed him or her at different venues, which led me to all sorts of stages across LA. I watched a participating comic perform at least five times, and often more than that.²⁶ By attending multiple shows with the same performer, I became familiar with their material and their performance styles. I was able to be attentive to changes in their repertoires and in audience responses to different jokes. Comics usually keep their polished jokes in circulation for an extended period of time, although what that means varies for each comedian. A well-crafted joke that is guaranteed to get laughter can be part of a comic’s joke roster for a year or more. Some comics never retire their jokes, and then that becomes an impediment to their growth as performers. The general practice is to retire jokes permanently once you’ve performed them on television.

I also conducted one-on-one in-depth open-ended interviews with the thirty core participants, as well as with club managers, bookers, and producers. Interviews with the comedians centered on co-analytical discussions of race- and gender-based joke content, racism and sexism in the industry and their lives, life histories, and how to “do” comedy. Interviews with non-comedians focused on the structural aspects of comedy as an industry. I also observed off-stage interactions among comedians; between comedians and producers, club owners, and

²⁶ Comedian KT Tatara pointed out that I have a different perspective on shows than most audiences because I am a multiple viewer (interview, 2/15/12). Most people don’t see a comic perform as many times as I did.

audience members; and comedians' involvement in their community. The number and length of interviews varied greatly depending on the comic's availability. With some comics and show producers I had an hour to get my most important questions asked. Others I met two to six times for two-hour interviews over lunch. I worked with all thirty comedians in this way. Out of the thirty, ten were women and twenty were men. Women are overrepresented (33 percent in my sample compared to 16-17 percent of the comics I saw perform) in order for the data I collected from them to be substantial enough to reveal patterns and themes. The predominant age range of the comics was 25-35 years old, with a few pushing into their early forties and one or two hitting fifty. Their socioeconomic backgrounds varied widely with most coming from middle-class families, but also some from poorer homes and a few from wealthy economic conditions. Eighteen comedians identified as Black. The remaining twelve comics were of Latina/o, Asian-American, Middle Eastern, and white backgrounds, sometimes in combination. Only one of the thirty participants identified as white only. I found it challenging to find white participants. First, few of the white comics I saw performed race material that was critical in some respect (many seemed to avoid race as a topic altogether—harking back to Brodtkin's earlier discussion on race-avoidance—or did racist jokes). Second, out of those I solicited who *did* talk critically about race in some way, only one agreed to participate.

While I followed thirty specific comedians, I watched over 550 comics perform at more than 130 different shows during the fieldwork period.²⁷ These comedians represent a range of skill sets, topical content, and years doing comedy. They, as much as the direct participants,

²⁷ Comedian Marcella Arguello pointed out that I probably have a generous definition of what counts as a comedian. All comics have an opinion of when someone counts as a comic, but she's right. My definition is very generous. I counted anyone who told jokes into a microphone at some kind of venue where other people did the same as a comedian.

schooled me in the dos and don'ts of stand-up comedy. And I learned as much from shows that completely flat-lined, as I did from shows that were ecstatically high. Although I began by searching out shows with ethnic themes, I ended up seeing all kinds of shows as I followed the comics. In addition to the ethnic rooms at comedy clubs, I attended club shows without an ethnic or racial emphasis, open-mics, alt shows, theatre shows with "big names," shows with all-women lineups, and one private show in someone's garden. With time, I became friends with some of the comics I worked with and attended shows or watched taped Specials on television with them, both of which gave me the opportunity to hear their analyses of the performances and test out my own.

At shows, I was a participant-observer. I'd typically arrive early and hang around at the venue to see if I could chat with someone. Once in the show room, I'd take a seat in the back or off to the side. I took notes in a small notebook during all the shows I attended, since recording is prohibited at the comedy clubs, and comedians are notoriously paranoid about having their jokes stolen or inadvertently ending up on YouTube without their consent.²⁸ I wrote down specific jokes as well as notes about comedian-audience interactions, audience responses, and anything else that caught my attention (comedians' attire, appearance, affect, etc.). While I clearly could not take note of everything, I still ended up with a rich documentation of jokes and show dynamics after seeing a comic five or more times. YouTube clips, Facebook posts, Tweets, CDs, and DVDs also form a rich supplement to the core data. Popular literature, magazine reviews, and news articles about comedians and their performances have also contributed to the assessment of the broader impact of comics and their work.

²⁸ On a few occasions during my fieldwork comics, club management, or staff approached me, wondering about my note taking and concerned that I was stealing jokes. A willing and open explanation of what I was doing, along with my UCLA business card, set them at ease.

All participants agreed to waive their right to anonymity; however, I have chosen not to reveal names, or to use fabricated names, when I'm referencing something they said that, in my judgment, could reflect negatively on them or someone else. That being said, in the instances where I discuss joke material, it is possible that those familiar with the jokes could identify some comics whom I've kept anonymous.

The Lineup

In chapter 1, I describe and illustrate the normal racial and gendered order of things in the comedy world, framed by the practices of the entertainment industry more broadly. These are the hegemonic race and gender discourses comedians push against on stage and negotiate in their daily lives.

In chapter 2, I present a lengthy ethnographic observation of a night at a comedy club in order to convey the feeling and atmosphere of the space in which comedians perform. This chapter introduces the main concept I'm arguing in this monograph, "pushing the edge," as well as the primary theoretical tools I will use in my analysis throughout the text.

In the third chapter I show what "pushing the edge" looks like, and the work comics who push the edge do, using extensive ethnographic data. The chapter is divided into sections that focus on different edges comedians push.

In chapter 4, I discuss heckling and sets that imploded and revealed the dirty core of hegemonic discourses of race and gender.

These four ethnographic chapters are "no joke" even though they contain lots of comedic material. I do, however, hope that what I have to say carries some of the elements of a good

punch line. I hope that some things surprise you, affect you, and yes, make you laugh. In the end, I hope I have given you something to think about. Now, let's get this show started!

Chapter 1: Hegemonic Race and Gender Discourses

This chapter shows what comedians who push the edge push against. They push against the hegemonic discourses on race and gender they encounter in the structure of the Industry, in their comedy careers, and in life in the US in general. In doing so, they reveal the normal order of things.²⁹

Stand-up comedy is a heavily male-dominated industry. Approximately 80-85 percent of the comedians on LA's stages are men. In my research, I viewed over 550 stand-up comedians perform live. Out of these, 17 percent were women (and this includes a number of shows specifically promoted as shows with an all-women lineup). Stand-up comedy is also majority white. There are no reliable available statistics on the racial and ethnic distribution of stand-up comedians specifically. Comics are a rather transient population to begin with, and any numbers kept by clubs or agents would already be skewed by some of the conditions described in this chapter. My own records also don't provide an accurate number since my research focuses on comics who engage critically with race; most are comics of color. The assessment of the sizes of different groups, then, are based on observing at clubs, assessing advertised club lineups, and most importantly, talking to comics and bookers. All agree on three demographic facts: (1) white comics constitute a majority, (2) Black comics constitute the largest minority group, and (3) male comics overwhelmingly outnumber female comics. Most working comics are white men, as are most of the people in the comedy and broader entertainment industry with gate-keeping powers (Hunt et al. 2014:28). Additionally, as elsewhere in US society, whiteness and heterosexuality

²⁹ As will quickly become apparent, this chapter contains material that is highly racist, sexist, and misogynistic. I'd like to give fair warning that reading some of it may have an assaulting affect, as do the broader racist and sexist discourses it describes.

are the normative standards, meaning that “white” and “straight” are unmarked normalized categories. The demographic distribution of racial and ethnic minorities in comedy deviates from the national distribution in that Black men and women stand out as the largest racial minority group (with far more men than women). Nationally, Latinos comprise a larger group (17.1 percent) than Blacks (13.2 percent) according to 2014 census estimates ([US Census Bureau 2015a](#)). Additionally, Latina/o comics (a heavily male group), East-Asian-American comedians (a small group of both men and women), and South Asian and Middle-Eastern American comics (also dominantly male) make a significant and noticeable contribution to the stand-up comedy scene in Los Angeles. Although I know of American Indian comedians, they are not a frequent or vocal presence on LA’s stages. Openly male gay comics of any race are far and few between, as are openly lesbian and gender-queer comics, and in eighteen months of fieldwork, I only saw one openly trans comic perform.

Part I: The Normal Order of Things

First, I will discuss the Hollywood entertainment industry briefly for context, (1) because the Industry impacts what takes place on stage in LA (since LA is a showcase town), and (2) because the vast majority of comics who work in LA aspire to also do film and television.

The Hollywood Context

One Black male comedian with 25 years of experience pitched a comedy Special to a white female cable-network representative. She professed to love his work, but laughingly rejected his proposal noting, “We only give comedy Specials to young white hipsters.” Sadly her statement is rather accurate. In 2013, thirteen out of seventeen performers (76 percent) with

comedy Specials on this network were white, and in 2011, white people constituted thirteen out of sixteen performers with Specials (81 percent) (epguides.com). Normative white male privilege in the entertainment industry more broadly is a well-documented fact that has been studied and analyzed extensively. In 2014, the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA issued a comprehensive report on diversity in Hollywood (Hunt et al. 2014). Surveying theatrical film releases and on-air television shows during the 2011-12 season, the report found that,

...while films and television shows with casts that reflect the nation's racial and ethnic diversity were more likely to post high box office figures or ratings during the study period, minorities and women were nonetheless woefully underrepresented among the corps of directors, show creators, writers, and lead actors that animates industry productions. Moreover, the dominant agencies—important gatekeepers for the film and television production process—tended to load their talent rosters with white male directors, show creators, writers, and leads, largely to the exclusion of minority and female talent. [Hunt et al. 2014:28]

Further bringing this point home, as I'm writing this chapter, the Academy Award nominations for 2015 have just been announced with all twenty nominations for acting roles given to white actors (Zeitchik & Ali 2015). This in spite of stellar performances by actors of color in some of the films nominated for best picture and in films that were not nominated at all.

One of the most overtly race- and gender-stereotyping public phases of television and movie production is the casting process. A 2010 casting call for a Persian iteration of MTV's reality show *Jersey Shore* asked for "Persian-Americans," who felt they were part of "a new Persian empire" in LA, to submit for auditions. Suitable candidates were solicited as a "bad-ass new dynasty where *exotic* beauty and *wild style* dominates the *sexiest* nightlife, exclusive venues and hottest beaches the modern world has to offer" (Bierly 2010, emphasis added). In 2014, another casting notice for the film "Straight Outta Compton," which tells the story of former rap group N.W.A., asked for "females" of different "categories" to submit photos for featured extras

(Cadet 2014). The available categories ranked “A Girls” as “the hottest of the hottest. Models. MUST have real hair - no extensions, very classy looking, great bodies. You can be black, white, asian, hispanic, mid eastern, or mixed race too” (Cadet 2014). “B Girls,” they specified, “are fine girls, long natural hair, really nice bodies. Small waists, nice hips. You should be light-skinned. Beyoncé is a prototype here” (Cadet 2014). Further down the list, “C Girls” were specifically “African American girls, medium to light skinned with a weave.” And, lastly, “D Girls” should be “African American girls. Poor, not in good shape. Medium to dark skin tone. Character types” (Cadet 2014). Both of these calls received well-earned criticism and online backlash, and the casting agency for “Straight Outta Compton” later apologized, as did the studio. In truth, though, the overtly racist, sexist, and Orientalist language is not uncommon for casting notices in the Industry. Rather, it’s par for the course.

Normative Whiteness and Marked “Others”

In the trenches of the comedy clubs, as elsewhere in US society, whiteness often disguises as normal and neutral. As Ruth Frankenberg stated earlier, the “usually unmarked and unnamed” practices of whiteness is one of its defining features (1993:1). Hence, when a white male club booker suggested to me that some Black comics don’t work well with “regular” audiences, a “regular” audience is to be understood as white. In truth, not all comics work for all audiences, whether Black or of any other race. As another booker put it: the comic has to be right for the room. The point here, however, is to note that in comedy, as elsewhere, “regular” usually means white. A “regular” show, then, typically has a white male lineup with one or two men of color for diversification purposes. However, if there *are* two men of color, they are often not of the same racial or ethnic belonging. Whiteness is normative and therefore invisible but for its

absence, whereas identifiably Black people are hypervisible as the starkest contrast to the white neutral standard. Black comedians have repeatedly told me of situations where they have asked for a spot on a show and have been declined because “we already have a Black comic in the lineup.” Other comedians of color may be more or less racially marked depending on how close to white they look. A woman may also be included in the lineup in addition to, or in lieu of, one of the men of color, and like Black male comics, female comics remark on the rarity of having two women on a club show (alt shows typically offer more spots for women). Male hosts often single out a woman in the lineup *as woman* in some way when they introduce her: Are you ready for a female? Normative whiteness and male privilege, then, “angle the room,” in Sara Ahmed’s terms, in different ways for all comics. For men of color and women this particular angling marks them as not “regular” because of their race and gender.

With white constituting what’s “regular” at mainstream clubs, shows with primarily or only people of color are generally advertised in a manner that suggests a racial or ethnic theme.³⁰ These shows typically have racially or ethnically suggestive names such as “Mo Betta Mondays” (indexes Black folks by use of Ebonics), “Refried Fridays” (where refried beans signify all Latinos), “Slanted Comedy” (refers to East Asians’ epicanthic eyes), and “Comedy Bazaar” (suggestive of Middle Easterners and South Asians).³¹ Club owners and bookers argue that racially and ethnically themed nights draw larger crowds from the targeted racial or ethnic demographic than do shows without a racial-ethnic theme. One producer noted that at a “regular” show at his club, approximately 40 percent of the audience is Latina/o. In contrast, a show with a recognizable south-of-the-border theme at the same club attracts 70 percent of the audience from

³⁰ This is not the case at Black clubs.

³¹ The producer of the show (the club or an independent producer) gives themed, or “segmented,” shows their names.

the Latina/o community. He remarks, “People show up for a show that is tailored for them.” He also says patrons enjoy the show even if the lineup consists of comics of races or ethnicities other than their own. Implied here is that this is the case as long as the host (who often is more of a draw at “ethnic” shows) belongs to the targeted ethnic group. The producer laments, “It’s unfortunate that people gravitate to a themed show as opposed to any show.”

Audiences, then, contribute to the racial thematization of shows by favoring them over “regular” shows. Rebecca Krefting confirms this shared responsibility between audiences and producers in her observation about the comedy industry more broadly, “While market gatekeepers may hold the purse strings and seem to dictate what is made available to us, they continually look to us to decide what or who will be featured next on America’s ‘It’ list. The public supports comics whose personae reflect their worldviews and ideologies” (2014:33). Producers, who have to consider the bottom line, happily or reluctantly oblige.

As for the comics, many I spoke to loathe these types of shows precisely because they feel racially or ethnically pigeonholed. “These shows are all fucking racist to me!” said one male comic, “The names are fucking dumb!” If a show or venue regularly features mostly Black performers and attracts a primarily Black audience, it is known as a “Black room” (but not advertised by that name; it’s a colloquial term). Some clubs specifically direct Black comics to such rooms even when their style of comedy holds appeal to all racial and ethnic demographics. This was the experience of comedic veteran Gina Yashere, a British-born African woman and a highly regarded and well-established comic in her native England and around the world. When she first came to Los Angeles and asked for a spot at a club in town, she was told to come back on the night of the “Black show.” It was assumed that as a Black woman she would work best with Black audiences and *not* be suitable for other audiences. Gina says she can work any

audience (and as a comic who performs in Europe, the US, Australia, and Asia every year, she can make such claims with more authority than most). She is also happy to do “Black shows,” but she does not want to be pigeonholed.

All comics of color, men and women, are subjected to this slotting into racially themed shows and to the tokenism of “regular” shows. Women, additionally, are grouped into all-women shows with names like “Ladies’ Night,” “Funny Females,” or “Pretty, Funny Women,” further suggesting that women as women are so different from the male standard as to constitute a theme, regardless of what they actually talk about on stage.

Exotic, Foreign, and Dangerous

Objectifying people of color as exotic and foreign has a long history in the US and Europe, with both men and women sought after by whites as entertainment and as objects of sexual desire and gratification (McClintock 1995).

“I’d like to settle down,” says the white male comic on stage (he’s in his late 50s or early 60s). “I like the sound of little pitter-patter. [pause] I love Asian hookers! [In mock-Asian “girly” voice:] ‘I love you long time!’ [brief pause] Yeah, you bet you will! No suck-y dick-y—back on boat-y! I’ll call immigration on you!” The mostly white audience groans audibly and is clearly not amused. “I don’t make the rules,” he responds to their overt disapproval, thereby trying to distance himself from what he just said.

In this bit the comic manages to include a slew of Orientalist tropes that intersect with racialized sexism. The “pitter patter” he professes to like at the start of the joke suggests the sound of children’s feet, but he quickly lets us know that he’s talking about adult Asian women. In other words, he infantilizes Asian women at the onset, which renders them small and

powerless in our imagination. He further exerts his power over the childlike Asian woman by calling her a hooker; he has paid her to have sex with him. The power inequality here operates on a racial, gendered, age, and economic level, where the white comic becomes the embodiment of white supremacy, patriarchy, and US imperialism. The fictive Asian girl-woman is also assumed to be foreign, hence the mock-Asian accent, and expresses that she will love him for a long time (in spite of this being framed as a sex transaction), suggesting a stereotypical willing, subservient Asian young woman who will put up with male abuse and mistreatment. The comic then reasserts his domination over the “Oriental subject” once again, now using mock-Asian language rather than an accent, by turning the love she just professed into a demand for sex on his part (“Yeah, you bet you will! No suck-y dick-y—back on boat-y!”), her possible denial of which carries the threat of punishment—being sent back home. The last threat that he’ll “call immigration on [her]” brings the full force of US Empire into play. He, as a white straight American male, can mobilize the power of the State in his personal sexual domination of Asian female subjects, and feels comfortable stating so. This short bit carries all the elements Said talks about in his description of the second and third meanings of Orientalism. The comic makes the distinction between “us” and “them” throughout the joke, both in the shifting power dynamic between him and an Asian woman, and in his use of an accent to mark positions. He also clearly feels entitled to assert his dominance and authority over “the Orient,” here imagined as a helpless, loving, childlike Asian prostitute. The fact that the audience groans at the joke and doesn’t laugh at all suggests that, in this case, the joke’s racism, sexism, and perhaps also explicit language was too overt and crude for the mostly white patrons in this more socially conservative part of LA. This particular comedian is a Las Vegas mainstay, and I speculate that his joke may resonate

better with a Vegas crowd in that the Vegas location itself carries an expectation of lasciviousness and unregulated behavior.

These and other racist tropes carry purchase in stand-up comedy as much as in US society more broadly. During my fieldwork, I heard non-Black comics gush on stage over how “cool” Black people are (“all they do is cool”) and try to imitate how “cool” Black people talk. I heard comments about the desirability of Black women’s buttocks, “sexy Spanish accents,” and Asian women’s assumed subservience combined with an equally assumed proclivity for sexual acrobatics. Comics also frequently verbally mocked and emasculated men of East Asian origin, both in jokes and in crowd work, through mock accents and mock language, and endless small-penis and math-nerd references. At one show, a male Latino comic asked an Asian man, who sat at a table up front with a bunch of his friends, what his name was. “Herbie,” said the man. “Herbie? Herbie? It’s not Ching Chong? Herbie! That’s the creepiest name I’ve ever heard! What are you?” “Chinese,” responded the man. “Chinese? You guys all look the same,” concluded the comic. People laughed, but not with gusto. Herbie and his friends didn’t exactly crack up either, when the comedian mocked his name and blurted out the tired racist line, “you guys all look the same.” This interaction was not a case of the audience laughing *together* when the comic picked on one of us. Rather, the comedian directed his meanness towards one of us for us to laugh *at*. I have seen cases where racializing jokes aimed at particular audience members indeed become an interaction where we all laugh together, but that was not the case here.

A less malevolent, yet classic, example of Orientalism occurred at a show when the Black host on stage asked an Asian-American man in the audience where he was from, in a manner that indicated that the comic expected him to be foreign. When the Asian-American man replied “Colorado,” the comic was clearly surprised and called himself on it, “Oh, that was racist as

hell!” He then went on to make fun of himself and to criticize the assumptions he had just made. While the comic took responsibility for his racialized assumptions and even turned the situation into a teaching moment, the exchange also perfectly illustrates an Orientalist gaze. If you look Asian, you must be foreign.

At one show, a young Persian comic asked the mostly young Middle Eastern-hailing audience if there were any Mexicans in the room. One young Mexican woman identified herself as such. The comic commented, “Persian men loove Mexican women! If it weren’t for you, all Persian guys would be virgin!” The audience laughed heartily at this. The male Persian comic singled out a Latina audience member as representative of stereotyped Latina promiscuity and also tacitly complimented Persian women for their perceived chastity. Latina women are frequent targets of exotification and debasement, typically through referrals to their assumed sexual promiscuity and hyper-fertility. Comics often make these references as if in passing. A white female comic asked the audience, “Is someone pregnant here? [brief pause] Of course you are, it’s a Mexican show! Who’s *not* pregnant?” Here, Latina women are primarily thought of in terms of sex. The white female comic conflated all Latinas as Mexican, and essentialized all Mexican women as pregnant. While this example may seem rather innocent as far as prejudices go, it still essentializes, and it excludes and puts down. The first example with the Persian comic also brings to light Andrea Smith’s point that people who endure one form of oppression are often complicit in maintaining other forms (2006:69). Comics of color often make racist jokes about members of other racial and ethnic groups who are also targets of white supremacy. Outside of comedy, we see this dynamic play out as anti-Latino immigrant sentiments, as exotification of Asian-Americans as foreign, and as a perception of Middle-Easterners as enemy threats, by people of color who don’t belong to the respective groups. While Smith specifically

talks about people oppressed under different *racial* logics as complicit against each other, the reasoning also applies to and is complicated by the intersections of gender, and sexual orientation with those logics (Smith 2006:69).³²

Middle-Eastern looking men continuously have to address what I've come to think of as "the terrorist label" on stage. A white male comic told the audience that he's working on a side project on gender relations in Muslim communities. He said he's going to title his book, *Men are from Al Qaeda, Women are from Hezbollah*.³³ In one fictitious book title he captures the ubiquitous Orientalist trope that all Middle Easterners are terrorists and religious fanatics. The continuous references to Middle Easterners as potential terrorists, even if jokingly, keep the image of the foreign threat alive and in power over both the Western imagination and the Middle-Eastern subjects. In comedy, we see the evidence of this in Middle-Eastern-looking comics' perceived need to address this label in some way as soon as they get on stage. Middle-Eastern-American comic Sammy Obeid says that, "When I started doing comedy, I felt like people wanted to know my racial background. It used to feel like the audience wasn't comfortable unless I told them. Now I have enough command of the stage for them to relax even without saying anything, but some people I can [still] feel relax a bit more when they know what I am" (interview, 8/6/11). For Middle-Eastern-looking comics, looking Middle Eastern is the proverbial "elephant in the room." As such, the comics have to address it on stage or risk bombing the set (no pun) by not making the audience comfortable. Note that the audience's discomfort is rarely with what the comedian actually appears to be (whether Middle Eastern,

³² The Civil Rights Movement is a good example of how a struggle against one form of oppression (racism) does not preclude participation in another (sexism).

³³ The comic here plays with the title of a best-selling book from the 1990s titled, *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray 1992).

overweight, very tall, very short, or something else), but with the comic *not stating* it, and stating it early in the set. This differs from what takes place outside of comedy, where some Americans feel great unease around Middle-Eastern looking people, especially at airports and on planes.

The Ubiquitous “Women Aren’t Funny” Discourse

Among many men and women in the entertainment industry, women are categorically dismissed as not funny. The explanations for why women supposedly aren’t funny, however, are contradictory and illogical. Presented, at times, as an evolutionary argument, women are purportedly not funny because, as one male comic explained, “Women don’t have to be funny to get guys.”³⁴ Guys, on the other hand, can get more women if they’re funny, especially if the men are not particularly good looking or rich. And even if you are a handsome and wealthy man, the reasoning goes, you will just be even more irresistible to women if you’re funny. Men, then, are supposedly funnier than women because they have to be in order to get laid (so women do, in theory, have some control over who they have sex with). However, none of the comics I talked to explicitly say that women aren’t funny, and many don’t seem to agree with that prejudice because they know and are friends with very funny women who are comedians. At the same time, many seem to think that the proposition holds for women in society more broadly. Missing from this conversation is the fact that *most people* aren’t funny enough to turn it into a profession. In fact, neither are most comics, whether men or women. But even though this is the reality in the trenches, the postulation that women aren’t funny remains, and it regularly causes

³⁴ A position reinforced by the late journalist Christopher Hitchens’ *Vanity Fair* article in 2007. Hitchens argued that women are not funny (or at the very least, are less funny than men) because their ability to bear children makes being funny a non-priority. That is, men don’t want women to be smart and funny because it diminishes their own smart and funny qualities, and because men are in actuality in women’s servitude and women therefore understand that it would be bad for procreation, so to speak, to remind men of their inferiority by also being funny.

heated debate in the comedy world.

One such occasion gained national attention when comedian Adam Carolla, host of “the world’s most popular podcast” (Still 2011), *The Adam Carolla Show*, stated in an interview that,

The reason why you know more funny dudes than funny chicks is that dudes are funnier than chicks. If my daughter has a mediocre sense of humor, I’m just gonna tell her, ‘Be a staff writer for a sitcom. Because they’ll have to hire you,³⁵ they can’t really fire you, and you don’t have to produce that much. It’ll be awesome.’” [Getlen 2012:np]

The interviewer noted that the debate over whether women are funny or not had become very heated recently, and asked Carolla if he was not concerned about reactions to his statement

(Getlen 2012). “I don’t care,” responded Carolla, and continued:

When you’re picking a basketball team, you’ll take the brother over the guy with the yarmulke. Why? Because you’re playing the odds. When it comes to comedy, of course there’s Sarah Silverman, Tina Fey, Kathy Griffin — super-funny chicks. But if you’re playing the odds? No. If Joy Behar or Sherri Shepherd was [sic] a dude, they’d be off TV. They’re not funny enough for dudes. What if Roseanne Barr was a dude? Think we’d know who she was? Honestly. [Getlen 2012]

Carolla does not try to offer an explanation for why he thinks women aren’t funny, but the interview illustrates how this sexist attitude permeates quotidian offerings like podcast interviews and social media posts. His choice of analogy also points to a racial aspect of this prejudice. If you were putting together a basketball team, suggests Carolla, you’d pick the Black man over the Jewish guy. He sees this as a matter of hedging your bets.

Carolla does not elaborate on any racial angle with regards to his prejudice against women though, which is consistent with what I’ve observed with regards to this debate in general. The anti-women discourse is typically not worded in racial terms off stage (on stage, as we saw in the earlier Asian-prostitute joke, the connection is explicit), perhaps because all women are thought of as the same in this instance, or because taking an overtly racist position is much more

³⁵ Presumably in order to show a “diverse” writing staff that does not exclude women.

sanctioned than taking an overtly sexist one. The fact that the racialization of gender is not loudly voiced off stage does not mean it's not happening. As far as the implications of the women-aren't-funny prejudice are concerned, most male comedians who spoke on this recognized the comedy industry as a whole as sexist and as a challenging territory for women to navigate. However, those who held the general belief that women don't need to be funny to get men (and that they therefore aren't as funny), did not explicitly connect their belief with the discrimination against women they observe in the comedy industry.

John, one of the male comedians I worked with, told of an interaction that illustrates the work this prejudice does among comics.³⁶ He was talking to Cliff, a successful male comic of color outside a club.³⁷ Cliff apologized for not offering John an opener position on his upcoming tour. He said John was too strong as a performer. While disappointing in terms of a missed opportunity for John, it was also a compliment (assuming it was genuine and not an excuse for not wanting to invite him); John was too good and might steal the headliner's thunder. Then, Cliff asked John if he knew "any chicks who were any good"—the assumption being (John told me) that even if they were good, they still wouldn't be as good as Cliff and therefore not a threat to his position as the headlining comic. Headlining comics often strategize in this way whether they are men or women. Nobody wants a more skilled and funnier comic to go up on stage right before their own headlining set. But Cliff assumed that a "funny chick" would automatically be less funny than he is, just because she is a woman. Ironically, in this situation, his prejudice against female comics made them his preferred choice, in fact creating a job opportunity for a female comic because of her presumed lesser skills.

³⁶ John is a fictional name.

³⁷ Cliff is also a fictional name.

Corroborating the prevalence of these sexist dynamics, several other comedians (men and women) informed me that attractive female comics of mediocre talent will get booked regularly because they make the male comics in the lineup look great and pose no threat to their (superior) positions. While there are plenty of mediocre comedians, both men and women, women (attractive or not) are assumed to be less talented as a baseline and therefore presumed unworthy of the spots they get in a lineup. Comedian Aida Rodriguez told me that some attractive-looking male comics also have to deal with this assumption of incompetence due to their looks. Their personal ordeal, however, does not begin to compare to the systemic devaluation female comics encounter. The discourse is reminiscent of the anti-affirmative-action rhetoric, where people of color and women are assumed to get jobs based on race and gender, and without or on lesser merit compared to their white/male counterparts, and where those in structural positions of power are then deemed to be the victims of “reverse racism.”

The situation gets further complicated when Industry people surrounding an aspiring attractive female comic push her into the public light too fast, before she’s had a chance to develop her talent sufficiently for the kind of exposure she’s getting. Comedian Maz Jobrani elaborates on this predicament and remarks,

There are no shortcuts in stand-up. [Comedian] Louis CK has been doing this for 28 years, and now you’re seeing his success.³⁸ There aren’t any 16-year-old Justin Biebers in stand-up. If you’re an attractive woman, I’ve seen agents and managers get really excited, and they look past whether you’re funny or not. But she may not be ready yet, and it becomes detrimental to that person’s career. It’s too soon. [interview, 1/23/12]

The woman then becomes both a victim of and fuel for the anti-women discourse, and it is not because she lacks the talent potential to develop into a good comic, but because of

³⁸ During my fieldwork, Louis CK was by far the most popular and successful comedian among the comics I talked to. Most named his career (sold-out shows, big theatre gigs, self-distributed online Specials, and his own wildly successful comedy show on television, *Louie*) as the role model for the career they’d like to have.

mismanagement by people looking to their own short-term gains. Mismanagement is not exclusively a problem for women in entertainment, but I would argue that this particular strand of mismanagement affects women comedians disproportionately due to the longstanding practice of seeing female attractiveness as a profitable and exploitable commodity. The commodification of attractive-looking women constitutes the normal order of things outside of the comedy industry as well, maybe even more so. In contrast, men who advance too quickly in their careers may be disparaged in different ways, but they aren't subjected to an anti-male discourse.

The attitude that women aren't funny is both a broad discourse and a direct factor in personal interactions. One female comic told me of one such encounter when she had showed up to a venue to do a set. A well-established male comic who knew that she was a comedian sarcastically asked her, "What are *you* doing here?" as if she was out of her league. "Same thing you're doing," she replied, "except *I'll* be funny..." Sometimes this discourse becomes the topic of a scandal that gets discussed as a third-party incident. At all times, it serves as the unstated backdrop for every female comedian's performance. In other words, the affective space in stand-up is circumscribed for women before they even take the stage. No matter how funny they are; they have to disprove the sexist image held against them before getting recognition on their own terms. Many female comedians recognize more intense sexism as part of the deal in choosing to be comics, and, like the comedian in this example, tackle it head on when they face it.

Women Should Not Act Like Men OR Like Women

Stand-up comedy is an art form that relies heavily on crude and "inappropriate" language and topics, and most comics do at least somewhat "dirty" shows if the venue permits them to do so. Susan Seizer argues that the use of obscenity in comedy creates an informal and intimate

atmosphere, and suggests that inappropriate language conveys an “off the record” and “from the heart” kind of attitude (2011:214). She also points out that “the majority of obscene words come from the source domain of sex and sex talk,... [a] realm of intimacy” (Seizer 2011:214). Obscenities that refer to “bodily functions and the stripped-naked basics of being human” also fit into this realm of intimacy (Seizer 2011:214). Intimacy is a highly affective experience; it’s an experience of connection, and both affect and connection are conditions for successfully pushing the edge. Not that the only way to create these conditions is to use foul language, or that all obscenities have this effect. But, well-placed inappropriateness can make the comedian come across as sincere and genuine. This creates a double bind for female comedians.

As a society, we accept crude and dirty talk more readily from men, “it’s just a dude being a dude.” When women do this, they risk coming across as off-putting and unfeminine. “It’s a male sport,” says comedian Aida Rodriguez, “[comedy is] not [considered] a feminine thing to do” (interview, 1/19/12). Women still cuss and talk dirty on stage. In that sense, they push the edges of mainstream discourses of femininity. But rather than being allowed to expand the public imagination of what being a woman encompasses (the way I will argue Black male comics are able to do when they challenge racialized images of their masculinity in chapter 3), women who push gender boundaries by cussing and talking crudely on stage are frequently publically reprimanded or, at best, tolerated.

Comedian Jerry Lewis stated back in 1998 that “watching women do comedy ‘sets me back a bit’ and that [I have] trouble with the notion of would-be mothers as comedians” (Coyle 2013). In 2013, Lewis reaffirmed his prejudice at the Cannes Film Festival when a question on his current views about women comics prompted him to say that, “I cannot sit and watch a lady diminish her qualities to the lowest common denominator... I just can’t do that” (Coyle 2013). A

year later still, Lewis amended his statement (somewhat) when he admitted that women comics could indeed be funny, “just not when they’re crude” (Bennett 2014). His sentiment, shared by some older male comics in particular, positions comedy as debasing and therefore unbecoming of a woman. The idea that comedy with its sexually explicit humor and foul language pollutes women—who in Lewis’s view are all “would-be mothers” (i.e. comedy’s sanctified opposite)—or its corollary, that women who are crude on stage are polluted, harkens back to a false and archaic notion that the pure and sacred (here, women) not only shouldn’t be, but *can* be, defiled (Douglas 2002[1966]:9). With this illogical reasoning, female comedians jeopardize their womanliness, indeed the sanctity of womanhood, when they cuss and talk about pussy on stage. Women who do comedy, then, per Lewis and sympathizers, are inauthentic both as women and as comics. This double standard is levied against white women as much as women of color.

In 2012, this grievance spilled into mainstream news when the booker for the *Late Show with David Letterman*, Eddie Brill, got in hot water for a statement he made in an interview. Brill said, “There are a lot less [*sic*] female comics who are authentic. I see a lot of female comics who to please an audience will act like men” (Zinoman 2012). Brill was fired from his job as booker within days of the article’s publication, but he reportedly stayed on as a warm-up act for the program’s live TV audiences (Itzkoff 2012). As criticized as he was for his comments, surprisingly, some male and female comedians still spoke out in his support. Brill’s comment that many female comics “act like men,” and as a result are not authentic, presumes an essentialized female nature that these women cover with a male act. In anthropologist John Jackson’s discussion of “racial sincerity” and “racial authenticity” (which I will elaborate on in the next chapter), a subject (the authenticator) confers racial authenticity onto an object (the authenticated) (2005:15). Applying this to the gender context places Brill in the position of

authenticating subject. Female comics are the authenticated, or in this case de-authenticated, objects because they don't repeat traits that Brill and others deem characteristic of women, and because they *do* deem those traits characteristic of men.

Doing what men do generates backlash for women. This is a form of the social power accrued to men within a patriarchal system. Men regulate women's behavior, and feel entitled to do so, by labeling certain forms inauthentic, and therefore undesirable and of lower value. Again, men authenticate female objects, so much so that female subjectivity in itself can be seen as "inauthentic" to the extent that it pushes against mainstream patriarchal cultural categories. Also, men's dirty talk is most often *about* women, but women who reply in kind are reprimanded.

The different standards for women are not only apparent with regards to crudeness and foul language; the *topics* they talk about (with or without f-bombs) are also evaluated more restrictively than are those of men. Race and gender are two big general categories that shape people's experiences of the world and life. Not surprisingly then, with regards to gender, straight men talk about being straight men. They talk about women they date, relationships, marriage, kids, money, sex, dicks, and vaginas. Straight women, also not surprisingly, talk about being straight women. They talk about men they date, relationships, marriage, kids, sex, money, dicks, and vaginas. In other words, straight men and women talk about the same general topics; yet only women comics are derided for "always talking about dating and their periods," as numerous male and female comics informed me throughout my fieldwork. Gina Yashere, the British-born African globetrotting comedian I mentioned previously, made a conscious decision earlier in her career to not do jokes premised on "women do this" and "men do that," or sex-based material. She notes that, "M[ale comics] can do it all day long, but women are judged badly when they do" (interview, 2/17/12). Both male and female comics and bookers let me know that for women to

talk about dating is considered hack, and for them to talk about their periods is “not relatable.” This is even though it’s relatable to at least half the audience, if not more, as women often constitute the majority in audiences.³⁹ Rebecca Krefting makes a similar observation with regards to a male comic she spoke with about his evaluation of a female colleague, where he found her funny “when she talks about human experiences, but [not when she speaks] from a female perspective” (2014:113). As Krefting concludes, “The underlying request seems to ask her to strip woman-ness from her comic material, arguably one of the fundamental social positions contributing to how she experiences the world” (2014:113). For women to earn respect as comedians, then, they have to show that they have range beyond that expected of men, and that they can talk about things that aren’t just about women and therefore presumably only interesting to women (because no man has ever been involved with a woman who had a period and therefore they know absolutely nothing about what that entails, unless of course it’s a male comic talking about how “crazy” his girlfriend gets while she’s PMS-ing). The flawed logics feed each other: women are marked as women, and since women as women aren’t seen as funny, they have to “unmark” themselves in order to be considered funny (and not just by men; many women have also bought into this tacit reasoning).

In sum, female comedians that cuss and use crude language on stage as part of establishing a personal and relatable connection to the audience are sometimes judged and reprimanded for being unfeminine and for debasing themselves, for being inauthentic as women.

³⁹ Richard Barrett, the director of entertainment at The Comedy and Magic Club in Hermosa Beach, CA, informed me that comedy clubs for the most part will have more women than men as guests. Clubs attract plenty of couples, but are more likely to have groups of women than groups of men (interview, 7/18/12). This was corroborated by the comedians I talked to, as well as by my own observations. Men typically go to clubs in the company of women whether as a couple or in a group of men and women. Women, however, frequently also go to comedy shows with other women, whereas men are less likely to go see a show with a group of just guys. Why this is so, I do not know.

As far as the topics women joke about, however, they are criticized for talking about things that are too women-centered and not generic enough, that is, relatable for men. In this respect, then, women can't win for losing.

How women act on stage is also a matter of more direct policing, which should come as no surprise. The normal order of things is normal because institutions and individuals repeatedly enact its various facets on a daily basis. Part II of this chapter details how the broader discourses presented in Part I are reproduced in the everyday situations and interactions women and comics of color have to negotiate in order to get on stage.

Part II: The Daily Work of Maintaining (and Resisting) Race and Gender Hegemonies

Policing Women's Performativity

There is no evil master who decrees the comedy industry's conflicted demands on women, although it may at times feel that way. These demands are created and upheld in daily interactions among comics, and between comics and bookers, producers, managers, agents, and networks. Men and women participate in regulating female comedians' appearance and performances. Among the Industry gatekeepers I interviewed, female bookers and show producers were the most vocal on this issue.

One female show producer declared:

I'm so hard on the females. I plead with them. I don't want to hear about dating in LA! I don't want to hear about your periods! I don't want to hear about your workout or how fat you are! Half of the audience is male. There are a lot of things in life you can talk about... You may have a great rack [and] you may have a great ass, but let the comedy speak for itself. [interview, date withheld]

Another female show producer said,

They say females aren't funny and I'll tell you why: *inauthentic* females aren't funny... If women come in all made up and all dressed up, it's just not honest. It's not authentic.

It's a put-on. Guys don't do that. Guys just say it like it is. Women are also taught to be apologetic and to be liked. You like someone cause they're honest and authentic. Women are taught to be nice. Nice is not funny. Now, a fat female cannot do that. That's why fat women are funnier cause there's no hiding. But people expect you to do fat jokes, even though you have more to say. When female comics put on make-up and heels, as a woman [in the audience], you're like, "I hate her! She's pretty!" And the men go right to the sex. So the men treat her like a sex object and the women hate her, so her likeability is out the window. Often with pretty women I will tell them to dress down. Don't wear make-up! Don't fix your hair! Be natural! [interview, date withheld]

If I draw this reasoning to its end point, female comics who look attractive are seen as dishonest, inauthentic, unnatural, and above all, not funny. And none of these perceived attributes generate feelings of relatability in the audience—a key to a successful set. If indeed audiences read female comedians in the manner these bookers attest to, then women work the show room on dramatically different terms from their male colleagues, even if we disregard all the other adverse conditions I've described thus far. In this scenario, men are assumed to be honest, authentic, and natural as a baseline, and this assumption only falters if they show that they aren't. For women, the opposite conditions are true, which means that they start their set from a negative position. Producers may argue that they are looking out for female comics and trying to prevent them from making costly career mistakes, that it's better to get the bitter medicine amongst "your own," so to speak. This may indeed be the case. It also keeps the sexist patriarchal system of the Industry firmly in place, where these bookers and show producers are in a unique position to challenge that system in their daily interactions with comics, audiences, and industry, rather than maintain it.

Female comedians describe how this judgment affects them. Marcella Arguello explains:

If you attempt to get dressed up at all, you're [seen as] a whore... And if you dress down, then you're [seen as] a dyke, and they treat you accordingly... You have to learn how to deal with it or not to deal with it. Ask any woman about dressing on stage and she will have something to say about it. Prettier girls will wear glasses on stage even if they don't need them, or they will have their hair pulled back. [interview, 11/15/11]

Aida Rodriguez has also dealt with this issue throughout her career as a comedian. She confirms,

Women are expected not to dress provocatively on stage, cause it takes away from the comedy. The less well dressed, the more respect women get, cause you are not trying to detract from the comedy. I dress the way I want. When I started, I dressed like a boy all the time. I did not want people to pay attention to anything but what I was saying.
[interview, 3/28/12]

Nowadays, Aida confidently wears dresses and jewelry at shows when she feels like it, in spite of the judgment she still incurs when she does. She faced chastisement for her attire in a very public way when she wore a short bright yellow dress as a top-ten finalist of *Last Comic Standing* (Season 8). One of the judges, a veteran Black comic, told her she needed to tone down her sex-appeal as it might distract from the comedy. Her performative expression of self, in this sense, was not seen as part of her performance, but as a distraction from it. The male comic, in other words, suggested that she work her identity differently, or as I would say, with less integrity. Aida returned the favor in the following episode of the show when she tartly commented on the judge's attractiveness as distracting and asked *him* to tone it down.

While Aida, a single mother of two young adults, can hold her ground any day of the week, the proscriptive advice she received on public television demonstrates how easily and matter of fact this discourse flows. Not only was she personally scolded on her attire; every woman (comedian or not) watching the televised show received that message too, and from a highly respected comic no less. Female comedians may not agree with what he said, but it's still information they'll have to take into consideration when they prepare for a show (whether they heed the "advice" or not). Such messages, especially when broadcast on national television, do the work of maintaining the hegemony of sexist gender discourses. They affirm the views of sympathizers, and serve as warnings to those who think otherwise not to step out of line. And for those who performatively disregard the boundaries of these discourses, it ensures that they do so

with the tension of knowing that they're sanctioned beforehand. This tension is a form of negative affect, in that it creates an initial negative feeling that has to be overcome. It can turn into something productive when women decide to use the proscription creatively, as Aida frequently does in her blog posts and short video clips on social media.

Complicating this matter is the reality that some female comics *do* dress and talk in a self-exploitive sexualizing manner on stage, and many of them are not funny (for the reason explained earlier—*most people* aren't funny enough to get on stage and make others laugh), which unfortunately just supports the prejudice. Rodriguez comments on this issue too, "On the other side, many women coming into the game have been programmed that if they show their titties or wear tight shorts [they can benefit], and then promoters go, 'See, that's why we're not booking you guys.' ... There are women who don't take the craft seriously, who ruin it for the rest of us. And then the notion is that we're not funny" (interview, 1/19/12).

The direction of the judgment of women's attire and physical presentation may at first seem counter-intuitive when compared to how it works in US society in general. Rather than expose and actively exploit women's bodies and female sexuality, as is the broader social norm, female comedians are judged negatively if they are perceived to emphasize any attractive physical features. But if they talk crudely and cuss, as is the custom of the trade, they are seen as off-putting because they are not feminine enough. As a woman in comedy, then, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Dressing in a flauntingly sexy manner is an immediate disqualifier of comedic competence, unless you are perceived as unattractive anyway. Being sexy on stage suggests that you are trying to sell your act by other means than comedic material. Even if a woman is not *trying* to be sexy, simply coming across as physically attractive can be perceived as a negative, as something she needs to overcome for her act to be taken seriously.

Sure, she's cute, but is she funny? Consequently, many female comedians purposefully dress down in order to deflect a hypersexualizing gaze and their devaluation as comics.

This strategy has a history in stand-up comedy, with the late comedian Phyllis Diller among the most well known old-timers to be self-deprecating and tone down her attractiveness. In an interview with the (now) late comedian Joan Rivers on the occasion of Diller's passing, Rivers noted that, "She was the last of the women comedians who had to make themselves ugly to be laughed at" (McLellan 2012). While women comics may no longer feel the need to "uglify" themselves, they oftentimes do tone down their attractiveness in order not to let looks potentially distract from their performances. In 1987 in a New York Times interview, comedian Elayne Boosler recounts how the bookers for Johnny Carson tried to push a self-deprecating style on her (Kohen 2012). "I went in to do the *Tonight Show*, I had a beautiful set all prepared, and they put someone on my case to write jokes. I remember the first joke I was handed went, 'I'm so ugly, I can't make a nickel on a battleship.' I just refused to do it" (Kohen 2012). Comedian Janeane Garofalo also adopted a self-effacing style when she started out in the 1990s, as did comedian Whitney Cummings more recently (Kohen 2012). According to journalist Yael Kohen, "Cummings says she used self-deprecating comments and baggy clothes to ingratiate herself with audiences at the start of her career" (2012:np). The comedy industry pushes female comics, especially when they start out, to work their gender identity in ways that are ultimately compromising, or that penalizes them for not acquiescing.

Women deemed *unattractive* according to mainstream standards of beauty can get away with showing skin or wearing more makeup because it cannot compensate for their perceived lack of attractiveness and therefore cannot be used to "hide" bad jokes. One female comedian told me "If you see a woman flaunting skin on stage, she is usually overweight, or if not, she's

probably not funny. She's using that as a tool. It's always something, and it's all strategic." In a sense, so called unattractive women are seen as more honest, because if they're funny it's "obvious" that it is due to good material alone, not looks. Both male and female comics have bought into and perpetuate this measure for women. For women this presents a conflicted dichotomy: they are subjected to and resent the limitations imposed by the male gaze, but they also look at and judge each other through that same lens, thereby becoming complicit in each others' and their own subjugation.

The terrain, as I have tried to show in this section, is messy and confusing. Female comedians have to find their way through it and, fortunately, many do. No matter what, it's a predicament they have to address. Deciding how to position themselves in relation to this paradox is a question of how they choose to work their gender identities. Female comedians have to solve the conflict between acting in congruence with their sense of self (i.e. with integrity) and of compromising that sense of self by yielding to the demands of the comedy industry, and to what degree they should do either.⁴⁰ Of course, because the demands of the industry are conflicting, with time, female comedians are guaranteed to get dinged one way or the other.

Devaluing Race

Where the previous section explored the double bind female comedians face, this section looks at a double bind that comedians of color have to confront. In the same sense that joke topics that relate to women are devalued as a function of male dominance in the industry (and the world) more broadly, the topic of race is devalued as a function of normative whiteness. Race is seen as a topic that primarily pertains to comics of color (also a common sentiment in US society

⁴⁰ This work on gender correlates with the racial negotiation process Carbado and Gulati (2013:25) propose, and which I explore further in the racial context in the next chapter.

in general, where race is seen as an issue that only bears on people of color and does not pertain to white people). As is often the case, when a phenomenon or issue is seen as exclusive to people of color, it is also viewed as less worthy. Correspondingly, race jokes tend to be devalued as hack when performed by people of color, or at the very least as being of a lower caliber than non-racial jokes. In speaking about personal characteristics in general, one white male show producer remarked that although “you can’t deny who you are, [there is] no need to make it your entire set.” As examples he suggested that overweight comics should not only do “fat jokes,” openly gay comics should not only do “gay jokes,” and Black people should not only do jokes about racism. This is good advice broadly speaking, and most comedians would argue that no comic should do a whole set about any one topic only, period. When it comes to comics of color, however, this sensible general idea acquires a constraining permutation with regards to the topic of race.

Another white male show producer remarked that Black people in particular should move away from doing race jokes, whereas Middle Eastern comics can do them because they “still have to explain themselves to some people who are ignorant about [them]” (interview, date withheld). My interviews with other non-comics who work in the comedy industry corroborate this idea that people of color should avoid race jokes. They reason that so much has already been said about race on stage that comedians rarely bring a fresh take on it, especially if the comic makes jokes involving his or her own race. Some also do not feel that race talk is relevant to a mainstream (white) audience and that it may be alienating to (white) patrons. I agree that race jokes *can* be hack (regardless of who tells them), especially when they rely on tired racist tropes like Black people’s credit, pregnant Latina women, or Asian drivers; but just because a joke is about race and performed by a comedian of color does not make it inherently hack.

This argument also flies in the face of the oft-repeated imperative that comics have to talk about their own personal experiences and vulnerabilities on stage in order to be relatable to audiences. For comics of color, their personal lives and vulnerabilities very much include their experiences as racialized people. To have to consider whether to “sanitize” race out of their sets for greater white palatability or not constitutes precisely the type of racial negotiation Carbado and Gulati discuss in their book on working racial identities in the work place (2013:25). Using Carbado and Gulati’s framing, for comedians the question becomes, should they “act with racial [and artistic] integrity” and do jokes that reflect their actual lives, or should they “compromise in order to acquiesce to institutional preferences” and therefore remove race jokes from their sets? Comics of color who don’t talk about race at all are often spoken of admiringly for that reason. One of the producers mentioned earlier gave one popular male comic of color as an example of a good role model precisely because the comedian has chosen not to do jokes that in any way reference his racial and ethnic belonging.⁴¹ Note that this negotiation is not one white comics need to entertain. They may decide not to do a race joke about people of color for a particular audience, but they are not talked about in negative terms if race jokes are part of their regular sets (unless, perhaps, they’re straight up racist). White comics who expose white privilege, or in other ways speak of their racial experiences as white, are typically very well received by audiences and Industry gatekeepers alike (Louis CK’s brilliant joke on white privilege is perhaps the most famous example of this). I also witnessed one such moment when the hilarious white comedian Jason Lawhead opened a show for Bill Burr, also white and hilarious (!). Lawhead shared that he was “celebrating” because he was found “not guilty.” The audience clapped as if

⁴¹ I’m not suggesting that comics of color *should* talk about race; they can talk about whatever they want. The point here is that *not* talking about race is seen as a bonus and rewarded with praise, and I’d speculate that it might also yield more bookings.

congratulating him. “It was great,” he confirmed, “especially since I *did* it!” People laughed, and then he tagged the joke, “It’s still good to be white in this country!” to even greater laughter. It’s a good joke, as are many other jokes that talk about race, whether told by white comics or comedians of color. Comics of color, however, risk being devalued or dismissed as not having range when their sets focus on race and ethnicity.

The devaluing of Black comics in particular has at times taken very explicit forms. The role of Blackness as a factor in “passing” comics at one of the big clubs in LA caught my attention during fieldwork. When a comic gets “passed,” he or she becomes a paid regular performer and gets his or her name inscribed on the outside wall of the club. This is a prestigious milestone in an LA comic’s career. The comedian literally and figuratively becomes part of the club and is deemed worthy of (nominal) pay. Paid regulars inform the club’s booker of their weekly availability and typically get stage time several times a week. Several comedians told me that a particular club did not “pass” any Black comics for seven or eight years during the 2000s. When a Black employee and aspiring comedian tried to organize a lawsuit (that apparently never came to fruition), the club seemingly strategically “passed” several comedians of color (including a number of Black comics) over the course of a few months. One Black comic told me that this was occasionally held against those comics with classic anti-affirmative action rhetoric: They were only passed cause they are Black; it’s bringing down the quality of the comedy. Rather than viewing the flurry of “passed” comics as worthy performers who received their dues, the critics (some of them Black) suggested these comics were inferior performers who diluted the quality of the comedy at the club. This even though the critics also recognized the booker’s notorious racism. He’d been overheard referring to a regular Black show at the club as “the nigger room” on multiple occasions. He apparently stopped using that term when the prospect of

a lawsuit began to circulate.⁴² Some comics' dismissal of their colleagues obviously rings of competitive envy and backstabbing—a common preoccupation among comedians trying to make it. Personal considerations aside, however, that discourse also reflects the broader devaluation of people of color, and specifically of Black people, in the Industry. If Black folks are absent, the explanation is that they're not very good, and if they're present, it's because they're Black and probably not very good. Absence, in other words, signals inferiority, but so does presence.

As in the previous section, where I discussed how women take the stage against a sexist baseline, comedians of color face a similar constraint when their presence is assumed to be the result of the institution's attempts to deflect accusations of racism, rather than of their own skills and merit. This is of course not a new phenomenon outside of the comedy world either. It has been, and continues to be, a form of racism levied against people of color in the workplace, and at institutions of higher education, regardless of whether affirmative action was in effect or not in their hiring or admission, and regardless of the fact that affirmative action (when *in* effect) is not a form of compensation for inferior ability, but an attempt to remedy a racially discriminatory and unequal structural baseline.

Reinforcing Heteronormativity

Male Heteronormativity and Gay Bashing

At a show I attended, a Latino comic was on stage and did some crowd work focused on the sexual habits of the men in the audience. He then asked an Asian man in the company of a woman what his fantasy was. “What’s your fantasy, man?” When the guy seemed unwilling to

⁴² That particular booker has since been fired from the club. It has not been stated that the reason for his termination of employment was due to racism. Although beloved by some (and disparaged by many), numerous comics have made it clear that the booker had more than racism on his list of negative attributes.

answer, the comic blurted out, “You fucking pussy-whipped son-of-a-bitch! Man up!” He then provided the answer he wanted, “A three-some! That’s my fantasy!” The audience, while not silent, did not respond with great enthusiasm to the name-calling of the Asian man. Some of the men in the audience did express their appreciation for the three-some fantasy, although it’s unclear if they actually agreed, or just felt pressured to agree so as not to belong to the group of “pussy-whipped sons-of-bitches” they’d otherwise be relegated to. This was one of the most explicit and egregious instances of enforcing heteronormativity that I observed in an interaction between a comic and audience member.

A more tacit enforcement of heteronormativity is ubiquitous in the show rooms. Its most common expression is the general assumption that people are straight unless they index otherwise, which reflects the same dynamic in US society more broadly. At times, this enforcement is more vocal and aggressive, as the example above illustrates, and in those cases seems specifically directed at men perceived not to conform with the comic’s heteronormative expectations. I also think that race is a factor here and that it’s not coincidental that the worst case of this kind of emasculating gender policing I saw was directed at an Asian man. In contrast, at another show, a Black male comic commented on a white man’s red jeans and asked him where he was from. He was from Sweden, and the comic then pointed out how badass European dudes are; “they don’t give a fuck!” I wear red pants, and I’m a man, so what? This was a very different kind of interaction related to the boundaries of masculinity compared to the one between the Latino comic and the Asian man.

While the reproduction of heteronormative dominance was everywhere, overt gay bashing rarely occurred at the shows I saw during my fieldwork. Undoubtedly, the historical time period of gay-rights advocacy and increasing awareness of LGBTQ concerns that we are currently in

the midst of explains much of that absence. Additional plausible reasons are the particular circumstances of Los Angeles as a field site; the three largest clubs are located in or immediately adjacent to West Hollywood, the region's famous "gay district." Also, many actors and other Industry folk identify as LGBTQ, and overt displays of homophobia are therefore unlikely to be well received when they're in the audience.

That being said, rare occurrences of homophobic jokes do not equal a complete absence. One Black male comedian lets the audience know that he has a gay son who is 21 years old. He tells the audience about the different clues he should have picked up on. He also imitates how his son talks and shows a stance that he says is a generic comedian pose for gay. "I'm doing the pose for my son," he says. The audience "awws" in sympathy with the son. "Don't feel sorry!" says the comic. "You're supposed to laugh! It's *my* sissy! I have to raise him!" The discomfort was clearly felt in the predominantly Black audience and no one laughed. I've seen similar reactions when some comics go off about "faggots." Audiences typically respond with disapproving silence. Perhaps homophobia can no longer be seen as part of a hegemonic discourse, at least not in this part of California and other progressive places.⁴³ Comics who bash gays (different from making fun of gay people) are sanctioned. On one occasion the Black male comedian on stage commented on the reaction, "Oh, you guys are sensitive!" Aside from illustrating what deflecting responsibility to the audience may look like—they're not laughing because they're sensitive, not because the comic is offensive—this type of response also gives evidence to the ongoing attunement on the comic's part to the shifts in affect in the room.

⁴³ I reason that if homophobia were part of the "local" mainstream, audiences would generally laugh at homophobic jokes, as it would reflect their own views. The silence these jokes met with, in the instances I observed, suggests that most people in the audience did not relate to them.

Sexist Announcements

The work environment at comedy clubs is not surprisingly also replete with sexist and misogynistic discourse. It's like air. It is everywhere, and you cannot go to a show and not inhale. The denigration comes from show announcers, from male comics addressing audience members, through joke content (of both male and female comics), and from male comics introducing female comedians or commenting after they leave the stage. At one Black show I attended, the demeaning of women started before the first comedian took the stage. The man who announced the start of the show over the speaker system called out, "All the fine ladies, make some noise!" to some cheering from the female audience members. He then followed with, "Ladies, if you don't have saggy titties make some noise!" Subsequently, he announced the rules of behavior in the showroom: no filming, no recording, no cell phones, a two-drink minimum, and then, seemingly tailored for this audience with a high percentage of Black women, "Ladies, keep your hair weaves out of other people's food and drinks!" Before the patrons have received their drinks, then, the women in the room have been objectified and put down. It should be said that this is not typical for most shows. Most announcers are rather formal and to the point when they remind audiences of the rules of attendance and bring everyone's attention to the stage. But, it happens.

Sexist Crowd Work

Once the show starts, the host usually begins with some crowd work. It's part of comedians' work of "putting themselves in the room," of making themselves relatable to the audience. Skilled comics weave seamlessly between crowd work and joke material throughout their sets. Crowd work frequently takes sexist turns directed at women in the audience. A

common opening line for male club comics is to comment on the breasts of a woman sitting up front. “Nice titties!” One white comic told a young woman (I was not close enough to see her), “You brought some big boobs tonight! What cup size?” This was after he first noticed a Black woman in the audience, commented on how attractive she was, and let her and us know that he had “not had some ‘chocolate’ in a long time!” Another comic started his set by announcing that “Titties are on the prowl tonight!” Male comedians of all races routinely make similar comments. At one show, a woman in the audience got up to go to the bathroom during a famous comic’s set. He immediately quipped, “Baby, you left your ass in that chair!” When she disappeared into the restroom without acknowledging him, he added, “That’s some flat ass! Ladies, you gotta keep your ass right! Men need to get their money right and women need to get their ass right!” He then told another woman that she *did* have a nice ass. The sexual objectification is explicit and direct. Women are reduced to the attractive worth of their bodies. Men are reduced to financial providers. The reductive division of life into male and female areas of responsibility adheres to the patriarchal system of social power, where men control women’s bodies *and* access to resources. It is not, then, a matter of complementary stereotypes, because men control both.

Sexist Jokes

Women are often reviled and demeaned in joke material as well. A common topic addresses men’s experiences (real or fictional) of dating women (which, as I mentioned earlier, is not seen as hack when men talk about it). In one of the most basic versions of this genre, the comic tells the audience about a girl he invited to dinner who told him that she doesn’t have sex on a first date. He typically enacts her voice in a “girly” register, and continues along the lines of, “And then I told her, ‘Well then I don’t pay for dinner on the first date either!’” I have heard

versions of this joke by various comedians. In these types of jokes, comics portray women as dumb, immature, and giggly, conveyed by vocal register. They view women, or rather, sex with women, as available for purchase in exchange for food, movies, travel, clothes, purses, and money. Or, if you don't have anything of value or don't wish to part with what you have, there is always rape. Rape jokes that make fun of the victims reinforce the existing (and flourishing) contemporary rape culture. Such jokes often skirt the reality of many women too closely for female audience members to laugh (although I have seen greatly inebriated women laugh out loudly at rape jokes, child-molestation jokes, and jokes about domestic violence). While rape jokes weren't rare occurrences during my fieldwork, they were not as prolific as one might have expected. It's a highly contentious joke topic on the comedy scene, and some comics see no reason to go there.

In order to affirm the prevalence of sexist and misogynistic material, I include a few other examples from the vast reservoir of sexist jokes I collected during fieldwork. These include one-liners like "Chicks are like real estate, and the first sign of a bad neighborhood is graffiti," and "Fat girls who don't suck dick are like Black people who swim; they don't exist!" The last one's a double whammy, sexist and racist in one sentence. In another joke, one comic wishes for a website like Carfax (a website that provides vehicle history reports for used cars) for whores, "Whorefax." He continues with a whores-and-cars analogy, "It says here you have a couple of miles on you, you were hit by a train..." In a last example, one Black comic announces that he's an "assman." "The only thing better than a Black woman is a white woman with an ass. A man with a white woman with an ass acts like he's got a new pair of Air Jordans." The comic

transitions to the next joke by letting the audience know that he likes natural women.⁴⁴ “Men don’t like weaves,” he claims, “they only tolerate it cause they want pussy.” And he hates “fake titties; it’s like fake hair. Titties are supposed to fall into your armpits.” He also says he likes “thick women.” He dated one girl who was too thin. “I’m kinda thin myself,” he admits, but “when she took her clothes off, she looked like a greyhound. When she ate I could see her food go through her body. [She asked,] ‘What are you looking at? [I answered,] ‘Digestion.’” The last part of the joke regarding watching digestion is rather clever, but the preceding jokes and the setup are still sexist. It’s worth noting here that offensive jokes *can* be funny; the two qualities are not mutually exclusive. Sexist jokes *can* be funny. They frequently aren’t to people who aren’t highly sexist, but they can be. This also applies to racially offensive jokes. For instance, at a Black show a white comic did a long impersonation of an old Black man. The joke did not involve overtly racist words or insinuations, but the enactment itself felt offensive, like watching a blackface performance. However, he executed the impersonation of a Black old-man stereotype so well that everyone laughed (me included and even though I resisted it intellectually). Jokes that stay well within the mainstream, then, and that don’t push the edges of any hegemonic discourses can still be funny. In fact, most jokes fall within this category, just not the jokes that are the topic of this dissertation.

“Bitches”

Another ubiquitous theme is referring to women as “bitches.” The word is used both as an expletive and as a synonym for “women” or “girls.” One Black comedian has a bit about how

⁴⁴ Although the contexts differ, it is worth noticing that the comic here puts the same terminology to use as the female bookers I mentioned earlier with regards to women and female comics respectively: they both desire “natural” women.

it takes very little for him to “break up with a bitch” (here the word denotes “woman”). A white comedian tells the audience that he was married to a Black woman for ten years. “I’m so glad I’m not with that crazy bitch! I’m going back to white bitches!” Here, “bitch” is first used as an expletive, and then referring to women in general. In another example, a comedian talks about “bitches” that listen to a particular kind of music. This very casual use of “bitches,” whether referring to women in general or to a particular woman, seems to have a desensitizing effect on many male comedians. When most comics use offensive slurs (racial or anti-gay for instance), it is readily apparent by how they use and deliver those words that the offense is intentional and part of the joke—the comics know they’re saying something offensive. They often use “bitches” differently. Aside from its use as an expletive (by both men and women), its conversational engagement suggests that many comics do not even register it as offensive. I have primarily observed this casual use of “bitches” by male comics (only occasionally have I heard women comedians use it as a general descriptor for women). Calling women by a derogatory term has become normalized. This practice is not limited to comedy; contemporary rap music is notorious for this (and arguably responsible for the current broad “acceptance” of this label), and so are pretty much all online forms of vitriol directed at women who speak out against misogyny and abuse. The ongoing delivery of these types of jokes and crowd-work interactions create a general atmosphere where women are targeted.

Sexist Introductions of Female Comics

Female comedians are verbally attacked more directly from the stage too. They are often introduced in a sexist manner or commented on in a sexist way as they leave the stage. One comedian told of her experiences on tour as the opening act for a renowned male comic. “[When

he got on stage after my set] he commented on my breast size, my lips, my hips... He told the audience: ‘You just like her cause of her big titties, or cause of her hips, or cause her lips look like she sucks dick, not cause she’s funny’” (interview, date withheld). I personally witnessed a similar, although less egregious, occurrence at a show where the male host took the stage after an ample-bosomed woman had just finished her set. He said, “Give it up for Mayisha! [the audience applauded] Fellows, give it up for Mayisha’s titties!” With a largely female audience that night, the second prompt fell flat and did not garner much audible support. When more males are present in the audience, such a prompt *may* elicit some shout-outs from the men, but typically not from the women. There could be a number of reasons why women don’t respond: it’s sexist; they aren’t interested in women’s breasts; or they don’t find it funny.

Comedian Marcella Arguello (who, as you may recall, is a tall woman at 6’2) told me of one occasion when a tall male comic, whom she didn’t know, got on stage after her. He said he “like[d] tall women, like Marcella,” and that he wanted to have babies with her, “make an NBA team.” “I didn’t even know he knew my name,” said Marcella, “we never talk, and all of a sudden I’m an object that he’s talking about [on stage]. It can get really frustrating to have to ignore all the little comments” (interview, 11/15/11). Sometimes female comics don’t ignore them. At one show I attended, a male comic (who was bombing badly), kept referring to the female comic who’d gone before him as “the bitch with the big tits.” She had unwisely mentioned the size of her breasts as part of her own set and this comic held on to that. He said this phrase so many times I lost count, and toward the end he also added something sexual he would like to do to “the bitch with the big tits.” The female comic had stayed on in the audience, and when he made the last comment, she yelled back at him, “I would never do that!” And added, “Just get off the stage!” At that very moment the comic got the light, so he rather sheepishly had

to leave the stage. The atmosphere in the room was decidedly tense during this interaction, though, and the audience just watched the set quickly deteriorate.

While the woman in the last example spoke up on that particular occasion, most female comics let less confrontational harassment slide, not because they're okay with it, but because they'd be in a direct state of conflict with male comics at some point on most nights they perform. Ignoring verbal sexist harassment becomes a coping mechanism, but it is not immunizing. The abuse is cumulative and women comics speak of needing breaks from the scene and their male colleagues every now and then for this reason. One female comic confessed, "A while back I had to get away from guys. It was affecting how I thought about relationships. I was looking at men like 'I hate you!' I hear the way they talk. Just walking down the street, 'Oh, I'd smash that!' ... So I had to take a time out. It's overwhelming sometimes. And some of these guys are on their way to becoming stars, and they're married, and they're cheating. I know cause they tell me, or I see them come to the club with their mistress" (interview, date withheld). Both male and female comics assert that being a comedian makes it difficult to maintain long-term intimate relationships. Both mention comedians' lifestyle in general as challenging with late nights; frequent travel, often including weekends; and missing out on holidays and family celebrations. Some women also find that the behaviors and attitudes of their male colleagues adversely affect their views on and relationships to men in general.

I'd like to add here, for comparison, that only on one occasion during my eighteen months of fieldwork did I hear a male comic brought to the stage (by a white host) with a comparable introduction that signified race. The host announced, "Next up is Joe Smith!⁴⁵ He's Black!" The veteran comic rightfully took offense and challenged the host as soon as he got the

⁴⁵ Joe Smith is a fictional name.

microphone. “He’s Black? What about ‘You’ve seen him on Comedy Central and on *Conan*?’” The Black comic immediately responded to the offense and corrected it, and doing so did not alienate the audience. If anything, the chastised host looked rather abashed when he came back on stage after the comic’s set. It’s a different dynamic for men, and I also think it’s a different dynamic with regards to race.⁴⁶

Not All Men

For all the male comics who sexualize and disparage female comedians on and off the stage, there are, thankfully, many that don’t. Here, I have addressed the many that do. Some comics speak out against rape jokes, refuse to call women “bitches” and “hoes,” and would never think to introduce their female colleagues in a pejorative manner. Not only do they refrain from putting down women comedians in public, they express their support off stage, and at times also publicly. Comedian Tony Baker recently tweeted some much-needed advice to other male comics who host shows. “Dear Hosts. U Don’t have to always bring a female comedian to the stage by saying ‘sexy’ or ‘beautiful’ just say ‘funny’. That’s what matters.” And in another tweet he said, “Hey male comedians. When U host a show & U are about to bring up a female comedian stop asking the audience ‘Are you ready for a female?’ Stop making the gender of the comedian an issue.” Comics like Tony realize that they and their jokes don’t exist in a cultural vacuum. What comedians talk about and how they talk affects people. Their words do work. They are performative (in the Austinian sense), and when their words are sexist and

⁴⁶ Men who speak out are perceived as assertive and self-respecting, whereas women who do the same are often interpreted as aggressive and complaining. This is not a new observation. With regards to race, people generally seem to more readily recognize racist comments than sexist remarks. This should not suggest that I think people recognize most forms of racism they aren’t subjected to. To the contrary, it just shows the even lower level of recognition of sexism as justifiably offensive to women (and men).

misogynistic, they do violence to women. So do the sexist, misogynistic, and racist words people use in the rest of American society. These include the ongoing derogation of women by conservative politicians and right-wing radio- and talk show hosts, as well as the continuous verbal vilification of people of color.

The Reality of Sexual Harassment and Violence

Women risk sexual harassment and the threat of violence wherever they are; the stand-up comedy scene is no different. Female comedians tell of male comics, promoters, bookers, et cetera, who approach them under the guise of wanting to help them with jokes as a way of making advances. Says one female comedian,

The running joke with women is they [men] say, “You’re good, but I’d like to help you with your set.” Promoters, veteran comics, producers. Now[adays] I go, “I’m better than you. What are you gonna show me? We’re gonna go backwards?” [interview, date withheld]

When asked how men respond to her challenging them, she says, “angry. A lot of comics are angry, dark, abusive. You’ve seen it! Many abuse the audience when they’re on stage, ‘you bitches,’ ‘you hoes...’” (interview, date withheld). Her comment attests not only to being harassed, but that she interprets the behavior that some male comics direct at audiences as abusive too, and that she links that behavior to how they behave towards her.

One particularly dangerous aspect for women who pursue a career in comedy is touring. All working comics tour throughout their careers. It is part of the job. Touring tends to be a lonely endeavor. Comics travel by themselves to an often-unfamiliar location, perform in a lineup with comics they may or may not know, and then retreat to a lonely hotel room late at night after the show, perhaps after a late-night meal with the other comics. The very nature of

touring, then, presents particular challenges and risks for women, including an increased risk for sexual violence. One female comedian recounts several disturbing incidents while on the road:

[One time] a comedian sent his promoter to knock on my door to ‘see if she’ll give it up.’ The male comedian thought it was funny. He told me later that he’d done that, and that ‘you passed the test this time.’ Another comedian told a promoter that he’d been my boyfriend. He told him, ‘She’s a freak, she’s a screamer; you should book her so you can try to fuck her.’ The booker was known for date rape—a friend of mine told me. The comedian later apologized to me. Male comics don’t worry about being raped. [And] one [random] guy asked the receptionist at a hotel I was staying at, ‘Who’s that girl on the flier?’ ‘Oh, she’s upstairs in [room] 207,’ [the receptionist blurted out]. And then [as a result], I had a drunk baseball player knocking on my door in the middle of the night. I called the police. I was petrified. Men don’t have to worry about that stuff. [interview, date withheld]

For many women, the sexism and harassment they endure on the comedy scene is just a continuation of what they endure in American society more broadly. Comedian Candice Thompson observes that,

We deal with it in our normal lives. I get sexually harassed at my day job too! It’s everywhere, but it’s different when it’s my comedy, cause I don’t care about the other jobs. But with stand-up, I want you to respect me, and what you said showed a lack of respect, cause you would never have said that to a guy comic... There is a level of respect between guy comics that you will never get from them because you have a vagina... Even guy comics will hang with guy comics who are not on the same level, and bring them along. But they won’t ask a better comic just cause she’s a girl. But you have to have thick skin and focus on the bigger picture... But in the comedy club, if I get sexually harassed, I take it like anything else. It lets me know your character. I know I’m not messing with you anymore. Not gonna do your show. I’ll delete you as my friend from Facebook. A few years ago I may not have done that. Now that people know me some, I’ve earned some respect, and so I don’t get talked to like that as much anymore. Guys have to earn the respect to, but the base level [of respect] they get is more than what women get. [interview, 9/14/12]

When I ask why she does stand-up, given the very sexist environment she’s just described, Thompson says, “I’m a dude! I was a tomboy growing up. I always played with boys. I wasn’t into the girly things. I do those things occasionally now, if I have to. But I hang around guys. I don’t have a lot of girlfriends” (interview, 9/14/12). Her relations with male comedian friends support this assertion in that they treat her like one of the guys. And they explicitly draw

a distinction between her and “bitches.” She says, “[Guys] say, ‘I’m not talking about you when I say ‘bitch.’ Well you are; I’m still a woman” (interview, 9/14/12). Thompson’s assertion that she’s still a woman notwithstanding, in the male world of comedy she’s sometimes treated more like a man (as one of the guys)—or at least, less like a woman—and this is seen as “positive.” Female comedians who earn male respect for their craft, then, are “explained” by having their “female qualities” qualified as not like the other “bitches.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown the environment that women and comics of color have to negotiate with regards to race, ethnicity, and gender, both on a broad scale and in the local club setting. That the comedy industry is sexist and misogynistic is not a surprise, and the forms this oppression takes are not new. What I find surprising is the apparent lack of awareness and recognition of the adverse effects this has on people of color and on women as artists, performers, and people. These conditions need to be kept in mind as I show what pushing the edge actually looks like in subsequent chapters. In the next chapter, I begin that endeavor in earnest by establishing the edge and the concepts I use to analyze it.

Chapter 2: “The Edge” and its Pushing

In this chapter, I show how some comedians critically engage hegemonic race and gender discourses by “pushing the edge” in ways that rely on affect and performativity.

I conceptualize the edge as an unfixed fluctuating affective perimeter that floats at the outer limits of hegemonic discourses. The edge serves as the outer rim of what we often refer to as “the mainstream.” Stand-up comedians reveal the edge to be a politically and socially critical affective space in their stage interactions with audiences. It is a space they can affectively locate in relation to an audience and deliberately push.

A joke or performance that pushes the edge of hegemonic discourses pushes the audience beyond the mainstream and involves some form of social critique. These jokes locate the gaps in the taken-for-granted and explore them. They are the voices that call out the emperor’s nakedness rather than condone the pretense of his new clothes. In pushing the edge, comics exploit incongruences in dominant discourses and challenge unequal power relationships. They also position themselves as outside the mainstream in some way. Their alignment itself is part of pushing the edge. Their enactments on stage may at times necessitate a reproduction of that which they critique or a repositioning from a different perspective, hence the use of what Rebecca Krefting calls “modern-day minstrelsy” by some comics who do this work (2014:203). Comics can also push audiences *without* necessarily pushing the edges of any hegemonic discourses. Pushing the audience still involves finding an affective edge, reading the room, and sensing how much the particular group of people present can handle with regards to obscenity, hostility, et cetera. Potty humor, for instance, can push an audience without offering the social critique involved in pushing the edge.

Sometimes performances engage hegemonic discourses in a way I describe as *imploding*. I will focus on such implosions in chapter 4, but at this juncture I introduce the concept in order to establish the qualities of pushing the edge. Imploding performances are one's where the comedian on stage "loses it" and goes off on an off-the-cuff racist or sexist or homophobic rant. Such performances fuel and reproduce racist and sexist discourses, and reinforce unequal power relationships, without offering any meaningful critique. Implosions don't expand hegemonic discourses outwardly the way pushing the edge does. Instead, they move away from the edge in the opposite direction, towards the violent core that lies at the center of hegemony. Key here is the comic's alignment with and aggressive enactment of a racist or sexist position. It's not an instance of telling a racist or sexist joke; it's a case of comedian meltdown. Additionally, many jokes neither push hegemonic discourses nor implode. They are not the subject of this inquiry.

Besides pushing hegemonic edges, pushing audiences, and imploding, comedians also push their jokes. This is the craft of developing a joke beyond the initial premise, set-up, and punch line. It means finding more potential twists and turns in the material, playing with language, customizing parts for specific audiences, and adding a tag at the end, in essence, milking the joke for as many laughs as it can yield. This pushing is more like squeezing juice out of an orange than pushing against an edge. Affect is not a direct factor in this work of crafting, but plays a role in testing the joke in front of an audience to see if it works in its developing iterations.

The work of "pushing the edge" can engage different kinds of hegemonic discourses, (e.g., those pertaining to race, gender, sexual orientation, and class). When comedians push the edge on race and gender discourses, they engage the familiar and taken-for-granted (the mainstream) with a peripheral gaze (from the racial/gendered margin), thereby producing a form

of cultural critique.⁴⁷ Their work becomes part of broader anti-racist discourses through social media, film, and television.

Before I proceed I want to situate “pushing the edge” in terms of what’s funny. The three major theories of humor commonly cited in humor studies suggest that we laugh for relief (the relief theory), at the woes and failures of others (the superiority theory), and “when our expectations are somewhat disturbed” (the incongruity theory) (Carpio 2008:5-6). The relief theory, proposed by Sigmund Freud, holds that “tendentious jokes” (those that are either obscene or hostile) permit both the comic and the audience “to release energy for the purposes of inhibition” (Carpio 2008:5). The superiority theory accounts for the humor we see in slapstick comedy, like old Chaplin movies and Laurel and Hardy films, where we laugh at their silliness and misfortunes. With regards to the incongruity theory, literary and African American studies scholar Glenda Carpio states that,

...[it] entails the playing of ‘what if’ games that suspend normativity... At its best [it] allows us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place and to get us, especially when the humor is hot enough to push our buttons, to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race. [2008:6]

Carpio’s elaboration suggests that what makes pushing the edges of race and gender in comedy funny is that it somewhat disturbs our expectations. I think the word “somewhat” is integral here, since disturbing expectations too dramatically (a relative assessment) may be upsetting rather than funny, depending on the audience. Alternately, audiences may find the disturbance anomalous and funny, but are then not open to the pushing of any hegemonic edges. Edges, then, are moving targets in part determined by the interactions between the audience and the comic on stage.

⁴⁷ In anthropology, the “cultural critique” concept specifically refers to the analytical practice of defamiliarizing the taken-for-granted in order to gain a non-normative perspective and offer a critique (see Marcus and Fischer 1986).

While I agree that a lot of what audiences at comedy clubs laugh at may well fit into some or a combination of these theories, I don't wish to limit the possibilities of what makes comedy that pushes the edge funny to these categories. Rebecca Krefting argues that, "We laugh because we simultaneously appreciate the lawlessness of comedy *and* because we 'get' it, and through our 'getting it,' we also belong" (2014:122). I think Krefting's emphasis on belonging is important and ties in with the relatability that is essential for successful comedy, and that also comes into play when pushing the edge. If the audience members relate to the comic, they are more likely to accept what he or she says and to find it funny. I propose, then, that comedy that pushes the edge is funny because it disturbs mainstream expectations without completely rupturing them, because it presents a differently angled perspective on the habitual and taken-for-granted, and because, when done well, the audience "gets" it.

To show what pushing the edge looks like, I will recount a lengthy ethnographic observation of a night at a club. This is the only instance in this manuscript where I present the rhythm of an entire show. I want to give a sense of how an evening at a club might unfold. Feeling the rhythm of a show, the back-and-forth flow between performers and audience, viscerally conveys the affective workspace comedians operate within. It is within that space and through that rhythm that they home in on the edge. In subsequent chapters, I focus on particular performers and specific chunks of material without elaborating on the rhythm of the show as a whole, but it should be understood as the greater spatial and affective context in which the analyzed segments take place. Another purpose for starting with a long ethnographic account is precisely to bring the affect of being at a show onto the page as much as possible. I will endeavor to do this throughout the text. While I'll elaborate on affect as a concept later in this chapter, for now it may be useful to understand affect as "*force or forces of encounter*" (Seigworth and

Gregg 2010:2). These forces of encounter generate the pulse or beat of a show. The pulse is the affective wave on which the edge travels, which I elaborate on after the ethnographic account.

Opening with a night at the club also positions me, as the ethnographer, explicitly within the narrative. As an audience member, I become a contributor to the rhythm of the show just like the rest of the audience. And as I observe the interactions between the comic on stage and the other audience members, I'm also aware of my own responses to both and of my interactions with them. My responses determine what I find noteworthy (literally), the examples I use to illustrate my argument, and my interpretations of the interactions in the club. In this particular account, I therefore include my comments and opinions as part of the narrative. I don't express my voice as a participant as overtly in the remainder of the text, but it should still be understood as present. My presence as ethnographer is also relevant in that I am a white-looking or racially ambiguous-looking (depending on who you ask), "mixed-race," Swedish and Black American woman. As a woman who is not a comedian, and who still traveled solo in a high-testosterone environment, chatted with comics of both sexes, solicited some of them as participants, and asked them to lunch interviews, I had my own experience of race and gender in stand-up. This informed the questions I asked and my understanding of the experiences comics shared with me. While my elucidation of "the edge" focuses on the analysis of ethnographic data, rather than my positionality in relation to that data, I think it prudent to acknowledge my own identity filters lest it be thought I think I don't have any. Finally, presenting a full show allows me to introduce the main analytical concepts I'll use to theorize "the edge," and to show the work comedians do when they push the edges of mainstream race and gender discourses. The analytical tools I'll engage are energy/affect, authenticity/sincerity, and performativity. Lastly, I'll tie them together in my conceptualization of "pushing the edge."

*A Night at the Club*⁴⁸

It's a Thursday night at the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. I'm here for "Crack'em Up Thursdays," the 10 pm show in the Belly Room. "Crack'em Up" is a Black independent show.⁴⁹ Nichelle Murdock has been producing it for nine years, giving young and seasoned comedians, primarily of color, stage time so they can work on their comedy chops. Levi Alexander, the show's floor manager, arrives and greets me and two other women who are also waiting outside the venue. Everybody calls him "Uncle Levi." He's the flyest old-school former pimp around. Polite and smooth talking, Uncle Levi makes sure everyone feels welcome. He greets newcomers, regulars, and comics as they enter the show room. The fellows he knows get handshakes and man hugs, and the ladies a greeting hand and a kiss on the cheek, if appropriate, as he escorts them to their seats. Tonight is Uncle Levi's 61st birthday and he is dressed to the teeth. He sports a silver-grey striped suit with a long zoot-suit jacket, sharp silver-colored shoes in a square patterned design, and his signature conked hair lays in perfect waves down to his shoulders. Levi is ready for the show and to be its honoree.

While waiting outside the club for the room to be readied for patrons, I approach one of the show's co-hosts, DC Ervin, to chat and ask him for an interview. He kindly agrees, and I already feel like I accomplished something tonight and the show hasn't even started. Zsa Zsa Gabor's daughter is also waiting outside, and she's rather diligently trying to get the comic who's working the door to ask me on a date. It's kind of funny and a bit awkward. Once we're

⁴⁸ This show took place on September 1, 2011.

⁴⁹ It's a Black show in that it features predominantly Black comics and the audience is predominantly Black. Therefore, unless I specifically mention a person's racial or ethnic background in this particular account, all the comedians are Black. The show is independent in that it is not produced by The Comedy Store, but has an outside producer who has a financial arrangement with the club.

let in, I talk to some people in the hallway. Gabor's daughter wants to introduce me to another comic, not for romantic purposes this time. He isn't all that talkative, but the two Black women standing next to him pick up the conversation. They're both comedians. One of them is performing tonight and her friend is here to offer support and be a friendly face in the audience. Maunda, who's performing, gives me her card. Another comic walks up to talk to the quiet guy next to us. I recognize him as "G-Thang" Johnson, the high-energy host of a show I'd seen a few days earlier. I introduce myself and let him know I really liked his performance. He seems to recognize me too and comments that I was the one sitting by myself toward the side at the show. I'm surprised that he could see that far from the stage. He mentions that I was taking notes and asks if I'm a comedian (in which case I might have been stealing jokes. I assure him I'm not a comic, mention my research project and give him one of my business cards as a way of legitimizing myself).

I climb the narrow stairs up to the Belly Room. The Belly Room is the smallest room with the smallest stage at The Comedy Store. The room capacity is 90. It's a classic comedy show room with black walls, black drapes as a backdrop to the small rectangular stage, and dark red seats on the black chairs that are scattered around small black tables. Black and red are the standard colors of most show rooms. To the right as you enter is a fully mirrored wall. The left wall is a half wall with a built-in diner-style couch. A set of a few steps on the left, before the half wall, lead up to an elevated seating section that looks out over the stage above the half wall below it. The lights are low and seductive; small tea candles on the tables vaguely illuminate the room. By contrast, bright spotlights aim blindingly at the stage. The Belly Room, like the rest of the Store, feels seedy and has a burlesque flair. The smell of grease from the kitchen right underneath permeates the air, as well as the clothes and hair of everyone in the room. The room

is pretty empty at this early hour, except for Marcella Arguello, who's a comedian. I've seen her perform before, but we've never talked. I go up to her, introduce myself, and give her my card. I mention our mutual contact, Sammy Obeid, tell her about my research project, and ask if she'd be interested in being interviewed. She agrees right away, gives me her card, and tells me to call her. I've scored a second participant this evening. This is going splendidly!

I take a seat in the elevated side section of the room. It gives a different angle of the stage, and I think I prefer it to sitting in the mid-section where I've sat for other shows. The two comics I'd talked to in the hallway, Maunda and Lisa, also sit there, so we chat a bit more. After a while, I see Nichelle Murdock in the producer's corner, and I go down to greet her. We'd texted earlier in the day about scheduling an interview. After a quick chat, I return to my seat and shortly thereafter the show starts with a fairly empty room. This is rather typical and the room is bound to fill up as the evening proceeds. An "opener"⁵⁰ precedes the host's arrival on stage. It's the most unrewarding position on a show and it is usually given to a less experienced comic just to give him or her some stage time. It's an unrewarding position because the audience is absolutely cold; there is no momentum to ride on, and the novice comic is highly likely to bomb. Comics sometimes refer to the first guy up as "taking a bullet" for the rest of the lineup. Tonight it's George.⁵¹ I recognize some of his jokes; I've seen him before on "The Diversity Show" at the Laugh Factory. He has a joke where he demonstrates what a Vietnamese Seinfeld⁵² sounds like. I also recognize his impersonation of "an anus during anal sex while the anus is reading a book." This was a gross but funny bit when I saw it the first time. He elaborated more on the story then.

⁵⁰ "The opener" is the comic who opens the show.

⁵¹ George is a fictional name.

⁵² Actor and comedian Jerry Seinfeld of *The Seinfeld Show*.

This time he shortened it and it was still funny, but not as funny as the first time. His placement in the lineup was different on the previous occasion, though, and that makes a big difference.

Opening a show is always more challenging.

Then it's time for DC Ervin, one of the two hosts, to take the stage and build the energy in the room. This is a crucial part of any show. Not all comics are well suited to hosting. A host has to read the energy of the audience throughout the show, get them going at the beginning, pick them up if a comic in the lineup bombs and brings the energy down, and minimize the in-between talk and get out of the way if the energy is high and rolling. The host mediates between the audience and the comics on the lineup. DC is an excellent host. His style is warm, easygoing, and friendly. It feels good just to have him up there and talking. And that's pretty much what he does to get us started. For 15-20 minutes he just talks about this and that, does a little bit of material, but does not really go into a full set. He does of course mention that it's Uncle Levi's birthday. In fact, he mentions this every time he gets on stage throughout the evening. Once he's done his time and the audience has warmed up, DC introduces the first comic in the actual lineup.

My new friend Maunda is the first comic to go on stage. She starts by commenting that it's "the Negro section" up where I am sitting. Turns out all the comedians are sitting there, which proves to be really interesting for me. She jabs one of her darker comic friends, "I know you up there, Dion [Lack], I just can't see ya..!" The audience lets out a collective, "Ouuuh!!!" People laugh hard and the comedians who are watching laugh the hardest. They're seemingly delighted at the jab one of their friends just took. Maunda says she was "raised by a ghetto mama who liked to drop it like it's hot!" "My dad," she says, "is very pro-Black. That's why I got the name. He wouldn't even let us have white walls at home, didn't want us to be surrounded by

white...” The audience laughs. “I like to drink,” she continues and talks about coming from a family of alcoholics (which may be fiction; she doesn’t tell). “I got pulled over while sipping on my cognac,” she says pausing, “I *had* a straw!” There’s more laughter in the room. “And I got a bit irritated with the officer. ‘Why are you bothering me? [pause] This is just another case of racial profiling.’ [pause] ‘Miss, you’re on the sidewalk!’ [the audience laughs] ‘Oh, well... [pause] do you want some pussy, cause I don’t know how else to get out of this... huh? It’s African; it’s rare!’” Maunda delivers an energized set. She’s done a great job to get the evening going. I’d like to see more of her work.

Next up is Damon Wayans Jr., and he comes on stage imitating Tony Baker (DC’s co-host at “Crack’em Up”). “Nuthin’? nuthin’?” he says as he stretches the flat palm of his hand out and staggers backwards toward the wall behind him. He has Tony’s body movements, facial expressions, and cadence down pat. It’s hilarious! The room is ripping at the seams. Everyone is busting up laughing, including Tony. So funny! And there’s a certain honor in having other comics good-naturedly reference your set, or signature way of performing, in their own sets. Wayans continues with his onesies bit. He talks about onesies for babies that always have words that praise the parents rather than “tell the truth.” “I want to put out a line with the absolute truth,” he says, “like, ‘Fuck your dreams!’ or ‘Fuck your weekends!’ ‘She said she was on the pill, but here I am!’ and ‘Are you my daddy?’ with arrows pointing everywhere.” Wayans has the room on fire. The audience is hot and the comics on the sideline are hot. The vibe is high and sizzling!

Next on stage is Joe, the young man I’d just talked to while waiting by the entrance. He works as a doorman, but like everyone else who works the door at the Store, he’s also a comedian. He says he recently got called a “house-nigger.” “I know I’m not representative of the

Black community,” he says, “I mean... I know Led Zeppelin is a group, not a person...” He continues with more comparisons that come at me faster than I can take down in my notebook. “I apparently have ‘white’ taste in music,” he says, “I like *Rage Against The Machine*. I went to their concert recently and I swear, out of 60,000 people there were fifty Black people—me, two guys I saw in line, and 47 security guards.” The audience laughs at some of Joe’s jokes, but they aren’t completely into his performance tonight. I suspect he didn’t sufficiently “authenticate” his Blackness before or after he pointed out the ways in which he doesn’t fit the image of a Black man (more on this issue in the discussion of concepts and in subsequent chapters). One plausible reason for this lack of audience engagement could be nervousness on the part of the comic surrounding his expectation not to fit in, which might then have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Shane Miller, who had been sitting next to me up in the side section, follows. He’s a light-skinned brother with somewhat slanted eyes (says he gets mistaken for Pilipino). “I’m tired of having to prove my Blackness,” he says. “Like the other day I said out loud, ‘A nigga’ can’t get shit in Hollywood,’ and a white dude comes up to me and says, ‘You can’t say that!’ What the fuck? ‘Well, you know, you’re more like ta-pi-o-ca!’” explains the white guy. Shane says he served eight years in the US Marine Corps, “cause they have some skilled pimps called recruiters.” “They go into Black neighborhoods and say, ‘If you join you can shoot people and not get caught!’ In Latino neighborhoods they tempt them with ‘You get to drive cars without insurance!’” Shane is in school now, he says, but he’s upset that the government is only covering 75 percent of the cost. “That’s why it’s *Uncle Sam*, not *Daddy Sam*!” People laugh. He follows with a bit about how he met his dad for the first time three years ago and how they made amends. “My father has cancer, so now I can’t hate on him. He robbed me of my moment!” As if talking

to his father he says, “I guess you got something you can keep... something you can pay attention to now...” He continues, “I used to think fathers were a myth, and I thought my friends were lying to me when they said they had to go home to do something with their dads.” The audience sympathizes with a loud “awww.” “It’s just jokes!” Shane retorts, “you know, I’m light-skinned; I’m bitter. I didn’t get beat up!” Some people laugh, but others sit in silence. Some of Shane’s material feels too emotionally raw or unprocessed to be funny yet. He then ends with a “Planet of the Apes” joke, a very topical joke at the moment.⁵³

At this point DC passes the hosting baton to Tony Baker. Tony immediately spoofs on Damon Jr’s earlier mockery, repeating the same gestures and words. We all laugh at it again. Callbacks (making a reference to an earlier joke in a set) are often very funny to audiences. We’re in on the joke, so to speak. Tony tries out some new bits. One is about how he talks and moves around in his sleep, specifically about how his speech during sleep becomes very hostile and aggressive. He demonstrates. He then ties this segment to an experience he had recently while flying Southwest Airlines, and speculates on how his speech while sleeping would play out on a flight. It’s funny. He also tries a bit about how he doesn’t like crowds and how we are not necessarily aware of history being made as it’s happening in the present. He gives Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech in 1963 as an example and pretends to be a brother in the crowd on what he imagines to have been a very hot day. “I’m sure there was someone in the crowd who was hatin’,” he says, “someone who was complaining about the heat, ‘It’s hot as hell!’ and it being too crowded, and ‘What dream is he talking about anyway? When are they gonna stop the lynchings?’” Tony’s physical performance shows a disgruntled march participant who is looking

⁵³ Topical jokes are jokes about something that is currently in the news. Topical jokes have a short life span before they sound dated or irrelevant (although they can sometimes be reworked into a bit with longer staying power).

around in annoyed discomfort at the people around him, frowning and making irritable faces. The audience in the room is cracking up, as are the other comedians. The irreverent and quotidian attitude Tony brings to a powerful and galvanizing moment in the Civil Rights Movement is good comedy. It's absolutely hilarious!

From here he shifts topic and wonders, "What do you say right after sex?" He says he wishes women climaxed like men so that he could just take it in the face, which would give him a reason to get out of bed and not have to say anything. This joke is not one of my favorites, but Tony manages to work pretty much all of his material to good effect, and his male fellow comics seem to enjoy it. He looks at his cell phone for a reminder of other bits he's working on that he would like to try out. "I hated my elementary school teacher, Mrs. Young," he says. "Ninety-eight percent of my teachers were Black women," he explains (Tony went to public school on the south side of Chicago). She had a mohawk," he adds, and when she passed around handouts, she repeatedly licked her thumb before handing out the sheet of paper. "I always got the page with the lick," he reveals, his face distorted with repulsion. The audience lets out a prolonged "eew" in emphatic disgust.

Tony stops performing and asks what's going on over by the door. "Why are all you people bunching up at the door? What's going on?" Uncle Levi announces that Katt Williams, the famous comic, is in the house to wish him (Levi) a happy birthday. I'm not sure that's the reason Williams is here, but in Uncle Levi's version of the story it now is. Williams and two women walk in and take a seat in the second row in front of the stage (there is no one in the first row). I thought Williams showing up was an exciting coincidence considering the recent virtual uproar over a YouTube clip of him going on a lengthy tirade against a Latino heckler in Phoenix (I'll analyze that incident in detail in Chapter 4). Tony seems unperturbed, yet wonders out loud,

“Katt Williams is here, but is he gonna laugh or is he just gonna make me self-conscious?” This is a moment of sincerity; the kind that brings audiences closer to the comic, and makes him even more relatable and likeable. On some level we can all appreciate that a nationally famous comedian who fills large theatres sitting right in front of you when you’re on stage might affect the performance of a more junior comic (junior in a career sense, although here also age-wise). Tony continues his set, and I think I detect a sense of extra commitment in his performance (although Tony is always committed to what he does on stage; that’s one of his several strengths). He tries out another newer bit about how he used to be called a “teddy bear” when he was a teen and how he hated it. “A teddy bear has no penis, so when you call a guy that, you are basically saying he has no game...” He gives plenty of examples of penis-less bears, Yogi Bear, Winnie the Pooh—who just wears a red shirt and nothing on the bottom—and Kermit, who, although a frog, is also butt naked. “So,” he says, “if I were to dress as Pooh for Halloween, I’d just put on a red shirt and leave the rest in the open.” Here Tony uses the mic to graphically simulate a swinging phallus as he yells, “Trick or treat!” The room is screaming with laughter, including Katt Williams and his entourage. Tony ends with an unfinished bit about not having any tattoos and how that makes him stand out nowadays. “What’s that? That’s my raw skin. Where’d you get that? My mama gave it to me. Yeah!” His delivery is hilarious and he’s done his job. Everyone is laughing and the energy is high.

The first comic up in Tony’s section is Marcella Arguello. I’m excited to see her. She has done really well when I’ve seen her perform, most recently down in the Comedy Store’s Main Room where she had a very strong set a couple of nights ago. As soon as she hits the stage tonight, though, I can feel that it’s not going to be so easy this time. I have no idea why, but there’s a slight energy shift in the room. She starts off with her usual opening bit. “I’m not a

trannie! Let's just get that out of the way! I'm not a basketball player. I'm not a model. I'm just tall. I'm 6'2." Having addressed her height, she continues with how short guys are the ones who usually hit on her, and she shows what that looks and sounds like. "Hey shawty!"⁵⁴ they call out to her, "I'm not intimidated by you!" "Well, you should be," she retorts, "cause your whole body fits inside my vagina... Katt Williams!!!" That last part is obviously an addition as a result of Williams (who is of short stature) sitting in the audience right in front of her; it's not part of her usual bit. The people in the room react as if someone has thrown a bucket of ice over them and lets out an audible gasp.⁵⁵ The two male comics sitting next to me up on the side section seem quite disturbed, even shocked. Their body language is very agitated, and they whisper to each other back and forth rapidly and intensely. There is commotion among the other comics behind me. "Yeah, I went there!" adds Marcella, thereby recognizing that she's noticed the reaction in the room. This is crucial to do in order for her to continue. It might not save her set, but ignoring downward energy shifts guarantees bombing. A comic has to be honest with what's going on with the energy in the room otherwise he or she loses control over it.

Marcella keeps her set going but it's clear that she feels the shift. "Wow!" she says, "you guys are not feeling me at all!" Some of the comedians encourage her to "keep at it" from the side section, and some other audience members also express sounds of encouragement to keep it going. In spite of the apparent overall shock, some of her fellow comics signal their empathy. She keeps going and talks about her ethnic identity (Marcella is Latina and Middle-Eastern American). She uses that to segue into her bit about a former job as a bank teller and the female

⁵⁴ "Shawty" refers to an attractive woman.

⁵⁵ When I talked to her a couple of days later, she said she felt the whole room shift when she said that, and asked me if I felt that too from where I was sitting, which I said I did. Marcella said that Williams had enjoyed her opening up until then. She could tell because he was smiling and nodding. But when she used him as a tag, his face just froze and it was clear he was offended.

Latina customer who insulted her in Spanish, thinking she wouldn't understand. The joke usually gets a good response from audiences, but it didn't fly today. "Fuck! What do you guys wanna talk about?" Marcella asks with resignation as she takes a seat on the stool standing on the stage. Now the audience laughs (I found it funny too). She does her bit about how Black women talk with authority. "They have so much authority in their voices, they can say anything, even if what they are saying makes no sense." She demonstrates how this may come across when you hear a Black woman on the phone. She ends the imagined conversation with a forceful and nonsensical "and two plus two equal four!" and slams an imaginary phone down. She uses the N-word in her impersonation of a Black woman. Using the N-word typically does not go over well for non-Black comedians, especially not with Black audiences, but I've seen Marcella pull it off on several occasions. The other night when she did this bit in front of a predominantly Black audience, she tore the room up. Tonight at the Belly Room, however, it doesn't help a set that was already off to a rough start.

Tony is back on stage and comments that, "stand-up comedy is not for the faint of heart." I found out later that he'd not seen the actual "incident" during Marcella's set, but he'd received word and a summarized account of what had happened before he went back on stage. Now that he is on stage, he talks about doing shows with stone-faced people in the front row (probably an apt description of Williams and his entourage at this point), and then introduces the next comic, Royale Watkins. Royale goes up with a strong and forceful presence, which is probably the way to go after the upheaval during the previous set even though Tony's interlude calmed the waters to a certain extent. Royale is a bit older than most of the other comedians (maybe early 40s); he's married and has kids, which he mentions during the set. "Where the hoes at?" he starts off. "LA has a 17 percent hoe capacity at comedy shows, so there should be at least two point five hoes in

here. Where the hoes at?” No one responds to this, which should come as no surprise to the comedian considering the largely female audience. “How many housewives in here?” A few claps and hoots come in response. “You know there’s a war between housewives and hoes?” he asks. Housewives had the upper hand for a while, he says, with *Housewives of Atlanta* and *Housewives of New York*. Then the hoes got back at them with *Basketball Wives* (a now-canceled VH1 reality show that featured Black women married to basketball players and stereotypically portrayed them as gold-diggers). “That’s Hoe TV! You know none of them hoes is married. They just practicing!” The audience finds this hilarious.

Royale continues with a long, elaborate bit about wives who go fishing for evidence that their men are cheating by rummaging through their guy’s emails. He is very physical in this bit and demonstrates the physical analogy of casting a fish line to show the process of catching evidence on the computer. Royale is a very skilled performer and completely committed to the act-out. The audience loves it. His fellow comedians are also visibly impressed and appreciative. They laugh and holler and clap and pound at the tables. They also excitedly yell out pointers to Royale, things for him to do to add even more impact and humor to the act. Royale, in turn, listens and incorporates their advice to the even greater excitement of the audience. The energy is high and palpable in the room. You can almost touch it. Royale ends his set with a few serious words stating that, “I’ve been in this business long enough to know that the most important thing we have is the respect for the craft, and what we get from audiences, Nichelle [the producer], Uncle Levi, and other comedians.” The audience cheers him on and claps at this acknowledgment and moment of reflection. After Royale’s set, Maunda and Lisa leave; we say bye and agree to stay in touch.

Edwonda White is next. “I’m proud to be a Black woman,” she says, “but I don’t like people who won’t admit they’re Black, like [golfer] Tiger Woods and [singer] Mariah [Carey], inventing all kinds of new names... Tiger know he Black now!!!” (Tiger Woods had generated national headlines with his confession to numerous extra-marital affairs the year before). And Mariah, she just could have said she’s an Israelite, cause she ‘rea-l-ite.’⁵⁶ The jokes meet with some laughs and groans. Comics have kept coming and going up on the side section during the course of the evening. The two who were agitated during Marcella’s performance left and others have taken their spots. The comedian currently sitting next to me introduces himself. His name is Dee Lai, and he’s about to go up. First, however, is a comedian named Jay Reid, who follows Edwonda. Reid is wearing a white polo shirt and white jeans. He jokes around with Uncle Levi on stage and makes fun of him. “He’s about a thousand years old, but still cranking that pimp style and his curl.” Uncle Levi’s age and hair style have been the subject of countless impromptu jokes over my time in the field, and they always meet with great enthusiasm from the crowd *and* from Uncle Levi who fully basks in the attention. Dee Lai calls out to Reid from the sidelines with the word “uncle,” clearly asking for a particular bit, and Reid hears him and follows the cue (but I did not write down the bit). His performance style is energetic. He then continues with a joke about his mom. “I gave my mom a smart phone, but she’s not so smart, he says (I can hear some audience groans of good-natured disapproval). “I got a picture on my phone of a big ass. I didn’t recognize the number, so I called it up. ‘Praise the Lord!’ the person answered. ‘Mama?’ ‘Oh, hi son!’ ‘Ma, did you just send me a picture of your booty?’ ‘Oh, that was sent to you?! It

⁵⁶ Golfer Tiger Woods famously referred to himself as “Cablinasian” (rather than Black) in an interview to signify his Caucasian, Black, American Indian, and Asian racial background. He subsequently faced backlash from parts of the Black community for being perceived as not wanting to be “just Black.” Singer Mariah Carey faced similar critique for referring to herself as “mixed race” and not explicitly stating that she’s Black until a few years ago.

was meant for Father James!’ ‘Ma, why do you have ‘God’s Property’ [tattooed] on you ass?’ ‘You *know* I belong to Jesus!’” The audience laughs and seems to enjoy the breaking of multiple taboos in this joke.

Dee Lai goes up next. He too has a dynamic and energetic stage presence. He tells a joke, and at the end of it he comments that he’d delivered some of the lines in the wrong order, which gave the punch line less impact. Some of the other comics urge him to “stay with it!” and a few of the audience members chime in. “Don’t say that!” jokes Dee Lai, “I don’t need your church shit!” People laugh. He’s making this situation really funny. He does a church bit and asks the audience to give him some “church clapping” (a fairly quick beat). Most of the audience knows what he means and follows cue. The comics in particular take charge of the clapping to support him. Dee Lai ends with a bit about having his uncle as a roommate when he was eight years old. His uncle kept him up at night talking about all kinds of things that were inappropriate for a child. He kills it! Lastly he announces that he has a Showtime Special that will air in the fall, and then he addresses his fellow comics, telling them that, “We have a hell of a class; we can create shit of our own. It’s nice when others invite us to do shit, but meanwhile, we can and should do it ourselves.”⁵⁷ The energy in the room is at fever pitch. It’s been steadily building in spite of a few dips here and there, and everyone seems ready to keep it going and to have a good time.

The next comic, Mitch Marchand, is also a little older than most of the other fellows. He says he’s married and has kids, and he too talks about his mom. She leaves him voice mail messages that sound like she’s having a conversation, he says. He pulls out his phone, holds it up to the microphone, and plays a recording of his mom. I’m not sure if it’s real or made for performance purposes. At times it sounds almost too manufactured, but at other times it sounds

⁵⁷ Comics sometimes refer to those of their colleagues who started hitting stages in LA around the same time as belonging to the same class or generation, as in cohort.

like it could be a real voice-mail message. Either way, the audience likes it and laughs enthusiastically. He gives props to his wife. “My wife is the best,” he says, “apart from two kids [he has four], she put God in my life.” He sounds completely serious and sincere. “But,” he says, “I’m a comedian, so I’m a skeptic. Like this idea that God is the cause of everything...” He proceeds to give examples of several not-so-good things that God might not want to take credit for. People laugh. At one point in the set he talks about how music mogul Puff Diddy’s dance moves have deteriorated over the years as Puffy has aged. He shows what PD’s current moves look like (pretty slow and basic side-to-side stepping). Mitch prefers what the Old Puffy (i.e. a younger Puffy) used to do when he was still a dancer. He asks the DJ to play an old Puffy tune and does the dance. It entails a vigorous hip-hop routine with bouncy rhythmical moves in stark contrast to the current Puffy’s proposed middle-aged shuffle. The room blows up! It’s hilarious! Everyone is laughing and hollering. When he’s done, the audience asks him to do it again and he indulges us. Again, we are all screaming! Too funny!

Dion Lack—Maunda’s jab target at the beginning of the evening—is the last comic on stage for the night. I haven’t seen Dion perform for quite a while, but he was the first comedian I saw on stage when I started fieldwork. He tears it up tonight! He comes on stage and walks right up to the mirrored wall next to him. He starts talking to his mirror image, complimenting himself, “You’re a fine nigga,” and then as if he’s taunting himself, “You mockin’ me, nigga?!!” People are laughing hard. “Wouldn’t it be funny if the mirror image stayed and stared at me as I walked away,” he asks and laughs along with the audience. He does a spoof of Mitch Marchand’s Puffy dance and calls him back to the stage telling him he needs to finish it. Mitch runs up and humorously apologizes and finishes the dance with a couple of bouncy moves and

then runs off stage again. There's lots of laughter throughout as this show is turning way more improv than is customary and to hilarious effect. Dion finishes his set and the show is over.

We are all invited to stay for Uncle Levi's birthday cake, which was brought in a bit earlier and placed on the table in front of the stage in the first row. We all sing "Happy Birthday" to Uncle Levi and then dig into gigantic pieces of chocolate cake with fresh strawberries in the middle and vanilla ice cream. It is delicious! Nichelle does the cutting and a female comedian helps handing out the full plates. Uncle Levi is having a good ole time on stage with the mic as people are eating. He poses for pictures with some of his family members and friends and works his pimp style hard. He's clearly enjoying himself. "I'm so fresh and so clean, if you know what I mean," he rhymes into the mic. Uncle Levi likes to talk in rhyming sound bites. He announces that he is going to Las Vegas over Labor Day Weekend to see Sade in concert. "Anybody wanna roll? I got a limo!" At that point I say goodbye to Uncle Levi, DC, Tony, and Nichelle and make for the exit. As I get outside there is a whole scene unfolding. The Store is a place where many comics end up hanging out toward the end of the night. This being a Thursday night—a big night for Hollywood's nightlife—it certainly is the case. I stop to chat with a comedian friend and learn that the incident with Katt Williams and Marcella has already hit the grapevine. News travels fast in comedy circles. And like the rest of us, comics gossip. This particular incident will reverberate for several days, kept alive on Twitter and in conversations. It's 1:30am, so I bid my farewell and walk up the slope to get my car in the parking structure. It's been a full night, full of impressions, full of comedy, full of energy. As I merge my car with the westbound traffic flow on Sunset Boulevard, I allow the tiredness of the day to settle into my body. Even so, I know that it will be an hour or two before I can wind down enough to fall asleep. In that sense *my* comedy work mimics that of the comics. I too need to descend from the energized state of being that live

stand-up frequently generates. A glass of wine and some Internet surfing usually does the trick. Eventually, I make it to bed and turn off the lights, grateful to have a research project I absolutely love and that I get to laugh my way through.

The Analytical Components of the Edge and its Pushing

Segments of the night at the club will now help introduce and illustrate the concepts I will use in discussing “the edge” and the theoretical usefulness of “pushing the edge.” The first concept, energy/affect, more specifically, “the energy in the room,” captures the spatial context. It is a prerequisite for understanding “the edge,” as it provides the medium for locating the edge and is the space in which pushing the edge takes place. The second concept I use in my analysis, and a key component of comedic performances, is (perceived) authenticity (Jackson 2005). In my work, I focus on race- and gender authenticity because comics’ ability to work these particular identities to a great degree determines their ability to push the edge on issues of race and gender (see Carbado and Gulati 2013 for an exposition of the working of racial identities in a US employment context). The conscious working of identities is an act of performativity. Performativity, too, is a key aspect of stand-up comedy, including of pushing edges. The term has different uses among academic disciplines; here I use two main interpretations, one centered on identity and one on language. Lastly, I will bring these analytical perspectives together in my conceptualization of pushing the edge. Pushing the edge on mainstream discourses of race and gender requires an attunement to the energy or affect of the space of interaction. While the comedians I observed attune to the energy of the comedy show room, I see the space of interaction as extending beyond the comedy club into “white public space” (Page and Thomas

1994), and also into private settings with non-white interlocutors.⁵⁸ The energy of the space of interaction is impacted by the race and gender discourses that co-construct that space—discourses that often revolve around notions of authenticity. The energy of the space and its constitutive discourses therefore impact how one works one’s identities within it, and hence, where the edge lies and in what ways one can push it. Neither the discourses (as Chapter 1 showed), nor the working of identities required in order to negotiate these discourses (the focus of Chapter 3), are limited to the comedy industry. Rather, both are ubiquitous aspects of racialized and gendered living in the contemporary US. By paying attention to the edges of mainstream race and gender discourses and how they can be pushed, we can home in on where the live wires of racism and sexism float around today. Some of these wires are new forms of old models, some of them are direct remnants from an unresolved past. Through the work of stand-up comedians who point to those wires when they push edges (successfully or not), we can also attune to the affective and performative dynamics that need to be considered in collective and individual anti-racist/anti-white-supremacist resistance more broadly.

Energy/Affect as Constitutive of the Space that Holds the Edge

In order to understand “the edge” and what pushing it entails, we need to understand energy and affect. Comedians routinely speak of the performance aspects of their work and the

⁵⁸ Anthropologists Helán Page and R. Brooke Thomas introduce the concept of “white public space” in discussing the US health care system. They assert that, “Either in its material or symbolic dimensions, white public space is comprised of all the *places* where racism is reproduced by the professional class. That space may entail particular or generalized locations, sites, patterns, configurations, tactics, or devices that routinely, discursively, and sometimes coercively privilege Euro-Americans over nonwhites” (1994:111). Linguistic anthropologist Jane H. Hill explains white public space as “a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal and the objects of monitoring ranging from individual judgment to Official English legislation” (1998:682).

spaces where they perform in terms of energy. They speak of having a low-energy or high-energy performance style (e.g. Joe, the doorman, and Royale Watkins' physical reenactment of fishing for emails, respectively). With either, they can "bring more energy to the stage," if they feel a particular audience requires it or just feel so inspired. The first comic on stage carries the burden of "building the energy in the room." The comedians who follow in the lineup have to sustain it. Should someone fail at doing this by bombing (like Marcella did on this night) and leave the audience "cold," the next comic has to "bring the energy back up" (the worst of which Tony Baker took care of as the host, and that Watkins then built on). Ideally, a skilled host will do this build-up work so that the comedian doing a set can focus on keeping the energy moving rather than generating it anew. In the opening club segment, DC Ervin and Tony Baker do that job as hosts. Comedians often also compliment a responsive audience by telling them they have "great energy," or if the audience feels slow warming up, a comic may explicitly ask them to "give me some energy!"

Comedians also "read" the energy of the room. Ideally comics arrive at a venue when the show starts, regardless of their place in the lineup, in order to "read" the audience. Reading the audience is both a visual practice (What are the demographics? Are they drinkers? Any bachelorette parties?) and an affective practice (How are they responding to the comic on stage? Are they laughing at dirty jokes? Race jokes?). At the very least, comics will show up a few acts ahead of their own for that purpose. They have to know the energy of the room in order to work the crowd right. The comedians in the lineup who are looking at the show in the Belly Room are doing just that. They are also supporting their colleagues on stage and may give them feedback on their joke material afterwards, but either way, they are reading the room as well.⁵⁹ Once on

⁵⁹ There's an etiquette involved in giving feedback that I will not go into here.

stage, comedians constantly calibrate their sets from that vantage point. Their reading directs them in terms of joke topics, and in determining whether the audience is ready for material or requires more crowd work. Marcella Arguello directly responded to her reading of the room when she said, “Wow! You guys are not feeling me at all!” and one joke later when she sat down and said, “Fuck! What do you guys wanna talk about?” Rather than insist on continuing with her material, she paused to talk to the audience. In doing so she made the audience laugh.

Unfortunately, on this night, she lost them again when she went back to her material. Comics locate the edge by reading the energy in the room; that energy includes the different qualities of laughter as well as its absence.

When a set works, that is, when the audience responds to a comic’s jokes with repeated out-loud laughter, the affective dynamic between the comic on stage and the audience has a rhythm or pulse to it that feels like a loop, a circular flow. It’s an energy flow from the comedian into the audience, and the audience then returns that flow of energy in the form of laughter, which feeds the comic’s next outpouring of energy. At the night at the club, Royale Watkins’ act-out of women fishing for cheating evidence on their spouse’s computers perceptibly generates such a flow. When he first physically demonstrates what this fishing looks like, the audience and his fellow comic laugh out loudly. The laughter closes the loop and returns the flow of energy to Royale along with suggestions for how to push the joke further (as in milking it for more laughter). Royale transmutes the energy flow that comes back to him into new iterations of the joke, which in turn generates even more laughter and enthusiasm from the spectators. With each loop, the overall energy in the room rises and ends at a euphoric pitch. One comedian described the feeling of that pulse as a wave coming at you, a force. The comic’s job is to ride that wave. Every comic I have ever talked to describes that feeling as the ultimate high. Some

say, there is nothing better; others describe it as addictive.⁶⁰ When a set doesn't work, when comics bomb, they often express feeling drained of energy or depressed (in a non-clinical sense). They were unable to home in on the affective wave. One could liken the dynamic to the path of a boomerang. If you throw it well, it comes back to your hand. If you miscalculate or don't have the skills, the boomerang may disappear over the horizon or hit you, or someone else, in the head on its return.

Royale Watkins did not read the room well when he chose to open his set by asking "Where the hoes at?" and announcing that Los Angeles has a 17 percent "hoe capacity." This is not a great way to make a room with a majority of Black women relate to you. However, because it's the set-up to his joke about reality TV shows, he didn't have much choice if he wanted to do that joke. He skillfully turned it around, though, and brought down great laughter by making the housewives of the shows his target rather than the women in the audience. He may even have known, based on previous experience, that this would be the effect of the joke once he got past the first lines. And he may have been working out different ways of setting up the joke, with this night's attempt being a less successful one. Either way, he killed the set as a whole, suggesting that he knows how to read a room well, even though he may choose not to cater to that reading at every moment of his performance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Comedians even speak of the dangers of getting addicted to killing it on stage. The high can be so seductive that comics only perform polished jokes that they know will get laughs, even at smaller shows where they should be working on new material. If they succumb to the high, they stop developing as performers. They no longer work on new material and they no longer push themselves to push the jokes further. If they are well established when this happens, they may still have a good career as stand-up comedians (and a very lucrative one as comedic actors, if they are able to transition to film or TV where other people are involved in the writing process). More junior comics who get addicted to the high, and stop creating jokes, are less likely to be able to turn stand-up into a career.

⁶¹ Sometimes when comics are working on bits, they don't necessarily care about putting on the best possible show, rather, they want to see the response to a particular set-up or wording or punch line. They

Only novice comics will go on stage and deliver their jokes without taking the energy in the room into consideration. The odds of bombing when they ignore it are great. Having said that, comedians can bomb for many reasons, not only due to a misreading of the energy of the room. For George, for instance, who as the first comic on stage had to open for a cold audience, an accurate reading of the room would not have had great impact on the outcome of his set. Even new comics can typically read an audience on a basic level; they feel the affect. But even if a comic reads the room right, he or she may not have the skill set or enough joke material to do anything about it. This is the more common scenario. A junior comic is therefore highly likely to bomb as an opener. With that in mind, George actually did better than one might have expected. With more experience, comedians who go up first can rev up the audience from the cold and have a killing set, a process that also involves energy. You have to put the energy “out there” in order to get the audience going.

The best situation, analytically, for isolating a misreading of the room is when the comic corrects it. At one show I attended, Lebanese-American comedian Sammy Obeid performed a couple of Palestinian jokes for a mostly Middle-Eastern audience to a lukewarm response. So he asked, “Any Jews in the audience?” The response was enthusiastic with shouts and loud clapping. “Oh, that explains a few things...” He immediately did a Jewish bit that he had previously told me Jewish audiences typically love. He was right. The audience busted out laughing and from there on he had them. He turned the whole vibe of the audience by correcting his reading, here, by actually asking them for information. The fact that Obeid was able to turn the audience around eliminates both lack of skills and lack of material as factors. He is also not a novice comic. He simply did not pick up on the large contingent of Persian Jews sitting in the audience.

may completely disregard their accurate reading of the room in order to get the information they need to improve their jokes.

He cued in on that in his reading of the energy of the room from the stage when they didn't respond as he expected to his jokes.

Energy, in the sense I've observed, operates as force and as movement. It's a dynamic process that I think of in terms of affect. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, cultural theorists Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg speak of affect as "in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces of encounter*" (2010:2). "Affect," they explain,

is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility... [Seigworth and Gregg 2010:2]

The image of "a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations" that meander rhythmically and fluidly through different spatial configurations aptly describes the affective dynamics I've observed and been part of at comedy shows. These affective dynamics constitute "the energy in the room" that comedians talk about. In her work on affect and space, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed states that, "We may walk into the room [any room] and 'feel the atmosphere,' but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point" (2010:37). I use Ahmed's observation to add nuance to my elaboration on "the energy in the room" and to suggest that not only is there energy already present in the show room that comedians enter and read, their reading is also already affected by the energy they themselves bring upon entering and, later, that they bring to the stage. Ahmed brings affect into a spatial context. She conceives of the affect one experiences within a space as specific to one's position, or angle, in that particular moment. Part of becoming a good performer is to become aware of "the angle of [one's] arrival" and to learn how to read the already angled atmosphere in the room. Comedians learn how to "reset"

their own energy so that what they do bring with them into the room does not undermine their set, or alternatively, to recognize what they bring and make it part of their performance in a productive way.

Marcella provides a good example of this in the night at the club. She arrived to the show room before the show started. She was present and read the energy in the room as it built. Shortly before it was time for her to go on stage she went back into the green room (a lounge where performers can wait until it's their turn to go up), and therefore she was not present when Katt Williams arrived. His presence, as a famous comic, shifted the angle of the atmosphere in the room (you could actually feel this sitting in the audience), but Marcella did not find out that he was there until just before she went on stage. She later told me she felt nervous when she found out. She did not have time to reset her own emotional balance; she had already been introduced by the host and was walking up to the stage. Instead, she tried to make her self-consciousness part of her set by including Williams in it. That short course of events brings the angle of the room into relief (more easily "seen" or sensed at the moment it shifts), and shows what happens when the comic is unaware of the shift and does not have time to adjust once she finds out. She recognized her nervousness, but the way she worked it in that moment led to an affective free fall. Perhaps calling her nervousness out rather than Williams would have worked better, like Tony did when he asked, "Is he gonna laugh or is he just gonna make me self-conscious?" She could still have bombed that set, but might have avoided the agitated collective response to her tag (the last twist of a joke after the punch line; in this case, Marcella's addition of "Katt Williams" at the end).

Ahmed also posits that "...spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body" and that "the social also has its skin, as a

border that feels and that is shaped by the ‘impressions’ left by others...” (2006:9). The space that surrounds the comics and the audience in the showroom, then, is not void. Rather than empty space, it is potent space, in the sense that it holds power (energy) and that power in turn holds creative potential. Similar to the way in which the negative space surrounding an image of an object constitutes that object as much as the positive appearance of its configuration, the energy in the room constitutes the bodies in it as much as their own embodied presence. The barrier between the external and the internal is permeable, like the second skin Ahmed refers to, and therefore neither firm nor fixed. It is a fluid, dynamic, affective space, as suggested by its wave-like feeling. It is also a creative space. Performers and audiences are both created by and co-creators of the energy in the room at a particular moment in a particular space. Marcella’s incident, again, reveals this creative charge. Tagging Katt Williams was a spontaneous and creative move spurred by the unexpected shift in the angle of the room that took place right before she went on stage. The audience could have responded with raucous delight at the boldness of her tag, which would have created a very different energy in the room for Marcella to work with. Instead, the affective agitation that ensued disrupted any attempt to build a flow of energy between her and the audience.

Additionally, comedians deliberately push that energy in new or unexpected directions; the energy is creative, as we saw in Royale Watkins’ exploration of new ways of milking his joke that emerged with the collaboration of his colleagues and the audience’s encouragement *in the moment*. This creative charge also allows comics to push edges when the directions they take challenge mainstream racial and gender discourses. The creative aspect of energy/affect is key to pushing the edge and to comedy in general. Even when comics adhere to their prewritten jokes, the delivery at any given time requires a creative process of reading the room, interacting with

the audience, and determining how and when to transition between crowd work and material.

The opportunity that stand-up comedy offers to observe creativity in action, as opposed to solely observe its results, makes it a prime site for investigating the work comedians do when they challenge the taken-for-granted discourses on race and gender.

In the showroom, the co-creative circuits of energy simultaneously flow between (1) the performing comic and the audience, (2) the comic on stage and on-looking comedians, (3) the on-looking comedians and the audience, as well as (4) audience members, with varying levels of intensity. They also flow between everyone in all directions simultaneously, including the serving staff of the establishment. The energy movement between the comic on stage and the audience is usually the most noticeable. This is the affective circuit that constitutes what we typically think of as a show, and it includes jokes, crowd work, audience laughter and clapping, and also various forms of heckling. The opening ethnographic section also illustrates the flow between the comic on stage and the comics viewing from the sidelines. Both Maunda's jab at Dion for being so dark that she couldn't see him, and Damon Jr.'s imitation of Tony Baker's performance style show this particular dynamic. This flow is of course simultaneously aimed at the audience who is often much entertained by partaking in "inside" jokes, assuming they are familiar enough with the comics to get the joke. Getting it, as Rebecca Krefting points out, generates a sense of belonging (2014:122). Other forms of this dynamic include the comedians' requests for additions to or repetition of the jokes their colleagues deliver on stage.

The energy flow between attending comics and the audience is often less perceptible to an observer. The comics' reading of the room is one example, as is the audience response to outbursts by comics who aren't performing. This dynamic is much more noticeable at Black shows where comics who are not on stage at times vocally engage the comedian who is

performing, which audience members witness and respond to. In those rooms, the perceived barrier between stage and off-stage is more permeable. At most other comedy shows, however, comics in the show room do not make their presence known by interacting with the comic on stage. The affective circuits among audience members are apparent in looks and glances at each other when they share laughs, for instance, and in frowns and “shushing” when other patrons talk during the set. At a good show, these movements of energy entice the audience in ways perceived as funny. They have a lifting, lightening, and frequently collective quality, as was the case with many of the performances I described in the night at the club.

These movements of energy also hold the potential for comedians to push the edge. The edge is more workable when the audience is warm and the energy in the room is high. It is akin to kneading a piece of clay. The clay is more malleable and stretchable when it’s been warmed up. Working with it cold is more difficult and less productive.

This floating affective perimeter I call the edge wobbles on both a horizontal and vertical axis. The pushing of the edge takes place on the horizontal axis, where the boundaries of hegemonic discourses are stretched and put in affective tension. The subsequent chapters explore the work of this axis in depth. The edge fluctuates along the vertical axis depending on the ups and downs of the energy level in the room. Low energy in the room coincides with dips on the vertical axis. High energy and a feeling of electrical charge reflect a rise on the vertical axis. Throughout a show, the edge can teeter up and down with audiences’ laughter, silences, groans, and exclamations of sympathy. For instance, the set-up for Royale Watkins’ first joke in which he asks the audience, “Where the hoes at?” meets with silence. The question does not inspire audience engagement. He is not addressing the men in the room, who even if they found the set-up funny may choose not to laugh if in the company of a woman. And no woman (unless perhaps

exceptionally drunk) is likely to choose to seriously identify with that label. Some may find the suggestion offensive. Had Watkins persisted in this vein or questioned the lack of response, he may have bombed. Instead, he hurries to the substance of the joke, which targets reality TV “stars.” Having thus diverted the judgmental gaze from the women present, the audience finds a gap that allows them to align with him, and from there he can build the energy flow of his set to a higher level on the vertical axis.

The sympathetic “awww” that Shane Miller provokes when he says he thought fathers were a myth also generates a little dip in the edge. While sympathy from the audience gives evidence of the comic’s relatability, which is desirable, it also has the effect of curtailing laughter. People don’t laugh at what a comic says if they feel sorry. Comedians are well aware of this and typically swiftly dismiss pity with a pointed or crude remark that makes the audience laugh and thereby gets them through the momentary impasse. To a certain extent, this also applies to “real” talk. If comics say something on a serious note, the energy may drop slightly (even if the audience agrees with the remarks). Comics who wish to address the audience in this way therefore typically do so at the end of their sets, as was the case with Dee Lai’s praise of his comedy cohort. Although in his case the energy in the room did not drop from the high he’d built, it may have been a greater challenge had he chosen to *open* with a serious statement and then transitioned to jokes. The silences, demonstrations of sympathy, and real talk all reveal the wavering motion of the edge along the vertical axis. The next section on authenticity/sincerity will explore movements along the horizontal axis.

In this section I’ve sought to show the presence of energy and how it flows during a show. It’s muddled and somewhat diffused, both the energy and the process of following it. That process feels more accurate when one hovers around and catches glimpses of it rather than when

one tries to force it into focus and categorize it. It requires paying attention to what isn't as much as to what is. Seigworth and Gregg suggest that, "Because affect emerges out of muddy, unmediated relatedness and not in some dialectical reconciliation of cleanly oppositional elements or primary units, it makes easy compartmentalisms give way to thresholds and tensions, blends and blurs" (2010:4). In navigating this muddy landscape, comedians make decisions on how to present themselves, how to work their identities, and they evaluate how they are perceived, and how they are identified. Skilled and experienced comics have more performative range in this respect than do neophytes, which allows the former to perform well in front of a wide range of audiences.

Negotiating Race and Gender Authenticity/Sincerity

The question of authenticity is central to comedians' performativity and to audiences' perception of who the comics are, and as Jackson shows, to racialized intersubjective interactions more generally (2005). Comics need to be aware of both and need to figure out how to make themselves accepted by audiences regardless of what audiences identify them as or the audiences' feelings about those identifications. They need to address the unstated questions: Are you who we expect you to be when we look at you? If not, who are you?⁶² The last question opens a potential gap where comedians can play with authenticity and sincerity in ways that push the edges of race and gender.

Sociocultural anthropologist John Jackson Jr. describes authenticity as a relationship "between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are

⁶² These questions need to be addressed by most comics when they get on stage, but much less so, or not at all, by comics who are known enough to have their own fans, where people come to see them, not just to see a show (e.g. Wanda Sykes, Margaret Cho, Louis CK, Chris Rock).

interpreted and analyzed from the outside, because they cannot simply speak for themselves” (2005:15). Humans (subjects) authenticate things (objects). With regards to humans authenticating other humans, we typically resort to “scripts [that] provide guidelines for proper and improper behavior, for legitimate and illegitimate group membership, for social inclusion or ostracism” (Jackson 2005:13). From this perspective, “...race is seen as the restrictive script we use to authenticate some versions of blackness, whiteness, brownness, yellowness, and redness while simultaneously prohibiting others” (Jackson 2005:13). Jackson goes on to argue that, “...analyses that deal exclusively with discussions of ‘racial scripts’ dehumanize, much like the processes they ostensibly critique. They turn us all into mere objects of our own social discourses...” (2005:15). He introduces “racial sincerity” as a concept predicated on a subject-to-subject relationship (Jackson 2005:15). He notes,

A mere object could never be sincere, even if it is authentic. Sincerity is a trait of the object’s maker, or maybe even its authenticator, but never the object itself... Instead, sincerity presumes a liaison *between subjects*... Questions of sincerity imply social interlocutors who presume one another’s humanity, interiority, and subjectivity. [Jackson 2005:15]

Discourses of authenticity and sincerity are central to the interactions between comics and audiences in the showroom and therefore also to my analysis of those interactions. Comedians have to present themselves as sincere, as subjects, on stage in order to come across as genuine and relatable, which is key to a successful set. Audiences, however, first evaluate comics with an authenticating gaze, and need to be convinced by and accepting of the comic’s sincerity. This is not an either-or enterprise. A comic may present some “authentic” features and some “sincere” features with more or less emphasis on either, and the balance they strike may or may not work with a particular audience.

The (energy) connection between comic and audience, however, depends on a subject-to-

subject relationship. The comedian has to come across as “real” and not as an authentic caricature of him- or herself. Without this connection the comic is not in a position to push any edges because there is no energy moving in the room. In his bit about being chastised by a white guy for using the N-word when he himself is merely the shade of tapioca, Shane Miller engages the audience’s presumed scripts of racial authenticity (here, that being light and looking Pilipino makes him less or not authentically Black), *and* presents a racially sincere image of himself. Through the joke, he immediately acknowledges that he has lighter complexion than most of the other Black people present; he’s not pretending otherwise. He is being racially sincere. But he has also identified himself as Black by referring to himself as “a nigga” in the opening sentence, which serves as a Black-authenticating feature in this context.⁶³ In labeling himself in this way he not only verbally establishes his Black authenticity, but also avoids being mistaken for Pilipino and therefore as different from the audience. His statement is doubly authenticating (he says he’s “a nigga” so he’s Black, *and* he says he’s “a nigga” so he’s not Pilipino) and doubly dehumanizing (in authenticating himself he objectifies himself *and* he uses the oppressor’s dehumanizing term to do so). But it is also a sincere statement in that he’s broadened the category of Black to include people who look like him. Whatever one may think of the method, it accomplishes what he needs it to; it establishes him as both sincere and as authentically Black in spite of what the audience might have thought at first.

Shane also signals his authentic Blackness without directly claiming it through his hip-hop style attire and use of Black English. The fact that his attire and speech pattern index authentic Blackness in an objectifying sense does not preclude them from also being sincere

⁶³ Comedians use the N-word ubiquitously. When Black comics use it, the tone and context convey whether the term is used as a synonym for “Black” or as a racial pejorative. I will not weigh in on whether I think they should or should not do that here.

expressions of his identity (his racial identity, but also his identity as a male, and as a man of a certain age group). Similarly, his joke content, while self-objectifying, is also a sincere attempt to address his perceived racial difference. Jackson points out that authenticity and sincerity are not necessarily in opposition to each other; the relationship between the two is more nuanced and contentious than that. He explains,

Authenticity attempts to domesticate sincerity, rein it in, control its excesses. It demands hard, fast, and absolute sure-footedness, whereas racial sincerity wallows in unfalsifiability, ephemerality, partiality, and social vulnerability. Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting ‘liveness’ of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind. Where authenticity lauds content, sincerity privileges intent—an interiorized intent that decentralizes the racial seer (and the racial script), allowing for the possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity. With sincerity as a model, one still does not see into the other, one still does not know if one can trust the other’s performances (a... skepticism it shares with authenticity discourse); however, one recognizes that people are not simply racial objects (to be verified from without) but racial subjects with an interiority that is never completely and unquestionably clear. [Jackson 2005:18]

Shane’s opening joke exemplifies all of these dynamics, his sincerity apparent in the socially vulnerable position he assumes when he acknowledges himself as tapioca colored yet also claims his Blackness (a claim the audience could reject), but also when he reveals his mixed feelings about reuniting with his cancer-ridden absentee father.

Comedians consider vulnerability key to making themselves relatable on stage, and being relatable is key to making people laugh. The audience, in turn, needs to trust the comic enough to come along for a ride into his or her worldview, which they expect to be funny. The funny aspects may be due to both the foreignness and the familiarity of that worldview. In Shane’s case, his ambiguous feelings about his father expose a vulnerability that could conflict with both gendered and racial scripts of authenticity—authentic men don’t express emotions other than anger in public, and certainly not masculine straight-identified Black men. The audience appears

to accept his sincere expression, but not in the way he'd probably hoped. Their expression of sympathy with a collective "awww" demonstrates that they feel for him; they relate on some level, but they don't laugh. Relatability, again, is good, but lack of laughter isn't. It takes more effort (i.e. energy) to make sincere expressions funny. This relates to the vertical energy dip that occurs when audiences feel sorry for the comic, which I described in the previous section about energy/affect. It also offers one explanation for why comics who feel exposed and insecure on stage often resort to hack jokes that rely on "authentic" stereotypes. It is easier for the performer (1) because it feels less vulnerable and (2) because the authentic images correspond to ones the audience members recognize as part of a hegemonic imaginary and so they laugh. We laugh at the familiar as much as at the unexpected (e.g. spot-on impersonations are funny in part for this reason).

In Shane's case, it is true that the audience cannot "see into [him]" or be certain that they can "trust [his] performanc[e]," yet he has managed to "decentraliz[e] the racial seer[s] (and the racial script)" to a certain extent. What you think you see is not necessarily what you get; there's more. His way of engaging racial authenticity creates the space for his expression of racial sincerity. It does, however, not set the audience up to laugh. The discrepancy between the expected "authentic" image and the sincere image the comic presents opens up a space for pushing the edge. Before I explore this further, I need to introduce performativity, the process that facilitates these expressions of racially authentic and sincere identities.

Performativity and Discursive Agency

Performativity is prominently used as a concept in two different sets of disciplinary contexts—one that centers on theatre and "the *extroversion* of the actor (aimed entirely outward

toward the audience),” and one that centers on the speech act, the deconstruction and “*introversion* of the signifier (if ‘I apologize’ only apologizes, ‘I sentence’ only sentences, and so on)” (Sedgwick 2002:7, original emphasis). I will attend to performativity both as “theatrical” and “extroverted” in its direction, and, to a lesser degree, as a speech act where words and the act of speaking in itself do something. My understanding of performativity as outwardly directed expressions of identity draws on philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler’s (1999) investigation of gender performativity. Butler holds that there are no pre-existing gender attributes that require expression; rather, it is in the acts of performing these attributes that they are actually constituted (1999:180). In other words, gender is constituted through an ongoing performative process. Upholding gender identity, then, requires repetition (Butler 1999:178). Butler states, “This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (1999:178). Identities are seen as shaped and produced by social institutions, practices, and discourses, and are historically situated (Chadderton 2011:39), rather than prehistorical or ahistorical essences. Relevant to this project is also Butler’s assertion that those occasions when the repeated acts of the performance of gender “fail to repeat” are moments that present “the possibilities of... transformation” (1999:179). This is the case both when a comedian’s performance of gender fails to repeat, that is, does not conform to a patriarchal script, and when the performance of race fails to repeat. The former was the case with Marcella’s jab at Katt Williams (a male comic critical of the incident let me know that she “got her comeuppance” for having the nerve to include Williams in her bit, and suggested that both her younger career status and the fact that she’s a woman should have made her choose differently). I would argue the latter was also an element in Marcella’s bombing set. She usually identifies herself as Latina and

Middle Eastern early in the sets I've seen her do for Black audiences, but on this night she waited until midway through, after the incident, and I think it was too late. Based on my observations, comics do well to explain to the audience who they are before the audience has had a chance to make that decision for them, and before the comic offends them in their jokes. While the possibility of transformation that Butler speaks of was not actualized in Marcella's case on that night, "failing to repeat" still holds that potential (exemplified by Shane's set). Using the concepts I've introduced thus far, a failure to repeat expected identity scripts creates an affective shift in the energy of the room. Understanding gender, race, and other identities as performative, then, opens up the possibility of constituting identities in ways that do not adhere to a hegemonic set of meanings and images.

These moments of failed repetition suggest that the reenactment and re-experiencing of social meanings is not fully determined. The socially constructed subject has some agency. Education scholar Charlotte Chadderton explains that, "This is not a sovereign agency, rather the subject has discursive agency: agency within the limits of her subjection" (2011:49). This discursive agency is one that some comics, wittingly or not, take advantage of in the racial critique they levy through their performances on stage. Chadderton's elaboration on the implications of this agency speaks directly to the race-critical work comics do on stage:

This allows for a more complex understanding of resistance to dominant discourses, and the conditions under which resistance is possible, and indeed, that resistance may not necessarily be conscious or explicit... This notion therefore does not challenge the structural theory that master narratives such as white supremacy define social relations to a large extent, but it extends and complicates it. [2011:49]

Critical race theorists Devon Carbado and Mitu Gulati offer a schematic for how the execution of that limited "agency to structure the terms upon which [racialized subjects] are experienced" might unfold (2003:1772). Their schematic emerges from and addresses how

racialized and gendered employees work their racial identities in white-dominant work settings. I find it useful for looking at comedic performances as well, since comedians of color, while usually not employees of the comedy venues, are nonetheless racialized and gendered individuals who mostly work in white-dominant settings. Carbado and Gulati's four stages of racial negotiation suggest a first stage where the subject has a sense of self that allows for either "identity-affirming conduct that comports with [the subject's] sense of identity [or] identity-negating conduct that runs afoul of the [subject's] sense of... identity" (Carbado and Gulati 2013:25). Translated to the show room, Shane Miller exemplifies this stage when he affirms his identity in the opening bit by claiming his Blackness even though he's light and gets mistaken for Pilipino. In stage two, the subject forms an impression of the behavioral preferences of the institution or social space they are interacting within (Carbado and Gulati 2013:25). Continuing with Miller's opening bit, this impression is made when the white guy (here an embodiment of white public space) chastises him for using the N-word. Then, in stage three, the subject becomes aware of the conflict between his or her sense of self "as a person with racial integrity" and the preferred behaviors of the institution or social space (Carbado and Gulati 2013:25). Shane verbalizes this conflict in his complaint that he's tired of having to prove his Blackness; to have to confront accusations that he's not "Black enough" to say the N-word. Stage four is the actual negotiation where the subject has to determine how to resolve the conflict: act with racial integrity or compromise in order to acquiesce to institutional preferences (Carbado and Gulati 2013:25).

Miller's resolution to the conflict is evident on stage. In telling the story (whether based on a true event or not), he is choosing to act with racial integrity (every time he tells it). He claims his Blackness, recognizes his lightness and "foreign" traits, and says what he wants in

public. He repeatedly constructs and affirms his sincere racial identity, and hence, his racial integrity. It is a poster-model illustration of racial performativity. I will draw parallels between the stage-four negotiations in the schematic and comedians' internal (and sometimes external) negotiations of how to work their identities in their performances in subsequent chapters as well. It should be noted that in the comedy setting, even if a comedian hypothetically feels comfortable working their racial identity without compromise in relation to the work-place setting, that is, the club manager, show producer, or booker, he or she may not feel that way in relation to the specific audience in the room. In such case, the comic still has to negotiate exactly how to work his or her identities vis-à-vis the audience, and with that, if and how to push the edge.

In the account of the night at the club, Shane exercises some discursive agency within his broader subjectification as Black and male. He performatively expresses his identity as a particular type of Black person—a light skinned, often misidentified, Black man who nonetheless authenticates his Blackness through self-referential terms, hip-hop style attire, and his use of Black English. While he in many ways constructs himself in a common age-specific image of Blackness, the person he presents also suggests that there are different ways of being Black. Carbado and Gulati elaborate on the choices (often circumscribed) that Black people have in how they construct themselves racially:

In the context of everyday interactions, people construct – that is, they project and interpret particular images of – race. This means that the intelligibility of a black person's racial identity derives at least in part from (1) the 'picture' of blackness she projects and (2) how that racial projection is seen. This implies that there is more than one way to be, and be interpreted as, black. Blackness, in other words, is not monolithic." [2003:1771]

In addition to exercising agency in terms of what kind of Black guy he wants to present himself as, Shane also exercises agency in terms of how he presents himself as a political subject. His set

implies that he sees his own political identity as racially contingent. He makes it clear that he joined the Marines because he was duped by its deceptive recruiter-“pimps” who used racially targeted means of persuasion. Less clearly stated, but certainly implied, is that he thinks of the military’s mission as criminal. Shane’s remarks could be seen as “unpatriotic” and “un-American” within the contemporary social climate of pervasive American hyper-patriotism and exceptionalism. Yet, in identifying himself as a veteran with eight years of service, he also becomes an embodiment of the American hero. The performative expression of the hero, however, “fails to repeat” in the words he speaks. That dissonance pushes the edge of what it means to be an American war hero—and because he navigates the edge skillfully, he also maintains connection with the audience and makes them laugh.

To voice a political stance in a public space is also performative in the second sense mentioned earlier, as a speech act wherein the words *do* something. This understanding of performativity originated with language philosopher J. L. Austin’s (1962) influential work, *How to Do Things With Words*. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes Austin’s conceptualization of performativity as “a cluster of sentences about which ‘it seems clear that to utter the sentence... is not to *describe* my doing [a thing]... or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it’ (2002:3). Examples include ‘I promise,’ ‘I bequeath...,’ ‘I christen...,’ ‘I apologize,’ ‘I dare you,’ ‘I sentence you...’” (Sedgwick 2002:4). Performative utterances, as Austin later calls them, share certain syntactic and semantic features (Sedgwick 2002:4)—a level of detail that I will not explore further here. Instead, I will proceed to Austin’s conclusion that “there is finally no yes/no distinction between performative and nonperformative utterances” (Sedgwick 2002:5). Discussions of performativity have moved away from the “grammatical moment” that Austin engages, but I find Sedgwick’s claim that “Austinian performativity is about how language

constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it,” and that “language is directly *productive*” to be a good way of thinking about the race-critical work comedians do on stage (2002:5, original emphasis). My objective here, then, is to note that words *do* things, and subsequent chapters will look at what words do in terms of challenging hegemonic (mis)conceptions of race.

“Pushing the Edge” as a Concept

In live stand-up performances, comedians specifically seek to manipulate the energy in the room and to work their identities in order to evoke laughter. One comedic strategy for making people laugh is to push jokes, audiences, and the edges of hegemonic discourses in different ways. As I mentioned earlier, comics try to push their jokes to the limit; they want to milk them for as much laughter as possible by taking them as far as they can go. This is precisely what Marcella did when she tagged her regular opening bit by linking it to Katt Williams. She pushed the joke for more laughter; it just didn’t work that time. Comics also attempt to push the audience to wherever the comic perceives their limits of propriety to be, or beyond, without necessarily pushing the edge.⁶⁴ Jay Reid’s joke about his mom who accidentally sent him a picture of her rear with her smart phone (intended for her pastor) is a rather successful example of this. His joke trades on several taboos and moral issues. First, he’s an adult son who sees a picture of his mother’s naked behind, which should be private, and in a context where the picture

⁶⁴ Not all stand-up comedy seeks to do this. Comics can seek to offend without offering a social critique of the mainstream. Limits of propriety, then, do not correlate with the floating edges of hegemonic discourses. In some performances, comics seek neither to offend nor to push the edge. For instance, shows at churches, at corporate offices, or at family-oriented events usually carry restrictions on topics and cuss words. These limit, and often eliminate, the possibility of pushing any edges. Such shows can still be very funny, but they are unlikely to challenge dominant discourses to any great degree. They are typically “clean” and safe. Shows at most comedy clubs are neither. Even clubs that maintain relatively stricter rules for what can be said on stage allow for some cussing and “sensitive” topics.

is meant to be sexually enticing. This brushes up against American incest taboos, made even more immoral by the fact that his mother is religious, and hence (according to that particular script) should not engage in sexual seduction, with her pastor no less. The joke also triggers an innate repulsion in “children” to think about their parents, and their mothers in particular, as interested in and having sex. As the final straw, the photo reveals that his mother has a tattoo on her behind that reads “God’s Property.” Not only is that tattoo meant to be seen by someone, it was also inked by someone, which suggests that maybe mother shows her rear more regularly than “appropriate.” Her attempt, in the end, to rationalize her tattoo as a sign of her devotion to Christ is laughable given what we already know. And so we laugh. The joke pushes the audience’s expected sexual taboos and sense of religious propriety, the latter a particularly provocative topic for a Black audience, many of whom can be expected to ascribe to some religious affiliation in theory, if not in practice. The joke is inappropriate, but within a range that the audience can accommodate. Comics can push audiences, then, while aligning themselves with mainstream understandings of right and wrong, and without touching the edges of hegemonic discourses. Reid’s joke is also not blasphemous, which might have generated a different response. I’ve observed that many Black comics (in particular) steer away from making jokes about religion or God in ways that could be deemed blasphemous. The jokes involving religion that they do tell are typically good-natured. DC Ervin specifically told me that he does not joke about religion at all because he does not want to offend people’s faith (interview, 9/13/11); in other words, he avoids pushing the edges of religious discourses.

The energy in the room gives comedians a sense for where the edge might be for a particular audience on a particular topic at a particular time in a particular space. Its location changes with the variables. Finding the edge allows comics to push the audience without losing

the connection to them and also without pushing any hegemonic discourses, which is precisely what Jay Reid did above. While most comics push the edge with their jokes and joke content, they can also do so through their performance style (physical appearance, attire, speech pattern, etc.). Variables that affect the location of the edge at any given time include the assigned racial identification and actual racial identity of the comic; the comic's gender and sexual orientation; the comic's performance skills; the comic's performativity and palatability; joke topic, content, and delivery; the cleverness of the material; and the racial, gender, political, educational, and age demographics of the audience. A change in any one of these aspects of a show can change the location of the edge. The location can also change during the course of a show with the same audience depending on how the particular performer on stage articulates with these variables (Marcella Arguello's set is a good example of this).

While most all comics aim to push their jokes as far as they can (both Marcella Arguello and Jay Reid provide different examples of this), my focus is on comics who push the edge in ways that stretch mainstream dominant discourses of race and gender specifically. In this context, and as I described it at the beginning of this chapter, the edge becomes a politically and socially critical affective space that engages the familiar and taken-for-granted (the mainstream) with a peripheral gaze (from the racial margin), thereby engendering a form of cultural critique. While both Marcella and Jay pushed their jokes as far as they could, Jay's was scripted (as in pre-written) whereas Marcella's was spontaneous (more risky). As far as pushing edges are concerned, Jay Reid did not. His jokes positioned him within the boundaries of the mainstream by telling us of this outrageous thing his mother did—outrageous to both him and the audience. Marcella, I would argue, pushes the edge from the start with her opening bit. In asserting herself as just a tall woman, and rejecting all the labels people want to put on her as a result of her

height, she already defies expectations and prescriptions for what a woman should be or do. And that's before she tags Katt Williams. While the tag was spur of the moment, it ended up pushing the edge too, in that a slew of comedians (and possibly audience members) found it to be inappropriate for a female comic at her career level. She was out of her place, which is one way of describing comics who push the edge. In this particular instance, the audience was not with her, but that does not negate the fact that she pushed the edge on mainstream discourses of how women should behave and what they should do or be depending on what they look like.

Earlier in this chapter, I used Shane Miller's set to illustrate how comedians can play with racial authenticity and sincerity, and as I noted there, that play can open up the space for pushing edges. Here, I will look at the same set from that perspective. The first thing a comic has to do when he takes the stage is to "put himself in the room," which comedians typically do through "crowd work" (chatting with the audience as a collective or with individual patrons or both). The objective, to use Sara Ahmed's term, is to "inhabit the space." She explains,

The work of inhabitation involves orientation devices; ways of extending bodies into spaces that create new folds, or new contours of what we could call livable or inhabitable space. If orientation is about making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space, then disorientation occurs when that extension fails. Or we could say that some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others." [Ahmed 2006:11]

The comedian on stage purposefully seeks to inhabit the space of the whole room—not just the stage. The orientation devices at hand are all the different aspects of the performance: joke content, tone, attitude, facial expressions, confidence level, openness, et cetera. This initial work typically should address any personal trait that might distract the audience, for instance, the comic's racial or ethnic background (if different from that of most of the audience), height, weight, sexual orientation, unexpected speech patterns, et cetera. If a comic does not address traits that might stand out to the audience, they become the proverbial "elephant in the room."

Acknowledging such traits lets the audience know that they and the comic are seeing the same thing. They're on the same page, but they don't have to get stuck there. In his opening joke, Miller cleverly orients himself to the audience and pushes the edge at the same time. He orients himself precisely by making the strange (he's light and looks Pilipino) familiar (but he's really just Black like most everyone else in the room) through his self-deprecating bit about being chastised by a white guy for using the N-word when he himself is merely the shade of tapioca. With this joke he lets the audience know that he's aware of what they see—he's light skinned. By indexing himself as “a nigga,” he also lets them know that he sees himself as Black, light complexion notwithstanding, and that he's not Pilipino, which people often mistake him for. The joke also hits at the center of a common fraught discourse among Black folks that ranks light-skinned Blacks as potentially “less Black” and less committed to the race or the struggle than dark-skinned Blacks, while simultaneously questioning who has the right to say the N-word. Shane addresses the first issue by making his allegiance clear, and, in using the N-word, he asserts that he does have that right to say it, tapioca colored or not. Both issues can be contentious with Black audiences, especially when presented by someone as fair as Shane. But Shane pulls it off; he's committed to his act, and importantly, he also signals his Blackness through his attire and use of Black English. His material thus far is provocative, but does not push the edge of mainstream racialized discourses. I argue that the next part of his set does.

In referring to the Marine Corps recruiters as “pimps,” he asserts that the military controls and profits from soldiers' labor. This is not really a new or controversial insight. Where he pushes the edge, however, is when he specifically points out that the military deceptively solicits Blacks and Latinos by enticing them with “benefits” that are racially stereotyping. There's a gap between the upstanding public image of the US military and the deceptive racially

profiling tactics Shane describes. Through that discrepancy he pushes the edge. He pushes it further in implying that what you get to do if you join, that is, what the US Marine Corps does, is get away with murder and other illegal activities. That is a strong political statement that challenges mainstream justifications for US military interventions around the world. And in prefacing the bit by letting us know that he served for eight years, he also legitimizes his claim. He knows; he's been there.

Note that in offering this critique, Shane also reproduces dominant racial discourses. The bit reiterates racist prejudices against Black people as violent criminals, and of Latinos as skirting the law through everyday illegal activities, without challenging them. So, while Shane's tone and delivery make it clear that he disagrees with the military's exploitation of people of color based on racially stereotyping assumptions, he does not address the fact that those assumptions are highly problematic in and of themselves. He can, in other words, push that bit further. The reproduction of dominant racial discourses, however, is part of most racially edgy comedy I have watched. You often have to perform what you critique, on some level, in order to bring that critique across (show what's wrong so that you can point at it).

Shane's bit, then, engages the familiar and mainstream rhetoric of the US as a spreader of democracy and protector of "American freedoms" through military interventions, from the peripheral perspective of a racialized Black man. In doing so he turns a critical gaze on the tactics the military uses to recruit young people of color and on the racialization they are subjected to in that process. As a racially ambiguous-looking Black man who was seduced by the "recruiter-pimps" and has served his country extensively, he epitomizes both the mainstream and the margin in a number of ways that I have touched on throughout this chapter. The tension between his various positions as he presents them performatively on stage is a form of affect in

and of itself, and the way he pushes that tension both socially (in asserting his Blackness while recognizing his lightness and in revealing his feelings about his father) and politically (in his critique of the military) within a racial discourse constitutes the pushing of various edges.

Jokes that push the edge offer a critique of hegemonic systems; they challenge mainstream views. The critique can be conveyed through joke topic and content, but also performatively and affectively. Jokes that push the edge don't make the victimized or disempowered the butt of the joke. They may or may not be funny; it's of course better if they are, in terms of reception. The effect of jokes that push the edge on audiences in the show room is hard to assess other than that they laugh if they find them funny. People laugh for all kinds of reasons though. We laugh at the unexpected, but also at the familiar, and at ourselves. We laugh at the anomalous, and we laugh out of discomfort. As English and gender studies scholar Rachel Lee points out, performers can "forward a critique... but with no guarantee that audience members will consciously grasp [their] argument even as their convulsions have been registered in their guts" (2014:503). So, while I don't know precisely *why* audiences laugh (and neither may they always), *that* they laugh suggests that they "got" something. Laughter is evidence that *a* message if not *the* message was delivered and received. Television and social media are perhaps more revealing of the effect of working the racial edge in comedy on audiences more broadly. Clips of performances often land on YouTube and then travel onto Facebook, Twitter, and other sites as Internet memes. These clips are often presented as humorous educational pieces to those who don't know and as support for those who recognize the underlying truths. Through social media comedy that pushes the edge becomes part of broader racial discourses, furthered by "friends," "followers," and "re-tweeters," and gains a national pop-cultural stage for voicing stark racial realities.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the edge, conceptually and ethnographically, and the analytical tools I will use to analyze how comedians push it. I have discussed “pushing the edge” as a general creative strategy that stand-up comedians use in different ways and contexts, and I have noted that a comic’s ability to push the edge is a function of a number of (more or less) changing variables, including the comic’s race and gender. However, the features of the comic and the audience at a particular time in a particular space are not the only factors that impact the pushing of the edge. As I showed in chapter 1, the sociocultural context and environment in which comedians seek to do this work is also already an uneven playing field before the comic ever gets on a stage. As elsewhere in US society, racial and gendered circumscriptions are deeply embedded in the “normal” structure and social discourses of the comedy industry. With this in mind, in the next chapter I look at how comedians push the edges of hegemonic discourses on race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Chapter 3: Pushing the Edges of Race and Gender Discourses

Comedy that pushes the edges of race and gender discourses is smart, analytical, critical, and subversive. It is also often funny. Comedians push the edge through on-stage transgressive performative acts that strike a balance between stretching dominant ideological boundaries and maintaining a connection with the audience. Part of a comic's work, as I've discussed previously, is to "read" the audience at any particular show to determine how far and in what direction it can be pushed, to get a feel for "the energy in the room." Pushing the edge creates affective friction and tension. From a material perspective, friction transforms energy and can generate heat and fire. Pushing the edge also creates and takes advantage of gaps, gaps between the audience's comfort zones and where the comic is pushing them. Applying the idea of friction to a social and cultural arena, Anna Tsing conceptualizes friction as a form of interaction, "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" that produces culture (2005:4). Friction, as she frames it, is a creative process. Following Tsing, I think of friction as a form of creative energy that can be used to push the edge.

Tsing also speaks of gaps. In her work on the cultural processes that constitute "social-natural landscapes," she views gaps as both "conceptual spaces and real places" (Tsing 2005:175). She remarks that, "Wherever we want to trace the limits of hegemony, we need to look for gaps" (2005:202). Aptly, pushing the edge takes place at the limits of hegemony, and gaps of various kinds lead into that space. Kathleen Stewart sees gaps as "space[s] of friction, intensification, and proliferation," which well describes the affect of being at a show where comics push their jokes and the audience to the edge (1996: 130). In Butler's theory of performativity, these gaps are failed repetitions of identity expressions, and, as noted in the previous chapter, open up a space for change and contestation (1999:179). Comedians routinely

take advantage of that space between what the audience sees or thinks it knows and the unexpected interpretation the comic provides. The incongruity between what audiences expect and what comics deliver is both a site for funny and for critique. This reminds us of Philip Deloria's distinction between the unexpected and the anomalous, where the anomalous "reinforces expectations," and the unexpected "resists categorization and, thereby, questions expectation itself" (2004:11). In comedy, an example of the anomalous at play is a situation where the audience laughs *at* rather than *with* the comic. Laughing *at* affirms the rightness of the spectator's position without challenging it, whereas laughing *with* leaves room for questioning. For professional comics, the anomalous, in Deloria's sense, is a dangerous (and rare) territory, but, with good performance skills and a sharp tongue, they can potentially turn it into the unexpected.⁶⁵ I saw comedian Selene Luna do just that when she featured for Margaret Cho. As soon as Luna, who is a "little person" in her early 40s, went on stage, she said that people always look at her, which she understands, but some people just won't stop. "To those that stare too much, I quietly and calmly go up and whisper, 'No one else can see me. I'm sent here to protect you.'" The audience busted out laughing. Most of the audience members could easily have thought of Luna as anomalous because of her dwarfism, but her skills as a comedian immediately tackled any such leanings. After addressing the "elephant-in-the-room" with great success, Luna's dwarfism did not stand between her and the audience. She made herself relatable and

⁶⁵ It's rare because if audiences repeatedly laugh at you rather than with you, you are not likely to want to go on stage very often. Aspiring comics who get laughed at either improve their skills or quit. This discussion brings to mind when comedian Dave Chappelle walked away from his immensely successful TV show, *Chappelle's Show*, in 2004. The show parodied race issues (among other topics) in ways that at times offered critique, but could also come across as making fun of people of color. Rumor has it that during the taping of an episode, Chappelle heard a white cast member laugh in way that felt like being laughed *at* to him. Chappelle subsequently walked away from a multi-million dollar contract with Comedy Central, although clearly not for lack of performance skills. He has more than most of that.

turned what might have been an instance of the anomalous into something unexpected and funny.

Performing Slavery as Anti-racist Critique

A fair number of comics invoke slavery in their jokes in ways where they imagine themselves being present. During my fieldwork, I took notes on 29 different joke references to slavery made by 25 different comedians. Out of the 25, seven directly collaborated with this project. I don't claim to have written down every single slavery reference I heard, so there may well have been more at the shows I attended. Either way, slavery references were prevalent enough for me to pay attention to them as a particular phenomenon. My curiosity certainly also peaked when I noticed that the energy in the room felt particularly charged whenever comics brought up slavery. The room was not always charged with discomfort (although at times that too), but with an attentive sort of awareness (as in, where is this going?).

In contemporizing slavery, comics implicitly suggest that the institution of slavery, with its horrific connotations, serves as a conceptual framework for understanding and coping with racialized life in the present. The framing works because, although slavery has not been legal for close to one hundred and fifty years, the cultural, political, and economic power relationships on which slavery was based persist. The assertion that racism-white supremacy still operates is a provocative position to take. The majority of whites think that racism is no longer a problem (Fletcher 2014), and some even feel that the tables have turned and "reverse racism" against whites is now the predominant form of racial oppression (Norton and Summers 2011:215). It is also a provocative statement for some Black people who think of slavery as a shameful past they'd rather forget and of vivid reenactments by performers as degrading and offensive. That

slavery's legacy as a social system persists, albeit in different forms, is, however, not a new idea, as artists, scholars, and Black folks in general have argued this since the abolition of institutionalized slavery (Alexander 2011[2010]; Blackmon 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2010:81-82; Collins 2004:32; Du Bois 1962:30; Morrison 1993).

Leslie Jones

Comedian Leslie Jones is like a tornado on stage—captivating and intimidating. A six-foot Black woman with a sturdy physique and short spiky black hair, she has a very physical and in-your-face performance style. She paces the stage of the Laugh Factory menacingly for a while, and looks like she might grab an unsuspecting audience member by the collar and drag him or her up on stage alongside her at any given moment. Jones has her audience expectant and attentive. She opens her set by announcing that she is single. “That’s surprising,” she then reflects with an undeniably Black inflection, “cause during slavery, I would have been the head slave! Look at my teeth!” Jones grins widely while turning her head to show the audience her rows of pearly whites from every angle, as she walks demonstratively along the entire stage to make sure everyone can see. “I’d be popping out super babies every nine months! Kobe! Shaq! LeBron! Sinbad!” She gestures with swift one-hand outward motions from her crotch, as if hand-delivering one super baby after another. “I’d be first draft pick and I’d get to pick my own plantation!” Jones’s joke is harsh and explicit, just like her overall style on stage. She is in control of the energy of the room. The audience is enthralled and laughing.

Jones’s unapologetic in-your-face attitude and physicality on stage are provocative before she even opens her mouth. She does not present herself as racially palatable and does not seek to placate any audience discomfort that may result; rather, she seems to revel in it. She pushes the

edge right from the start by bringing slavery into the present. Her own present informs the story of the past she is telling that then in turn reflects back on her present. In moving back and forth, Jones affectively brings slavery's past closer in time (into the present) and in space (into the room). This increases the audience's potential discomfort by lessening (although not eliminating) the gap that gives them space to deflect the implications of what she's saying. Jones's seamless meandering between time periods also shows the contemporary relevance of slavery in a textual manner. She speaks to her audience simultaneously as a slave woman and as a Black woman in the 21st century. In using the word "slave" as a self-descriptor, she also defies the expectation that Black people would want to avoid making such a connotation. Her choice of words can be uncomfortable to both Black and white audiences; neither group typically likes to be reminded of the gruesome history of US slavery (especially not in each other's presence). And while she speaks the words, she simultaneously embodies them by grinningly showcasing her teeth. She's selling the idea of herself as a slave by offering physical evidence in a performative way. Her affective impact is forceful and affronting.

Referring to herself as a "first draft pick" further blurs the boundaries between past and present. Had Jones been sold at an auction during slavery, the transaction would have been a sale, not a draft. In using the term "draft," Jones conflates present-day athletic team drafts of primarily Black athletes, "sold" for their physical performance capabilities (to typically white-owned teams), with the slave auctions of the past that carried the same structural features. A primary difference, of course, is that today's "sales" of athletes are voluntary and to significant financial gain for the "sold" athlete, whereas the sale of slaves during slavery was neither.⁶⁶ Jones's

⁶⁶ Considering both the relatively limited actual opportunities for higher education and professional trades for Black people in the US compared to whites, and the conditioning of US society to think of Black men's professional options primarily limited to careers as athletes or rappers, one could argue that the

suggestion that she would get to pick her own plantation continues the conflation of the institution of slavery with today's sports organizations by equating the plantations of the past with the sports teams of the present.⁶⁷ Additionally, Jones speaks in Black English (or African American Vernacular English); she doesn't code switch for the benefit of the majority non-Black audience members. Not acquiescing to the broader social pressures to conform linguistically also pushes the edge, here on the behavioral expectations of Black people in white public spaces.

In addition to pushing on people's discomfort with slavery overall, and especially with a Black person talking about it openly, Jones challenges mainstream notions of femininity in general and of Black femininity in particular. Jones is not feminine by a white Western aesthetic, nor is she feminine by an aesthetic that exotifies dark-skinned women. Her appearance challenges such hegemonic images of womanhood. Her behavior also "fails" to reproduce any acceptable versions of "authentic" femininity. What's more, she's not trying to. Rather, she questions why she's single in her current state, as she is. Jones's performative expression of Black womanhood, then, tacitly exposes deeply embedded assumptions of beauty that hold white features as superior and feminine, and that exclude a Black female aesthetic that does not emulate white ideals. Against these standards, Jones comes across as a coarse, loud, and angry Black woman, a trope the audience is likely to recognize, and that also could make some patrons uncomfortable. But the live audience in the show room accepts Jones's presentation of herself as a sincere subject even though she deviates from the image of authentic femininity, and even though her performance is over-the-top in many ways. From the get-go, they are laughing out

term "voluntary" might not be the best descriptor of the draft enterprise, financial benefits notwithstanding.

⁶⁷ It is also a topical reference to basketball player LeBron James's announcement in 2010 that he was leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers for the Miami Heat. He made the announcement with publicity and fanfare in an ESPN Special for he which he received much criticism.

loudly at every part of her joke. There is no silence, no scattered chuckles. There is also no sense of hesitation or resistance from the audience. Jones would have had to address these had there been any or her set could not have killed the way it did.

Jones then includes present-day celebrity athletes (and one large-bodied veteran comedian, Sinbad) in her slavery scenario. “I’d be popping out super babies every nine months! Kobe, Shaq, LeBron, Sinbad! I’d be first draft pick, and I’d get to pick my own plantation!” Jones positions the athletes and comic at her own level, as Black people who would also have been likely candidates for breeding during slavery due to their physical strength and health. Here, Jones forces the audience to imagine her involved in one of the several violent and dehumanizing aspects of slavery, the involuntary copulation of slaves for breeding purposes. And she makes it sound like a good thing. In talking about an obviously horrible condition and time period for Black people as if it held something to wish for, Jones heightens the perversity and insanity of the actual historical events she’s referring to. Although we, as the audience, know that Jones does not really wish for slavery back, the fact that she makes it sound that way tacitly puts the conditions for Black people in the present into question. If slavery could have been better than the present moment, what does that say about now? Jones also brings our attention to the value of Black female bodies as reproductive commodities in the political economy of slavery, and to her present-day reality of not feeling valued as a Black woman who does not conform to mainstream standards of beauty. In doing so, she also points to the value of Black *male* bodies in the political economy of both slavery and today’s billion-dollar sports industry.

By placing herself on equal terms with male Black athletes, Jones again makes a commentary on femininity, specifically Black femininity. The connection is subtler, but in likening herself to athletes who are first draft picks in sports, she tacitly masculinizes herself; the

comparison does not have the effect of feminizing the male athletes. Implicit is a critique of a white imaginary that often does not see Black women as feminine, or even as women. This image has a long history dating back to slavery when the distinction between the sexes in terms of workload and abuse was negligible or non-existent. In a sense, Jones echoes Sojourner Truth in a modern-day context, “And ain’t I a woman?” Where Sojourner Truth questioned why the discourse on women’s rights excluded Black women (free and enslaved) like her, Leslie Jones questions the exclusion of Black women who look like her from contemporary discourses of beauty and femininity. The framework of slavery allows her to contextualize her personal experiences as a Black woman in a manner that is funny, brash, and that holds an affective undercurrent of sadness and pain. While never overtly stated, the painful core of the joke conveys sincerity. We feel her; we believe her, and we laugh.

So, while at the onset Leslie Jones’s joke appears to be about her civil status as a single woman, the deeper premise questions the raced and gendered standards of beauty and femininity she and other Black women are judged against, and the devaluation they suffer when they don’t meet them. Her performance questions why her “failure to repeat” (in Butler’s terms) a recognizable and approved-of femininity must mean she is single. In listing her assets as a would-be slave, she perversely makes the point that she has value beyond mainstream ideals. The perversion, of course, is that the value she gives herself is still objectified and subjugated; in slavery she would have been a breeder, and arguably not by consent. Indeed, she takes objectification to the extreme by valuing herself as a sexual commodity. In so doing, Jones continues to push the edge by showing that the world she lives in, whether during slavery or today, has an economic and political stake in protecting whiteness, and specifically in this case, white femininity, as an asset or form of property. Speaking of whiteness and property, Cheryl

Harris notes that the two “share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of a right to exclude,” and I’d add to authorize and objectify (1993:1714). While Harris discusses this exclusion in a legal context, Jones’s bit illustrates its social and cultural corollaries with regards to women of color, and Black women in particular. Her performativity as woman negates the ideal of white femininity as she forces the audience to face her exclusion and devaluation in its shadow. She holds the audience in that space for the duration of the joke. Jones’s performance skills and her attunement to the energy in the room allows her to take the audience to that affective realm—the edge—where she can challenge the devaluation of her Blackness by pushing various edges that comprise the white supremacist tenet of Black inferiority. In pointing out how the dynamics of slavery—white supremacy— still structures how Black women are valued, Jones also challenges any post-racial illusions. While post-racial claims sound ludicrous and unfounded to many of us, a significant number of whites see the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 as a “culmination of a long march of racial progress” (Fletcher 2014), the definitive end of America’s race problem. Jones’s bit forcefully argues it isn’t so. We can’t implicitly hold white as superior in taste, belief, and action, and also call ourselves post-racial.

Subsequent to the conclusion of my fieldwork, Leslie Jones has become a writer and, recently, a cast member on the weekly television comedy show *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*. Her hiring as a writer followed a public national outcry over the lack of Black women on *SNL*’s cast after the show hired six white male cast members, and no performers of color, for its new season. At the same time as Jones, *SNL* also hired another Black female writer (LaKendra Tokes), as well as the first Black female cast member in seven years (Sasheer Zamata). While a writer on the show, Jones performed a version of the slavery bit I analyze in this section on the regular

feature “Weekend Update” in her first on-camera appearance.⁶⁸ Although she sits at a desk for the *SNL* skit rather than pace a stage, the core of her bit does not differ significantly from the live version in either content or delivery style. There *are* some important differences, though, between Jones’s live stand-up performances and her *SNL* skit. First, *SNL* skits are scripted and the actors ostensibly perform the script for the most part. Although the show is taped in front of a live studio audience, the performer cannot alter the skit depending on his or her reading of the energy in the room. Secondly, even if that were possible, the performer cannot take the much larger television audience into account from an affective point of view. The immediate feedback and sensing of energy that is available in a show room is absent. With the delay in response, performers lose the opportunity to turn the show around if a bit falls flat.

When Jones’s bit aired on television it was well received by the live audience, but immediately caused outrage in the press and on social media. *Ebony Magazine*’s Senior Editor Jamilah Lemieux (2014) called Jones’s skit “grossly offensive,” and said Jones performed “like she was auditioning for *Birth of a Nation 2: We’s Really Like Dis*.” Both the delivery style and the subject matter offended Lemieux, and she argued that the joke made fun of slave rape.⁶⁹ Arit John (2014), at the online news site *The Wire*, noted that, “Even if you *get* the commentary on beauty and slavery, it feels like the skit panders to a white audience at the expense of black people.” Rebecca Carroll (2014), at online magazine *xoJane*, said that the skit “felt not so much like pushing the boundaries of political correctness as pandering to Lorne Michaels [creator and

⁶⁸ Link to Jones’s *SNL* performance: <http://www.hulu.com/watch/631153>

⁶⁹ For the *SNL* skit Jones segued into the slavery bit by first referencing the selection of Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong’o as *People Magazine*’s “Most Beautiful” woman of 2014 (Jordan and Coulton 2014). After congratulating Nyong’o on the award, Jones suggested the need for a “Most Useful” list, one where she herself could excel. Some, including *Ebony*’s Lemieux, felt that this slighted Nyong’o’s “moment” (Lemieux 2014).

producer of *SNL*] and the white *SNL* cast and audience.”⁷⁰

Jones spoke up in her own defense on Twitter. A compilation of her tweeted responses reads as follows:

If anybody should be offended is white folks cause it's what they did... Y'all so busy trying to be self-righteous you miss what the joke really is. Very sad I have to defend myself to black people. Now I'm betting if Chris Rock or Dave [Chappelle] did that joke or Jay Z or Kanye put in a rap they would be called brilliant. Cause they all do this type of material. Just cause it came from a strong black woman who ain't afraid to be real y'all mad. So here is my announcement black folks, you won't stop me and I'm gonna go even harder and deeper now. Cause it's a shame that we kill each other instead of support each other. This exactly why black people are where we are now cause we too f[ucking] sensitive and instead of making lemonade out of lemons we just suck the sour juice from the lemons. Wake up.” [McDonald 2014]

Later she added, “Where is the rape idiots? I said nothing about rape you f[ucking] morons. I was talking about being matched to another strong brother” (McDonald 2014). And lastly she tweeted, “Not being raped by white man. What part of this joke wasn't true? I would have been used for breeding straight up. And that's my reality” (McDonald 2014).

Jones's critics accuse her of reproducing racist discourses, of making fun of slavery and rape, and of pandering to whites. I agree that Jones's performative identity on stage and in the skit on *SNL* reproduce a problematic discourse of Black women as loud and uncouth. Contrary to her detractors, however, I don't interpret Jones as mocking that stereotypical image of a Black woman as much as arguing for her rights to inclusion by pointing to her longstanding and continued exclusion. Jones enacts and embodies an excluded image of Black womanhood. In stand-up comedy, critiquing and subverting racial discourses often means reproducing them to some extent. Crucial in those cases is to not end the joke with the racist part, but to push the joke

⁷⁰ Carroll's choice of words, “pushing the boundaries,” is obviously reminiscent of “pushing the edge,” although she engages it purely as a metaphor. I'm striving to show the affective and performative reality of the symbolic wording. Also, she sees “political correctness” as that which is being pushed, which I disagree with. I don't see that as Jones's objective or as the result of her joke, both of which I address in my discussion of the backlash against her.

further by adding a layer of critique. Sans critique, the joke is just plain racist (as was the case with the white comic's Asian hooker joke in chapter 1). However, *with* a critique, the joke can instead become subversive and, in effect, do anti-racist work. Anthropologist and dramaturge Dorinne Kondo observes that, "... 'subversion' itself implies that transcendent 'liberation' from power relations is illusory, for some degree of complicity with the dominant is inevitable" (1997:13). She adds, "For example, we are inevitably enmeshed in consumer capitalism, but this should not prevent us from pushing ourselves to create more vigorous and contestatory representations on-stage or to work on multiple fronts to transform hegemonic structures" (Kondo 1997:14). With regards to Jones's performance, she is complicit with the dominant to the extent that she reproduces a racialized discourse of Black womanhood, yet her representation also contests the idea that only racially palatable depictions should be performed, especially since she clearly does not see herself as fitting that image.

The relevant question here, then, is not, "Does Jones reproduce racist discourses about Black people?" Yes, she does, but that's not all she does. The more pertinent questions, and ones that the aforementioned critics seem to miss, are "what work does the joke do?" and "who is the butt of the joke?" It's not Lupita Nyong'o. It's not Black people in general. It's not the horrors of slavery. And it's not rape. It's not even Jones, in spite of the fact that she makes her own body the vessel for the joke. Rather, the punch line hits at white people, as Jones points out, and at the beauty standards that exclude women who look like her from mainstream social validation and appreciation.

Far from pandering to whites, then, Jones wields a harsh critique of white racism and its legacy. White folks are the ones who should be offended, she says, not her fellow Black people. Just because the joke is *set* in slavery does not mean the joke *makes fun* of slavery. This may

seem obvious, but it is a distinction that critics of comedians rarely seem to make. Similarly, the fact that slaves were forced to breed (which I agree qualifies as rape), does not suggest that Jones's observation that her greatest value would have been as a breeder makes fun of rape. Rather, and as her last tweet states, her joke is based on her truth. Her value (during slavery) would indeed most likely have been as a breeder of slaves, not as a "most beautiful" woman à la Lupita Nyong'o. That, she concludes, is her reality today. Off-stage and off-camera the gradual conflation of the past and present that weaves through her joke ends in the merging of the two. For Jones, at that particular moment, the past becomes the present.

The last critic I mention suggests that Jones doesn't "pus[h] the boundaries of political correctness" (Carroll 2014). Here, too, the criticism misses the point. Jones is not interested in pushing the boundaries of political correctness. She's making a forceful, yet nuanced, statement against white supremacy by challenging white mainstream beauty standards, racially exclusionary class and gender politics, Black bourgeois complicity, and any self-deceptive notions that we live at a postracial moment. One of the Huffington Post's readers got the message: "It's less of a joke than a social commentary. The slavery part makes it edgy enough that people talk about it" (quoted in Dickerson 2014). Because Jones performed her joke on *SNL*, she reached a much wider audience than she typically would at a club. As a result, and thanks to the skit's afterlife on the Internet, we can actually see in what ways people were pushed out of their comfort zone. Some viewers could accept Jones's pushing of various edges as productive and provocative. But many vocal others, especially in the Black community, thought she went too far. Even in a show room, not everyone in the audience may be on board with the edge-pushing work the comic does. However, as long as the vast majority present can go along with it, the set will typically work. In a broadcast context, the comic has zero control over the reception.

Not everyone found Jones's skit objectionable. *Essence* magazine reported that actors Whoopi Goldberg and Sherri Shepherd, on the television show *The View*, spoke up on behalf of Jones and argued that, "if you knew her standup routine, you'd know this wasn't new territory and Jones is known for pushing the envelope" (quoted in Sangweni 2014).⁷¹ Sherri Shepherd gave Jones her kudos, and Whoopi Goldberg said she found the joke funny (Sangweni 2014). Public comments submitted to "Black Voices" at The Huffington Post also revealed some more positive responses. "It's funny because there's a grain of truth to it," said one woman (quoted in Dickerson 2014). "Wasn't it really about the concept and context of beauty? The idea that strength (or competence or intellect...) isn't a valued attribute for women in our society..." offered another female commenter (quoted in Dickerson 2014). Another woman asked, "Would we have called Chris Rock or Dave Chappelle a coon or a sell out? Would we have judged them harshly or would we be celebrating their frankness and candor. Think about that before you talk about her! She was just as frank and funny as Garrett Morris or Eddie Murphy" (quoted in Dickerson 2014).

Both Jones and some of the commenters who come to her defense point out the sexism in the backlash against her. Jones, like the commenter above, bets that if famous Black male comics like Chris Rock or Dave Chappelle (or rappers Jay-Z or Kanye West) had performed her material, they would have been called brilliant. She wins that bet. In 2004, Chris Rock did a slavery joke where he talked about forced breeding and pointed to present-day Black athletes as the result of that eugenics project. Here is an excerpt of his bit:

During slavery, they used to take the biggest, strongest slaves and breed them, and try their best to make big strong super slaves. Okay? That's right. That's right. And there's evidence of that today, like the NFL, for instance. NFL stands for 'N[igger] F[ucking]

⁷¹ Here, too, the idea of pushing edges is implied in the wording of "pushing the envelope," as in that which envelops something.

Large.’ They bred the slaves — and this is why black people dominate every physical activity in the United States of America, okay. We’re only 10 percent of the population. We’re 90 percent of the Final Four, okay? We f[ucking] dominate ... basketball, baseball, football, boxing, track, even golf and tennis. And as soon as they make a heated hockey rink, we gon’ take that s[hit], too. [transcribed from a link in McDonald 2014]

For parts of the performance, Rock also enacts the role of a slave by assuming a slouched posture, a blank deferent facial expression, and an uneducated “Black slave” speech pattern.

There are several topical and performative parallels between Jones’s and Rock’s bits. Both are set in slavery. Both mention the breeding of slaves as something perversely positive when viewed outside the actual slavery context, in Jones’s case because she’d be valued and have a sex life, in Rock’s case because as a result of forced breeding for slaves, Black people dominate every major sport in the US. Both performatively and affectively reproduce Black stereotypes through body language and speech pattern. The only substantial differences are (1) that Jones is a woman and Rock is a man, and (2) that the underlying argument in Jones’s joke highlights the devaluation of Black women who don’t fit false standards of white superiority, whereas Rock explains Black dominance in sports. This part of Rock’s joke neither explicitly nor implicitly critiques white supremacy, whereas Jones’s unequivocally does. *Washington Post* columnist Soraya Nadia McDonald (2014) remarks that “Rock’s commentary... was well received and critically praised — Washington Post critic Tom Shales called it ‘thinking man’s raunch’ and a ‘furious tour de force.’”

McDonald also suggests that the difference in reception can be attributed to framing, but her perception and interpretation of that frame differs from mine. Says McDonald,

Rock’s monologue was served with a heaping mound of condemnation for slavery; he put his jokes in a larger context, arguing the merits of affirmative action. Jones’s bit, however, seemed to diminish the importance of a dark-skinned black woman such as Nyong’o being named “most beautiful” — Nyong’o has spoken publicly about her struggle to see herself as beautiful because of her dark skin — while also depicting forced breeding as consensual or enjoyable. [2014]

The criticism misses Jones's implicit critique of the contemporary effects of white supremacy, and the politics of exclusion still at play in spite of Nyong'o's well-deserved award. And while it emphasizes Rock's adamant denunciation of slavery, it ignores Jones's assertion in the *SNL* skit that she does not wish she were a slave. "Hell," she says, "I don't like working for you white people *now*, and y'all *pay* me!" Jones's wager, then, has already borne out—when a Black male comic performed a joke with similar features, it was indeed deemed brilliant. The case illustrates how the male domination in stand-up extends beyond the show room, and how patriarchy is maintained and reinforced by women as much as men. It also shows a constraint on women of color that cannot typically be observed in the show room, namely the time and emotional energy they have to expend to ward off (in print or in spirit) attempts to keep them in line with the hegemonic structures of patriarchy and white supremacy. This is precisely one of those instances where paying attention to affect and performativity can make the subtlety of hegemonic violence visible.

In the end, Jones does not give in to the backlash. She asserts herself as "a strong black woman who ain't afraid to be real," and makes it clear that "you won't stop me... I'm gonna go even harder and deeper now." She draws on her strength as a Black woman to carry her when her own people turn against her. Here, she deploys the trope of the strong Black woman as a source of resilience to see her through an upsetting situation, but this trope has also been used in other contexts as a criticism that derides Black femininity—the subtext of her joke. I think Leslie Jones was incredibly gutsy in her *SNL* skit. She did what I think stand-up comedians do at their best; she performed a social critique that pushed edges (here, of racism-white supremacy and sexism), *and* she was funny.

W. Kamau Bell

W. Kamau Bell is a Black male comedian who lives in Oakland, CA, and the former executive producer, creator, and host of *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*. *Totally Biased* was a stand-up comedy television series that ran for two seasons in 2012 and 2013 that offered a race and gender critical social commentary on current news events. Bell is the source of inspiration for this research project. I first saw him perform his one-man show, “The W. Kamau Bell Curve: Ending Racism in About an Hour,” in a theatre shack in San Francisco in 2007. Since then, I’ve seen him perform live on numerous occasions, including at a stand-up comedy show titled “The Postracial Show” at the Hollywood Improv’s former Lab venue a few years later.⁷² The show at the Lab crystalized stand-up comedy as the lens through which I wanted to investigate contestations of racism in American pop culture. As my project has advanced, so has Bell’s career; he has most recently linked up with CNN to host a documentary series titled “United Shades of America,” set to launch in 2016, and which will “loo[k] at different cultures in the United States with provocative humor” (Steinberg 2015).

Once I officially started my fieldwork, I headed up to Oakland to interview Bell and watch him perform again. While headlining the San Francisco Punchline (a comedy club) in front of a predominantly white audience, Bell opens his set by noting that California is considered one of the five most liberal states in America. “People who say that,” he remarks, “must not know that 45 minutes outside of every major city, it’s Texas!” The audience laughs knowingly. We all recognize that his statement has some truth to it; rural California is predominantly conservative. Bell then questions if California really is so liberal, pointing to

⁷² During my fieldwork, the Hollywood Improv had a small venue called the Improv Lab next to its main show room that was allocated to more experimental shows. It has since been turned into a bar/lounge/restaurant as part of a remodeling.

California's failure to legalize marijuana in the 2010 mid-term election and to legalize same-sex marriage in 2008.⁷³ "I'm glad we didn't vote on slavery...!" he says, and the audience laughs expectantly, but with a tinge of apprehension (where is he going with this?). "If there was a vote, do you think they'd get rid of slavery?" he asks rhetorically. In response, he impersonates the voice of a white man and fake-laughs incredulously:

Hahaha! We know slavery is wrong, but we couldn't live without Toby! I mean, who would take little Johnny to school? He's like a member of the family; he just sleeps on the outside. And the dog loves him! [Bell pauses, as if someone is asking him if the dog sleeps on the outside with Toby] Oh no! The dog sleeps on the inside; he's usually scared of Black people. And we beat him. Not the dog! Toby. It's wrong to beat dogs!

Bell's joke hits hard. The audience laughs, but it's clear that Bell knows that this material is not as easy for people to digest as some of his other jokes. He comments on it and says that we hadn't been all that responsive to his talk about his new baby (he'd recently become a father for the first time), so instead, we were going to talk about slavery. Bell is known for focusing on race in his work, so this does not come as a surprise to those of us in the audience who know what he's about. Nonetheless, he makes it clear that he's going for a "heavier" set than he'd originally thought to do.

Bell sets up his bit with a generalized and commonly accepted statement about California politics—California is one of the most liberal states in the country. His next comment complicates that assertion by pointing out that outside of major cities, California is predominantly conservative. This challenges the state's image as a monolithic bastion of liberalism. Since he's making this statement in San Francisco, one of those major cities he refers to that's surrounded by "Texas" (and arguably one of the most liberal cities in liberal California, if not the world), his words also do the work of aligning him with his audience. He's not talking

⁷³ On June 26, 2013, the US Supreme Court declared California's Proposition 8 (that banned same-sex marriage) unconstitutional in *Hollingsworth et al. v. Perry et al.* (US Supreme Court).

about us; he's talking about those other Californians, "the Texans." As a presumably mostly city-dwelling Californian audience, we can relate to him right away, since most of us have experienced the very conditions he's pointing to when we have traveled outside the state's major urban areas.

Having created a distance between the audience in the show room (the liberal city-dwellers) and the people he's now going to talk about (the "Texans" who live forty-five minutes away), he brings up two contemporary hot-button topics in state (and national) politics, the legalization of marijuana and of same-sex marriage. Bell points out that the failure of both issues to get a majority of votes as ballot initiatives suggests that maybe California isn't so liberal after all. The gap he's created by first distancing "us" from "them" has now given him room to question our collective commitment to the liberal principles we supposedly endorse. The unspoken understanding is that the failure of that commitment is because of "them," not "us," or is it? In leaving it unsaid, the audience is free to assume as it wishes, but it also leaves room for Bell to return with a critique that could be directed at the audience. The "us versus them" dynamic is key here in setting up his ability to push the edge. The gap places all of us in the room, along with Bell, on the "good" side. It also simultaneously gives him room to critique and the audience room to stay with him, as opposed to resisting and shutting down as a result of being challenged or called out directly with nowhere to go.

Having thus implied our shared position in relation to the material, Bell can get to his main question: Would California vote against slavery if it were up for election? Anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown's work on the importance of space and place in the construction of racial narratives in Liverpool, England, shows how "narrating slavery through 'place' is key to antiracist practice" and allows for an us-versus-them type of discourse (2000:342). We have a

corollary discourse in the US (Brown notes this too), and Bell counts on his audience to make this distinction between them and us. Americans “know” that Texas is conservative and racist. Places “like Texas” are therefore also likely to be conservative and racist (hence, the comment “it’s like Texas!” in referring to non-urban sites in California). And, of course, on the other side of it, we, in San Francisco, are urban, that is, not in “Texas,” and we are very liberal, so we are safe from being accused of being racists.⁷⁴ In my interview with Bell, he says that he enjoys talking about slavery on stage, “We sort of pretend that was a million years ago, and so screw you for pretending it was a million years ago. So, for me it just goes all these different places, and sometimes people laugh and sometimes they’re like ‘ohhhh’” (interview, 7/19/11). In presenting slavery and race, “the third rail of American culture” (Koehler 2014), as the main premise for the rest of the joke, Bell takes full advantage of the initial gap he created and uses it to push the edges of white liberalism. The mere mention of slavery in front of a mostly white audience is provocative. Many white Americans don’t like to be reminded of slavery for numerous reasons (white guilt, claims that it was in the past and is no longer relevant so black folks should just get over it, disavowal of responsibility because they were not alive at that time, etc.). As Leslie Jones showed, many Black Americans don’t like to be reminded of it either, but for different reasons. Just mentioning slavery, then, starts to push the edge. It’s as if the word itself has an affective power that makes people slightly uncomfortable, even if the edges the word pushes differ between people.

In this joke, Bell assumes the voice of the slave master, in contrast to Jones who spoke from the perspective of had-she-been-a-slave in her bit. I see Bell’s impersonating monologue as

⁷⁴ In my observation, white folks accused of being racist when they say something racist often act hugely offended at being called by that term (as if it in itself were a racial slur), and vehemently deny that what they said was racist (evidenced by their professed non-racist intention).

an allegory, where the slave master represents (white) America, the slave represents Black people, and slavery stands for its own legacy in contemporary forms of racism. Slavery (or racism) is bad, of course, and that acknowledgement is the first thing out of the slave master's mouth: "[It] is wrong." Few Americans would claim otherwise, aside from overt racists. But, laments the slave owner, we (white folks) can't (or don't want to) live without the "benefits" of slavery—an unpaid workforce (that in this instance provides child care). There is a gap between recognizing that slavery is wrong and the willingness to recognize and give up its perks. The benefits of whiteness are still inscribed in legal doctrine and are reaffirmed in both new and longstanding iterations, whether in the curtailing of Affirmative Action policies, the legal sanction of police violence against Black people, or the disproportionate incarceration of Black and Brown men. Mainstream white America (both conservative and liberal) has a high economic and political investment in white privilege and in denying its existence. As Andrea Smith notes, "the logic that "renders Black people... inherently slaveable" is "the anchor of capitalism" (2006:67). She explains,

To keep this capitalist system in place—which ultimately commodifies most people—the logic of slavery applies a racial hierarchy to this system. This racial hierarchy tells people that as long as you are not Black, you have the opportunity to escape the commodification of capitalism. This helps people who are not Black to accept their lot in life, because they can feel at least they are not at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy—at least they are not property; at least they are not slaveable. [2006:67]

Similarly, Cheryl Harris asserts that,

Because real power and wealth never have been accessible to more than a narrowly defined ruling elite, for many whites the benefits of whiteness as property, in the absence of legislated privilege, may have been reduced to a claim of relative privilege only in comparison to people of color. Nevertheless, whiteness retains its value as a "consolation prize": it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy—the position to which Blacks have been consigned. [1993:1758-1759]

And while we are all "family"—we're all Americans—the slave is excluded, segregated, outside

of the main house, that is, the site of resources and power. As Bell shows, slavery served white America's economic and political interests, as does its contemporary legacy of racism-white supremacy.

The distance that comes with exclusion from the house renders the slave less relatable, less human (and therefore inferior), than the beings that live close to the slave-owner. The slave owner cares more for his dog than for his slave; the dog gets to sleep indoors and does not get beaten. Violence against animals is unacceptable to the slave owner (as it is to many white liberals), but it's okay to beat the slave who is worth less than the dog.⁷⁵ Here Bell provides an unstated critique of the discrepancy between white people's vocal outrage over animal cruelty and frequent silence over ongoing debilitating racial inequality and racist violence.⁷⁶

Bell cleverly pushes the edges of white privilege and white liberalism from the "inside," by assuming the role of the slave owner. In assuming the role of the slave master, he brings both the character subject of his critique into the room and all the white liberal Californians whom he gets to represent, rather than point fingers as the excluded Black person. This tactic disables an otherwise moving target, the invisible undefined slave master, and makes him visible and accountable. At the same time, Bell *is* the image of that excluded Black person. The affective tension between Bell's performative expression as a 6'5 Black man with an untamed afro that the audience sees on stage, and the representation of the white slave master that he performs as a

⁷⁵ I'm singling out white liberals in this discussion because I see Bell's joke as targeting white smug liberalism, but in doing so I don't mean to imply that other groups in the US population don't share the same positions. So, for instance, there are obviously white conservatives and people of color who also vocally decry animal cruelty.

⁷⁶ This show took place before the deadly police violence against Black people, and the complicity of the US legal system in not indicting the killers, prompted a national state of crisis in 2014 after the slaying of two unarmed Black men (Michael Brown in Ferguson, MI, and Eric Garner in NYC). These events, and the militarized and heavy-handed response to protests by the police, shocked many white liberals into realizing the dire state of affairs for Black people in America.

character, is creative. It's creative in that it allows Bell to deliver a hard-hitting critique that implicates most of the audience in a way that they appear to accept on some level. This is evidenced by the quality and consistency of their laughter, by the fact that the energy in the room stays high, and that the audience does not shut down. The critique in Bell's performance is radical, even to a white liberal audience, or perhaps especially to a white liberal audience that may carry a strong investment in the political correctness of an anti-racist rhetoric of equality and freedom, yet may comfortably enjoy the unacknowledged and unquestioned benefits of white privilege.

Leslie Jones and W. Kamau Bell demonstrate what pushing the edges of the slavery logic of white supremacy can look like. Within this frame, they critique hegemonic notions of beauty and femininity, foreground the relevance of slavery in the contemporary US, and highlight conflicting political and economic interests in discourses of race, class, and gender, as well as complicity across racial, ethnic, and gendered lines that ultimately help keep ideologies of white supremacy and patriarchy in place. Other comics also address slavery in a variety of ways. Aida Rodriguez has a bit about how some Black women have a problem with her light-skinned complexion. "They say things like, 'If we were in slavery, you'd be in the house.' ... [Rodriguez counters,] If we were in slavery, we'd be in slavery... What the fuck does the location matter??!" And she adds, "I'm Puerto Rican [pause], and all it means is the boat stopped early." Comedian Ian Edwards tells a joke about his Jamaican great-great-grand father who was a slave. "He worked really hard to buy his freedom and then he sold himself back into slavery for a profit. He was the first Negro to refinance himself... he did it nine times until he owned the plantation." While doing crowd work, DC Ervin asks one woman in the audience where she is from, "Tennessee," she responds. "Oh, Tennessee! I was just there," he says, "Nashville, Memphis.

There's a lot of trees..." (people laugh) "There's a lot of history in those trees..." (audience members nod and laugh knowingly). He then tells the story of Emmett Till's murder in Mississippi. Some white comics talk about slavery and other historical aspects of Black oppression too. Louis CK has a famous bit about white privilege where he points out how great it is to be white,

I can get in a time machine and go to any time and it would be fucking awesome when I get there. That is exclusively a white privilege. Black people can't fuck with time machines. A black guy in a time machine is like, "Hey there, anything before 1980, no thank you; I don't wanna go!" But I can go to *any* time! The year 2, I don't even know what's happening then, but I know when I get there, "Welcome, we have a table right here for you, sir!"⁷⁷

Literary scholar Paul Gilroy remarks that, "if it is perceived to be relevant at all, the history of slavery is somehow assigned to blacks; it becomes our special property rather than a part of the ethical and intellectual heritage of the West as a whole" (1993:49). Bell's slavery joke specifically challenges the legacy of slavery as a legacy that just involves Black people. Louis CK picks up the other end of that stick and shows that white people still benefit from it.

Memories of Genocide and Colonialisms

As I mentioned in chapter 2, the LA comedy scene does not feature American Indian comics with any great frequency. That does not mean American Indian comedians don't exist. Most famous of American Indian comics is arguably the late Charlie Hill. With a long career in film and television, Hill also hosted the *American Indian Comedy Slam: Goin' Native No Reservations Needed* in 2009, a fabulous comedy show that features all indigenous comics and plenty of critical social commentary that targets genocide and settler colonialism in various ways.

⁷⁷ During a guest appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, Louis CK also commented in a very funny way on how white people think slavery was so long ago.

While American Indian comics are rare, some comedians of other backgrounds occasionally do bits that target the genocide/colonialism pillar of white supremacy.

As in the previous section, these comics' jokes draw on social memories of a time they were not alive to directly experience. Oddly, the topics of colonialism (settler and "regular") and indigenous genocide do not seem quite as inflammatory as slavery in contemporary mainstream US discourses. It's odd because the US is after all a settler-colonial state, and continues to actively enforce the settler-colonized power dynamic vis-à-vis First Nations. As Jessica Cattelino pointedly notes, "...the United States would not exist were it not for the indigenous genocide, cessions, wars, diplomacy, and service upon which it was built... US sovereignty does not lie outside or above the settler-indigenous relationship" (2008:177). This history and its ongoing legacy rarely cause heated debates in mainstream media or on online social media sites. Neither genocide, nor colonialism of any variety, gets the same traction as slavery in public discourses. One possible reason is the perception that American Indians simply aren't around. Cattelino points out that, "one effect of settler colonialism is to make it seem like Native people are dead or somewhere else, such that [their] visibility is itself an anti-colonial state" (personal communication, 4/29/15). She also notes that, "Los Angeles has more Native people than any other US city, and California more tribes than any other state" (personal communication, 4/29/15), which makes the American Indian absence on the comedy scene all the more remarkable.

Solomon Georgio

Comedian Solomon Georgio is an openly gay Black Ethiopian man. His comedy is acerbic and unapologetic when it comes to racial critique. Out of the comics I've introduced thus

far, his approach most closely resembles that of Leslie Jones in the sense that his jokes also sharply narrow the gap that provides wiggle room for any audience in discomfort. Their performance styles, however, are vastly different, with Georgio much less physical on stage and more contained in his delivery. Here are three excerpts from his set on *Conan* on TBS in 2014. These were jokes he worked out live on stage, while I was doing my fieldwork.⁷⁸

My name is Solomon Georgio. That is my real name.
It's a very beautiful name for a very beautiful man. [pause, l]
My last name, Georgio, is Italian. I am Ethiopian. [l]
Some people wonder, 'How does an African get a European last name?'
Well.. hum! [l] It's a lot like a fairy tale [l],
except in this fairy tale there happens to be an Italian army occupation [l], a brutal civil war, a few decades of famine, and no happy endings. [L]
...
I should let you guys know that I am openly gay, well, most of the time. [L]
I just took a break for Martin Luther King Day. [L]
Sometimes you just want to be Black and nothing else, you know... [big L and applause break]
...
I recently watched the Disney animated feature "Pocahontas,"
because I'm a grown man [l]
and no one can stop me from doing whatever I want. [L]
However, I feel that the movie should come with a written apology. Firstly, the Native Americans as a people have suffered the worst genocide in human history.
Some may say, 'Hey Solomon! What about the Holocaust?' And I wouldn't take that away from anyone; the Holocaust was a terrible, terrible tragedy, however,
I have seen ten or more Jewish people in the same room [L].
I haven't seen ten Native Americans... in my life! [L and applause break]
They used to live right 'her.' [l]

In the first chunk of material Georgio introduces himself to the audience. As I have pointed out throughout the chapters, comics typically first address whatever the audience may question when they first see him or her on stage, which lessens the risk of those traits hindering the rest of the set. Since comics also need to introduce themselves, addressing things that stand out about them is a good way of handling both tasks. Georgio talks about his ethnic background. As part of

⁷⁸ In this transcription [L] marks big laughter from the audience, and [l] marks a smaller, more moderate laugh.

explaining why he's a Black man with an Italian last name, he then tells the "fairy tale" of colonialism in Ethiopia, a fairy tale that includes an Italian occupation, a civil war, and decades of famine. While he doesn't say the word "colonialism," he presents some of its devastating aspects and consequences. In setting this up as the answer to a question, he uses a strategy that's common for writing jokes that offer some critique; he uses an educational setup. He cannot assume that his audience will understand his last name to be a consequence of colonialism, and, even less, what colonialism entailed in Ethiopia specifically. So, he tells them.

Georgio's way of pushing the edge is among the most direct and sharp cutting of all the comics I have seen perform. He delivers his set alternating between serious facial expressions and smiles, where his smiles dramatically contrast with the tartness of his material, and add layers of meaning to the joke through the deliberate performance and manipulation of affect. There is a sense of friction between what the audience sees and what it hears. What they see is a stylish gregarious-looking man. What they hear is a brutal reality without much buffering. As a result, audiences at times hesitate before they become familiar with his style and understand where he's going. So to start with, the laughter in response to his opening bit in this set is moderate. It is not until he ends the joke with a double entendre, "...and no happy endings," that the big laughter breaks through. The last line provides the gap, the wiggle room, for the audience. Indeed, the list of atrocities Solomon names do not make for a happy ending in a literal sense. There is nothing happy or funny about an army occupation, a civil war, or a famine. But a "happy ending," of course, also implies a sexual encounter and climax at the end of a massage, often mentioned in connection with "Asian" massage parlors. The double meaning gives the audience some affective space to process the heaviness of the joke. Either interpretation makes for a sad ending, but to consider a casual sexual encounter as a suitable ending to occupation,

war, and famine is also absurd. The absurd juxtaposition and the unexpectedness of the “happy ending,” as the last item in a string of horrors, allow the audience to laugh, and they laugh loudly. In the end, he doesn’t explain in detail how he ended up with an Italian last name, leaving that to the audience’s imagination.

Solomon then lets the audience know that he is gay. When he states that he’s gay, he comments that he’s gay *most* of the time. This is an odd thing to say and the audience laughs a little. Solomon adds that he took a break from being gay for Dr. King’s birthday, which draws a big laugh. Then he delivers the zinger, “Sometimes you just want to be Black and nothing else, you know...” Here the audience laughs out loudly and gives Solomon an “applause break.”⁷⁹ Solomon talks openly about being gay in his comedy in general and has a number of raunchy gay jokes that did not make it onto TV. He is by all accounts very comfortable with his identity as a gay Black man. The last line of this bit, however, suggests that there are times when he feels his racial identity more strongly than his gay identity, and that he’s in solidarity with *all* Black people regardless of sexual orientation.⁸⁰ In a sense, Georgio is saying that he doesn’t always want to experience his intersectionality; sometimes he just wants to be Black. The bit does not reveal whether this is actually possible, but his tone and delivery indicate that he feels he has a choice and can exercise some agency in the matter. The audience certainly supports his statement with great enthusiasm. This joke also does the work of asserting his Blackness, challenging any unstated assumptions that Black masculinity (or masculinity, period) does not encompass homosexuality (a topic I’ll return to later in this chapter).

⁷⁹ A big rolling laughter with a sustained applause that creates a break in the performance is the best audience response a comic can wish for, second only to the much rarer standing ovation.

⁸⁰ This statement, too, can be seen as pushing the edge within a Black sociocultural context, in that Black communities in the US have historically displayed overt homophobia, and many Blacks continue to hold disparaging and discriminating sentiments towards gays and lesbians, especially if they’re Black.

Georgio presents himself as a sincere subject to the audience. He “fails to repeat” expected scripts on a number of levels, which makes it hard to “authenticate” him. He does not act flamboyantly gay. He does not present a Black thug or hip-hop persona. He also does not give off any recognizably African cues, like a noticeable accent. What is a handsome Black Ethiopian gay man with no accent who dresses like a hipster and makes scathingly critical jokes about racism and colonialism supposed to be like? Solomon doesn’t leave audiences much option but to see him for who he shows himself to be, whether they accept him or not. His subjectivity is not easily boxed in. Based on audience responses, however, they seem to accept him just fine. Deloria’s distinction between the anomalous and the unexpected comes into play here. Georgio could be seen as anomalous on paper, the odd man out who confirms the solidity of mainstream race and gender discourses. The way he works his identities, though, including his visual presentation of self, resists recognizable categorization (paraphrasing Deloria), which tacitly questions the stability of the categories he ought to fit in. This work is also a form of disidentification, which queer studies theorist José Esteban Muñoz conceives as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (1999:4). Georgio arguably does not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship on any count, and his performative and affective work constitutes just the type of negotiation Muñoz points to. On the one hand, Georgio pushes the edges of broad social race and gender expectations, and at the same time, he does the work of situating himself as Solomon within a conflicted social matrix.

In the *Pocahontas* bit, Solomon argues that the Disney film should come with an apology because “the Native Americans as a people have suffered the worst genocide in human history.”

Here, Georgio actually says the word “genocide,” and in a sentence not meant to be funny, but as a statement of fact. That type of joke writing is part of what makes his comedy push the edge. “Genocide,” like “slavery,” is a laden word, and I view them as performative in that they affectively do something. They carry a charge that often affects the recipients in some way. Like slavery, the word “genocide” can be perceived as confrontational, in the same way “Black” is when used to index “African Americans.”⁸¹ Also, the fact that he takes the time to present the sordid historical context for his jokes is a bold, but necessary, educational move.⁸² He risks turning people off, if he talks too seriously for too long without generating laughter. Taking the time also increases the pressure to deliver a big laugh at the end of it. Solomon is up for that task though. In this joke, he is challenged to consider the Holocaust on par with the genocide of American Indians. He readily agrees that the Holocaust was a terrible tragedy, and then soberly notes that he has, however, seen ten Jewish people in the same room. People laugh loudly; they think they know where he’s going with this. And he has a point, even if he were not to take the joke beyond the audience’s presumed expectation; most people in the US have probably not seen ten American Indians in the same room unless they’ve visited an Indian reservation or attended some special indigenous function off the reservation. Except, the audience *doesn’t* know where he’s going. The expected parallel, that he’s never seen ten American Indians in a room at the same time *either*, does not materialize. Instead Georgio pushes the joke further (and this is a great example of what pushing a joke can look like) and states that he’s never seen ten Native Americans... in his life! Here he gets another big laugh and the much-coveted applause break.

⁸¹ A recent study shows that white people associate “black” with more negative attributes than “African-American” (Hall 2014).

⁸² The necessity of educating the audience about the genocide of American Indians is made all the more poignant by the fact that many US schools do not mention the United States as a country that has subjected the indigenous population to genocide (Lee 2015).

He has hit on another sad truth. Most of us have never met ten American Indians in our lives, period, not even one person at a time, let alone ten in the same room.

Georgio's observation directly engages Smith's second pillar of white supremacy. As she describes it, the genocide/colonialism logic is premised on the disappearance of indigenous peoples (Smith 2006:68). This logic therefore reduces American Indians to characters in America's origin story as exotic peoples of the past, rather than as contemporary and living tribal nations who are "at the heart of the American democratic form" (Cattelino 2008:177). Smith also notes that, "Through this logic of genocide, non-Native peoples then become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous—land, resources, indigenous spirituality, or culture" (2006:68). Georgio's end tag, "They used to live right her[e]," which he delivers pointing to the ground, addresses the land aspect of this logic. He brings his critique to the actual spot he's standing on, in effect eliminating a gap altogether. In my observation, most comics don't venture to close the gap completely, but comedians who push the edge, especially on issues of race, tend to do more of it. Even among them, however, it's not a common praxis. Closing the gap at all is risky, and closing it completely even more so, because audience members can feel cornered and directly implicated in the social critique the comic is levying. And if they feel that way, they won't laugh. On this occasion, Solomon's tag doesn't get a hit with the audience. Perhaps people don't actually know that Los Angeles sits directly on Native lands, not just in the general sense of the Americas being Native land, but that Los Angeles spreads out directly on Tongva Indian territory. Perhaps his alternative pronunciation of "here" as "her" (in a hip-hop-style diction) was lost on the audience and they therefore didn't respond. Perhaps the "gap-less" commentary was too blunt to take in and was therefore simply ignored.

Aparna Nancherla

Aparna Nancherla is a comic of East Indian heritage from Washington DC. A former writer on *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*, Nancherla delivers cutting jokes in a quirky, kind of depressed, performance style. The bluntness of her jokes stands out against her petite stature and nasal voice. Her style also involves assuming a bit of a persona. Whereas Solomon feels like he's pretty much himself on stage, Aparna comes across as being in character. There is no right or wrong here. Some comics use a character, others don't (although even when they don't, their stage persona is typically an exaggerated version of themselves). While I was doing fieldwork, Aparna performed some of the material I later saw her do on *Conan* on Columbus Day, 2013. This transcribed excerpt from her *Conan* set starts at 1:20 minutes into her act.

This isn't easy for me to say, but I do have some white friends [I].
It happens [I].
It's kind of unavoidable in this economy [L].
Sometimes I'll make a mistake though... , when one of my white friends apologizes to me, I'll assume it's for imperialism on some level [I].
I know... , it's totally my issue [I],
but it does lead to some weird situations. Like recently one of these so-called friends returned a DVD to me late. And she was like, "Hey Aparna, here's your copy of 'Hotel for Dogs,' sorry about the delay." And then I was just like, "Aaaand...?" [makes circular motions with one arm to suggest there should be more coming] [L]
And she was like, "I'm pretty sure, it's just the DVD."
And I was like, "Nooo, remember?! Your people [motions as if repeatedly stabbing someone below her while making a roar-like aggressive sound] [I];
My people [She shies backwards in horror as if attacked, squealing helplessly in pain] [I]."
And she [her friend] was like, "This again..." [L]
And I was like [in a squealing voice], "History's wounds never heal!!!" [I].
And she was like, "We're at a Yogurtland" [L]
And I was like, "It used to be *my* Yogurtland" [L]
And she was like, "That's the wrong kind of Indian." [L]
And I was like, "That's racist!" And I ran out. [I]
So, happy Columbus Day everyone!!! [I]
You're welcome!

Nancherla starts this chunk of material by apologetically confessing that she has white

friends. The fact that she, as a woman of color,⁸³ apologizes for having white friends, and makes it sound like something embarrassing, draws chuckles from the audience. It is a bit unexpected; people can be criticized for having friends of particular racial or ethnic belonging, but rarely do people express embarrassment for the race and ethnicity of the friends they *do* have. If it were a problem for them, they'd presumably not have them as friends. By marking her friends specifically as "white," an otherwise unmarked category in mainstream US discourses, Nancherla turns the tables on US racial dynamics where people of color are marked and whites are the invisible neutral, as I discussed in chapter 1. She ends the bit with the line that takes it home, "It's kind of unavoidable in this economy." The audience laughs loudly. Here, she links the category "white" to the economy; white people hold the majority of resources. In an economic downturn, having white friends is an economic asset in Nancherla's view. The joke corroborates Cheryl Harris's (1993) argument that whiteness is property, that is, whiteness has value as an asset (legal *and* economic). Nancherla here pushes the edge by making "white" a marked racial category and by pointing out that it's a category that comes with material benefits. Although she doesn't say so explicitly, white privilege is a material benefit (it is of course also a social benefit, but that is not her point here).

The first bit sets up the rest of the chunk of material. When her white friends apologize for something trivial, Aparna assumes that the apology also is for imperialism and wants it to be stated as such. The comment implies both that the West has not paid retribution for the murder and pillaging of "the Orient" in the name of empire, and that the legacy of colonialism still does work on behalf of the West and white supremacy. When she first states her assumption, the

⁸³ I don't know if Nancherla would describe herself by this term; the description in this instance is mine. I recognize that the term, "people of color," is not necessarily one that all people who are typically included in this category would choose for themselves, and also that it is a US-specific term not everyone relates to. In discussing matters of race and ethnicity in the US, however, I do find the term useful.

audience laughs a little, but when she then enacts the premise as if talking to a friend, they give her a big laugh. The coupling of an apology for returning a DVD late with the expectation to therefore also get an apology for imperialism is illogical. No one would think to expect that, but Aparna asserts that she does. And she provides a re-enacted argument for her expectation by demonstrating physically what her friend's people did to her own people. The audience laughs moderately at the re-enactment. When her white friend responds in a tired voice, "This again..." (letting us know that it's not the first time), the audience finds it hilarious. But Aparna insists that the wounds of that history have not healed; she is still wounded, which brings out some laughter. She insists on holding white folks accountable for past atrocities, noting that the damage their ancestors did still does damage. Her friend, putting the melodramatically delivered comment in perspective, reminds Aparna that they're at a Yogurtland shop buying frozen yogurt. Here the audience laughs out loudly. Aparna responds that it used to be *her* Yogurtland, also to great response from the audience. Her retort conflates East Indian with American Indian. As the latter, she makes claims to the (Yogurt)"land" that used to belong to "her people." Her comment links the stealing of native land with the colonization of India, suggesting that the two are ideologically connected, which Smith's genocide/colonialism logic also implies. Her friend, unimpressed, points out that Aparna references the wrong kind of Indian in her claim; Aparna is not American Indian. This gets big laughs from the audience again. The friend's comment prompts Aparna to storm out of the shop after she accuses her white friend of being racist (again, a major insult in the US).⁸⁴ Then, having ended the story, Nancherla cheers the audience with a pointed "Happy Columbus Day!"

⁸⁴ Being called a racist is an insult in other areas of the world too, but only in the US have I observed the dynamic where being called a racist often seems to be seen as more offensive than the racist act that prompted the accusation.

Aparna pushes the edge with a combination of blunt unexpected observations, absurd linkages, and purposeful nonsensical misinterpretations. All of these comedic tools play within gaps. In unexpected observations, the gap is between what she says, “This isn’t easy for me to say, but I do have some white friends,” and what the audience expects her to say, namely that the thing she does not find easy to say is something they would expect to be difficult or embarrassing. Having white friends doesn’t qualify. Absurd linkages, such as expecting an apology for a late return of a borrowed item to include an apology for imperialism, play with the discrepancy (here, in seriousness of offense) between the two. With this part of the joke, Nancherla also comments on the perceived gap between history and its inheritors in a way that pushes the edge. While the actual colonizers are long dead, their offspring still enjoy the loot, so to speak. And, says Aparna, that wound is still open, suggesting that it still hurts. At the end of the joke, she strings a series of purposeful nonsensical misinterpretations together—gaps between what she says and what she means—for comedic effect, which allows her to slip a social commentary into the gap that criticizes the stealing of Native lands. Whose land are we talking about? That of East Indians or American Indians? It doesn’t really matter Nancherla seems to say. In taking “our” land the damage was done, and she’s still waiting for an apology.

Both Solomon Georgio and Aparna Nancherla push the edges of the genocide/colonialism logic by bluntly presenting gruesome historical facts and making them relevant in the present. Like Leslie Jones and W. Kamau Bell in the previous section on slavery, Georgio and Nancherla make it clear that the contemporary moment is not an ahistorical one, much as white folks and the West wish to absolve themselves of responsibility for the actions of their forebears with arguments that “it’s in the past,” admonitions to “let it go,” and accusations

of using “the race card.”⁸⁵ The comics also make it clear that these histories have shaped them in different ways, and influence how they see the world and how they experience their daily lives.

Aside from Georgio’s and Nancherla’s sets, I encountered a sprinkling of other jokes where comics referenced colonialism in some way. Lebanese-American comedian Sammy Obeid talks about white people and “Indians” in one set. Pretending to be a white guy he asks, “Is that a Reservation Indian or a 7-11 Indian? Huhuhu! [he mimics the laughter of a corny white guy].” Obeid responds to the fictive white person: “No, actually, it’s the kind your forefathers raped and pillaged. [pause] Oh! That’s both! Huhuhu! [mocking the white guys laughter].” Obeid also has a joke about his difficulty in filling out forms because there is no box for his race. “‘Oh, here it is!’ says the lady [in the government office], ‘Indian.’” Obeid responds, “You can’t just pick any brown person and call him ‘Indian!’ You’re not Columbus!!!” And while hosting the Black show, “Mo Betta Mondays,” white comic Ray Lipowski says, “I steal. [pause] Yeah, Black people, white people steal too. White people steal the best in the world! We stole the fuckin’ United States!” The audience laughs, although not with great force. Perhaps it’s the implication of “white people steal *too*” that dampens the funny part.

Among the comedians I worked with, Candice Thompson identifies as Native American and African American, but when she talks about race, she primarily addresses her experiences as a light-skinned Black woman who frequently gets misidentified for white and other aspects of Black American culture. She does occasionally mention her Native heritage, but it’s not an accentuated feature in her comedy. Other than Candice, I did not see any American Indian

⁸⁵ I find “the race card” to be one of the most offensive terms deemed acceptable in daily language. The suggestion that an allegation of racism is used as a tool for winning an argument or other gain without basis is disingenuous at best. Even if someone purposefully uses it as a tool for personal gain, the fact remains that in a system of white supremacy every action (whether perceptibly racial or not) is always inherently raced (and gendered).

comedians perform who identified themselves as such, or somehow made that identity apparent, during my fieldwork. As I mentioned earlier, there are a small number of Native comics on the circuit, but not with any noticeable presence in Los Angeles. This state of affairs strongly parallels the (in)visibility and “disappearance” of American Indians in the contemporary American imaginary more broadly. To the extent that America’s Native peoples are part of mainstream culture, they exist as representations of the past. They emerge as “memories” of the “Wild Wild West,” as Halloween costumes, or as bearers of ancient spiritual wisdom and healing traditions (e.g. the New-Age popularity of shamanic healing, sweat lodges, and powwows). As I’m putting the finishing touches on this document, a number of American Indian actors quit the Adam Sandler movie they were shooting due to offensive stereotyping of Natives, misrepresentation, and mistreatment on set (Contreras 2015). Not only does dominant US culture romanticize America’s Native population through “noble savage” sentimentalism, it also mocks and ridicules American Indians as amusement in pop culture. Historically, American Indians “simply vanish[ed] from the master narrative” (Deloria 2004:225). They were thought to either have “assimilate[d] or die[d] out” (Deloria 2004:225). Sadly, the comedy scene reflects this disappearance narrative all too well, with no real change in sight.

“Humanizing” Middle Easterners

Middle-Eastern-looking male comics face a unique set of conditions in post-9/11 America. The “Middle Eastern” label here includes a wider range of ethnic and national backgrounds than is customary in American society in general, per the practice I observed in the industry. Unsurprisingly, this category includes comics with Iranian, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Lebanese backgrounds, but it also covers comics with East Indian, Pakistani, and Armenian

heritage, for example. To mainstream America and Hollywood they all look Middle Eastern. The sometimes unspoken, sometimes explicit, implication is that they therefore also look like terrorists. I have yet to see a Middle-Eastern looking male comic take the stage and not address the terrorist label in some way. Here, I will use their work to illustrate how the edges they push often seek to “humanize” Middle Easterners within a US cultural context that does not always afford them that right to humanity. Under the logic of Orientalism, the categories of victims and those complicit in the oppression shift from that of the slavery logic. In the latter, we saw the oppression of Black people as inferior, with whites as the oppressors and people of color as more or less complicit to the extent that they reproduce that dynamic. Here, the victimized category is “the Oriental” who is oppressed by “the Occidental,” using Said’s analytics (1079[1978]). The Orientalist gaze comes from white, Black, and brown people alike, even though it, too, serves white supremacy, and so ultimately only benefits white people.

Before I proceed, I also want to mention that I saw very few Middle-Eastern women perform during my fieldwork. They aren’t in large numbers to begin with, but they do have a presence, mostly in NY and LA. The few I did see did not focus heavily on their “Middle Easternness,” and if they did mention it, they typically did not address the “terrorist label”. By comparison, male Middle Eastern comics have a strong presence on the comedy scene in terms of numbers, and they are the ones who feel most compelled to challenge the stigmatizing label.

Maz Jobrani

Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani has a worldwide fan base and performs extensively in the US, Europe, and in the Middle East. In the US, he draws huge crowds of Iranian-Americans and of people from the entire surrounding geographical region: Egyptians,

Saudi Arabians, Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians, East Indians, Pakistanis, Armenians, as well as some white folks and a few Black people.⁸⁶ His shows are gregarious party-like events with a tangible warm atmosphere and high energy. Maz pushes the edge by effectively challenging negative images of Middle Easterners. His performative style is non-confrontational, and he maintains a respectful affective distance to the audience. It's a very different way of pushing the edge compared both to Leslie Jones's intense stage presence and W. Kamau Bell's critical stance. The edge to Jobrani's comedy is more affectively subtle. Jobrani pushes it through his comedic material, through a racially or ethnically sincere performativity, and through crowd interactions that affectively let audiences know that he's a genuinely nice guy. I here analyze his headlining set at one of the many shows of his that I attended during my fieldwork.

At Jobrani's packed 39th birthday show at the Comedy and Magic Club in Hermosa Beach, CA, the atmosphere is high from the hilarious performances of a string of comics. The room has an expectant charge. As soon as Maz, the marquis headliner, takes the stage, an audience member yells out "*Tavallodet Mobarak!*" ("Happy Birthday" in Farsi). Maz doesn't skip a beat. With a big smile he immediately addresses the white people in the audience, "Don't worry white people!" and with feigned concern he assures them that it's not "terrorist speak," even though part of it sounds like "bomb" and like the last name of the recently ousted Egyptian leader (Hosni) Mubarak. Right at the onset, he makes the Middle Eastern-terrorist connection explicit, which has a disarming (no pun) effect on the non-Middle Eastern audience, and at the same time makes the Middle Eastern-hailing patrons laugh enthusiastically. He has addressed the "elephant in the room" first thing and off the cuff in a manner that makes people laugh, putting

⁸⁶ While the US Census categorizes people of Middle Eastern and Arab descent as "white," I don't, because people with this background are routinely racially discriminated against and are not the beneficiaries of white privilege (see Tehranian 2009).

the room at ease. His affective message is, we're all on the same page; I'm not a terrorist, and neither are the Farsi-speaking audience members present. With that comment, he also silently concedes the pressure of having to distance himself from the terrorist label in order to make non-Middle-Eastern Westerners comfortable. It's a survival skill Black Americans recognize well, both in the present and historically, as "double consciousness" (so termed by W.E.B. DuBois). Through double consciousness, you learn to see yourself through the eyes of your oppressor in addition to your own; this consciousness specifically makes you aware of how you are seen by society and the discrepancy between what you are seen as and how you see yourself (DuBois 2003[1903]:9). Maz never speaks to this directly in his comedy, but the sentiment hovers below the surface on a couple of occasions during this set.

In addressing the terrorism label, Maz's performance can be analyzed using Said's Orientalism (1979[1978]). Jobrani's opening interaction with the audience speaks to this unvoiced gaze that would see him, and the Middle Easterners in the audience, as terrorist enemy threats, and counters it with an expression of harmlessness; the man is just saying "Happy birthday!" The juxtaposition of "terrorist speak" and "Happy birthday!" creates a wide affective gap by positioning two phrases with such oppositional meanings and associated feelings in close proximity. As I noted earlier, when comics create a gap by countering a mainstream image with something that is affectively oppositional, they create a dissonance that not only can be funny, but that also leaves room for critique.⁸⁷ In a sense, the gap itself, when made apparent (implicitly

⁸⁷ If we think of a gap, in Stewart's sense, as the space between an event and its meaning, jokes that create a gap make room for the unexpected. The unexpected, as we have seen, is often perceived as funny. When the unexpected is in the form of a critique, social commentary and funny can inhabit the same space. This is at least in part because the gap allows for wiggle room so that the audience can deflect direct implications. Without a gap, there is no wiggle room, for instance, in a direct critical statement or overt stereotype reinforcement left unchallenged. Jokes without gaps can still be funny to audiences that are in agreement with what's performed, but such jokes are more difficult to digest and therefore less

or explicitly), becomes a form of critique. The suggestion that someone might think “Happy birthday!” is “terrorist speak” makes the person who misinterprets look a bit like a fool; it exposes his or her unsubstantiated prejudices. It pushes the edge.

Maz then goes on to talk about how excited he was when he recently received his American passport, only to find that it still said “Iran” under “Place of birth.” “It’s like having bad credit!” he says; it follows you everywhere. Here people laugh out loudly again. Bad credit is a concept everyone in the audience can understand regardless of racial or ethnic background. Speaking of one’s birthplace in those terms puts it in a perspective that gets very little mainstream coverage. Maybe Middle Easterners find their freedom curtailed by the sociopolitical unrest in their countries of origin as much as (or more) than many Westerners think they themselves do. Here Maz pushes the edges of ethnocentrism, an entrenched feature of the Orientalist gaze. But, he explains, he does not have any problems traveling in Western countries; the problems are in Arab countries “cause many of them don’t like Iran.” “Americans don’t know that the Middle East is not all the same country,” he adds.

In this segment Jobrani first positions himself as a “good immigrant” who is grateful to have become a US citizen. This caters to a mainstream narrative of the good immigrant as one who embraces and loves America and who is above all grateful (Coutin 2003). He then laments that the excitement over his US citizenship is somewhat dampened by the “bad credit” he also inherited by having Iran listed as his place of birth in the passport. The bad credit is in a sense a stain on his new and otherwise “untarnished” citizenship. The rebirth that supposedly comes with acquiring US citizenship and leaving your foreign affiliation behind is thus not a perfect analogy of the process of becoming a citizen (Coutin 2003:515). You do, in fact, bring your past with you,

guaranteed to generate laughter. It is harder (almost impossible, I’d dare say) to push the edge and be funny at the same time without playing with a gap.

if nothing else because your birthplace remains the same and is listed in your passport. Oftentimes you bring way more than that, as Maz makes clear throughout his set. After exposing his “bad credit,” making fun of it, and, in the process, criticizing Arab countries rather than the US and the West, he then points finger at Americans who think the Middle East is one country. He does so in a most affable and non-scolding way, which increases the audience’s receptivity and acceptance of what he has to say. Maz’s comedy trades on gaps (this is what you think you see, but that is what you get), but not on friction or tension. He does not make his audience uncomfortable, which in this case is counter-stereotypical in that the dominant American image of Middle Easterners often makes mainstream Americans uncomfortable. Genuine in his niceness, Maz nonetheless also pushes the edges of ethnocentrism. Here, he targets the average American’s notorious ignorance of geography and sets the record straight on a common conflation people make—the Middle East is all one country—a mistake that directly impacts the daily lives of Middle-Eastern-looking people in the US.

Jobrani then points out that after an airing of his “Axis of Evil Comedy Tour” Special on Comedy Central,⁸⁸ an online comment on conservative talk-show host Shawn Hannity’s chat room read, “I never knew these people laughed!” Maz uses this to segue into talking about how much people in the Middle East love to laugh and dance. “All you need to do is start clapping and Middle Easterners will stop whatever they are doing and join in. We should have sent clapping troops [to Afghanistan and Iraq]!” he suggests. As with the misperception that the Middle East is one country, here, Maz seeks to rectify another common image, namely that all Middle Easterners are angry and dour religious fanatics and suicide bombers. To make the point

⁸⁸ From 2005-2011, Maz Jobrani and three other comics of Middle-Eastern descent embarked on the “Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.” The group toured the United States and the Middle East offering humorous commentary on Middle Eastern cultures and the comedians’ experiences of being Middle Eastern in the US

more vividly, he sets it up with a real-life anecdote, a viewer's comment on a right-wing talk show's website. And then, rather than criticize the ignorance of the person who held such a limited understanding of Middle Easterners, Maz focuses on positive traits of Middle Easterners that counter that ignorance. Again, he creates a gap by positioning ideas at two affective extremes next to each other: troops fighting terrorists versus laughing and clapping Afghans and Iraqis. He also creates a gap for the audience to wiggle in, so to speak, by making the representative for America an anonymous commenter online. In the first instance, he "humanizes" Middle Easterners as a group to the non-Middle-Eastern audience, while simultaneously reflecting a "humanized" self-image to the Middle Eastern patrons, and levying a critique of the dehumanization they endure in the U.S society more broadly. In the second instance, he deflects that critique somewhat by distancing his interlocutor as someone who is not present and without a known name. He can also count on many in the audience assuming the commenter to be a white right-wing Republican, unlike most of us in the audience (at least on all three counts combined), reminiscent of W. Kamau Bell's "us" versus "Texas" contrast that accomplished the same dislocation.

Maz then continues with a story about how he was in Times Square in New York the year before, when a car bomb exploded. He was doing a show just down the street, he says. Then he happened to be in Austin, Texas, when a white guy flew into a building. After this happened, he acknowledges that he became a bit self-conscious, noting that it was not good to be Iranian-American and present at too many of these locations. "After a while I started asking myself, am I involved in this?" The audience laughs heartily. This joke again points to the psychological dilemma of internalizing the prejudices others hold against you. While Maz only touches on the issue, he suggests that if you share a set of phenotypic and culturally specific traits with a reviled

group of people—Middle-Eastern terrorists—you may at some point start to question yourself and your motives even without having participated or been directly accused. Once more, he reveals the dynamics of double consciousness at play. Jobrani’s joke acknowledges the impact of this kind of vision on how Middle Easterners may begin to see themselves. Having established that he and the Middle-Easterners present are not terrorists, as well as how this label can affect them, he then moves on to make fun of actual terrorists, while also continuing to push the edges of racial and ethnic double standards that always favor white people.

Maz notes that every time there is an act of terrorism, a Middle-Eastern organization takes credit. By contrast, when the perpetrator of such an act is white, he says white people call it “an individualistic act by an individual!” “Why would Middle-Eastern organizations take credit for a failed car bombing???” he asks, and people laugh. Posing as the voice of a terrorist spokesperson, Maz assumes a Middle-Eastern accent and says, “We just wanted to come and say, ‘we tried... [big laughs] it’s the thought that counts... [more big laughs and an applause break] win some, lose some! [more laughter]’” Here, he throws a direct hit on media representations of people of color, not just people of Middle-Eastern decent, and the privilege of whiteness. White people are judged as individuals, so that if one white person commits a heinous act it does not automatically render all other white people complicit. The media typically presents these white criminals as mentally ill loners. And mainstream discourses never blame their criminal behavior on some inherently deviant cultural characteristics. Whereas if someone from any other racial or ethnic group commits a crime, the whole group they are associated with is implicated and feels compelled to distance themselves from the offender. Those who don’t explicitly do so are seen as even more complicit than those who decry the acts. Maz then concludes that chunk of material with a silly joke where he impersonates a terrorist at a press conference who takes responsibility

for the failed attack.

Maz tells his audiences that he likes to have mixed groups of people in the room “cause we get to laugh together and break stereotypes.” We all hold stereotypes, he observes. He admits that when he visited Dubai recently he had to face some of his own. There are a lot of workers from India in Dubai (and elsewhere in the UAE), and he found that he had stereotyped Indians as “workers.” He tells the story of how he was in the lobby of his hotel, waiting for his driver, and an Indian man was standing there just staring at him. Maz went up to him and asked, “Excuse me, are you my driver?” “No,” answered the man (Maz portrays the man with a mock-Indian accent), “I own the hotel.” People laugh out loudly. “Oh, I’m sorry,” said Maz, “but why were you staring at me?” “I thought you were *my* driver!” answered the Indian man. The audience bursts into laughter again and adds applause. They get the message, “everyone does it” with the unstated consolation, “so don’t feel bad, just recognize it when it happens, admit, and do better.” Here Maz universalizes racism, but doesn’t venture into a more nuanced analysis of power within that universal claim. He deftly avoids making this point a white-versus-people-of-color issue by switching the protagonists of his bit to two brown people, albeit of different ethnic and racial origin (in US Census terms).⁸⁹ In doing so, he softens the blow against white people significantly, while at the same time making the Middle Easterners and other people of color in the audience aware of the fact that while they are typically on the receiving end of racism, they often also hold racial prejudices against each other.⁹⁰

While Jobrani takes a rather gentle approach in pushing his audience, other comics are

⁸⁹ According to the US Census of 2010, people of Middle Eastern decent are categorized as “white,” whereas people of East Indian decent are categorized as “Asian.”

⁹⁰ Although not very frequently discussed in mainstream US media, racism in general and anti-Black racism in particular, is highly prevalent in all countries of the Middle East, both historically and in present times (Chiles 2012).

more blunt. Some decide to play along with the terrorist narrative as a way to show that they can act the role, if that's what we expect them to do, and even though it is not who they really are. Airplane travel is a frequent theme in these kinds of jokes. For instance, Canadian comic "Sugar Sammy," who is of East Indian descent, says that when people see him at airports, they hug their families one last time... and when the plane takes off, he likes "doing things that scare white people, but that cannot get you arrested." The audience laughs. He continues and says he will find an Arab guy on the plane and give him "the nod," indicating that it's time to crash or blow up the plane. People laugh at the nod reference. Iranian-American comedian Amir K lets the audience know that he just came back from a trip to Montana. "On the plane to Montana," he says, "there were only white people. They looked so racist! One guy said, 'Here comes Osama!' to his friend as I walked by."⁹¹ "Watch your back, Chip!" quipped the other in response and they laughed. "So I leaned down to Chip and whispered with a Middle-Eastern accent, 'Don't be a hero!'" The audience laughs.

Both Sugar Sammy and Amir K have a more provocative attitude on stage than Maz Jobrani. In both of these bits the underlying premise is to scare white people into thinking they are actual terrorists. At the same time, they make it clear that they are not afraid of white people's misidentifications. It's as if they don't care. Judge me if you want; I'll have the last laugh. In figuratively flipping off the authenticating Western gaze, they create tension, tension that positions them at the edge. The gap that creates the space for pushing those edges comes from the distinction between the people the jokes implicate and the people in the audience. As in W. Kamau Bell's jokes about slavery, talking about "those kinds of people" as different from "us" gives the audience members some wiggle room so they can laugh. They can choose to think that

⁹¹ Referring to Osama Bin Laden, former leader of the terrorist group Al Qaeda.

it's not necessarily them the comic talks about, even though the people talked about are members of the same group as some of the patrons. Still, it's close enough for people to feel the push of the edge. And the jokes seem to work with both white audiences and audiences of color.

Amir also plays with this dynamic in one of his promotional fliers (Image 1), which depicts him strapped like a suicide bomber, with microphones in lieu of bombs, and holding one mic in his hand while standing in a cloud of smoke.



Image 1. Courtesy of Amir K (from Facebook).

The image is a striking visual commentary on the racism Middle Easterners are up against, and ways of confronting it, by a young Iranian-American comic. His message is clear; he's fighting the racism he faces in America with the weapon of stand-up comedy, symbolized by the microphones. The image captures the tension between what he knows people see him as and how he sees himself.

The work comedians (Middle Easterners and others), do when they push the edges of

limiting hegemonic understandings of race and gender identities typically engages some form of double consciousness. Comics know what they may be seen as and they know how they differ from that image. They use the gap between the two to push the edge, often by presenting a sincere subjectivity, in Jackson's sense, that conflicts with the expected "authentic" one, or by mocking the supposedly "authentic" image of themselves and thereby situating themselves against it (as Sugar Sammy and Amir K do above). Deciding what image to present requires the type of negotiation Carbado and Gulati (2013:25) discuss as part of working one's identity; that is, to what extent do you compromise yourself in order to fit into predominantly white institutions or to protect yourself from exclusion, harassment, and even physical attack?

Legal scholar John Tehranian points out that the racialization of Middle Easterners "encourages assimilatory activities" (2009:6). As examples he notes that,

Many Middle Eastern Americans Anglicize their names so as not to draw attention to themselves; those of Muslim faith refrain from prayer or the donning of head scarves; men avoid wearing facial hair; and many Middle Eastern Americans adopt narratives about their family history to avoid the contagion of association with the Middle East. [Tehranian 2009:6]

Maz's joke about the "bad credit" of having Iran listed as birthplace in his passport assumes the audience's awareness of the contagion Tehranian speaks of. Other Middle Eastern comedians also bring up these issues in their comedy. A young East Indian comic says he's glad Osama is gone, cause now he doesn't have to shave anymore. Also talking about beards, Sammy Obeid says, "I trim my beard daily. People ask me, 'why?' Cause I have to or I end up with 9/11-face! The kind of face where I get blamed for something I didn't do." Obeid talks about how he was seventeen and in high school when the 9/11 attacks happened. "People said, 'Your people caused 9/11!' I was just like, 'Uhhh ok.' Then I thought, 'I didn't know anyone involved in 9/11. I was seventeen!'" Comics like Amir K and Sammy Obeid show how everyday activities like

commercial flying (a frequent occurrence for working comics) or having a beard can be fraught with anxiety under the Orientalist gaze.

Although I have exclusively used the work of Middle-Eastern comics to illustrate what pushing the edges of Orientalism can look like, they are not the only ones to do so. Asian-American comics with roots in East Asia also engage this logic in various ways in their comedy (see Margaret Cho in the next section). During my fieldwork, however, Middle-Eastern comics stood out in their ongoing efforts to counter the terrorist label on stage, and I therefore found their work particularly suitable to illustrate the pushing of the edges of this logic.

Challenging Racialized Masculinities

In my research I found that masculinity in comedy frequently seems defined and expressed in relation to a mainstream image, specifically, of authentic *Black* masculinity, that of the rapper/thug, the Black criminal. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins observes that the images of Black criminals or “thugs” (as well as images of Black athletes) sit at the core of mainstream perceptions of Black masculinity (Collins 2004:152). These images revolve around toughness, street smarts, and sexual prowess (Collins 2004:151). Male comedians (Blacks and others) often situate themselves in relation to this image in various ways, whether by alignment or disidentification (in Muñoz’s sense), where the thug symbolizes both authentic Blackness and authentic masculinity.

Black comics who don’t signify a rapper/thug aesthetic in any way at all, whether by phenotype, speech patterns, attire, education, intellectualism, class, or joke content, and therefore don’t fit into mainstream images of “authentic” Black masculinity, tend to find greater acceptance on the alt comedy scene. Their “alternative” Blackness gains traction with alt

audiences by exploiting the gap between the expected and the unexpected. That gap is often not available to them in the clubs, where the audiences tend to be less likely to accept them, not because they aren't funny (which the laughing alt audiences prove), but because they are anomalous. There are a number of reasons for this. If the image of Black men as a "combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence" (Collins 2004:152) is one that authenticates Black men, then the perceived lack of these traits renders a Black man less authentically Black, or not authentic at all, in the public imagination.⁹² It's the kind of Black man white people in particular are comfortable with, safe and non-threatening (to power relations) as opposed to violent and dangerous (Collins 2004:178).

Collins pinpoints several of the features that I have found reversely correlate with the alt appeal of a Black comic. She first mentions the image of Black men as having a physical rather than an intellectual presence. The Black man's body is seen as exotic, towering, and dangerous, and with all else being equal, the darker-skinned man is more exotic, towering, and dangerous than the lighter-skinned man. The physical appearance of the Black men I've seen on the alt scene divert from that of the imagined "authentic" Black male in that they, for instance, may be light skinned, or have a thin "non-threatening" body frame, or be overtly gay. They are also unapologetically intellectual as people and in their performances. They use words that might be deemed "too fancy" or "not Black enough" for audiences in the more mainstream club scene. They typically don't "talk Black," and they don't talk about stereotypically "Black stuff" (the hood, bitches and hoes, prison, pimpin', etc.). They do talk about books they've read, their

⁹² Note that most Black men don't fit the image of "authentic" Black masculinity, which only attests to the power of white supremacy in creating and reproducing images that protect white privilege without any basis in reality.

college experiences, comic books, “Star Trek,” and other supposedly non-Black and certainly non-thuggish topics. They also often talk about not fitting the mainstream image of Black masculinity, and as I will show, many levy sharp and witty critiques of racism and sexism in US society as part of this material. How they talk and what they talk about, then, negates any other perceived authentic Blackness, even if their phenotype marks them as Black. They’re sometimes referred to as “Black nerds” in popular culture, but they don’t necessarily use or appreciate that label, even though in recent years it carries an element of “cool” in some circles (Toby 2012).

Black comics who work the alt scene are obviously no less Black-identified and no less masculine than those who work the club scene. Many are even more conscious of the complexity of race and gender dynamics and discourses in America than some of the club comics, and make it explicit in their acts. They draw on their experiences as Black men in the US, which includes the experience of not fitting into a mainstream understanding of Black masculinity or Blackness more broadly. They are at times not seen as authentically Black by other Black people or by non-Blacks.

This question of male authenticity for men of color also comes up for those who identify as gay, and they, too, typically get more appreciation and stage time on the alt scene than at club venues.⁹³ Here two broader factors seem to be at work. First, openly gay comics, regardless of race or ethnicity, unsettle mainstream notions of American masculinity as heteronormative, and Black gay comics specifically upend understandings of hyper-heterosexual Black masculinity (Collins 2004:174). I’d also argue that gay Latinos face a similar dynamic in dealing with the oft-expected *macho* identity. This poses a greater challenge for gay comics at the more mainstream club venues than on the alt scene. Second, white liberals have embraced gay rights to

⁹³ One exception would be when clubs put on themed shows for gay audiences, for example, “Gays’R’Us” at the Hollywood Improv.

a greater extent than communities of color (Pew Research Center 2012); and as I mentioned earlier, young white liberal hipsters dominate the alt scene.

Kevin Avery

Comedian, television writer, and indie short-film film producer Kevin Avery speaks of not fitting people's image of Black men is his set. He says that as a light-skinned Black man, he often gets the question "Are you *full* Black?" Sometimes white people also accuse him of not being "black enough." "Believe me," he says, "You don't *want* me to be *that* Black guy." In his set he explains why he doesn't "sound Black," sharing that he comes from a middle-class background with two college-educated parents and went to (white) private schools for most of his life up until college. "I grew up in a Cosby family," he concludes.⁹⁴ He also talks about his parents' realization that Kevin and his brother needed "a dose of Blackness," and therefore enrolled them in a Jack-and-Jill⁹⁵ group once a month when they were growing up. This felt foreign and challenging to them. They lacked the cultural knowledge that would have marked them as in-group. "Nobody had told me that Fresh Prince and Will Smith were the same guy...!"⁹⁶

Avery pushes the edge of both Black people's and white people's images of authentic

⁹⁴ This was before the numerous drugged-rape allegations against Bill Cosby mired him in scandal in 2014. In Avery's joke, the reference is to a wholesome middle-class professional Black family.

⁹⁵ **"Jack and Jill of America, Inc. is a membership organization of mothers with children ages 2-19, dedicated to nurturing future African-American leaders by strengthening children through leadership development, volunteer service, philanthropic giving and civic duty" (Jack and Jill of America, Inc.).**

⁹⁶ Actor and rapper Will Smith, whose rap name was "The Fresh Prince," starred as his own namesake in the hugely popular TV-series *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* in the 1990s.

Blackness. He's light-skinned to start with, does not "talk Black," does not come from a poor uneducated single-parent home, is not uneducated, and was not au courant with Black pop culture growing up. All of these racist stereotypes (not including the last trait) are ones imposed on Black people (men and women) by virtue of looking Black. In his comedy, Avery challenges all of them, not only through his joke content, but also in his performative expression of his Black male identity. It's in his physical appearance, his speech pattern, his attire, and his social class. Because of this, Avery has not always met with acceptance in working-class Black rooms, whereas he's been readily welcomed by Black middle-class college-educated audiences and on the alt scene.⁹⁷ Some audiences may think of him as "acting white" by not indexing what Carbado and Gulati call a "black prototype" identity (2003:1757). It's not so much that Kevin reflects whiteness; rather, he does not come across as "Black enough" to those audiences, as he himself points out in his bit. In a mostly white alt room, however, Kevin is undeniably Black in terms of how he's visually recognized, but not "real Black" in terms of expected behavior and presentation of self (Jackson 2005). Deloria's distinction between the anomalous and the unexpected seems fitting in this discussion. In working-class Black rooms, Kevin may indeed appear anomalous; his "unrelatable" presence merely reaffirms the audience's expectations of Blackness. In white alt rooms, mixed rooms, and middle-class Black rooms, he comes across as unexpected, and with that he has the necessary gap to push edges. Framed differently, his sincere expressions of identity are generally not accepted by the audiences in working-class Black rooms, but *are* in show rooms with different racial or class demographics.

⁹⁷ The Black comics I talked to who expressed that they were generally not accepted by Black working-class audiences noted that this was not an issue when they performed for Black middle-class college-educated audiences.

Baron Vaughn

Comedian and actor Baron Vaughn talks about being thought of as a “Black nerd” in a set that aired on *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* on August 5, 2013. Vaughn, who was a cast member on the USA network television show *Fairly Legal* and is part of the all-star cast on a soon-to-be-released Netflix original series *Grace and Frankie*, is a very theatrical performer (reflecting his training in that art form). He uses gestures, facial expressions, and voice alterations extensively on stage, none of which a textual transcription begins to do justice. I’m therefore embedding the link to his set:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kh9b2xS2maA#t=279>. The “Black nerd” segment starts at 2:13. Here is a transcription:

Now there’s this new term going around called ‘Black nerd’ and I don’t know exactly how I feel about it especially because I’m supposed to be one.
But I’ve never called myself a nerd or referred to myself as a nerd because I lack the commitment I think it takes to *be* a nerd.
You know like, I love nerd culture but I’m not *in* love with nerd culture, you know. Like I like comic books and video games, but not as a *lifestyle*.
Like the only thing I’ve been able to really get into, like as an activity, like as a *hobby though* is... naps! Haha! [L]
Where are the trading cards for naps? [L]
Haha! Cause I am a “*sleep* nerd!” It’s also called depression. [L and big applause break]
I was talking to a Caucasian friend the other day [L] about Black nerds, and he was like, “Well if it’s new, who invented it? Who was the first Black nerd? Was it like Steve Urkel?”⁹⁸
And I was like, How about Fredrick Douglass, okay? [L] Nothing’s nerdier than freedom! [L]
And how dare you throw out Urkel as an actual option? That’s a fictional character, man! Here are some non-fiction options I would have accepted: Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. You know, the names you recognize from history class in February. [L]
Why? Because before Black nerd, it was called Black leader, can you dig it?’ [L]
Then at some point in the 80s it became uncool for Black people to read.

⁹⁸ Steve Urkel is a fictional character on the sit-com *Family Matters*, and he looks like the quintessential nerd with thick glasses, pants that hover around his ankles, suspenders, and grand-pa-style cardigans.

I'm not going to point fingers, but if I were to, I'd point at crack and Reagan. [L] And so, pursuing knowledge became like a nerdy thing, it became a mockery. "What's this nerd doing? Reading?! What are you reading, nerd? The Constitution?!"

This nerd wants to understand this country as a concept envisioned by our forefathers, and see if there's a gap between that and how it is practiced by elected officials. That way he can join the system and work within it to make this country better for the citizens of it, and also the citizens of other countries, since we are a world power. Neeerd!!!" [L and big applause break]

That child ran home to his mom saying, "They're making fun of me!"

And then she said, "Don't you worry about that, Barack!" [L]

Vaughn first argues that while he can appreciate things associated with nerds, he rejects the label as far as his lifestyle is concerned, regardless of what others may call him. He also indirectly questions the relevance of the topic altogether by placing it next to an issue that is far more serious and meaningful to him—depression. Performatively, this is an expression of sincerity. Vaughn makes himself vulnerable to his audience by sharing an implied personal struggle (one not associated with the rapper/thug image of Black masculinity). In doing so, he also subtly questions why his external expression of Blackness matters more than his emotional and mental wellbeing. This juxtaposition more broadly questions what we choose to emphasize and care about when we see a Black man, and suggests we ought to pay more attention to what's on the inside than on the outside, adding an interior depth not usually ascribed to Black men in American pop culture.

He then dissects what the term "Black nerd" means and argues that people referred to as Black nerds are the same kind of people that used to be referred to as "Black leaders." Here he reframes and elevates the Black nerd, who is not seen as authentically Black, to Black-leader status by placing the nerd next to the names of historical Black heroes who are undeniably authentically Black, thereby pushing the edge of the category he's been assigned. He names several examples, and then shows why this is so. The traits that people use to determine if someone is a Black nerd (reading books, using one's intellect, being an informed citizen) are

traits that are sought after and necessary in leaders. The comparison suggests we start thinking of Black intellectuals in terms of leadership (an affirmative and empowering connotation) rather than in terms of nerdiness, which can easily be dismissed. Vaughn presents these nerdy traits in the anti-intellectual mocking fashion that came in vogue in the 80s, thereby affectively mocking the mocking in a subversive move. In his conclusion, however, the Black nerds get the last laugh, when he turns out to be the future first Black president of the United States, a young Barack Obama.

Both Black and white folks challenge Avery and Vaughn on their Blackness, both in their comedy work and in life outside of comedy. They choose to (or have to) address the topic on stage in some way. Both are highly skilled comics and they talk about this issue in ways that feel uncontrived and funny. Comics who are younger in their careers, or who have not processed these questions on a personal level to the extent that Avery and Vaughn have, or who are trying to perform for an audience that does not see them as authentic, may find themselves quickly sinking into a bombing set. On the alt scene, however, they typically find greater acceptance among comics and audiences who more readily relate to their material and their personalities. My observations corroborate this as well as my conversations with Black comics who mostly work the alt scene.

Thai Rivera

Thai Rivera is an openly gay Latino comedian who works straight crowds with great success. He talks about how he often offends people when he does shows. He says, “I am Mexican. I am gay. I look Asian [he does; he looks Pilipino]. My very existence may offend some people!” He also announces that, “I perform a lot in redneck rooms with a lot of white

straight people. Sometimes my act doesn't feel like an act, but like a long suicide note..." While Rivera is very open about being gay, it is not the only thing he talks about in his sets. It is certainly a topic he frequently returns to, but he also talks about his past as a drug user, about straight people, about lesbians, about his female friends, about race and ethnicity, and anything else he feels like talking about. Sometimes he effectively weaves gay topics and race topics together, as in this bit:

I've been described as a gay person who hates other gay people.
I don't hate gay people; I love gay people.
I just hate the gay community, mostly as represented by GLAAD.⁹⁹
I think GLAAD is the same to the gay community as Al Sharpton is to the Black community.
You've never heard a Black person say, "I'm sure glad Al Sharpton got on TV and straightened this shit out!!!"
GLADD says that gay is the new Black.¹⁰⁰ You cannot compare gay rights with Black civil rights. You cannot call gay the *new* Black, cause Black is not done being Black...!
And when people, after talking with me and observing my behavior, find out I'm gay, they may decide they don't like me, but Black people you see them and right away you know you don't like them!
Please understand; I'm not racist!
I'm just from Arizona! [He *is* from Arizona].

In this chunk of material Rivera addresses a criticism against him head-on by clarifying what his issue with the gay community is. He compares his problem with GLADD to Black folks' issues with Al Sharpton (and I'd add Jesse Jackson) who seems to show up wherever Black people have been violated and race seems to be a factor.¹⁰¹ He then turns a critical racial lens on GLADD in

⁹⁹ Formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

¹⁰⁰ The magazine *Advocate* had this on its front page on its Dec 16, 2008 issue along with the tag line: "The Last Great Civil Rights Struggle."

¹⁰¹ It is my position that race is always a factor, even if not explicitly so, in all areas of American life because white privilege is always operating, as is white supremacy. I would also like to add that while both Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson are frequently mocked and derided for their apparent love of the camera, and for occasionally coming across as opportunistic in their activism, they have also contributed to the Black cause during and in the aftermath of the civil rights movement.

suggesting that they are co-opting Black people's continuing struggle when they use the catch phrase "Gay is the new Black." Rivera also points out that there are differences in these two struggles that are important to bear in mind. Gay people have a choice in revealing themselves as gay (which, for instance, has allowed gay actors to play straight leads since the beginning of the motion picture industry), whereas (most) Black people don't have that choice. Rivera makes that point with a bluntly racist statement, which, in context, becomes an anti-racist critique, especially when tagged with "I'm not racist! I'm just from Arizona!"¹⁰² Because of his versatility as a comedian, his confident stage presence, and his no-holds-barred attitude, Rivera does very well with a wide range of audiences, including ones one might expect to be unaccepting of gays and gay rights. Even if audiences disapprove of gay people, Rivera disarms them and makes them laugh.

Rivera challenges multiple images of racial and gender authenticity in his stage performances. He looks Asian, but he is Mexican. That in itself pushes the edge of mainstream images of what races are supposed to look like. There's a gap between who the audience thinks it's looking at and who he says he is. That gives him room to play with. And the moment he starts talking, he reveals that he's gay; he has a "gay voice." This, along with his racial/ethnic belonging, is his elephant-in-the-room. Presenting himself as a gay Latino starkly clashes with

¹⁰² My fieldwork period coincided with the state of Arizona passing a new immigration law (S.B. 1070), which "requires police officers to check the immigration status of anyone whom they arrest or detain and allows them to stop and arrest someone if they believe that he is an undocumented immigrant," "which makes it a crime to be in Arizona without valid immigration papers," "which makes it a crime to apply for or hold a job without proper immigration papers," and which "allows a police officer to arrest someone, without a warrant, if the officer believes that he has committed – at some point in time – a crime that could cause him to be deported" (Howe 2012). The law was challenged in the Supreme Court, and the Court only upheld the first point listed; the other points were preempted by federal immigration law (Howe 2012).

the image of Latinos as macho men. If audiences thereby assume that he is “soft” or “weak,” Rivera’s performative expression of his homosexual identity quickly challenges that assumption. He has attitude and is not afraid of speaking his mind. One might say he has balls. I use that term because to the extent that gay men are seen as sissies or as lacking courage (“no balls”), Rivera does not abide by that label. He is a fit and slender man, so he cannot necessarily use his physique to assert a muscle-bound masculinity; he does it with his mind. In a way, a much more convincing approach. Additionally, he provocatively makes the point that while people may dislike him once they become aware of his gay identity, they dislike Black people at mere sight. It’s not the same kind of discrimination. Rivera pushes the edge of misconstrued formulations of race and racial authenticity, homosexuality, masculinity, and their intersections. He works well on any stage, both club and alt, with all kinds of racial demographics. Unless he’s working a “gay room,” he’s a multiple minority wherever he performs, and he makes all of those aspects of himself part of his sets.

Kevin Avery and Baron Vaughn showed how they address challenges to their Blackness as non-stereotypical Black men on stage by dramatizing and finding the funny in these typically hurtful and frustrating real-life experiences. Thai Rivera, in turn, provides a good example of how an openly gay comic frames his comedic material around his sexual orientation, yet is able to present himself as a complex and multidimensional man that straight people relate to regardless of prejudice. The boundaries between being on stage and off stage, then, between doing your job as a professional comedian and asserting yourself in the wake of different intersectional forms of everyday racisms, become blurred as comics bring their daily lives onto the stage and work it out.

In pushing the edges of mainstream images of racialized masculinities, comics loosen the

hold of those authenticating images in the public imagination. When comics make it clear that they don't fit the image, or make fun of it in ways that highlight its non-applicability, they loosen its grip. This doesn't always mean that they can push the edge, as Kevin Avery's experiences in working-class Black rooms demonstrate. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, a range of factors determine not only the location of the edge at any particular moment, but also a comic's ability to successfully push it. Audience demographics is one such factor, as is the comedian's race, performativity, et cetera. When comics speak against those expected images, they also engage in a performative act in the Austinian sense. Stating that, "I'm not *that* Black guy," but I'm still Black, to a certain extent makes it so. It doesn't always work, again depending on the demographics of the audience and the comic who's saying it, but at times it does. While pushing the edge in this way does not put one's self-identity as Black, Latino, man, straight or gay, into question, it opens up a space for male comics of color to interrogate what those categories mean.

Women's "Disturbing" Presence

I have already discussed women in stand-up comedy a fair bit in chapter 1 and in my earlier analysis of Leslie Jones, both the challenges they face and how they deal with them. The examples I've given demonstrate that women of color are carefully monitored and policed by other comics, show producers, and national audiences in terms of the images they portray as racialized women. Jones received harsh criticism for enacting a role that emblemized her experience in life as a Black woman whose appearance does not reflect mainstream standards of beauty. But Jones also showed that some female comics fight back. She pushed the edges of those mainstream standards and judgments held against her, first in the joke segment itself, and then in her Twitter responses to her critics.

Women don't silently accept sexist and misogynistic conditions. Anthropologist and feminist scholar Sondra Hale cautions against reducing women to "a passive, undifferentiated mass and not actors in their own drama, and in the process overlooking the processes of resistance, adaptation, or accommodation strategies that women everywhere employ in situations of oppression or subordination..." (1992:27-28). While Hale's work centers on women in Sudan, her admonition applies equally to the analysis of female comedians (and people of color, as well as other oppressed groups) in Los Angeles. As far as women comedians are concerned, I argue that their very presence on stage, night after night, in itself pushes the edge. While not all female comics do this work in their comedic material, they are all on stage *in spite of* the forces that mobilize against them (sometimes in the form of direct interactions, sometimes as ever-present cultural hegemony).

Many of these direct interactions that women have to deal with as part of the normal order of things center around their authenticity, or perceived lack thereof, as women. Here I'd like to discuss the work of one particular female comic who pushes several edges in her performances by implicitly questioning what it means to be a woman, what it means to be a woman of color, and what it means to be a queer Asian woman. It's Cho time! (Yes, it's corny, but I couldn't resist).

Margaret Cho

In my interview with Margaret Cho, she says she thinks of herself as an American, and she thinks this means she thinks she's white (interview, 1/12/12). In one of her bits she mentions that when she went to England, they wouldn't let her in the country. "At the airport," she says, "they took me to the turban detention room. If you try to come into the country with something

colored on your head, and if your face underneath it is colored, you're fucked! And I sometimes forget that I'm not white, and that my eyes are in my face!" The audience at the Brea Improv laughs at the thought of it. Cho's fans come to her shows specifically to see her, not just to go to a comedy show. The difference in the energy in the room compared to a show without a "big name" is palpable. The audience is with her from the get-go; she's instantly relatable and does not need to address any "elephants."

In our interview, Cho says that she has been able to get to where she is today because of race. "There's this thing of being a model minority that is appealing to Asian-American culture. Not that we have any power above what we are, cause we are still people of color. It's this weird thing. You want to be empowered with this thing of being white. My father has no discernible Korean accent. He was going to beat it out" (interview, 1/12/12). She concedes that her goal to "be white" never materialized. "It's a weird goal," she says, "Part of dealing with racial identity in an honest way is to realize that" (interview, 1/12/12). She says she feels protected and rich in her minority status. She's a woman; she's Asian-American, and she's bisexual. "Minority status gives you power in our culture. You'd think it doesn't, but it does. I can comment on all these things and really have a lot more freedom than a straight white man. I am 'the Other,' so I can comment on 'the Other'" (interview, 1/12/12). Cho's perspective at first seems to challenge the common understanding that minorities have less power or no power than those who are actually in positions of social, cultural, and political power. Her comment needs to be understood as emerging from her particular experience as a stand-up comedian who has achieved a great amount of popular success as a result of freely expressing herself as a racialized queer woman. It may even be true for other stand-up comics who inhabit positions of minority status in that the art form they practice is particularly open to socially transgressive topics in general. However,

men and women of color in academia, or women of all races in the tech industry, for instance, vocally express their lack of power, often by way of exclusion, even in professional careers that are relatively well compensated. Those furthest down the socioeconomic scale, such as undocumented immigrants or homeless people of color, are of course even more unlikely to experience any form of power in their minority status. Undoubtedly, Cho would agree. Having said that, Cho's remark also reveals the potential in viewing one's marginalized voice, perhaps in union with others, as a tool for minority power to challenge those *in* power.

While on stage at the Brea Improv, Cho mentions that her shows in England are different because "they don't know I'm already famous. They're not used to Asian women talking. I get booed on sight, booed on sight. What? [as if asking the imagined British audience] Are you still mad because I broke up *The Beatles*!?" The audience screams with laughter. Cho hits a common Orientalist trope with this joke, the Western perception that "all Asians look the same." She invokes this trope by suggesting that the audience she faced in England thought that she, a Korean-American, was Yoko Ono, the Japanese widow of the late *Beatles* member John Lennon. Yoko Ono may arguably still be one of the most widely known women of Asian background in the West and certainly in Europe. When *The Beatles* broke up, many of the group's fans hated Ono and blamed her for the dissolution of the band. Reflecting on the British audience in a later interview Cho says, "They had this animosity against this Asian woman of power. I honestly think they're still mad because of Yoko Ono. It's the last experience they had of an Asian woman in power. Their reaction wasn't against what I was talking about, cause I hadn't even spoken. It was against what they were looking at and what it meant to them" (interview, 1/12/12) (so the gap was closed before Cho even had a chance to perform).

Cho's experience nicely illustrates both how a woman of color who is seen as out of (her) place can fail to connect with an audience by her very existence, *and* how she can use that experience on a different occasion to push the edges of white supremacy and patriarchy. In this instance, Cho felt the audience could not accept her because of what they saw and what that meant to them, specifically as a function of her being in a position of power (the microphone gives the comic the power to run the show). In a sense, the image of Cho (Asian woman in power) to the British audience was anomalous (what is *she* doing *here*?). Based on Cho's description of the event, it seems unlikely that they were open to the transformation her "unexpectedness" could have stimulated. In such case, her anomalous presence may have reaffirmed the expectations of Asian women they already held. But, in turning that experience into a bit that she then told on stages across the US, she put the incident work. In the US, where Cho is famous and audiences know her, the reaction of the British audience to her is the unexpected part. In telling it, Cho creates a gap that she can use to push the edge. For while US audiences, including Cho's fans, may be familiar with her, they are not exempt from holding sexist and Orientalist views towards other women of Asian background. As in previous examples, talking about "them," the Brits, safely distances her criticism from "us," anyone who might be in the show room (unless they happen to be British, of course). That gives her space to offer her critique without sugarcoating (which is not Cho's style anyway).

Cho also remarks that, "because of my identity, I can't be anything but a political comedian. My existence is political" (interview, 1/12/12). Both Cho's "Asian-ness" and her "woman-ness" are aggravating attributes for the audience in this story, where they see the Asian as foreign, and imagine the Asian woman as "Oriental," docile, and subservient. As an American, brash, and outspoken stand-up comedian, Cho does not deliver on those expectations.

When I asked her how she responded to the audience, she said, “I performed. And because I know they’re angry, I won’t leave the stage. I use the social contract we have that they have to sit there and listen. I go really long. It’s awful of me. It’s mean. They could leave, but they can’t. So I definitely utilized that position of power in a negative way” (interview, 1/12/12). Here, Cho acknowledges her relative position of power vis-à-vis her audience and admits to using it to make the hostile audience stay. This kind of audience control is not typical at LA clubs, where audience members may come and go during a set (this can be disruptive, but there is no social protocol that makes it unacceptable). At theatre venues, however, the behavioral expectations of the audience are different.¹⁰³ Audiences stay in their seats until the show is over. In this case, rather than try to placate the audience and woo them, Cho asserts her power as an Asian-American female comedian further by not letting the audience leave until she is good, well, and ready.

Cho is known to reproduce racial discourses on stage, for instance, her impersonation of her mother by using a mock-Asian accent. She argues that saying stereotyping things about people of color when you are a person of color turns what you are saying into a challenge of the racist image. “You are criticizing the existence of it, and utilizing the existence of it. I think it’s a really freeing thing. This idea that women of color are really empowered to do things that other people can’t” (interview, 1/12/12). Linguist Elaine Chun agrees that Cho’s use of mock-Asian in her performances “necessarily reproduce[s] mainstream American racializing discourses about Asians,” but argues (in agreement with Cho) that her use “simultaneously decontextualize[s] and deconstruct[s] these very discourses” (2004:263). In other words, it does both. Chun then argues

¹⁰³ When comics develop a following, they often perform at theatres instead of comedy clubs. Theaters can typically hold bigger audiences than the clubs and are more financially lucrative for performers who can fill the seats.

that “it is [Cho’s] successful authentication as an Asian American comedian, particularly one who is critical of Asian marginalization in the US, that legitimizes her use of Mock Asian and that yields an interpretation of her practices primarily as a critique of racist mainstream ideologies” (2004:263). Cho feels that as a queer woman of color she can “get away with things.” And one might well argue that she does. Cho is known for speaking freely about race, gender, and sex in ways that challenge mainstream views on all three topics. At one of her shows she announces that she’s bisexual. “I’m the B in the LGBT,” she says, “and the B is silent, cause we don’t get a lot of representation in the community.” “I’m about fifty-fifty,” she continues, “I just wish I could say no to pussy, cause pussy is a lot of work. It’s time consuming. That’s how you know being gay is not a choice!” People laugh out loudly. “I wish that if someone offered me pussy, I could just say, ‘No! [pause] I just ate!’” And there’s roaring laughter at her punch.

This crude bit pushes several edges. First, she gives a jab at the LGBT community for not always recognizing bisexuals as truly belonging. Because bisexuals are attracted to both the same sex and the opposite sex, some in the LGBT community see them as not really “out,” and perhaps also misconstrue them as therefore not equally committed to gay rights. Cho figures that she is fifty-fifty with regards to her male/female ratio of lovers. She then affirms that being gay is not a choice by pointing out how much work she thinks it takes to be sexually intimate with a woman. No one would do that by choice, is the implication, only by a biologically driven orientation. This meets with cheering laughter from the audience. The bit pushes the edge on heteronormative and socially conservative assumptions that being gay is a chosen (negative) behavior, and that there is therefore something that can and should be done to “fix” it. It also pushes the edges on mainstream notions of appropriate female behavior. Cho makes her points using salacious, sexually explicit language that mainstream America would likely consider

unbecoming of a woman. Similarly, Cho's heavily tattooed body challenges images of "authentic" femininity where the authentication comes from a straight male gaze. Rachel Lee speaks of Cho's body in general and her use of it on the stage *as* the stage (Lee 2004:110). Lee sees Cho's body as "rendering political knowledge through affect, critiquing the boundaries that set apart historical knowledge from bodily pleasure, and mocking not just the alienation of racially and sexually marked subjects from the proper (civilized) representational field, but also the mechanism of this alienation itself (2004:126). Symbolically speaking, then, the ink on Cho's skin inscribes her authorship of and authority over her body, and directly flaunts it in the face of patriarchal and heteronormative conventions.

Cho notes that during the course of her career, "people have been adamant at times about me not being so raunchy or sexual, but at the same time, I've had a lot of freedom with my identity because people don't know what to do with it" (interview, 1/12/12). Cho's remark echoes my observation of audiences' reaction and acceptance of Solomon Georgio earlier in this chapter. When the sincere image a comic presents is so far from the mainstream that it defies categorization into imaginary templates of authenticity, sometimes the mind appears to surrender and open.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, comedians push the edges of different forms of racism and sexism by deploying various joke topics, performance styles, forms of delivery, race and gender performativities, comedic tools, and forms of affect, while offering some form of racial critique. Racial critique is inherently a cultural critique when the cultural domain in question is premised on white supremacy. In providing this critique, comics use their variously, and sometimes

multiply, marginalized positions in US society to make astute and biting observations about some aspect of life in mainstream America that many take for granted. They engage the legacies of slavery, genocide, and colonialism. They shine light on present-day Orientalism, racialized tropes of manhood, and overt misogyny. Through gaps, frictions, and tensions; unexpected discursive turns and presentations of self; as well as disidentifications, comics push the edges of what constitutes the normal order of things to mainstream America. While not all of them may see themselves as doing anti-racist work in their performances, I argue that they do, by pushing back against the everyday racial dynamics they encounter as men and women and taking their commentary to a public forum. Thus far I have shown cases where comedians push the edge to both positive and negative response. In the next chapter, I will present instances of its affective opposite—performances that move towards the violent center of hegemonic discourses—performances that implode.

Chapter 4: Heckling and Imploding Performances

The comics in the previous chapter pushed the edges of racism-white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity in different ways. Comics can push other hegemonic edges too, for instance, the edges of hegemonic discourses of class and religion. For my purposes, inherent in pushing the edge, as I have defined it, is that it has to challenge the mainstream and taken-for-granted in a way that involves some social or political critique. Comics can also challenge mainstream notions without pushing the edge by performing offensive behavior. Their jokes or performativity may rely on shock value and incite audience disgust or offense, as for example, in Jay Reid's joke from chapter 2 about his mom who sent a picture of her rear to her pastor. Here, Reid kept the audience with him by expressing his shock, thereby situating himself on the side of conventional morality. In so doing, he affirmed mainstream discourses through outrageousness. The outrageous is part of the material and the act, and audiences frequently find it entertaining.

This chapter is about times when comics "lose it," and act outrageously and perform racism or sexism in unplanned and unscripted ways. I think of such performances as "imploding," because the set collapses. Like a building implosion, the initiating impulse comes from outside (Merriam-Webster 2015), typically an unexpected intrusion or distraction by a heckler. The comic, unable to maintain the stability of the set, lets the heckling get to him, lets it get personal, and responds with extreme verbal aggression. The behavior of the comedian is key to implosion. It's not merely telling racist, sexist, or other offensive jokes (as I have shown, these are par for the course); implosion takes place when the comic has a meltdown and, in this case, assumes overtly racist or misogynistic positions. I focus on a few instances when a comic's implosion takes a racial or gendered tone, and reveals a raw glimpse of the violent core of these

hegemonies, something that is ordinarily not visible to mainstream America. Note that the exposure of the violent core is not inherent in implosion. Rather, occasions of implosion are the only ones where I have seen this core revealed in comedy. On occasion, the collapse ignites an explosion in that the repercussions or shockwaves of the violent performance extend far beyond the show room in both space and time.

I will argue that these anomalous events (and their corollaries beyond comedy) do *not* have the effect of challenging the mainstream when they (accidentally) reveal its fundamental premises. Rather, they validate more liberal positions *within* the mainstream as reasonable by comparison. This further argues for the importance of paying attention to the work of comics who actually do push the edge by mobilizing the unexpected.

The three examples I analyze in this chapter all gained national attention for the severity of the comedians' offensiveness. These comics imploded to different degrees and with different outcomes. One thing they all had in common, however, is that a heckler set them off. Before I introduce the actual incidents, then, I need to talk about hecklers.

The Role of Hecklers

Audience members are not passive spectators at comedy shows; they participate in the performance vocally and affectively. As long as the participation follows an expected and nonintrusive course, it is seen as positive, indeed needed, for a show to be successful. After all, comedians want audiences to laugh, clap, and cheer, and the more the better (mostly).

Participation becomes a problem when some individual audience members decide to participate in ways that disrupt the show. That's when they become hecklers. Hecklers are rather common at

comedy shows. I'd guess at least half of the shows I attended involved some kind of heckling, usually of the drunken kind.

Hecklers can be mean or benevolent. Mean hecklers “talk shit” to the comedian while he or she is performing: “Say something funny!” “Get off the stage!” “You suck!” Benevolent hecklers might yell words of appreciation, “I love you!” or an emphatic but misplaced “YEAH!” When an audience member heckles, whether meanly or friendly, the comic *must* respond or risk losing the audience. The comedian on stage has to be in charge. When a comic gets heckled, then, the imperative is to take back control as quickly as possible. The most common way to do this is to silence the heckler. The comic on stage has at least two advantages over the heckling audience member in these types of interactions: (1) the comic has the mike, so everyone can hear what he or she says—the heckler has to yell and can easily be vocally overpowered by the comic, and (2) even novice comics are typically funnier and quicker with their come-backs than your average audience member.

In order to silence a heckler, a comic often verbally attacks him or her in a way that makes the rest of the audience laugh at the heckler, which usually does the trick. Few hecklers (except the heavily inebriated) will continue to mouth off once they sense the entire room against them or laughing at them.¹⁰⁴ Usually, a certain amount of heavy-handedness is required to make this happen, and even if it isn't, many comedians feel they have full license to go at the heckler without filters because he or she “fucked with” their set. The attack is often personal and may

¹⁰⁴ In cases where a heckler is heavily intoxicated, club security staff typically escorts the person out of the club very swiftly. I have seen people carried out (by the arms and legs) of a show room within minutes of starting to act out. Oftentimes the comedian offers amusing commentary while the **club staff deals with the** disturbance. Ignoring it would be akin to ignoring the elephant-in-the-room. The club's handling of such situations effectively takes the pressure off the comic to do so in a more aggressive performative manner. The imperative is the same, though; someone has to silence the heckler.

target the heckler's appearance in a mocking way (or, more meanly, may target the appearance of the person accompanying the heckler).

Another way of dealing with hecklers is to directly engage them in conversation and make the interaction contribute to the show. This is easier and more fun to do when the heckling is good-natured. Sometimes audience members are so involved and excited about a performance, they cannot help themselves from yelling out cheers or words of appreciation. Sometimes they are people who long for the attention the comedian gets on stage, and the comic may recognize that and graciously extend him or herself. Of course, the point is always to make fun of and quieten down the heckler, but it can be done in a way where the heckler also laughs along with everyone else. In those cases, the hecklers get the bit of attention they want and the show can move on. This approach takes a more mature and confident performer and is contingent on the heckler coming across as harmless. With mean hecklers, comedians of any level will go for the kill and usually come out victorious. I have actually never witnessed a heckler win the room, although I've heard comics tell of times when this has happened.

Some novice comics are scared of hecklers. They just want to get on stage and tell their jokes. But learning how to deal with hecklers builds confidence and improvising skills, and many comedians eventually find them amusing. Veteran comedian Gina Yashere says, "I love a heckler. I love coming off skit and destroy[ing] someone's dreams. You heckle me at your own peril! You can always go too hard on a heckler and lose the audience. So I make it playful, not too hard. I may say the most heinous things, but with a smile" (interview, 2/17/12). It becomes a game, and it can be hilarious to the audience. At one memorable Black show, a young woman (in the company of a female friend) talked back at the comedians right from the get-go. She and her friend stood out in their short hairdos colored bright fire engine red. One wore hers slicked into a

Tintin-style front flip, while the other had hers straight on her head with bangs. The one with the Tintin flip wore jeans, a faux-fur cheetah-patterned short jacket and glittery eye shadow. Her very thin friend also wore jeans with a short brown leather jacket. She had two-inch acrylic nails curling out from her fingers, gigantic hoop earrings, and huge sparkling bracelets worn over her leather jacket sleeves. They were both drunk, and Ms. Tintin did not stop talking—and she “talked fresh” at that. The whole show became about her.¹⁰⁵

Ms. Tintin mouthed off at every single comic who took the stage. All of them, except one, talked to her and several mostly abandoned their material in order to do crowd work that primarily focused on her. Tony, the host, paid particular attention to Ms. Tintin, who did most of the talking of the two women. She said her name was “Yo-Luv.” He made fun of their apparent surprise at the two-drink-minimum requirement. He enacted an improvised bit pretending not to need any drinks at all cause he had saliva instead. Another comic engaged them with a lot of “hood-talk.” He asked them where they were from. They said they were from Compton, from the hood. He told them they weren’t real “hood niggers” cause “real niggers don’t leave the hood.” He managed to work in a bit and said that, “if I’m in your hood and my hat is the wrong color, shoot the hat [as he motioned throwing it on the floor to be shot].” He had the audience laughing a lot. Gina Yashere went on the offensive as soon as she got on stage rather than wait for the jabs to come at her. She commented on the acrylic nails, and asked the woman where she came from (Gina had not been in the room when the previous comic asked). She answered that she was from “the Eastside.” “What is this Eastside shit,” asked Gina, “do you mean Compton?” Gina (who’s from London) added that this was the only Black area in LA she knew of cause she’d seen it in

¹⁰⁵ This was a workout show where telling hecklers to leave is not the norm unless they are so disruptive they actually stop the show from proceeding. At headlining shows, an insistent heckler will be made to leave.

the movies. Yes, confirmed the woman and added some other comment that I could not hear. “I don’t know what the fuck you just said” countered Gina. “I’m from England; I speak English. Can you say it in English?” The audience was roaring. Gina then asked for her name. She now answered “Taco Lady,” at which the audience laughed. Turns out she was a caterer and served a taco buffet. “And how many,” asked Gina, “have eaten at your buffet?” Without waiting for an answer she then concluded, “So you’re saying you’re a hoe!” Gina’s interaction with the hecklers illustrates the strategy she attested to in her earlier interview comment. She’s pointed in her comments and doesn’t let any gap in the interaction slide. Working with gaps is crucial in dealing with hecklers. If the heckler reveals any inconsistencies or weaknesses in what they say, and they often do, the comic will seize those opportunities and insert their own sarcastic, funny, and silencing comment. For instance, the woman said she’s from “the Eastside.” Whether she was trying to avoid saying Compton or not, Gina picked up on it as a potential euphemism and dug in. Same thing when she couldn’t understand what the woman said. Rather than ask her to repeat it (a position of weakness; the heckler can potentially jab the comic for not hearing), Gina questioned the heckler’s ability to speak (her query made even sharper by her “proper” British accent). That’s two-to-one to Gina. And then the grand finale, “how many have eaten at your buffet?” with all its sexual innuendo. Gina seals her victory with the direct hit of her last sentence, “So you’re saying you’re a hoe!” A term she might not use against a non-heckling audience member.

The show was off-the-cuff and over-the-top in crudeness, but it was all very funny. The room and the hecklers were roaring with laughter throughout. The comics all made fun of Ms. Tintin in one way or another, and she kept answering back. Some comics distanced themselves, and others aligned themselves with her. The one comedian who did not engage her—he tried to

deliver his jokes without deviating from the script—bombed badly. Perhaps he was insecure about how to handle her, or he just wanted to do what he was there for, to work on his jokes. It was the wrong move for that particular night. He couldn't get the audience with him because there was a sideshow going on that he tried to ignore (yet another version of the elephant-in-the-room issue). Instead of dealing with it, he got pissed off and walked off the stage sullen and muttering. The next comic up at this particular show knew what was going on and dug right into the female heckler when he got up on stage. No mercy! Everybody laughed and the show was back on track. Hecklers, then, provide an element of uncertainty for the comic, and because they wish to take back control quickly and without losing face, they typically go at the heckler rather harshly. If a comic goes after a heckler too harshly, so that the audience feels sorry for the heckler, the set can bomb, but I have never witnessed such an occurrence.

The examples of implosion that I will explore in this chapter are not instances of bombing. There's a distinction between the two, even though both words suggest an explosive energy. Bombing just means the audience did not laugh at the jokes. All comics bomb, especially in the early years of their careers, but it can also happen to seasoned comics now and then. Imploding is about a particular kind of response to heckling. When comics implode, they're angry and have lost some control of themselves and of the performance because of a heckler. They may have offended someone in the audience (one person or many, and often personally) to such a degree that they incur some backlash heckling, which may anger them to the extent that they abandon character or professionalism. In the next section, I analyze the most dramatic and most complete implosion on stage that I've heard of (complete in terms of the extent of the violence of hegemony that it exposed).

At the Core of White Supremacy

In 2006, comedic actor Michael Richards, most famous for playing the character “Kramer” on the television show *Seinfeld*, performed a live stand-up set at the Laugh Factory in Hollywood. The show was “Chocolate Sundaes,” a weekly show run by Black producers that features a majority of Black comics and attracts a racially mixed audience, usually with a substantial number of Black patrons. A large group of Black guests reportedly arrived late during Richards’ set and settled in and ordered drinks in what he perceived to be a noisy and distracting manner. Richards lost his mind and went on a racist rant evoking the lynching of Black men and repeatedly using the N-word. Someone in the audience filmed part of the meltdown on a cell phone and posted it online, where it then went viral and became a publicly debated incident. It arguably ruined Richards’ career. Here is the rant:¹⁰⁶

Richards (addressing the noisy patrons): Shut up! Fifty years ago we’d have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass! [some people can be heard laughing]
You can talk! You can talk! You can talk! You’re brave now, motherfucker!
Throw his ass out! He’s a nigger! [laughter] He’s a nigger! He’s a nigger! [an audience member is heard saying, “Oh, my God!”] A nigger! Look! There’s a nigger! [Richards is pointing up to the offending party]
[At this point the audience seems to have realized that this is not comedy anymore; there’s an audible murmur of shock on the camera recording, and Richards’ comment reflects that] Oooh! Ooh!
All right, you see! This shocks you? It shocks you? To see what’s buried beneath, you stupid motherfuckers? [Richards is now addressing the audience sitting in front of him]
Audience member from the balcony (possibly “the heckler”): That was uncalled for!
Richards: What was uncalled for? [facing the side part of the balcony section]
It’s uncalled for you to interrupt my ass, you cheap motherfucker!
[there’s audible laughter from some audience members, now clearly at the disaster they are witnessing more so than because they find what is being said funny]
You guys have been talking and talking and talking.
I don’t know! I don’t know! I don’t know! [it’s unclear what this is in reference to]
[an audience member can be heard saying, “this guy’s going nuts!”]
[addressing audience members in the front row Richards assumes feigned concern]

¹⁰⁶ It is unclear whether the audience members heard on the recording are one person or different people. The voice appears to come from different distances to the recording device, but that could be the same person moving around the space or different people talking.

What's the matter! Is this too much for you to handle?
 They're going to arrest me for calling a Black man a nigger.
 [audience members can be heard talking back to him, but what they say is unintelligible on the recording]
 [an audience member, presumably "the heckler" is leaving]
 Wait a minute, where's he going?
Audience member: That was uncalled for you fucking cracker-ass motherfucker!
Richards: Cracker-ass? You calling me cracker-ass, nigga?
Audience member: ...[unintelligible]... Fucking white boy!
Richards: Oh, you're threatening me?!
Audience member: We'll see what's up!
Richards [mockingly]: Oh, it's a big threat! That's how you get back at the man!
Audience member: That was real uncalled for!
Richards: Wait a minute! He's not going is he?
Audience member: It's not funny! That's why you're a reject! Never had no shows!
 Never had no movies! *Seinfeld*, that's it!
Richards [mockingly]: Oh, I guess you got me there! You're absolutely right! I'm just a wash-up. Gotta stand on the stage.
 [unintelligible mumbling from both Richards and the audience]
Audience member: That's fucking uncalled for! That ain't necessary!
Richards: Well, you interrupted me, pal!!! [people are seen leaving the venue]
 That's what happens when you interrupt the white man, don't you know?
Audience member: That was uncalled for!
Richards [now seemingly rambling]: You see, you see, there's still those words, those words, those words... [he walks off the stage]

The camera keeps rolling as people get up and leave. After a short while a white man [possibly the host, although he's wearing a suit and does not look like a comic] comes on stage and with a resigned gesture says, "Sorry about that."

Richards' rant reveals the violent core of white supremacy with his first outburst, "Fifty years ago we'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass!" He let this out without waiting to see if his "Shut up!" had an effect in silencing the noisy patrons. In making a lynching reference his first go-to, Richards scales back all the layers of white supremacist discourse to its fundamental premise: we (white people) can kill you (Blacks) if we don't like what you do (e.g. talk out of what we think is your place) because we are superior to you. Richards then follows with, "You can talk! You can talk! You can talk! You're brave now, motherfucker!" as if taunting the Black patron. The Black man wouldn't have felt brave enough to talk (out of his

place) fifty years ago, when his life may have been at risk for doing so, Richards asserts, as if there is a point to be made. He then demands that the audience member be thrown out because “He’s a nigger!” His Blackness, in other words, is sufficient reason for him not to belong and to be removed from the premises. And the repeated use of the N-word in its full form, so to speak, constitutes both a taunt (yeah, I said it) and a sort of surrender to what is arguably the most powerful symbol of anti-Black racism currently in circulation. Up to this point, audience members aren’t sure if this is part of a bit or if Richards is speaking his own truth (if he means it). This is noticeable on the filmed recording and was later corroborated by interviews with audience members in attendance (Hill 2008:89-90). If it’s part of a bit, then the audience may laugh because it isn’t “real,” even if offensive, racist, and hugely inappropriate. But the same enactment without a performance frame is not for laughs. “Oh, my God!” he really means this.

Richards continues, “Look! There’s a nigger!” as if identifying an anomaly, a freak. The comment is reminiscent of philosopher Franz Fanon’s experience of a white little boy seeing him and crying out to his mother, “Look, a Negro!” (1967[1952]:110-111). Fanon found that as a Black man among other Blacks, he “was an object in the midst of other objects” (1967[1952]:109). In John Jackson’s terms, Fanon was “authenticated” as “a Negro,” his interiority invisible to the white authenticating gaze. Try as Richards may to turn the Black man into an anomaly (which, using Deloria’s definition, would reinforce the expectedness and normalcy of his own outbursts), the audience was not on board. A Black man in a comedy club with a racially and ethnically diverse audience was not anomalous in 2006, but a white man spewing overt and violent racisms on a stage at such a club was. Here, Richards became the anomaly. And as an anomaly, he became cocooned in his own racist web allowing viewers (in the audience and later online) to isolate him from any of their own complicities with white

supremacy. I am not like him. I would never say such horrible things. Therefore I am safe in my current position. I don't need to link his behavior to any less blatantly racist beliefs of my own. I am not like him.

Recognizing the audience's expression of shock at his anomalous behavior (our beloved *Seinfeld* character "Kramer" can't be saying this!), Richards mockingly asks the audience if they're shocked at what's buried underneath. Given the out-of-control atmosphere that is apparent even on the cell phone recording, perhaps Richards was *also* in shock at what he had percolating under the surface. He continues with the mocking, "They're going to arrest me for calling a Black man a nigger," suggesting that we all know that would not be the case. Under the protective wings of white supremacy, white folks get away with racism, he seems to be saying; although that is not to be the case for him. Real life, of course, is actually even direr in that white folks (police and "civilians" alike) often get away not only with racism, but also with murder, under the ideology of white supremacy.

One of the audience members in the attacked party has been shouting that Richards' behavior was uncalled for. As the patron appears to leave the show room, Richards calls out twice to question his leaving. It's a peculiar move at first glance. Why would he want the alleged heckler to stay? Perhaps because if the man and his friends left, his rant would have lost its target and may come to a stop, and then what? What could he possibly say to the rest of the audience at that point? As long as his target is in the room, Richards can keep going and delay the inevitable disastrous end. In his continued tirade, Richards appears to try to soften his words somewhat, although perhaps not consciously since he doesn't stop the vitriol altogether. Even so, he switches from "nigger" to "nigga," a term of endearment among Blacks in some interpretations, although not quite with that effect when spoken by a white man. A few back-and-forths later, he

calls the Black man “pal,” a decidedly softened term of address. Although less so when followed by “That’s what happens when you interrupt the white man, don’t you know?” Here, Richards clearly recognizes both who he is and what he represents. He is “a” white man as Michael Richards, and in this context he is also “the” white man as the symbol of white supremacy. It’s a claim of authority (*I am the man*), and it’s self-authenticating (*I am the man*). It is also a warning to the heckler; he feels the Black man should have recognized him as such, “don’t you know?” Don’t they teach you Black people these things? As Richards leaves the stage, he rambles, “...there’s still those words, those words, those words...” Words that lie dormant right under the surface or deep at the core. Words that do work. And for Richards, words that ended his live stand-up career.

The phenomenon of implosion occurred when Richards let the disruptive patrons get to him, and he then viciously attacked them verbally, offended the rest of the audience, *and* lost control of himself. Linguistic anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey interviewed Black comics after Richards’ breakdown and one comedian said he understood what happened to Richards, “‘He choked. I’ve done it. Every comic’s done it.’ [The comic] also understood how Richards ended up at a point of no return” (2006b:2). In my fieldwork, I also witnessed situations where the comic on stage was unable to handle an unexpected incident and stumbled in his or her response to the situation. As I mentioned earlier, when that happens it is not uncommon for the comic to come on harder, rather than back off and risk seeming weak. If they do the latter, they are bound to lose the audience and bomb. If they come on strongly, they have a chance of making it funny. Richards was unable to do that. Instead, he unleashed an apparent stream-of-consciousness racist rant invoking America’s history of lynching, using overtly racist slurs, asserting the power of whiteness, and doling out the punishment you get for “interrupting the white man.”

In the aftermath, Richards apologized in a live videocast on *Late Show with David Letterman*, while his friend and former *Seinfeld* colleague, Jerry Seinfeld, was a guest at the show (Zeller Jr. 2006).¹⁰⁷ Richards' meltdown was widely deplored and viewed with shock all over the media. Even conservative television and radio host Glenn Beck (known for making various bigoted remarks against different groups based on race, ethnicity, and gender) expressed amazement "that someone could still go to something like that" (YouTube 2006a). Richards' two main targets (Kyle Doss and Frank McBride) appeared on *The Today Show* with television journalist Matt Lauer to tell their side of what happened, and to ask for financial "reparations" with the legal aid of discrimination attorney Gloria Allred (YouTube 2006b). They also refused Richards' *Letterman* apology. So did Reverend Al Sharpton, but he agreed to meet with Richards to "star[t] a process to really deal with the continual problem of racism in this country" (CNN 2006). Richards apologized a second time in the company of Reverend Jesse Jackson, after discussing the incident on the latter's radio show (Associated Press 2006).¹⁰⁸

Contrary to Reverend Sharpton's wish that Richards' tirade would initiate a process of honest dialogue about race and racial healing, I contend that it may have accomplished closer to the opposite. Although Richards himself made a connection between the words he spoke and the broader world around him when he stated that he was concerned about additional rage and hate "coming through," not just against him, but against people of color (he mentioned hurricane Katrina), most responses in mainstream media focused on the anomaly of the event. Richards' exposure of the violent nucleus of white supremacy did not do anti-racist work by revealing how horrifying and destructive white supremacy is; it just allowed spectators to be comfortable with

¹⁰⁷ Link to apology on *Letterman*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6hYrmPUwknk>

¹⁰⁸ Richards also hired a public relations expert (Los Angeles Times 2006).

and reaffirmed in their own milder versions of it. In a sense, he enacted the affect of white supremacy—fear and hatred—and the audience (in the room and online) responded with dismay. How could he say something like that? How could he carry such racism inside of him? In Richards' case, implosion created an interaction between the comic and the audience that brought a racist binary into play. Since what he is saying is racist, and I would never say that, I'm not racist. There is no in between. Similarly, the wider audience that heard about and saw the clips of the meltdown could comfortably assume an I'm-not-racist, or even an anti-racist, position against his textbook enactment of "a racist."

With someone like Glenn Beck sounding like the voice of reason on a race matter, we can see how far off center Richards' incident was perceived to be, not only by the mainstream, but also by people on the political extreme. While Richards' outburst was egregious for sure, it was not off center. It was *at* the center. Michael Richards' meltdown did not challenge white supremacy by exposing its dirty core; rather, the tirade strengthened its hold by allowing everyone else to identify themselves as fundamentally different from Richards and therefore not needing to question themselves in relation to it. One might argue that because Richards' outburst was so uniformly rejected by the mainstream (to the point of ending his live stand-up career), what he exposed was *not* the center of hegemony. I firmly reject that interpretation. The violent core of hegemony (think, the nucleus of a sphere) is not the comfort zone of the mainstream (that's the volume of the sphere that surrounds the nucleus in this image). The comfort zone of the mainstream changes through history and with geographic locale, but in the present, that area of comfort is at a distance from the violent core. Seeing the core offends the mainstream as much as it offends those who push its edges. I realize that these speculations are theoretical at present, and therefore present an opportunity for future work.

While Richards' is a notorious and particularly bad case, in terms of viciousness, degree of overt racism, fame of the perpetrator, and career damage, he is not the only comic to lose it on stage in recent years. Black comedian Katt Williams had a different type of angry confrontation with a heckler at one of his shows, which I'll present next.

Performing US Imperialism (with a Twist of Misogyny)

In August of 2011, comedian Katt Williams engaged in a widely publicized interaction with a heckler that some critics felt got out of hand.¹⁰⁹ Katt Williams is the famous comic who appeared in the segment "A Night at the Club" in chapter 2 and became the butt of Marcella Arguello's joke about her height. At Williams' Phoenix show, he got into an almost eight-minute verbal altercation with an audience member of Mexican-American descent. In a later interview on CNN, Williams explained that he was setting up a joke to make the point that since Mexicans love America so much (apparent in his mind because there are so many Mexicans in the US), could they give Mexico to Black people, cause it's real close, and Black people can't go back to Africa because of the flies (CNN 2011a). Williams never got to deliver the joke in full, though, because the heckler yelled out, "Fuck America!" as Williams was setting it up. This is when he went off on a rant, parts of which I've transcribed here:

Williams: Are you Mexican? [inaudible reply from heckler] Do you know where Mexico is?

Heckler: *This* is Mexico!

Williams: No, this ain't Mexico! [pointing to the ground] It *used* to be Mexico, motherfucker, but now it's Phoenix, goddammit!
[both Williams and the heckler engage in lots of 'male posturing']

Williams: [chanting] USA! USA! USA! [while stomping his foot; audience chants with him]

...

Williams: Do you know where you're at, nigga? USA! USA! USA! I don't give a fuck!

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/ratch?v=4VQs-ts1qL0>

[more posturing and two large male security staff position themselves closely behind the heckler]

Williams: Fuck him! [as he walks around the circular stage; the audience cheers]
Motherfuckers think they can live in this country and then pledge allegiance to another country. If you love another country more than you love America, motherfucker, then get to steppin' in that bitch [rousing audience cheers]

Williams [addressing another audience member away from the heckler, presumably Black]: Do you remember when white people used to say, "Go back to Africa!?" And we had to tell them, "We don't want to?"

[Then, addressing the heckler] So if you love Mexico, bitch, get the fuck over there [loud cheers from the audience]

[Williams is taunting the heckler by jumping up and down waving a kerchief and then keeps walking around the stage]

Williams: As for my Mexican-American homies: "*Viva la revolución!*"

[Williams sings the Star Spangled Banner to the heckler with the audience joining him. He lets the audience continue singing, while he carries a statue of an American bald eagle that apparently was already on the stage, and places it on the stage in front of the heckler. He salutes the eagle while staring at the heckler]

...

Williams: We were slaves, bitch! [obviously referring to Black people] Y'all just work like it at the landscapers! [Williams high-fives a couple of audience members who seem to initiate the contact]

...

Heckler: Nigger! [pause] Nigger! [pause] Nigger!

Williams: It's not even racial! You're a bitch!

[Towards other audience members while pointing at the heckler, he says:] I don't give a fuck what race that is! That's a pussy!¹¹⁰

[Shortly thereafter the heckler leaves the venue.]

These excerpts of the heckling incident begin with Williams asking the heckler if he is Mexican and does he know where Mexico is. The heckler responds with a claim that is a critique in itself, "*This is Mexico!*" Here, an audience member actually pushes the edge of a hegemonic discourse of American Imperialism by reminding Williams and the rest of the audience that Phoenix and the state of Arizona used to belong to Mexico.¹¹¹ At this, Williams' tone of voice

¹¹⁰ Williams' comment suggests he finds gender-based slurs even more offensive than race-based ones.

¹¹¹ Of course, it used to belong to the indigenous American population prior to that, a fact that is often conveniently omitted from this argument (see Kosek 2006 for a nuanced analysis of these dynamics in Arizona's neighboring state of New Mexico).

becomes increasingly irate and his demeanor is serious-looking and pissed off. He rejects the validity of the heckler's claim to Arizona, by pointing out that while it used to be Mexico, it no longer is, in a sense perversely gloating over the US victory in the Mexican-American War in 1848 (perverse because the victory he gloats over took place while Black people were still enslaved). Williams' comment also legitimizes US imperialist war conquests. The dance of male posturing that both Williams and the heckler then engage in, combined with the rhetoric, visually illustrates the links (and conflation) between American images of masculinity, personal violence, war, and patriotism. As if on cue, Williams then invokes the support of the US federation in its entirety by chanting "USA! USA! USA!" The audience keeps the invocation going, showing both their support for Williams the performer and Williams the American patriot, while he continues his skewering of the heckler.

"Do you know where you're at, nigga? USA! USA! USA!" The term "nigga" is not used in a friendly way in this instance; rather, Williams is using the word as a pejorative (also perversely, since he's well aware of its use against his own people). After more taunting USA chants, Williams says, "I don't give a fuck!" as in, I don't give a fuck what you think or say. He performatively vocalizes America's reputation as a bully in foreign policy (especially in relation to non-Western countries). Williams then deploys the tired if-you-don't-love-America-then-go-back-to-your-country rhetoric, as if people primarily migrate to the US and stay out of *love* for America. In an odd shift, Williams then compares Blacks and Mexicans by noting that when Blacks were told by whites to go back to Africa, "...we had to tell them, 'We don't want to[!]" The insinuation here is that Black people loved the US so much they wanted to stay, and by that logic Mexicans who don't love it here can go back to Mexico. Then, in another odd shift, he calls out to his "Mexican-American homies: *Viva la Revolución!*" He's clearly seeking to align

himself with the other Mexican-Americans in the audience and at the same time isolate the heckler as separate from them. What revolution he's referring to and how it fits with his imperialist and patriotic stance is unclear. At this point, Williams' rant is venturing into the absurd; he's talking like a lunatic. That is where he really begins to lose it, even though he doesn't implode fully like Michael Richards did in the previous example.

Williams continues to invoke the US federation, invoking the nation-state both as a way of displaying power and as personal taunt. He now does this by singing the Star-Spangled Banner directly to the heckler, with the audience joining him. And while the audience sings, Williams carries a large statue of a bald eagle that was sitting in the center of the stage and places it directly in front of the heckler. He salutes the eagle while mad dogging the heckler.¹¹² The fact that the eagle statue was already on stage shows that Williams' patriotic and exceptionalist sentiment was a "pre-existing condition" and not brought forth solely by the heckling interaction. This visual deployment of patriotic symbolism is powerful, and the audience responds with increased cheering. In the public eye, Williams' primary offense was his next comment, where he says that Black people used to be actual slaves whereas "Y'all [Mexicans/Latinos] just work like it at the landscapers!" That comment in itself, however, is rather tame compared to what comics say on stages all around LA any night of the week. Here, however, the insult was personally directed at a Mexican-American audience member and recorded on camera for others to see later. The audience overall does not seem to respond to Williams remark negatively, though.

In the last excerpt, the heckler resorts to calling Williams, "Nigger!" As in the earlier case of Michael Richards, the word symbolizes the violent core of white supremacy. It holds the

¹¹² Mad dogging means to stare at someone as if you're mad and crazy.

violence of its history and it deploys that violence every time it's used, both symbolically and psychologically. Here, then, both the heckler and Williams have become complicit in each others' oppression—two fools who are both under the boot of white supremacy fighting each other using the tools of the power system that holds them each as inferior and less human. While writer and civil rights activist Audre Lorde famously argued that, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” the oppressed can readily use the master’s tools to try to dismantle each other (2007[1984]:110). Williams responds to the slurs by dismissing the antagonism as not racial, “It’s not even racial! You’re a bitch!” and that regardless of what race “that” is, “That’s a pussy!” Where the heckler touched on the core of white supremacy, Williams tries to outdo him by calling him derogatory terms for women, “bitch” and “pussy.” Worse than being called by the N-word, then, is to label a man with female slurs. The word “bitch,” of course, conveys the image of a female dog, an animal worth less than a (hu)man. “Pussy” indexes a vagina, the sexualized symbol of a woman and also of her objectification and status as less worthy than a man. The word also suggests cowardice, weakness, and effeminacy. In Williams’ use of these words, there is no elaboration. The words in this context do their work without any explanation necessary. They stand alone as the ultimate insult against another man of any race or ethnicity.

Williams created quite a stir with this incident and his way of dealing with the heckler. He not only appeared on CNN, he was also the subject of discussion in national media outlets (Huffington Post 2011). His publicist issued an apology (CNN 2011b), which Williams later withdrew as not authorized by him (CNN 2011a). Instead, he insisted that he was “not allowed to apologize,” because as a stand-up comedian he sells “uncensored thought” (CNN 2011b). He also made it clear that his remarks were not anti-Mexican, but anti the heckler in question. He

claimed that with the large Latino audience at the venue, had his performance insulted Mexicans in general, he would not have left alive (CNN 2011b).

Williams' performance in Phoenix demonstrates an extreme version of attacking a heckler in order to silence them. In this case, Williams eventually succeeded in that respect, since the heckler was escorted out of the building. And he most certainly turned the audience against the heckler right from the start. That is what allowed him to pursue the heckler so ferociously and at such length. In a sense, even though he was pissed off, he also played the hand he was dealt very skillfully in terms of responding to the audience dynamics in the room overall. This is so regardless of what one thinks of what Williams actually said. What he said, however, is an example of how victims of one of the logics of white supremacy can become complicit in the oppression of those victimized by another (Smith 2006:69). In this case, Williams, who as a Black man is subjected to various forms of anti-Black racism and white supremacy, perpetuates anti-immigrant prejudice and anti-Latino racism against a perceived non-ally of the United States. And the heckler returns the favor with anti-Black racist slurs. While the audience clearly was riled up and seemingly supportive of Williams, the racist and misogynistic display of American imperialism under the guise of patriotism offended many who were not at the show, but who saw the recorded clip (including Arizona civil rights activists, see Duke 2011), hence the publicist's apology on Williams' behalf and the CNN appearance. Contrary to the Michael Richards case, where Richards was the anomalous element that allowed the audience (in the room and online) to stay comfortably in their own racial views, in Williams' case, the heckler comes across as the anomaly. As an anomaly, he did not pose a threat to any hegemonic discourses (even though he did push the edge in one instance). Rather, his heckling allowed

Williams to reinforce those discourses with the overwhelming support of the audience at the show, who as a collective did not appear conflicted in endorsing Williams' position.

Williams' set was an instance of implosion because he was angry and discursively partook in the inherent violence of US imperialism (which overlaps with its colonial enterprises); because he reproduced and invigorated racist and misogynistic discourses, while in both cases targeting the victims; and because he did not in any way critique existing unequal power structures—he endorsed them. He wasn't out of control like Richards though. He did come across as angry, yes, but he neither lost control of himself or of the audience. Implosion, then, does not have to mean that the comic bombs. Michael Richards did both; he imploded *and* he bombed. Williams imploded, but he still killed the show (at least in the segment that was recorded). Both Richards and Williams exposed the violence of racism-white supremacy in different manifestations. Williams also touched on the violence of misogyny at the very end of the clip. In the next section, Daniel Tosh exposes the violent core of misogyny in his interaction with a female heckler.

“Rape Jokes are Always Hilarious”

At a show at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles in 2012, white comedian Daniel Tosh (of Comedy Central's *Tosh.0* fame) reportedly performed a string of rape jokes (a fairly regular part of his sets) and then declared that rape jokes are always hilarious (Corneau 2012). One female audience member yelled out, “Actually, rape jokes are never funny!” (Cookies for Breakfast 2012), to which Tosh reportedly responded, “Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her...” (Corneau 2012). Tosh apologized via Twitter a couple of days after the show, and claimed to have been quoted out of

context. He said that “the point [he] was making before [he] was heckled was [that] there are awful things in the world but you can still make jokes about them” (Corneau 2012).

From a comic’s perspective, Tosh should be able to make one outrageous rape joke after another without being heckled. I have not heard a single comic, male or female, disagree with this general premise. Comedian KT Tatara spoke to this issue in a status update on Facebook (2/21/12) a few months before the Tosh incident. He wrote,

Let's see...don't talk about religion because people get offended, don't talk about politics because people get offended, don't talk about race because people get offended, don't talk about women because they get offended, don't talk about animals because people get offended, don't talk about sports because people get offended, don't talk about people's looks because people get offended...what does that leave us with? I guess men and plants are the only things to safely talk about. Don't you think maybe it's time that we reevaluate what we, as a society, get offended at? Seems like a much better solution than just making a long list of things to not say.

Even though many comics share Tatara’s frustration with political correctness and the policing of what comics say, not all would agree with how Tosh handled the heckling woman in the audience.¹¹³ They would understand Tosh’s predicament, being on stage and having someone loudly criticize your material. But, they would probably also be well aware that Tosh has issues with women, something he himself seems to agree with.

While I was not present when the exchange at the Laugh Factory took place, I had seen Tosh at a show at the Improv on a previous occasion, where he revealed his awareness of how he talks about women. He said, “Women like sex a lot more than me.” A woman in the audience hooted, “Yeah!” He addressed her (and this was actually really funny): “Trust me, lady, you’re not going to like where this is going [audience laughter]. You may be new to my comedy. I have

¹¹³ Comics regularly use free-speech arguments when they are challenged on things they say on stage. I’ve heard various comics say that stand-up comedy is all that’s left of free speech. When they say this, they often do so to silence the right to free speech of their critics, which suggests the free-speech rhetoric they deploy is vacuous and self-serving.

a very gender-specific slant that I like to stick with [audience laughter]. I'm not known for being nice to women... [audience laughter]."¹¹⁴ The interaction shows that Tosh is well aware of his sexism and that he's "not nice to women."

In sum, a famous comedian performs a string of rape jokes (not *uncommon*), is heckled (common), attacks the heckler by suggesting it would be funny if she were instantly gang raped (not common), receives a strong backlash in the Twittersverse and on other online sites including the heckler's blog (common), and subsequently (sort of) apologizes (also common).¹¹⁵ The unusual part here, then, is Tosh's verbal violation of the heckling woman. This is where I argue he imploded. His aggressive verbal attack mobilized what's at the core of misogyny, the violent act of coercive sex, made all the more vile by the gang-rape invocation. Tosh used the threat of sexual violence to silence a woman who dared speak out against his assertion that rape jokes, that is, jokes about her and other women's sexual violation, are always funny. Many comics would argue that if she had a problem with what Tosh said, she should have left rather than heckle him and disrupt the show. In this analysis, however, I'm not interested in what she should

¹¹⁴ It struck me as odd that when I saw this interaction in the show room, I found it as funny as the rest of the audience seemed to. How can someone admitting that they're not known for being nice to women, that is, they are known for being sexist and misogynistic, be funny at any time? On that particular night and specifically, in the particular context in which those comments were delivered, it was. Linguistic anthropologists Marjorie Goodwin and Charles Goodwin argue that, "displays of emotion must be analyzed by embedding [them] within a larger sequence of action" (2000:242). That applies to stand-up comedy as much as elsewhere, and carries particular salience in that the terms of acceptable action (and interaction) are different in stand-up. There is more leeway in what you can say, and statements can come across as funny when they wouldn't elsewhere. Aside from that general assertion that context matters, I have no specific explanation for why I found it funny and laughed at it.

¹¹⁵ I say "sort of" because Tosh clearly felt that his words were taken out of context and misconstrued, in which case he presumably did not think he had anything to apologize for, but to appease his critics he chose to do so anyway (and perhaps he cares about his gig on Comedy Central, which I don't blame him for). It read as the standard celebrity/politician non-apology, "I'm sorry you felt offended..."

or shouldn't have done.¹¹⁶ My concern lies with the discourses Tosh deployed as a performer in trying to silence her and the work he participated in by doing so, regardless of whether one thinks her heckling right or wrong.

After this incident hit cyber space, a number of well-known male comedians tweeted their support for Tosh, and found it regrettable that he had apologized. The comedians who responded showed their support by attacking the woman for being a heckler and for being easily offended (in their opinion). One comic lamented that Tosh had to apologize to a “self-aggrandizing, idiotic blogger” (Corneau 2102). Another male comic added insult to injury by tweeting another rape joke about the incident, “This Daniel Tosh rape joke controversy really has me second guessing some of my rapes” (Corneau 2102). Yet another comedian commented that, “If you journey through this life easily offended by other people's words I think it's best for everyone if you just kill yourself” (Corneau 2012). In their support of Tosh, then, they specifically sought to attack the woman who had protested, rather than simply argue (as they could have) that Tosh had the right to say whatever he wanted, or that heckling requires strong responses. Supporting Tosh by upholding his right to say whatever he wants on stage was not sufficient to reset the gender power (im)balance back to normal. The woman who dared speak up and therefore to be “out of her place,” had to be put down and back “in place,” in order for the hegemonic power balance to be fully restored. In this case, however, the woman who heckled didn't walk home feeling powerless. She used her blog to out Tosh and caused an online media storm. Tosh provides an example of a comic asserting a heteronormative and patriarchal social structure by literally advocating for sexual violence against a woman who is sitting right in front

¹¹⁶ The woman did actually address this in her blog post. She said, “I felt that sitting there and saying nothing, or leaving quietly, would have been against my values as a person and as a woman.” (Cookies for Breakfast 2012).

of him and in public. The call for action makes it different from most rape jokes, which generally do not address someone in the audience. Of course, while Tosh was trying to be funny, his was not an actual joke, but a response to a heckler who objected to his statement *about* rape jokes. Through his online supporters, the incident also shows how sexism and misogyny on stage travel off stage to do the work of maintaining male power and domination. I showed another side of this discourse in the discussion about threats to women on tour in chapter 1, with one female comedian describing the terror of having a drunken male fan banging on her hotel door in the middle of the night.

Since there is no recording of Tosh's set to my knowledge, it is not known how the audience in the show room reacted to his gang-rape suggestion. We do know that the woman he targeted was offended and expressed herself in a subsequent blog post. We also know that many comedians came out in support of Tosh, while many others harshly criticized his and their comments. To those who agreed with Tosh's statement, or at the very least came to his defense even if they disapproved of what he said (but kept it to themselves), Tosh, like Williams, did not represent the anomalous. The heckled woman did. She was out of her place; she did not belong. Therefore, what she said could be dismissed. It posed not threat to and did not challenge the expected order of things. The status quo of gender hegemony remained intact.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown three widely publicized examples of what a comedy performance that implodes can look like. My objective for introducing these cases in support of my argument about pushing the edge is to show that when comics go in the opposite direction, and unwittingly remove the veneer from racist and misogynistic discourses, seeing expressions

of their violent cores does *not* have the effect of dismantling or challenging the discursive edifices. Instead, implosions seem to strengthen these discourses, or at least leave them intact, by allowing viewers to see themselves as distant from the ugliness they've witnessed without further self-reflection. Implosions solidify that which they reveal when what they reveal is perceived as anomalous.

To end this chapter, I wish to acknowledge that many comedians realize that they and their jokes don't exist in a cultural vacuum, that what they talk about and how they talk affects people. Their words do work, and when their words are racist and misogynistic, that work does violence. The fact that those words are spoken on comedy stages and meant to be funny, as jokes or off-the-cuff crowd work, does not exempt the speakers from the responsibility of what they say. Comedian Michael Lawrence worded this well in a Facebook commentary (no date):

I think comics are allowed to say whatever they want but have to accept that they are accountable for the negative effects that their jokes have. Go ahead and do jokes about the bombings in Boston or the shootings in Connecticut but deal with the negative repercussions and know that even if you think of yourself as more of a comedian for telling them, some might think of you as less of a person. And that's as much their right as it's yours to poke fresh wounds.

Although Lawrence did not specifically speak about the incidents I've highlighted in this chapter, his conclusion is still relevant and applies to crowd work as much as to bona fide jokes. Comedians can say whatever they want and they do; they just can't expect to do it without being held accountable.

The End of the Show

On August 11, 2014, world-famous comedian and actor Robin Williams committed suicide. Dead at 63 years old, Williams had suffered from severe depression, and had spoken openly about his lifelong struggle with alcohol and other drugs throughout the years. His death served as a chilling reminder to comics everywhere of the struggles and perils they often face with regards to their health and wellbeing. This is the shadow side of comedy. It's a side audiences rarely encounter, but it's only one step behind in the consciousness of every comedian I know. Veteran comedian Alonzo Bodden shed light on some of what hides in that shadow in a Facebook post after Williams' suicide:

I feel for Robin Williams and my sympathy goes out to his family, but I can't take another post of a comic saying I'm depressed too. ENOUGH.
Guess what comics? We all are. We all have depression and anger and loneliness and whatever other sad situation you want to share. Don't believe it? Ask the people who live and work with us. They know we're sick.
Drug addiction? Yep. Alcoholism? Yep. Check those off too.
We're all broken toys.
I'm a recovering drug addict alcoholic who goes thru periods of depression and have probably reached the point I'll never be in a successful relationship, and you know what? I WOULDN'T TRADE IT FOR THE FUNNY.
See that's the thing, I believe without the dark side I wouldn't be funny and I think the dirty little secret is [that] no real comic would make that trade.
Give up funny to be happy all the time? Are you kidding? Hell no.
Happy is overrated.
We explore the darkness and misery and hate, to tell you what's funny about it. That's how we take the power out of it and help people deal with it. I'm not trying to make us saints here, I'm just telling you what we do. Some of the funniest people I know are the least well adjusted.
Now, it's definitely tragic when we lose brilliant comics and good people like Robin Williams, Rich Jeni, Greg Giraldo, [and] Mitch Hedberg to drugs, alcohol, and suicide. I'm sure if he didn't take drugs, Pryor would've been around longer, but sadly it happens. Thank God they were here and funny for as long as they were.
Stop it comics! People know we're broken. The last thing I want is a crowd of people looking at me saying "Don't laugh; he's really sad under that joke."
I have a friend who's a brilliant musician & composer. He's got a beautiful family, tons

of money, millions of fans, and he's deaf in one ear. Yep, has everything except hearing in both ears. Doctors have told him they could fix his hearing, and you know what he said? "What about F sharp?" He said, "what if I get my hearing back, but lose the F sharp note," or some other aspect of music he hears. He won't risk his music. Well, guess what? I think the one thing comics aren't saying about depression is we are willing to risk it because we're more afraid of losing the funny. I don't want to lose my F sharp. We'll miss you Robin.

Bodden's touching and powerful tribute to Robin Williams and the work of comedy brings to the fore both the hazards of being a comedian, and the compelling force that drives comics to take the stage and speak their hearts and minds. Bodden's first point is that being a comedian involves risk. While he specifically speaks of the risks of depression and various forms of addiction, the lifestyle of a comic is risky in other ways too. I gained insight into some of these during my fieldwork when three comedians I knew of died.

First was Patrice O'Neal. In October of 2011, O'Neal suffered a massive stroke that eventually killed him a month later. New-York based O'Neal was a comics' comic. He was seen as underappreciated by the entertainment industry, but comics loved him and respected him greatly. O'Neal kept things real. Not everyone agreed with his take on things, but you could always count on him saying what he felt without sugar coating, whether he talked about race or women or anything else. I never had the chance to meet O'Neal, but I felt the impact of his death as it reverberated through the comedy community across the nation and deeply touched comics I worked with.

Kibibi Dillon died next. Kibibi's passing hit particularly close to home because I had just interviewed her for this project two weeks before. She died in a freak auto accident. Kibibi was a young Black comedian who had left a career in education to pursue her passion in comedy. She was starting to get some appreciation and build a reputation in LA and San Francisco for her bold and funny jokes, often about race, which is how our paths crossed. A vibrant woman, Dillon

was full of heart and full of laughter. She was a “conscious sista’,” and her critical consciousness fed her comedy. She told me that her dream was to open for legendary comic Paul Mooney, a comedian with an acerbic tongue if there ever was one. That did not scare her though, as she could deliver the naked truth in stark and unvarnished terms herself. Her death was sudden, unexpected, and shocking, and the news spread far beyond those who had met her in person.

Lastly, Angelo Bowers was killed in a late-night car accident when a drunk driver hit the vehicle he was traveling in. Bowers worked the LA comedy scene, and I saw him perform once at the Ice House in Pasadena. He was a friend of most of the comedians I worked with. He was an understated comic, low-key, and known for his witty one-liners. They said Bowers was a “true” comic in the sense that he did not seek to cross over into other forms of entertainment and was not pursuing fame or fortune. He just loved doing stand-up, and he was good at it. Word had it that Sarah Silverman had seen him perform and asked him to stay in contact cause she liked what he did. I found this out from a comedian friend based in New York who had never met Bowers. My friend expressed the kind of shock and sadness one might expect from someone who lost a member of the extended family, which is not surprising, because when tragedy hits, comedians typically interact with each other as a community.

Aside from my desire to recognize and pay tribute to these three comics whose lives and deaths touched me in some way, their passing also points to the risks comedians face in their careers. It’s not all fun and games. In addition to the depression and addictions Alonzo Bodden mentions, the late nights that comedians keep pose indirect threats, such as being out on the road when more drivers are likely to be under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Comics who are serious about their work try to hit stages most every night, and in Los Angeles that means driving a lot. Therefore, the odds of facing a drunk driver are much higher for comedians than for those

of us who normally only stay out late once in a while. And even if comics get through traffic unscathed, they often suffer stress and ill health in other ways (financial woes, lack of health insurance, poor diets, lack of exercise, drugs and alcohol, etc.). They share some of these difficulties with many other people in the US, of course, but these issues seem exacerbated in the entertainment (and music) industry.

Bodden's description of comedy work, "We explore the darkness and misery and hate, to tell you what's funny about it. That's how we take the power out of it and help people deal with it," is also a good way to describe what "pushing the edge" entails from a different perspective. Using Bodden's frame, when comedians push the edge, they investigate the shadow side of human beings, our cultural behavior, and the social structures and systems we've created (both the ones in society more broadly and their manifestations in the show room). In exploring the darkness, they shine light on it, like Solomon Georgio did in telling the story of colonialism to explain why he has an Italian last name. In letting themselves dive into the depths of human misery, they resurface with nuggets of "insanity" that we can laugh at, the way Leslie Jones did in her joke connecting her value as a woman to that of being a breeder during slavery. And in unpacking and making fun of hatred, they disempower it and ease the affective impact of oppression, like Sammy Obeid did when he joked about a Middle Easterner and a Mexican both telling him to go back to his country, thinking he was the Other in both instances. The disempowering aspect is critical, and the comedians whose work I've discussed accomplish this, in part, through joke content that challenges mainstream discourses and ideologies. White supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity are three such discourses that are foundational to a collective American identity, as well as to the institutional structure of American society. Stated differently, white supremacy and patriarchy are constitutive of America (see Carbado 2005 on

how racism naturalizes people into becoming American), and comics who are on the receiving end of these oppressive forces (and some who aren't) push back against them through performance.

The racial edges that emerge as salient today are both reshaped versions of older forms, and direct recycled iterations of the past. The reshaped edges are ones that abut white privilege and its presumption of white normativity. White privilege has operated for a long time as part of white supremacy, but has not been part of mainstream conversations until rather recently. The shadow side of the privileging of whiteness is the systemic exclusion of people of color from participation in the democratic process writ large, which also is not a new phenomenon. One may think of current forms of exclusion as “Jim Crow 2.0”—the “upgraded” version. Several of the comedians in this text challenge white privilege as well as racism more broadly (think Leslie Jones’s and W. Kamau Bell’s performances).

Racial stereotypes also draw from older forms of racist tropes (like the images of hypersexual Black males, subservient Asian women, and “hot” Latinas for example), oftentimes directly mimicking these, but also adding contemporary updates, such as the Middle-Eastern terrorist label. These stereotypes are also still intersectional, with sexist racism or racialized sexism prominent throughout, and directed at both men and women. Lastly, the unchanged, but perhaps now more publicized, ubiquity of police violence and institutional complicity in condoning violence against people of color—Black folks in particular—stands out as one edge that comics also engage, usually to sympathetic audiences. I have not included examples of this here, as these more publicized killings really exploded onto a national platform (and therefore

also onto comedy stages) with the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin, long after my fieldwork ended.¹¹⁷

Comics who challenge and subvert white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity in their acts also do so by reading the energy in the room and finding that affective zone at the outskirts of mainstream discourses I call “the edge.” They push the edge using joke content, affect and performativity as primary tools. Productive affective patterns include an emphasis on words and speech that establish presence, that is, a feeling of personal connection between the comic and the audience, and often also words that have a charge. Related is the display of genuineness and honesty (which, for instance, can be done through a sincere identity expression), in order to make oneself likeable. To successfully push the edge, comedians have to attune to the particular context and atmosphere they find themselves in; they have to read the energy in the room. This includes an attunement, not just to the audience, but also to their own frame of mind and affect in that moment. From this position, comics take advantage of discursive gaps, slippages, and zones of friction, in order to push audience members to entertain possibly new and alternative interpretations of the taken-for-granted. The affective pushing may include playing with absurdity and reenactments (e.g. W. Kamau Bell’s performance as a slave master and Aparna Nancherla’s demand for an apology for imperialism from her friend who returned a DVD), as well as performing “the obvious” in ways that implicitly question its obviousness (like Amir K and Sugar Sammy did when they pretended to be the Middle-Eastern terrorists people expected them to be).

Comics also work their identities in ways that challenge authenticating gazes. Which performative strategies work depends on audience and context. The reading of the energy in the

¹¹⁷ Although George Zimmerman is not a police officer, I include him here because of the institutional complicity in his case, which is one we frequently see in killings of Black people by the police.

room is also crucial for this. Forms of linguistic coding play a significant role here too. On one occasion a white comic performing at a Black show mistakenly referred to rapper 50 Cent as “50 Cents.” The mistakenly added “s” at the end indexed “not Black,” but the comic immediately corrected the faux pas by saying the rapper’s name properly, “50 Cent,” and then apologizing and pointing out that “I’m white.” The crowd laughed heartily at this self-deprecation, and he was able to continue his set without audience resistance. He displayed a form of racial sincerity that the audience could appreciate. Deliberate expressions of identity often also involve some form of reproduction of stereotypes for subversive purposes (e.g. Leslie Jones and Margaret Cho), although they don’t have to (as Solomon Georgio and Kevin Avery exemplified).

By paying attention to the “edges” of hegemonic discourses of race and gender, and how comedians push them, we can deepen our understanding of how discourses of white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity function in America today, as well as uncover affective (and effective) strategies for subverting these discourses. The key points in my argument have been, first, to establish the existence and location of “the edge” as an affective perimeter of the hegemonic discourses in the show room. Second, to show that this edge is unfixed; it fluctuates, and can therefore be manipulated (typically by comics, but occasionally also by audience members). Third, to illustrate what it looks like when comics manipulate the edge in ways that involve some form of social critique and “push the edge.” The degree of pushing comics can do in any particular set depends on multiple variables (e.g. audience demographics, the comic’s performance skills and ability to read the room, placement in the lineup) and context. Lastly, to show that when comedians push the edge, they reveal (1) the affective and performative dimensions of discourse, here, of race and gender discourses; (2) that hegemony is not only oppressive on a gross level, but also does violence on a subtle and intimate affective level; and

(3) that this subtle impact of hegemonic discourses, and affective resistance and challenges against it, can be studied and analyzed by social scientists.

The work of comedians who push the edges of white supremacy and patriarchy becomes part of broader anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-heteronormative discourses through social media, film, and television, with more or less impact. Different forms of laughter and silence are the main (imperfect) indicators for whether the audience “gets” the joke or not, but what exactly they get and what they already had is impossible to know. However, with the current ubiquity of social media, audiences increasingly leave an online trail of comments and feedback. In those instances, the discursive effects of pushing edges stand out in greater relief. We saw this most noticeably in the case of Leslie Jones in chapter 3. Margaret Cho has been part of those discourses throughout her career, and comedians, like W. Kamau Bell, Baron Vaughn, Aparna Nancherla, Solomon Georgio, and Maz Jobrani in chapter 3, have also contributed to these broader conversations through their television appearances, blogs, online articles, and print books (see Cho 2001, 2005, and Jobrani 2015). On an individual level, doing material that pushes the edge gives comics an outlet for their personal frustrations with having to deal with the various forms of oppression they encounter from living in America. Performing jokes that push the edge is also a way of vocally and publically challenging these oppressions, both for the comic and for audience members who may experience similar incursions. For the comedian, it’s a direct act of agency. For the audience members, it’s a vicarious experience while in the show room that may inspire action once they leave the show (e.g. the female blogger who exposed Daniel Tosh’s gang rape advocacy in the previous chapter).

The work I’ve presented suggests that affective edges can be located in other types of discourses and areas of life as well. Studies of these could greatly enrich the concept as such, as

well as what it means to challenge it. Scholarship on art and performance; race, gender, and identity politics; and protest and resistance, would also be able to explore deeper aspects of hegemonic race and gender discourses by considering the edge as an analytic. I also propose that different forms of anti-racist and anti-sexist work can benefit from including an affective and deliberately performative dimension.

For the continued exploration of the edge, I wish to emphasize the importance of ethnography. It is through sustained ethnographic research that the edge emerges for observation, in my case, by witnessing repeated performances and ones that failed to repeat, as well as through long-term interaction and dialogue with comics about their work. Through ethnography, the world of comedy and life in the show room became a familiar landscape and the details of that scenery became visible. And it is through ethnographic research that the language to describe the edge and talk about it organically developed. It is also because of ethnography that I was able to laugh my way through eighteen months of research and appreciate the courage comedians demonstrate every time they take the stage. For that, I am immensely grateful.

The Tag

Out of the several thousand jokes I heard during my research, I could only include a small selection in this text. I had to cut many very good ones. I'd like to end with one of them—one of my favorite jokes by Sammy Obeid—because it nicely touches on several of the topics

I've discussed, and it also pushes the edge. It's a bear joke...

“One of my white friends is very environmentally political,” says Obeid. “He wants to save the polar bears. ‘Polar bears are just like people,’ he says. ‘When the ice caps melt, where are the polar bears going to go?’ If polar bears are just like people,” responds Obeid, “I’m sure they’re going to be okay, right? [pause] I mean... I figure they’ll just take land from the grizzly bears, have the black bears do all the work, and have the panda bears build them railroads. [pause] Some of you are like, ‘Oh, shit!’ [brief pause, then Obeid responds:] It’s not racist! It’s about bears! There are no bears here! It’s a hypothetical where bears make a country. Call it Abearica! They elect a half polar bear, half black bear for president, Obearma! It’s still a bear joke!”

#dropsthemis

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