Title

Double Binds and Punchlines: An Examination of Women in Stand Up Comedy and Television Writers' Rooms

Permalink

Author

Sargent, Amberia

Publication Date

2019

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Double Binds and Punchlines:

An Examination of Women's Experiences

in Stand up Comedy and Television Writers' Rooms

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Sociology

by

Amberia Sargent

2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Double Binds and Punchlines:

An Examination of Women's Experiences

in Stand up Comedy and Television Writers' Rooms

by

Amberia Sargent

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles 2019

Professor Abigail Cope Saguy, Chair

In this dissertation, I examine how double binds around sexuality and gender norms shape how women navigate sexual harassment and threats to their professional identities in stand up comedy and television writers' rooms. I argue that the workplace dilemmas women confront in these spaces are forms of gender discrimination. I explain the ways the constraints women face and the responses they deploy are informed by race, sexuality, physical attractiveness, tenure, and relationship status.

The dissertation of Amberia Sargent is approved.

Karida L. Brown

Darnell Montez Hunt

Mignon Moore

Abigail Cope Saguy, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

To Amy

Table of Contents

AMBERIA SARGENT

EDUCATION

2013   M.A.   University of California, Los Angeles
                        Department of Sociology

2010   M.A.   California State University, Northridge,
                        Departments of Sociology and Pan African Studies

2008   B.A.   Chapman University, Department of Sociology

PUBLICATIONS

Darnell Hunt, Ana Christina Ramon, Michael Tran, **Amberia Sargent,** and Debanjan Roychoudhury. 2018 Hollywood Diversity Report: Five Years of Progress and Missed Opportunities. UCLA College, Social Sciences.

Darnell Hunt, Ana Christina Ramon, Michael Tran, **Amberia Sargent** and Vanessa Diaz. 2017 Hollywood Diversity Report: Setting the Record Straight. The Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA.

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

2013   Graduate Research Mentorship, University of California, Los Angeles

2011-2015   Eugene V. Cota-Robles Fellowship, University of California, Los Angeles

2011-2013   Graduate Summer Research Fellowship, University of California, Los Angeles

PRESENTATIONS

2017   "2017 Hollywood Diversity Report." Bunche Circle of Thought.

2014   "Black Brides, White Weddings: How race and gender are constructed in the wedding ritual." Black Doctoral Network Conference

2014   "Black Brides, White Weddings: How race and gender are constructed in the wedding ritual." American Sociological Association Annual Meeting

2012	"Black Brides, White Weddings: How Black women conceptualize their dream weddings." UCLA Thinking Gender Conference
2010	"Always a Bridesmaid: Black women and the mainstream wedding industry." California Sociological Association Conference
2009	"Achieving the Dream by Any Means Necessary: Prefigurative Framing in the American Civil Rights and Black Power Movements" Pacific Sociological Association Conference

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of California, Los Angeles

Summer 2016: Instructor, The Sociology of Gender

Spring 2016: Instructor, Gender Performativity and Work

Winter 2016: Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Sociology

Fall 2015: Teaching Assistant, American Racism

Summer 2015: Instructor, The Sociology of Gender

Summer 2014: Instructor, The Social Organization of Black Communities

Summer 2013: Instructor, The Social Organization of Black Communities

Spring 2013: Teaching Assistant, Introduction to Sociology

Winter 2013: Teaching Assistant, Social Organization of Black Communities

Fall 2012: Teaching Assistant, Sociology of Gender

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

University of California, Los Angeles

2017-2018	Graduate Student Researcher, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies
2012-2015	Graduate Student Researcher, Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies
2013-2014	Graduate Student Researcher, Professor Abigail Saguy

Setting the Stage: An Introduction to Women in Comedy

One year into my stand up comedy career, I performed on a talent showcase to become a

paid regular[i] at a prominent comedy club in Los Angeles by recommendation of two veteran[ii]

men comedians (also paid regulars at the comedy club). After performing, comedians await a

meeting with the club owner for feedback and to receive news about an offer for the paid regular

position. After my set[iii], the club manager called me into the hallway and said, "Your

performance was good, but you need to smile more. You're so pretty." I was shocked then

offended. Then overcome with a wave of embarrassment, hoping the comedians lingering within

an earshot didn't hear the manager's comments. Despite the disappointment of not having

received constructive commentary on my work, rather a note about emoting happiness and

embodying attractiveness; I smiled, agreed, and told him I would work on it. He replied, "See,

there's the smile I'm talking about." As a novice comedian, I feared any form of resistance

would constrain future opportunities for consistent stage time. I, therefore, deployed

graciousness, accepting the sexist critique with my professional trajectory in mind.

My dissertation project investigates how women in comedy respond to the embodied

demands of masculinized work cultures in their gender management strategies and performance

of work. While we know that women confront myriad challenges around self-definition and

representation onstage as performers (Fulton 2004; Gilbert 1997; Mizejewski 2015) we know

less about how they navigate interactional challenges offstage. It is this offstage labor- building

relationships with fellow comics, hanging out in comedy clubs, and engaging with club staff and

---

[i] A paid regular is a comedian that receives regular performance spots and is on payroll at a comedy club
[ii] A veteran comedian has over 15 years of experience. Tenure is often conflated with age in this regard,
where older comedians are assumed to have years of experience.
[iii] A set is a comedian's performance.

audience members that helps comics secure future professional opportunities. Indeed, stand-up comedy's constantly shifting contexts tests women's ability to deploy acceptable self-presentations in front of different audiences, with fellow comedians and club bookers, and other professional gatekeepers. But the pervasive narrative that women are not funny reinforces gender stereotypes about women's competence as comedians, and gender-based stigmas around sexuality levied against women jeopardize valuable workplace interactions and often leave women vulnerable to harassment and sexual assault. Moreover, the informal nature of comedy, where political correctness is subordinate to jokes, often protects inappropriate behavior, and women have few avenues to push back against threats to their bodies and affronts to their professional identities. As a form of precarious labor where women are hypervisible, stand up comedy also has no intuitional protections against harassment, such as human resources agencies or formal ranking structures where comics can report objectionable conduct. How women manage complicated interactions in these informal spaces bears significant weight on their professional trajectories.

Women confront similar interactional challenges in comedy writers' rooms. Writers' rooms have historically been overwhelmingly white and male with slow progress toward racial and gender diversity in recent years (Hunt et. al. 2018; 2019). Previous scholarship has shown that women experience gender-based discrimination in gaining access to writers' rooms (Grugulis & Stoyanova 2012), and that these masculinized organizational culture of these rooms can be inhospitable to women (Henderson 2011). Moreover, the pursuit of laughs at any cost and fierce protections of free speech in writers' rooms further complicate rules about boundaries and appropriate behavior. But scholars have yet to explore how women navigate these spaces, the self-presentation strategies that are effective, those that are unsuccessful, and why. This

dissertation helps bridge these gaps in the literature by identifying the distinct forms of gender discrimination women confront in comedy writers' rooms and examining the ways different intersectional identity positions create unique dilemmas in self-presentation and performativity for women.

Drawing on two years of participant observation research as a stand up comedian and television writer in Los Angeles, this dissertation examines how different occupational contexts invite varied gendered performances and impose gendered sanctions on women's performed tasks, and the ways women resist the gender constraints they encounter at work. The first article, "Performing Offstage," explores how women comics navigate gender-based stigmas to construct professional identities offstage. I argue that double binds around femininity and competence restrict women's access to comedy clubs and to valuable skill-building professional activities at work. My findings also show that women engage in constant risk assessments when building relationships with fellow comedians to mitigate threats to their professional reputations. I pay extensive attention to the role of attractiveness as an asset and liability for women comics.

In the second article, "This is Not a Joke," I discuss the ways gender stereotypes around femininity place women in precarious situations to avoid sexual harassment and sexual assault at work. Stand-up comedy's informal and unpredictable workplace culture poses gender-specific risks to women comedians that they must manage independently. Because jokes structure the workplace environment of stand up comedy, I articulate humor as an organizational context, a tool used to perpetrate sexual harassment, and as a situationally useful response strategy women comics deploy to challenge harassment at work. Drawing on an intersectional framework, I show that women comics' experiences of and strategies for dealing with sexual harassment also shift based on tenure, sexuality and gender presentation, celebrity status, and relationship status.

Finally, in "Double Binds and Punchlines," I turn my attention to comedy writers' rooms. Researchers have examined the structural issues women face in securing work in Hollywood writers' rooms, but few studies have examined the cultural contexts and internal politics of writers' rooms to theorize how these dynamics may impact the larger inequalities in the representation of women in the industry. Drawing on participation in two comedy writers' rooms, this article argues that the masculinized organizational norms of writers' rooms impose double binds on women that constrain their ability to effectively integrate into workplace milieus. Coworker's interpretations of the behavioral norms associated with race, attractiveness, class, and relationship status shape the ways women can participate in the work environment. These cultural ideas limit the self-presentations available to women writers. In some instances, women can mobilize their identities as resources and create palatable self-presentations that foster successful integration at work. Still, some identity positions effectively preclude women from full inclusion. I also provide evidence that women use collective action to push back on efforts to marginalize their competence as writers. Taken together, these articles extend theoretical formulations of the double bind and give insight into the contours of workplace inequality.

Performing Offstage: How Women Construct Professional Identities in Stand-up Comedy

Drawing on 13 months of participant observation and 44 interviews with women stand up comedians, this article examines how gender stereotypes about women's humor and gender norms around sexuality shape the constraints that women confront offstage. I argue that double binds around femininity and competence restrict women's access to comedy clubs and valuable skill-building professional activities offstage. My findings also show that while rapport building with fellow comedians is integral to mobility within stand up comedy, these interactions can stigmatize women and threaten their professional reputations. To mitigate these workplace dilemmas, women comics deploy individual response strategies, which are shaped by race, age, tenure, relationship status, and physical attractiveness.

"…The moment a female comic steps offstage, her power dissipates. She is a woman, again."- Laurie Kilmartin[iv]

Sexual misconduct in the workplace has been long debated in scholarly work, public policy, and more recently, in popular culture with the mobilization of the #Me Too movement. In articulating individual experiences with sexual harassment and assault, women across the country shed light on the scale and scope of a pervasive collective problem. And while #Me Too has most identifiably galvanized efforts to create initiatives and advocacy around sexual assault and misconduct, it has also established fertile territory to discuss other forms of sexism that produce toxic workplace cultures. We know that sexual harassment and assault negatively impact women's job retention, productivity, and advancement opportunities across professions. In this paper, I discuss how double binds around sexuality and competence in intersection with other identity positions amount to a form of harassment that women in stand up comedy must navigate to be successful at work.

Extant literature has shown that gendered narratives about humor create a double bind (Kanter 1977; Valian 1998) for women pursuing careers in comedy, where women who embody

---

[iv] [iv] Kilmartin, Laurie. (2017, November 10) "Being a Female Comic in Louis CK's World." *The New York Times*, p. SR4.

stereotypical femininity risk undermining their perceived competence as comedians; while women who deviate from proscribed gender norms are deemed inappropriately feminine (Antoine 2015; Mizejewski 2015). Scholars have discussed the correlation between sex stereotyping and biased evaluations of women's comedic performances by colleagues, audiences and industry gatekeepers (Gilbert 2004; Greenbaum 1997; Krefting 2014). These studies explore the ways women navigate double binds onstage through their performance of comedic material (Barreca 2013; Walker 1998). Other studies detail the structural barriers that obstruct women's advancement to commercial success including: sexist booking practices at comedy clubs, rampant sexual harassment, and commitment mechanisms around motherhood (Greenbaum 1997; Oliver 2013), but little attention has been given to the embodied work women must perform *offstage* to navigate these barriers at the interactional level. Women must deftly navigate interactions with fellow comics, comedy club stuff and audience members to avoid gender-based stigma, sexist evaluations of their competence as comedians. In this article I ask: How do women construct professional identities offstage?

Drawing on observations in comedy clubs in Los Angeles, I argue that women implement coping strategies to mitigate the delegitimizing effects of the interactional dilemmas they confront offstage. This offstage labor is consequential in how women build professional relationships and secure opportunities as comedians. Like other male-dominated professions, stand-up comedy evaluates women based on their performance of the work and their ability to fit in to a masculinized work culture. Women comedians suffer from the demands of sexist work ideologies, where the pervasive narrative that women are not funny and gender scripts around sexuality constrain professional identities and, sometimes, opportunities available to them. While we know women deploy context specific gender management strategies tied to race, class and

sexual identity (Denissen & Saguy 2014; Wingfield 2010; Garcia-Lopez & Segura 2008); we know less about the nuanced ways other identity positions shape how women respond to the double binds they encounter in the workplace. Building on existing literature on the intersectional double bind, I discuss the ways attractiveness, age, relationship status, and tenure directly shape how women resist and rearrange social relations in male dominated professions.

Women in Male Dominated Professions

Gendered institutional structures, practices and workplace cultures pose significant barriers to women's advancement in male-dominated professions. Notions of gender difference are salient in these occupational contexts. Valian (1998) argues that implicit biases about sex differences, or gender schemas, frame certain forms of labor as inherently masculine or feminine and inform the performance expectations and evaluations of men and women in the workplace. Women's presence in male-dominated workplaces destabilizes essentialized notions of the work as intrinsically masculine (Collinson 2010; Epstein 1992; Paap 2006), and threatens the durability of masculine work cultures that reproduce gender inequality. Men, thus benefit from reinscribing gender boundaries, which protect their material and cultural capital within the workplace (Schwalbe et. al. 2000).

The double bind places women in untenable predicaments and presents myriad interactional and self-presentation challenges at work. In male-dominated professions, gender stereotypes often result in unequal role expectations, position misidentification, and discrepancies in achievement, compensation and advancement for women (Levin 2001; Valian 1998; Yodanis 2000). Previous studies have also documented high levels of harassment, sabotage, intimidation, and exclusion in male-dominated professions (Welsh 1999; Wong 2005). Women, thus, operationalize situational gender displays (Denissen 2010a) in response to the

structural and interactional barriers they face at work. Fitting in requires women prove they can

both perform the duties of the job and acclimate into the masculinized work culture (Dryburgh

1999; Harris & Guiffre 2015). To avoid disrupting the existing climate in male-dominated

professions, women must comport themselves in ways that make men comfortable engaging in

sexual talking, joking and gesturing, and overtly or indirectly propositioning them for sex (Byrd

1996; Denissen 2010b). Women must hold their own in hostile spaces and defend themselves

against various forms of bullying and unwanted sexual advances (Denissen & Saguy 2014;

Harris & Guiffre 2015) without drawing negative attention (Rhoton 2011).

Thus, women in male-dominated workplaces constantly engage in risk assessments

(McDermott 2006) calculating which gender practices may undermine their legitimacy as

professionals. In these processes of impression management, women often negotiate gender

meanings based on embodiment practices that are likely to be rewarded, while avoiding those

that are stigma-producing. To resist gender stereotyping at work, women often engage in

distancing practices such as downplaying femininity and avoiding women who perform

conventional femininity (Rhoton 2011), downplaying gender difference (Denissen and Saguy

2014), and denying gender inequality altogether (Rhoton 2011). On the one hand, these

processes of operationalizing the most situationally advantageous identity can help women gain

approval or protection from men or preserve their perceived competence. On the other, they

often serve to stigmatize femininities and reinforce hegemonic masculinity (Bettie 2003;

Hamilton 2007; Myers 2004; Pyke and Johnson 2003).

Still, the process of navigating or destabilizing masculinity at work varies for women

based on the identity displays available to them. The double bind functions differently for

women across identity positions. Denissen and Saguy (2013) find that being fat and gender non-

conforming worsen the stigmatization tradeswomen experience at work. While some gender-non conforming lesbian women receive the benefits of being included and treated as 'one of the guys,' gender non-conforming tradeswomen of color can be vulnerable to hostility. In response, they often conceal their sexual identities and distance themselves from other women to resist homophobia. Thus, while all women are categorically expected to preserve the hegemonic gender order, workplace milieus function differently for minority women (Wingfield 2007). Indeed, women of color across male-dominated professions must navigate double binds complicated by racialized gender ideologies. Garcia-Lopez and Segura (2008) show that Chicana attorneys, often misidentified as support staff, manipulate their dress, hairstyling, dialect and tone to conform to white, middle class professional presentation norms while simultaneously working to display cultural authenticity to ethnically diverse clients. The intersection of race and gender also constrain the emotional displays available to women in the workplace. Black women attorneys are penalized for expressing strength or frustration, and actively engage in emotion management to gain acceptance, avoid exploitation, and secure promotions in largely white, male dominated work contexts (Wingfield 2010). Intersectional approaches to the double bind demonstrate that embodiment practices are informed by the ways employees are differently situated within the workplace. I extend this theoretical work by highlighting patterns of privilege and disadvantage based on attractiveness, age, tenure and relationship status in the strategies women use to build professional identities and navigate barriers within stand up comedy.

Data and Methods

I draw on 13 months of participant observation at comedy clubs in Los Angeles and in-depth interviews conducted with 44 women actively working as stand-up comedians. My ethnographic focus centers on how women navigate the gendered context of comedy clubs and

9

other spaces comedians frequent. Networking and building camaraderie with other comedians, comedy club management and staff, and audience members are competence-reinforcing skills comics must hone to secure their standing in the professional community. To capture how comedians form and maintain these interactions, I spent time with comedians outside of comedy clubs in a variety of contexts including: open mics, writing sessions, television sets, comedy festivals, and sharing meals or drinks before or after shows.

Through a process of purposive snowball sampling, I recruited women comics for interviews from the various comedy clubs and open mics I regularly attended in Los Angeles. The interviewees were a diverse sample in terms of race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and tenure in stand-up comedy. Among the interviewees, 32 identified as heterosexual and 12 as lesbian or queer; 20 were Black, 12 were white, 4 Latina, 3 Asian American, 1 Indian American, and 5 identified as biracial or multiracial. They range in age from 19 to 53, with most between 21 and 40 years of age. I oversampled for Black women to address the intersectional differences that drive my research questions. Moreover, the Black comedy scene and 'mainstream' stand up comedy scene are bifurcated in ways that often replicate homogenous relationships among comedians. Thus the oversampling is a natural outcome of my access to Black women, and the snowball sample I used to recruit participants.

The interviews range in length from one to three hours and covered how comedians came to work in stand-up comedy, and their relationships with fellow comics and club management and support staff. I conducted interviews at comedy clubs, open mics, and coffee shops. I analyzed the data thematically using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) and open-coded interview transcripts to identify themes and unpack the layered contexts in women's discussions about their experiences, self-presentation strategies, and dominant narratives around

race, gender, sexuality and the body. The interview excerpts have been edited lightly for readability.

Because I draw on some of my own experiences in addition to the interviews, I find it relevant to discuss my positionality as an insider participant. Prior to engaging in ethnographic study on women in comedy, I established unique access to this population by working as a comedian for one year and a half. While my foray into stand-up was not a part of my data collection strategy, my experiences managing my own self-presentation and establishing myself as a legitimate comedian motivated this analysis. Though I occupied a marginalized position as a new comedian and a Black woman[v], my early successes in stand-up, including winning a national comedy competition title, hosting two network television comedies, and my consistent visibility in the Los Angeles comedy scene, helped abate this skepticism. My status as a fairly recognizable comedian among a small subset of the Los Angeles stand up circuit also allowed me to escape being labeled as a groupie, girlfriend, or fan while conducting research.

My growing visibility with the stand-up comedy scene in Los Angeles granted me access to a pool of interview participants with relative ease. Moreover, my expressed interest in gender inequality within stand-up comedy, made evident in my performance material, served to validate me among female comedians who experienced forms of gender-based oppression at work. In this way, I established solidarity with the women interested in participating in the study, which helped me navigate sensitive issues such as my own thin-privilege, heterosexuality, cisgender

---

[v] There is a widely held belief among comedians that the stand-up comedy market is oversaturated with hopefuls. Consequently, new comedians are often not taken seriously. Many veteran comics insist that stand-up will purge itself of the unfit due to its precarious structure: long hours, mediocre pay, no benefits, and unmeasured markers of progress. New comedians and women, in particular, are targets of this type of incredulousness and must constantly work to prove their talent and commitment. Moreover, Black comedians face the challenge of being both legible in the Black comedy scene and achieving success in the predominantly white or "mainstream" comedy scene.

and marital status, and perceived attractiveness. My shared race-gender status was particularly

salient in interactions with Black women when disclosing distinct experiences marked by

intersections of racism and sexism. Despite the rapport I built with the women, I avoided making

assumptions based on our shared identities—recognizing attendant differences across age,

sexuality and tenure, in particular. In addition to the interviews, I draw on my own experiences

when relevant.

Findings

In the following sections, I detail how gender stereotyping about women's competence as

comedians and stigmas around sexuality result in overt and covert discrimination. In response,

women in comedy deploy various strategies to challenge the dilemmas they face at work.

Embodied displays of confidence and expertise help women sidestep identity-threatening

obstacles and establish themselves as competent workers. My findings also show that while

rapport building with fellow comedians is integral to mobility within stand up comedy, these

interactions can simultaneously become liabilities. To resist objectification, women use

distancing to create physical boundaries with coworkers that threaten their professional

reputations. These strategies shift based on how women are differently situated across race,

gender and sexuality, but also in nuanced ways conditioned on tenure, attractiveness,

relationships status and age. These same identity positions also shape women's access to

occupational rewards and opportunities within stand up comedy.

Embodying Competence Through Confidence Displays

Previous literature has shown the ways biased infrastructure and practices impede women's

integration and accommodation in male-dominated professions (Denissen 2010; Denissen and

Saguy 2014; Garcia-Lopez and Segura 2010). Women's bodies, alone, become liabilities in these

masculinized work contexts, and women deploy varied interactional and embodiment strategies to overcome professional barriers. For women in comedy, gaining reasonable entrée into comedy spaces is a privilege that women often have to earn. Walking into a comedy club without interference is a privilege most men take-for-granted. Comedy regulars, celebrity comedians and often, regular civilian men can often pass club security without being asked to prove they are in fact, comedians. Women comedians have to find ways to physically embody confidence to reject gender schemas that bar them from reasonable entree into comedy spaces.

Tanya, a 25 year-old white comic explains:

> I hate the process of walking into a club. You're always stopped as a woman and asked, "Are you in the right place?" or "Can I see your ID?" They think we're audience. We don't get the benefit of the doubt that we are comics. When I first started [comedy], I remember not going to just sit and watch at comedy clubs because if I wasn't on the show, I was afraid I couldn't prove I was a comedian. The crazy thing is you can perform at a club a thousand times and it can still be an issue. You have to do the work of doing it over and over until they don't stop you, or if they do, you can handle it smoothly. So I just try to do it as confidently as possible.

Tanya describes the ways women must consistently validate their status to enter the workplace. Her anxieties around this process of professional legitimation even lead her to restrict her attendance at comedy clubs as a novice comedian. Tanya also highlights the ways this process of gaining entrée is ongoing. Stand up comedy differs from other professions in that the workplace changes frequently. The comedy club entrance, thus, becomes a site of practice and rehearsal of confidence displays for women. Door staff serve as preliminary gatekeepers in women's advancement in comedy, and women develop a corpus of strategies to ameliorate potentially identity-threatening encounters.

To resist interrogations with comedy club gatekeepers, Blaine, a 26 year-old Asian American comedian, says, "I literally put on a bitch face and strut my ass into the club."

Similarly, Nicki, a 32 year-old Black comedian explains, "When you enter the room, you gotta be a bad bitch. You carry yourself that way so no one tries you." I personally adopted this strategy when entering a club for a showcase in my first year as a comedian. A security guard refused to return my ID until I confirmed that I "was not one of those male bashing comedians." I snatched my ID from him and asked him how many male comedians he asks that same question as I walked to the showroom. This type of identity disciplining is another way women experience threats to their professional dignity. Women comics who succeed learn to reroute these affronts through embodied confidence.

Sometimes, women couple displays of confidence with other identity tools to gain access to comedy clubs. Linda, a 56 year-old Black comedian says, "I'm older and new to comedy, so I don't think anyone ever thinks I'm a comic. I used to be so insecure at the door, but I learned you have to walk in like you are supposed to be there. But usually I'm older than the door guy, so I can use that to get a little respect and they let me in. Nobody wants to be the guy arguing with someone's mama." Linda's particular intersectional identity moves her through shifting modes of analysis in the attempt to enter a comedy club. Her gender, age and novice status threaten her identity as a comedian. Yet, she is able to use the intersection of her age and gender, particularly an assumed status as a mother, to stake a claim for deference that ultimately grants her entry. In this way, Linda actively turns her disadvantages into a privilege highlighting the important ways gender and age also impact how women can navigate complicated workplace encounters.

Expertise as Competence Reinforcing

Women also use displays of expertise to shore up their identities as comedians at work. Understanding the geography of the comedy club, using professionalizing rhetoric, and demonstrating adeptness in joke-making serve as identity confirming resources for women at

work. Asha, a 38 year-old white comedian explains:

> Women have to prove that they are comics all the time. And a lot of that begins before you even get on stage. When I get to a show, I make it a point to go in every greenroom, talk about how much time we are getting [to perform], talk about where the light is, talk about what the energy of the room is, you know, just show that I belong there and know what's going on, so they don't just think I'm some girl.

Asha demonstrates knowledge of insider language and logistical information about how comedy shows function to counter assumptions she is not a comedian. Many women comics also report demonstrating expertise by helping fellow comics work through material at comedy shows. Tia, a 32 year-old Latina comedian, explains, "I will break down jokes with comics. Help them figure out the premise, the punchlines. That shows you're invested and you know what you're doing." Public displays of actively engaging in the intellectual labor of building material helps women cement their identities as legitimate comedians. Although service is understood as a traditionally feminine support role, it this context, it conveys a position of inclusion, belonging and authority. In this way, stand up comedy inverts conventional gender scripts.

Similarly, receiving help is another way women comics can receive validation of their expertise. Comedians frequently offer "tags" or "punches" to fellow comedians after they watch them perform to assist with the development of a joke. This communal process of tagging signals that a comedian is respected, and that the recipient is deemed funny enough to receive the help. Once, after performing a solid set at a local comedy club with comedians with whom I assumed I had established good rapport; I left the stage and joined them outside of the comedy club where they were tagging a veteran comedian's jokes. They subsequently went around the group and began tagging one another's jokes. I participated, confidently expecting to receive reciprocal tags for my recent set. Instead, the veteran comic slyly asked, "Amberia, you still married?" The other comics roared in laughter. The implication of his question was, "Are you available to me

sexually, yet?" I responded by telling him his jokes were not nearly funny enough for me to ever consider leaving my marriage, which sent the group back into laughter. The following week, the same veteran comic invited me to write on a project based on my ability to hold my own in the aforementioned exchange.

In this brief exchange, I moved from being excluded, to hypervisible, to fully included. I understood the exclusion from receiving joke tags as an affront to my competence as a performer, which I re-established through comedic insult after being on the receiving end of sexual teasing. This ability to effectively engage in verbal jousting, particularly in instances of sexual teasing, builds on extant literature highlighting the importance of women's ability to hold their own in masculinized work cultures. In stand up comedy, verbal jousting is a competence reinforcing tool women can use to not only escape uncomfortable workplace interactions, but also to create future professional opportunities. Unlike other professions, where joking can pose threats to professionalism, stand up comedy encourages women to master them. As comedians, women must demonstrate their competence as joke-makers both on and offstage.

Distancing as a Competence Reinforcing Strategy

For women in stand-up, the offstage work of hanging out in comedy clubs and around fellow comedians can be both an asset and liability to their professional development. On the one hand, time spent building relationships within the comedy network expands opportunities for potential work. On the other hand, gender stereotypes can stigmatize women and pose persistent threats to their professional identities. While previous gender and work scholars have articulated distance as the discursive gendered distinctions women make between themselves and other women coworkers (Rhoton 2011), I discuss distance as the physical body work women do to avoid stigma, mislabeling and threatening encounters at work. Many women comics navigate

these obstacles by deploying physical distance as a strategy for maintaining professional relationships with fellow comics.

The first rule most women in stand-up learn is to never sleep with men comics. Janelle, a 32 year-old Black comedian, offers the following advice to an audience of women comedians: "Don't sleep with these comics. It's the advice I was given and the advice I would give to any up and coming female comic. You don't need to do that to get ahead, and you wanna be able to go into the green room without it being weird." Janelle's response highlights the gender specific nature of distancing as a strategy for women comedian's professional success. Indeed, all of the heterosexual women in the study sample report receiving similar advice in the early stages of their comedy careers. Janelle's warning also reflects two prominent views among respondents: that sexual liaisons with men comedians do not guarantee professional advancement for women, and that these pursuits may threaten women's ability to comfortably occupy important spaces within the comedy network.

Janelle advises women to avoid any behaviors that may preclude them from entering spaces that are integral to network development, such as the green room: a holding room designated for talent at a comedy club. The greenroom often serves as a nucleus for comics as they prepare for shows, build material, and hang out during and after shows. Dominated by men, greenrooms are already poised as potentially hostile spaces for women. "You wanna be able to walk in there and be recognized for your talent, which is already hard enough. I was told not to make it harder by sleeping with any of the guys 'cuz they talk," says Raya, a 36 year-old Indian American comic. The disclosure of a sexual encounter or relationship by men comedians may create stigma that exacerbates the discomfort many women comics already feel when navigating greenrooms.

The stigma of being incorrectly perceived as, even if you are not, sleeping with a comic is also similarly career threatening for women. In this regard, deploying distance is useful, especially for women perceived as conventionally attractive. Melissa, a 31 year-old Latina comedian, discusses hearing rumors about her interactions with two celebrity comedians during their tour: "After the show, I had a few drinks backstage with them and their crew, and next thing you know, word around town is I'm a hoe and I'm sleeping with them. Because in this profession, if you're a pretty girl around a group of male comics there's gonna' be talk. And it's ridiculous because I'm a comic!" While Melissa believes that her position as a comedian should grant her access to socializing with men comedians in ways that would otherwise stigmatize ordinary women; it is specifically her gender presentation and attractiveness that preclude her from being perceived as a comic. Drawing on aforementioned claims that women comics use sexuality to secure professional advancement, the comedians' celebrity status further exacerbates assumptions about Melissa's intentions. Melissa's perceived violation of the norms of conservative sexuality delegitimizes her claim on a professional identity, and she is subsequently penalized for not distancing herself from men comics.

After a show, the rumors about Melissa resurface in a conversation among men comics. Chris, a 35 year-old male comic, explains, "She knows she's cute, and to me, she acts like a groupie, not a comic. I mean, I always see her around, but never on stage. So to me, she's not a real comedian." Attractive women can easily be dismissed as non-professionals depending on how they are situated within their stand-up career and how they present themselves offstage. This dismissal can be arbitrarily tied to one's visibility in the comedy scene. Chris conflates Melissa's attractiveness with sexual interest, which he uses to delegitimize her. He accuses Melissa of not striking an appropriate balance of on and offstage visibility. Attractiveness, then,

frames the ways women encounter fellow comedians, and they are held accountable to police their behavior to maintain professional dignity. Consequently, Melissa's failure to do distance appropriately negatively impacts her reputation.

Women deemed unattractive are penalized differently for not distancing themselves from men comedians. Taryn, a 37 year-old Black comedian who describes herself as fat admits, "I'm aggressive. If I want to flirt and be in a male comic's face or say something sexual, I'll do it. Most dudes just dismiss it like, 'Girl you crazy!'" Taryn's proximity to male comics is often driven by sexual interest and may be perceived as such, but does not threaten her career in the way it would for a woman deemed physically attractive. Men disregard Taryn's sexual advances because of her physical appearance and demeanor. Darren, a 48 year-old Black comic explains, "Taryn is a girl I'd take out on the road to feature for me, and my wife wouldn't worry at all. She knows I'm not gonna do anything with her." Taryn does not have conventional attractiveness nor does she conform to the embodied norms of conventional gender relations, whereby women do not deploy sexual prowess. Yet, while Taryn's perceived unattractiveness makes her the subject of negative critique, it also produces unique employment opportunities, such as featuring for male comedians on tour. The invitation to feature suggests as assumption of skill on Taryn's part, further entrenching the notion that unattractiveness is tied to competence for women in comedy.

When doing distancing, women are also responsible for knowing the sexual reputations of men comics and shifting their behavior accordingly. Ashley, a 32 year-old Black comedian explains:

> I remember being told not to hang out with this veteran comic because apparently, he had a reputation for sleeping with younger attractive female comics. But this man had made no sexual advances with me and was genuinely helping me in my career, which can be hard starting out. It was super helpful to have someone

19

established vouch for me. But the more we were seen together, the rumors started to spread about me. So I had to break ties, and it sucked because I tried to not go to shows where I knew he would be, and sometimes I'd avoid the comedy scene altogether because I was paranoid we would be seen together, cuz you never know when you will run into someone at a show- and that's not cool. You can't just stop going out and do all this work of trying to avoid someone because of rumors. And honestly, this is only an issue because I'm cute. If I wasn't pretty, no one would be worried about what we were doing or they wouldn't question his motives. I started to think, "What's worse: the rumors or the effects of me not going out to work because of them?"

Ashley's experience illustrates how professional status, attractiveness, and gender stereotypes constrain the ways women engage in offstage labor that may produce future opportunities. For Ashley, securing the validation of an established comic could help her gain entree into the comedy scene as a new comedian. Although not evidenced in his interactions with Ashley, his reputation for predatory behavior becomes a liability for Ashley's professional trajectory. Her attractiveness also undermines perceptions that the relationship is solely professional. She subsequently deploys distance as a strategy to assuage rumors, which negatively impacts her own growth as a performer. Women comics must strategically engage in and withdraw from interactions with men comedians that may otherwise pose risks to their careers. This is a persisting form of sex-based discrimination that accumulates over time to significantly disadvantage women as they seek professional mobility.

Sexuality also shapes the way women deploy distancing in their offstage interactions with other comedians. Adrian, a 27 year-old Black lesbian comedian explains, "I was supposed to shoot this sketch with another female comic, and at the last minute she pulled out because she didn't want people to think she was a lesbian by doing a video with me." Some heterosexual women use distance from lesbian coworkers as a stigma aversion tool. Lana, a 28 year-old biracial comic explains the perceived risk these interactions pose:

> I became labeled a lesbian because I was hanging out with Nicki. I am not [a lesbian] but I was labeled that. But because I'm hanging out with this chick who is seen as bisexual then clearly that's my thing. She had already been labeled because she had made some jokes about being bi-curious or whatever. And if you're hanging with her people are gonna' think that's probably going down. So I cut off the friendship.

Lana unpacks the ways women comedians regulate their behavior based on homophobic anxieties around sexuality. Comics incautiously use Nicki's material to construct a lesbian identity, though in her jokes, she appears to claim a bisexual identity. Implicit are the assumptions that platonic relationships cannot exist between heterosexual and lesbian women, and that all lesbians must share romantic interest. In this context, Lana's proximity to Nicki is problematic and threatens her reputation. Differently, Kimberly, a 32 year-old Latina comedian maintains a long-standing friendship with a lesbian comedian saying, "If you see me, you see her. Thick as thieves. She's the closest person to me in the business, and I feel like no one says nothing about it because I'm married [to a man], and Tiffany has a girlfriend." Here, relationship status, alone, does not protect Kimberly and Tiffany from stigma. It is their romantic interest in appropriately corresponding sex partners-reinforcing heterosexuality on one end, and same gender-loving desire on the other- that legitimizes their friendship.

The Limits of Distancing

The experiences of heterosexual celebrity women comics suggest that distancing is not always an effective professional strategy for women. Women comedians with celebrity status find that distancing can threaten their reputations among comedians. In fact, when celebrity comics deploy distance, they can be perceived as being self-important. Kerry, a 52 year-old Black comedian explains, "When you go to the clubs, you have to be personable and speak and give hugs because you don't want people thinking you're Hollywood." Being "Hollywood" connotes a disposition of pretention and suggests that a comic has lost touch with the spadework

involved in stand-up comedy. Therefore, celebrity women often do proximity with other comedians to create an image of collegiality while navigating various comedy spaces. Brea, a 32 year-old Black comedian and actress, says, "When you're working [on television] and you go to do spots, you have to be nice to the male and female comics because any little thing can be misinterpreted as 'she think she's whatever because of that little show.'" Brea reveals that celebrity women comedians fear that distancing could result in mislabeling and a subsequent loss of credibility.

Yet, doing proximity can be risky for some women comics with celebrity status. When celebrity women comedians are considered unattractive, their interactions with men of inferior professional status can be called into question. For example, when a prominent touring comedian selected a younger, novice, male comic as her feature act, rumors surfaced that she was pursuing a sexual relationship with him. "She definitely took him on tour to try it," says Vince, a 36 year-old male comedian. Lance, another male comic, adds, "Teri gotta take dick out on the road with her. Otherwise, she's not gonna get any." These findings point to the significance of status and attractiveness in how women comedians' actions are interpreted. On the one hand, when women with low professional status women are deemed attractive, proximity with men of high professional status signals an ulterior motive of professional advancement or sexual interest. On the other, when women have both celebrity status and are conventionally attractive, men map pretention onto any form of perceived distance. Differently, celebrity women comics considered unattractive must carefully deploy distance to avoid assumptions that romantic interests shape their professional decisions or interactions with men at work. The shifting consequences highlight the ways in which the coping strategies women deploy are not only context specific, but also identity specific.

Discussion and Conclusion

Moving beyond a single analysis framework that focuses on the challenges women face as performers, this article emphasizes the importance of offstage interactions in the development of workplace identities as comedians. I show that double binds for women performers extend beyond the stage, and that women are accountable for maintaining situationally appropriate bodily displays in response to gendered workplace cultures, racialized stereotypes and attendant context specific institutional norms. Where women can project authority and self-definition on stage as performers to counter stereotypes that women are not funny; offstage interactions are more fraught. In the opening quote of this article, Laurie Kilmartin suggests that a woman loses her power once she steps off stage, once again occupying a marginalized gender status. My findings detail the complicated ways in which women can be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged in the interactions they encounter offstage. Moreover, it is precisely the informal nature of these offstage interactions that complicate efforts to develop effective professionalizing strategies that affirm women's identities as comedians. Women navigate a complicated landscape of professional landmines by drawing on professionalizing rhetoric, embodying confidence and displays of expertise, and strategically doing distance or proximity with fellow comedians.

For women in comedy, competence building is a continuous process that requires skillful engagement. Without a larger occupational structure and attendant formal positions or explicit mobility frameworks, stand up comedy requires constant visibility and active displays of expertise to designate a comic's status and competence. Women challenge gender schemas that create entrance barriers into comedy clubs by adopting body dispositions that project confidence. Projecting a self-described "bitch" attitude or engaging in direct confrontation with club

gatekeepers rejects gender schemas that prevent women gaining reasonable entry into the workplace. Moreover, in strategically mobilizing situationally favorable identity resources over disadvantaged ones, women thwart potentially unfavorable encounters with staff and fellow comics. When women demonstrate a command of insider knowledge in offstage workspaces and engage in visible efforts to assist fellow comedians in writing material, they use expertise displays to claim identities as competent workers.

Yet, embodying competence does not ameliorate the gender discrimination comics experience at work. My findings show the ways building relationships with comedians is both an asset and liability for women as seek professional advancement. In response, women deploy distancing to forestall perceptions that they are romantically involved with fellow comedians. Existing theories discuss distancing as the discursive distinctions women make between themselves and other women coworkers, particularly those who embody conventional femininity. Differently, I articulate distancing as the physical boundary work women do with both men and women to protect their professional reputations. Women must engage this kind of distancing to resist rumors that they are romantically involved with fellow comics. These gender-based stigmas levied against women jeopardize these interactions and serve to reproduce inequalities by leaving in tact entrance barriers that disproportionately impact women in stand-up. These disparities are not specific to stand up comedy, and future work should investigate the ways these forms of workplace discrimination are happening across professions. Given that informal and freelance occupational contexts do not have conventional institutional policies, researchers should give close attention to how women navigate these workplace milieus.

This article lays bare a corpus of sexist behaviors that create workplace dilemmas for women. These disadvantages can accumulate over time (Valian 1998) for women and result in

poor professional outcomes. Drawing on Schultz (2018), my findings suggest that we should expand understandings of harassment to include other gender-based discriminatory practices that rely on sex and sexuality to marginalize women at work. Future work should delve into these mechanisms, how they function and the different strategies that women who are differently positioned develop to resist workplace dilemmas. Building on intersectional literature, this article gives extensive attention to the role attractiveness can serve as an asset and liability for women at work. Bringing attractiveness, tenure, and relationship status to the analytic level of race, gender and sexuality further complicates understandings of the double bind. Future work should further consider how these identity positions inform the ways women across professions experience inequalities, and the coping strategies they develop in response. Indeed, scholars should also investigate how women can actively marshal their identity resources to destabilize masculinized work cultures, thus shifting the analytic framework from women's coping mechanisms to the agentive tools women deploy to secure positive professional outcomes.

References

Antoine, Katja. 2015. Pushing the edge: Challenging racism and sexism in American stand-up comedy. Phd Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Barecca, Gina. 2013. *They Used to Call Me Snow White…But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor.* University Press of New England.

Bettie, J. 2003. *Women without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. University of California Press.

Byrd, B. 1996. Women in carpentry apprenticeship: A case study. *Labor Studies Journal* 24: 3-22.

Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Sage Publications.

Collinson, David L. 2010. *Managing the Shopfloor.* De Gruyter.

Denissen, Amy M. 2010a. "Crossing the line: How women in the building trades

interpret and respond to sexual conduct at work. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39: 298-327.

Denissen, Amy M. 2010b. The right tools for the job: Constructing gender meanings and identities in the male-dominated building trades. *Human Relations* 63:1051-69.

Denissen, Amy and Saguy, Abigail 2014. Gendered homophobia and the contradictions of workplace discrimination for women in the building trades. *Gender & Society* 20 (10): 1-24.

Dryburgh, Heather. 1999. Work Hard, Play Hard: Women and Professionalization in Engineering—Adapting to the Culture. *Gender & Society* 13 (5): 664-82.

Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. 1992. Tinkerbells and pinups. In *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality*, edited by Michèle Lamont and Marcel Fournier. University of Chicago Press.

Garcia-Lopez, Gladys and Segura, Denise. 2008. They are testing you all the time: Negotiating dual femininities among Chicana attorneys." *Feminist Studies*. 34 (1/2): 229-258.

Gilbert, Joanne. 2004. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique*.

Greenbaum, Andrea. 1997. Women's comic voices: The art and craft of female humor. *American Studies* 38 (1): 117-138

Hamilton, Laura. 2007. Trading on heterosexuality: College women's gender strategies and homophobia. *Gender & Society* 21 (2): 145-172.

Harris, Deborah and Giuffre, Patti. 2015. *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen*. Rutgers University Press.

Kanter, Rosabeth M. 1977. *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Kilmartin, Laurie 2017. Being a female comic in Louis C.K.'s world. *The New York Times*, November 10, SR4.

Krefting, Rebecca. 2014. *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Levin, P. 2001. Gendering the market: Temporality, work and gender on a national futures exchange. *Work & Occupations* 28 (1): 112-130.

McDermott, E. 2006. Surviving in dangerous places: Lesbian identity performances in the workplace, social class and psychological health. *Feminism and Psychology* 16:193-211.

Mizejewski, Linda. 2015. *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*. University of Texas Press.

Myers, Kristen A., Kay B. Forest, and Susan L. Miller. 2004. Officer friendly and the tough cop: Gays and lesbians navigate homophobia in policing. *Journal of Homosexuality* 47: 17-37.

Oliver, B. 2013. *The Tao of Comedy: Embrace the Pause.*

Paap, Kris. 2006. *Working construction: Why white working-class men put themselves and the labor movement—in harm's way*. Cornell University Press.

Pyke, Karen D., and Denise L. Johnson. 2003. "Asian American women and racialized femininities: Doing gender across cultural worlds. *Gender & Society* 17 (1): 33-53.

Rhoton, Laura. 2011. Distancing as a gendered barrier: Understanding women scientists' gender practices. 25 (6): 696-716.

Schwalbe, M., Godwin, S., Holden, D., Schrock, D., Thompson, S., and Wolkomir, M. 2010. Generic processes and the reproduction of inequality: An interactionist perspective. *Social Forces* 79 (2): 419-452.

Shultz, Vicki. 2018. Reconceptualizing sexual harassment, again. Faculty Scholarship Series, 5366.

Valian, Virginia 1998. *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*. MIT Press.

Walker, N. 1998. *What's So Funny?:Humor in American Culture.*

Welsh, S. 1999. Gender and sexual harassment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1):169-190.

Wingfield, A. Harvey. 2007. The modern mammy and the angry Black man: African American professionals' experiences with gendered racism in the workplace" in *Race, Gender, and Class*, (14) 2: 196-212.

Wingfield, A. 2010. Are some emotions marked 'whites only'?: Racialized feeling rules in professional workplaces. *Social Problems* 57 (2): 251-268.

Wong, MML. 2005. Subtextual gendering processes: A study of Japanese retail firms in Hong Kong. *Human Relations* 58 (2) 249-276.

Yodanis, CL. 2000. Constructing gender and occupational segregation: A study of women and work in fishing communities. *Qualitative Sociology* 23 (3): 267-290.

This is not a Joke: How Women Navigate Threats of Sexual Harassment in Stand-up Comedy

Stand-up comedy's informal and unpredictable workplace culture poses gender-specific risks to women comedians that they must manage independently. Drawing from ethnographic observations of and interviews with women comedians, I argue that gender stereotypes around femininity place women in precarious situations to avoid sexual harassment and threats of sexual assault in stand up comedy. This study builds on existing gender and work scholarship by exploring humor as an organizational context, a tool used to perpetrate sexual harassment, and as a situationally useful response strategy women comics deploy to challenge harassment at work. Finally, I show that women comics' experiences of and strategies for dealing with sexual harassment also shift based on tenure, sexuality and gender presentation, celebrity status, and relationship status.

The #MeToo and Time's Up movements have ushered in a new era of scrutiny of sexual harassment in the workplace, triggered by the uncovering of rampant sexual misconduct in the entertainment industry. With several high-profile comedians credibly accused of sexual misconduct in recent years, stand-up comedy moved to the center of debates around what constitutes harassment, the workplace cultural norms that support it, and the long entrenched gender inequalities that structure the entertainment industry at large. These questions have been hotly debated in public discourse, legal and political arenas, but also on stage, by comedians themselves. Aziz Ansari addressed his own sexual misconduct allegations in a recent Netflix comedy special, sparking both praise and backlash. Louis C.K.'s controversial return to stand-up comedy incited questions about what responsibility comedy clubs have in restricting access to comics accused of sexual misconduct. These high-profile cases offer a glimpse into the prevalence of sexual harassment in stand-up comedy and the attendant occupational structures that create complicated workplace dilemmas for women comics.

Stand-up comedy is a unique occupational context in which to study sexual harassment. Working as a comedian requires a high degree of independent labor but also demands frequent social interaction. Comedians regularly work multiple venues in various cities interfacing with

coworkers, comedy club staff, and audience members. In this way, stand up comedy exposes

comics to shifting organizational contexts and interactants, some familiar, some foreign, on a

regular basis. This lifestyle poses various gender-specific risks for women. Drawing on

participant observation, I discuss the ways women suffer the deficits of stand-up comedy's

informal and unpredictable workplace culture. This organizational culture serves the interests of

stand-up comedy's male-dominated gender structure.

We know that women in male-dominated professions report gender discrimination and

sexual harassment at higher rates than women in other occupations (Parker 2018). Moreover,

women who work in informal or grey economies such as domestic work, freelance labor, and

agricultural work face higher rates of sexual harassment and little protection (Barber 2016; Pape

& Vryenhoek 2018). I argue that without formal structures in place to effectively deal with

sexual harassment, stand-up comedy forces comics to manage these workplace issues

independently. Gender stereotypes around femininity place women in precarious situations to

avoid sexual harassment, and threats of sexual assault. Moreover, the institutionalization of

humor in stand-up comedy normalizes inappropriate behaviors, which can blur the line between

what is and is not appropriate. Women must, therefore, deftly navigate the interactional

landmines of sexual teasing and overt forms of sexual harassment. Building on existing gender

and work scholarship that highlights the intersection of race and gender, I show that women

comics' experiences of and strategies for dealing with sexual harassment also shift based on

tenure, sexuality and gender presentation, celebrity status, and relationship status.

Women and Stand-up Comedy

Extant literature has examined the gender biases in comedy that that position humor as

masculine (Fulton 2004; Greenbaum 1997; Kein 2015) and stereotype women as categorically

not funny (Gilbert 2004; Mizejewski 2015). Popular culture is replete with messaging that perpetuates this misconception. For example, Christopher Hitchens' contentious *Vanity Fair* piece, "Why Women Aren't Funny,"[vi] marked a watershed in the public discussion of women and comedy. Hitchens articulated women as "antithetical" to humor; a claim subsequently echoed in controversial statements made by popular comedians Adam Carolla in 2012 and Jerry Lewis in 2013. In response, a wave of women comics and comedy writers engaged in the discursive debate on stages, in media interviews and in the production of two documentaries: *Why We Laugh: Funny Women* (2013) and *Women Aren't Funny* (2014). These interventions challenged gender ideologies about women and humor by positioning women as subjects within comedy.

Biased gender narratives establish comedy as "men's work" and make it difficult for women to advance within the ranks of stand-up comedy. Women constitute only roughly 15% of all working comedians, but their rising visibility in stand-up comedy and related commercial successes have motivated increased scholarly attention on the enveloping gender politics that shape women's experiences in comedy (Antoine 2015; Gilbert 2004; Krefting 2014). While these studies detail the challenges women face as performers (Antoine 2015; Fulton 2004; Mizejewski 2015) and single mechanisms of gender inequality such as hiring discrimination and securing talent representation (Oliver 2013), scholars have yet to explore the specific ways gender biases in stand-up comedy shape how women experience and cope with sexual harassment. Similar to women in other male-dominated professions, women comics must navigate complicated gender stereotypes and masculinized workplace cultures to neutralize sexual harassment and protect their professional identities. I argue that stand-up comedy's informal organizational norms coupled with the intersectional identity positions of both victims

---

[vi] Hitchens, Christopher (2007, January 1). "Why Women Aren't Funny" Retrieved from: http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701

and transgressors shape the context-specific responses women deploy in response to sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment in Male-Dominated Occupations

Researchers contend that the ratio of men to women in a workplace, and the gender composition of work groups are often the most salient predictors the prevalence of sexual harassment at work (Gruber 1998; Stainback 2011; Welsh 1999). Previous work shows that women in male dominated professions report more gender-based and sexual harassment than women in other occupations (Gutek 1985; LaFontaine and Tredeau 1986; Rubenstein 1992). Studies show that women experience concentrated levels of harassment in jobs where their presence undermines the construction of the work as inherently masculine, such as: policing (Appier 1997; Brown, Campbell and Fife Schaw 1995; Martin and Jurik 2001;) corrections (Deitch and Fechner 1995; Owen 1988; Martin and Jurik 1996), and the construction trades (Denissen 2010a; Denissen & Saguy 2014). The gender dualisms around what constitutes men's work create myriad occupational dilemmas for women in traditionally male occupations. In addition to harassment, women are also targets of intimidation, sabotage, and exclusion, which often result in low workplace cohesion and even job loss (Denissen 2010a; Welsh 1999; Wong 2005). Cultural ideologies around gender are thus, consequential in determining the climate of sexual harassment in the workplace.

But gender stereotypes are only one aspect of organizational culture. Researchers have worked to identify other facets of workplace environments that are conducive to sexual harassment. Dziec & Weiner (1990) argue that organizational practices and cultures (Bingham & Scherer 1993; Lafontaine & Trudeau 1986) that fail to promote equal opportunities for women are related to high levels of reported harassment. Other studies directly link incidents of sexual

31

harassment to environmental tolerance of harassment, the perceived commitment of organizational officials to effectively handle harassment problems, and the implementation of policies or procedures to combat such problems (Gruber 1998). In their study of women's experiences in the magazine industry, Dellinger & Williams (2002) show that women felt protected from sexual harassment as a result of an attorney who aggressively pursued complaints of discrimination and unacceptable behavior. Occupations with proactive leadership structures have fewer issues with sexual harassment than workplaces perceived as indifferent toward or encouraging of sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination (Gruber 1998; Niebuhr 1997; Pryor et. al 1993). Organizational leadership, then, plays a significant role in shaping workplace climate.

Women deploy various strategies in response to sexual harassment in male dominated professions. Previous studies categorized have articulated indirect strategies such as ignoring or casually suggesting harassment is unwanted or more direct responses like stating objections to questionable behavior and persuading perpetrators to desist (Bingham & Scherer 1993). Responses to sexual harassment also vary by race. Yoder & Aniakudo (1995) find that Black women firefighters use externally-focused, confrontational strategies to challenge sexual and gender harassment at work. These strategies include: confronting the harasser, using threats to seek legal redress, and countering physical harassment in kind. Contrary to previous work that focused largely on the indirect and internally-focused strategies of white women in middle-class contexts such as denial, self blame and enduring harassment (Fitzgerald et. al 1990); they show that Black women found direct confrontation effective in stopping ongoing harassment and deterring future incidents. Because Black women firefighters were already excluded from a largely white and overwhelmingly male workplace culture (Yoder & Aniakude 1996; 1997), they

were liberated from trying to fit in with coworkers. In this way, their preexisting racial and gender marginalization within the organizational culture of their workplace provided access to an alternative set of response tools.

Still, race and sexual orientation complicate responses to sexual harassment. Thierry Texeira (2002) finds that Black policewomen are reluctant to report incidents of sexual harassment perpetrated by Black male coworkers for fear of violating expectations of racial solidarity. Lesbian tradeswomen must strategically mobilize aspects of their subordinated identities and hide others to resist homophobia and forestall threats of sexual harassment (Denissen & Saguy 2014). Some women aggressively reaffirm their sexual identities in response to challenge coworker's attempts to map heterosexual desire onto their bodies. Others respond to coworkers who suggest 'threesomes' with them and their romantic partners by "turning the tables" and asking their male coworker if their own wife would be interested in a 'threesome. The above studies document the ways workplace culture coupled with women's intersectional identity positions shape how they experience and respond to sexual harassment.

What remains consistent, irrespective of race, gender and other master statuses, is the salience of humor in gender-based and sexual harassment in male-dominated professions. Men often use sexual joking to haze female coworkers in a process of acculturation into a masculine work environment. Differently, humor is one of the consistent strategies workers use to deal with ambiguous, unsettling or unwanted experiences (Fitzgerald, Swan, and Fischer 1995). Some tradeswomen use sexual humor to neutralize uncomfortable situations and earn respect (Denissen & Saguy 2014). Women chefs participate in sex talk and gesturing to assimilate into the masculinized culture of professional kitchens (Harris & Guiffre 2015).

Differently, Dellinger & Williams (2002) show that women often draw on norms of local workplace humor to define boundary lines between acceptable and inappropriate behavior. They find that men and women in highly gendered and sexualized workplaces enjoy sexual joking until it crosses personal boundaries. In stand up comedy, the boundary between acceptable and harassing sexual behavior is often blurred because it is often difficult to decipher when a comic is joking or when they have gone too far (Antoine 2015). Stand up comedians must also prove that they can not only perform jokes, but also withstand being the butt of a joke. The ubiquitous narrative that women are not funny spills over into assumptions that women are unable to take a joke. The construction of women as 'sensitive,' 'exaggerating,' or 'uptight' is a gaslighting tactic (Sweet 2019) that distorts women's perceptions of inappropriate behavior and constrains their ability to define harassment. By mobilizing these gender stereotypes that women are unable to take a joke, men prevent women from pushing back on harassment. This study builds on existing gender and work scholarship by exploring humor as an organizational context, a tool used to perpetrate sexual harassment, and as a situationally useful response strategy women comics deploy to challenge harassment at work.

Data and Methods

Data for this article draw from a larger research project on the embodiment practices women deploy as they navigate careers in stand-up comedy. In the process of conducting semi-structured interviews about how women perform the offstage work involved in stand-up comedy, several stories of sexual teasing, harassment and assault emerged. In discovering the pervasiveness of sexual misconduct in stand-up comedy, I decided to focus my efforts on how women develop and deploy coping strategies at work. I began this research early on in my stand-up career. I was booking regular spots in a few local comedy clubs, and had won a national

stand-up comedy competition, thus establishing some visibility within the Los Angeles scene. I also regularly attended an open-mic exclusively for women where I cultivated a vast majority of my material and routinely spoke informally with other women about the structural barriers and interactional challenges we faced as comics. It was in this space where I first overheard women speaking openly about instances of sexual harassment, often naming problematic male comics and comedy bookers. In divulging some of my own experiences, I was able to establish rapport and further solidify my insider subject status among fellow women comedians.

To examine how women manage sexual misconduct at work, I draw on 32 interviews and 13 months of participant observation in comedy clubs, open mics, comedy festivals and television show auditions. Comedians ranged in age from 19 to 53 with most between 21 and 40 years of age. Of the 32 interviewees, 13 are white, 11 are Black, 4 Latina, 2 Asian American, and 3 identified as biracial or multiracial. Only 6 comedians identified as lesbian or queer, with everyone else identifying as straight. The interviewees are also diverse in tenure. Of the 32 comedians, 13 had less than 10 years of experience, 9 had between 11 and 15 years experience, with the rest having over 16 years of experience working as comics. I conducted interviews at comedy clubs, open mic venues, and over the phone to accommodate busy performance schedules. Interviews lasted an average of one hour and covered how comics began their careers and the challenges they face as women at work. I open-coded interview transcripts to unpack themes around the gendered labor women perform in response to sexual harassment, sexual assault and other forms of gender based threats. Because I was fully immersed in the workplace context as a working comedian, I will also draw on my own experiences when germane to the findings. Indeed, my own status as a conventionally attractive, married Black woman made me

uniquely positioned to explore nuances in how experiences of sexual harassment vary by race, physical appearance and relationship status.

Findings

In what follows, I examine how women navigate context-specific threats of sexual harassment in stand-up comedy. First, I demonstrate the ways stand-up's informal organizational structure informs how women comics experience sexual harassment. I then, discuss protective embodied distancing, a self defense strategy women comics use to avoid harassers and potentially threatening workplace situations. Differently, some women deploy direct confrontation to diffuse harassment by employing humor, downplaying gender difference, or openly challenging harassers with aggressive talk. Finally, I give attention to the ways sexuality and gender presentation are particularly salient in how women comics experience harassment and the types of strategies available to them. My findings also suggest that celebrity status, tenure and relationship status impact women's experiences of sexual harassment and the coping mechanisms they use to neutralize these threats.

Sexual Harassment as a Shifting and Ever-Present Reality

Establishing rapport with fellow comedians and comedy club staff is integral to mobility within stand-up, but this interpersonal work can be a liability for women comics. Despite working to build platonic and professional relationships with men, women comics experience constant forms of sexual teasing and harassment. For many women in comedy, these sexual advances continue over their entire career. Kira, a 42 year-old white comedian says, "This has been one of the only work environments that I've been in where people are constantly trying to get in my pants. For years." Kira's comparison suggests that stand-up comedy cultivates a distinctly problematic workplace climate that is hospitable to harassing behaviors. Some women

36

even expected to experience gender-based harassment when entering into stand-up comedy. Jasmine, a 33 year-old Black comic explains, "I knew they'd give me shit in the beginning, but thought that after they've seen me around for a while and know I'm funny, I'd be 'in'. And you feel like maybe you could let your guard down. But sadly, it doesn't stop." Jasmine initially understands harassment as an acute form of workplace hazing, but later learns that it is not limited to proving herself as a competent comedian.

To the contrary, sexual harassment necessitates often an ongoing process of interpretation and response for women comics. Sara, a 29 year-old biracial comedian, explains, "The thing is, you never know when it's gonna drop [laughs]. You could be totally cool with a male comic, worked with him a bunch before, then bam! He's touching your shoulder or saying some wild shit to you after a show. And because its comedy, all the lines are always blurred." The conflation of comedy with nonprofessionalism makes room for men to make both subtle and overt boundary violations with women. The "blurred lines" Sara references expose the ways men use jokes to perpetrate inappropriate behaviors. Tiffany, a 38 year-old Black comedian elaborates, "We have to navigate men every night. And not everyone is bad, but you always have to guard yourself. You're always thinking, 'what did he mean by that? Or is he too close? Or is this worth bitching about? Do I have the energy?'" Women in comedy must perform active vigilance in workplace interactions. Stand-up comedy's informal organizational context grants men access to women's bodies without professionalizing codes of conduct. Women constantly discern and question comments, touching, and the degree to which they believe their accounts will be given legitimacy.

Some respondents commented on the ways men's behavior changes in different offstage spaces. Taylor, a 37 year-old Black comedian explains:

> There was this comic I was really cool with. We'd always have spots at the same clubs, work the same rooms. One of the people who you trust to help you with material, and occasionally we'd hang out outside of comedy-grab a drink or food or whatever. The point is, we were cool-friends. And I will never forget the night I was at a comedy club and [celebrity comic] was in the green room, and he [friend] was in there with him. So I went in the green room to chill. And somehow, [celebrity comic] starts talking about what sex would be like with me. And then he [friend] jumps in and starts roasting me too saying all this inappropriate stuff about my body. I was so mad because it felt like maybe he wanted to say all those things all this time and finally found the right moment where it was "OK" because it was jokes, and [celebrity comic] was there, and it was just comics messing around.

Here, various positionalities come to bear on ways men perpetrate acts of sexual harassment. Taylor, who is both conventionally attractive and unpartnered, is highly visible in this new work space, the green room, and consequently becomes a target. By participating in sexualizing Taylor, her friend and coworker attempts to gain recognition and acceptance from the comic with higher social status. This celebrity status supersedes their long established friendship. In this way, sexual teasing serves as a mechanism for professional capital for men in certain spaces. Again, jokes provide cover for offensive behavior providing little recourse for women when confronting these occupational dilemmas. Indeed, the male dominance in comedy reinforces this type of gendered mocking. Arguably, if most celebrity comics were women, there would be little incentive to engage in this kind of harassment.

This problematic workplace culture extends to the interactions women comics have with comedy club managers, show promoters, and audience members. Taryn, a 31 year-old biracial comedian, explains the complicated ways onstage performance create distorted expectations for viewers:

There's something about making a connection with people on stage that makes them feel like they know you, and then they feel comfortable enough to take it to extreme levels because comedy has no boundaries in a lot of ways, which can make it very unsafe. Because what I talk about on stage does not mean you can come up to me afterwards and approach me about a threesome with your girlfriend or follow me to my car or insist that I hang out with you. I've also been aggressively encouraged to drink with people from the audience that I don't know. So between that and dealing with male comics, it can be really exhausting because you kind of need all these people, ya' know? At some point in your career.

Stand-up comedy's informal norms often make the process of drawing boundary lines between acceptable and unacceptable behavior difficult. The harassing climate of stand-up comedy is unique in that it includes coworkers, but also comedy club patrons and ancillary staff. Women comics must reconstitute professional boundaries with audience members that may be deconstructed during their performances. Like any other profession, the stakes are high in these workplace social interactions. Maintaining a healthy rapport with club staff and building a fan base are integral to a comedian's commercial success.

Women comics also expressed concerns about safety at work more generally. The lifestyle of a working comedian requires frequent travel "on the road" performing dates at various venues across the country, and internationally. Accommodations for road performances are directly tied to a comedian's tenure and status. Lena, a 29 year-old white comedian, says, "It's hard to get road dates, but I only go out [to perform] with guys I know. Otherwise, I just have to turn it down. And I'm glad I'm in a position to be able to turn things down if I need to." Tori, a 32 year-old Black comedian, similarly shares, "I've been asked to feature [perform as the opening act] for guys, and you just never know what it's gonna be. Does he really want you to work, or is it just a ploy to try something with you? Then you have to see what the set up is. Are you gonna have your own hotel room? Rental car? It's all about figuring out what the cost versus risks are and trying to vet the guy before agreeing to take the gig." These performances are invaluable to a

comedian's professional growth, as it can be difficult to secure consistent stage time and long set times that performances on road dates provide. Still, women carefully make risk-assessments before taking gainful work.

Even when men coworkers do not pose threats on the road, women comics must be actively vigilant about other potential dangers. In 2015, I performed on an all-women comedy tour that was well-sponsored with safe accommodations provided for each performer. But after a show, an attendee lingered until the audience and other comedians filed out and insisted that he walk me to my hotel room from the performance venue. I declined multiple times, but he proceeded to walk alongside me, striking up conversation about my material, future performances, all of which were laden with not-so-subtle come ons. Once we entered the hotel lobby, he invited me to a drink at the bar. After refusing his advances for a fourth time, I made up an excuse that I agreed to meet my fellow comics [who had performed on the show], to which he replied, "Let me know if you guys end up having a pillow fight." I waited at the hotel reception desk until he left before returning safely to my room. Women comics confront multiple threat sources when working on the road. In stand-up comedy, traveling dates expand the analysis of workplace sexual harassment beyond a localized context.

Danielle, a 49 year-old white comedian, reflects on her experiences on the road as a novice comedian:

> I remember going on the road early on in my career, and it was shitty and scary. And I was working in the [American] south. So it was shitty little clubs-not even clubs sometimes. Bars, random little spots. But you do it because you don't have a freakin' manager or agent, and you just need the experience and to build your act. You also need to make money. It's shit money, but you're a comic. You're poor. You need whatever people are gonna pay you. But you rent your car and you drive all over in these random middle-of-nowhere towns by yourself, and it's scary. And I was doing this before cell phones were a thing! And that's when comedy clubs did the comedy condo-and some still do this now. Comedy clubs buy a condo and put all their comics there instead of renting individual hotels

40

every week. But it's so not comfortable or even safe for women. You're just in there with a bunch of dudes. You'll be lucky if there's another woman booked on your shows.

Danielle unpacks the layered risks women can encounter while traveling. While there is no specific threat of sexual harassment or assault, the context of the work is precarious and lends itself to various gender-specific hazards. Women comics, therefore, develop various coping strategies both in response to and in anticipation of the harassment they face at work.

Responding to Harassment Through Defensive Embodied Distancing

Like women in other professions, women in comedy use avoidance, where victims avoid a specific harasser, as a tool to neutralize sexual harassment at work. But women comics often avoid work-related activities, altogether, to guard themselves against sexual advances disguised as professional opportunities. Indeed, over half of the women sampled in the study reported receiving warnings about attending writing sessions with men comics. A writing session, where pairs or groups of comedians gather to write or improve existing jokes, is a routine practice among comics. These informal collaborative meetings are integral to building an act and cultivating relationships that can provide future opportunities for stage time.

But many women see invitations to write with men as both professionally and personally risky. Ashley, a 36 year-old Asian American comedian says, "Guys are constantly trying to see if they can sleep with you. It's always, 'Let's write together. Come to my house.'" Similarly, Jennifer, a 23 year-old biracial comic explains, "I never go to those writing sessions with guys unless I really know them. Sometimes, it can be ok if its public, because I also don't want people thinking something went down because I went to 'so and so's' house." Women use this strategy of defensive embodied distancing to protect themselves from the potential precariousness of a private writing session. This form of distancing not only prevents harassment, but also serves to

41

protect one's professional identity and reputation. I contend that women rely so heavily on distancing because it is the only approach that completely forestalls threats to their physical safety. However, this comes at a cost of missing out on professional opportunities, a cost that men comics do not have to pay.

Rachel, a 34 year-old Black comedian, recalls her own violent encounter at a writing session:

> Women get invited to writing sessions that are not actual writing sessions, and it's just you and the person that invited you. And this happened to me when I first started. And I was like, you told me were gonna be writing. And he comes over to me where I was sitting on the couch…and he gets on top of me and he holds my body down on his couch. I was in complete shock, but I stayed calm and told him to get off of me, and he stared at me for minute, smiled, and then rolled off of me. I'll never forget that. Because he tried to act normal again after, like it was a prank or something. I was not aggressive because I didn't feel it was safe to be. I left and never brought it up until now because it's not like we have an HR [department].

Rachel's experience underscores the myriad ways women comics, particularly those with novice status, are vulnerable to threats of sexual assault. Writing sessions, present as extremely valuable in the professional development of a stand-up act. This type of collaboration is rare in the early stages of a comedian's career, as new comics are still working to build relationships. Like other professions, tenure is a significant predictor of women's exposure to sexual harassment. But it is the lack of institutional safeguards in stand-up comedy that both compounds the risk of threatening behavior and constrains women's options for support. Without organizational relief, victims of sexual harassment and assault must cope and manage on their own, which is why defensive embodied distancing is a vital resource for women in comedy. Rachel also points to the ways men use the veil of humor to justify inappropriate behavior. By reframing the assault as a prank, Rachel's harasser takes control over the momentary situation and the potential consequences thereafter.

42

In stand-up comedy, offstage spaces are informal work environments centered on performing humor, and women comics are often expected to tolerate verbal harassment and sexual teasing done in jest or under the guise of jest. Lisa, a 31 year-old Asian American comedian says, "The more you are affected by it or show that you are affected by it, you are seen as weak. You gotta be able to hold your own." The association of women with sensitivity and weakness exacerbates the existing power imbalances in stand-up comedy by taxing women with the undue burden of constantly regulating their responses to men. Consequently, women must be able to discern if, when and how they should intervene in various questionable situations. Tyler, a 36 year-old Black comedian explains:

> There was a male comic that wrote "Them titties though" with an "LOL" on my Facebook page. I called him immediately and told him not to write anything disrespectful on my page, and he apologized. And it got awkward for a while, but after a while things were back to normal and we were joking and laughing. But I had to say something in that moment because if I didn't, then it woulda been, "Let me see a nipple. Lemme touch 'em." You have to set boundaries or they will keep testing you.

Tyler's example highlights the ways women comedians use direct confrontation to construct themselves as colleagues rather than sexual objects. Though the aforementioned comic attempts to give allay to his reference to Tyler's breasts by conjoining his comment with the "laugh out loud" acronym, Tyler perceives his social media post as inappropriate. She subsequently uses assertive tactics to forestall any future breaches of professional decorum, undeterred by the short-term adverse impact on their existing working relationship.

Unpartnered heterosexual women say they feel they are easy targets for sexual teasing. Lynn, a 33 year-old white comedian says, "They always think they can try it. You know, cross the line here and there. Especially if you're single. They think, 'Nobody's gonna vouch for her or

say don't talk to her like that.' So you have to let them know direct what's not gonna happen."

According to Lynn, direct confrontation allows women to "vouch" for themselves and rebuff

inappropriate comments. Amber a 26 year-old white comedian, argues, "Men always try to find

ways to touch you. Say little jokes and touch your knee, rub up against you and say something

dumb. And they do it like that so you can't call it what it is." Again, men comics use humor as a

cover to make unwanted physical contact with women. This strategy gives men plausible

deniability and limits the ways women can respond.

My respondents report that marital status can offer some security against explicit

harassment. Tara, a 38 year-old biracial comedian admits, "I'm married to another comedian, so

I'm a little protected from some of the more crazy stuff. But they try it in other ways. You know,

the lingering hug or accidental knee touch. Occasionally I have to let a motherfucker know.

Don't bring that shit over here." Indeed, Tara's positionality as a married, heterosexual woman

helps insulate her against overt sexual advances by men at work. Moreover, her partner's

position as a workplace insider further precludes her from flagrant harassment. Instead, men

comics perpetrate many boundary-crossing acts through excessive touching.

I recall an incident after a show where a comedy club promoter asked to take a picture of

me and another comedian who had performed that night. Upon posing for the picture, this

comedian, with whom I had worked with consistently, reached around me and placed his hand on

my thigh. He then moved his hand and facetiously said, "Let me put my hand where everybody

can see so they don't take my sitcom in 10 years [laughs]." I pushed him off of me and

sarcastically remarked, "It's cute that you think you'll get a show." He later told me that my

comment went "too far" because it was a personal attack. This comedian constructs discursive

boundaries around appropriate behavior that exclude women's bodies from being defined as

personal, but include comments about his professional potential as boundary-crossing.

As a married comedian, I often experience thinly veiled inappropriate slippages and forms of sexual teasing that give just enough cover for plausible deniability. But in this instance, the perpetrating comic implicitly draws on The #MeToo movement to correct his behavior while simultaneously framing #MeToo as absurd in its efforts. "Taking his show" is a reference to the punitive backlash against perpetrators of sexual misconduct in the entertainment industry. But instead of recognizing his excessive touching as improper, he seemingly blames The #MeToo movement for going too far. Responding in kind, I use direct confrontation in the form of humor to ridicule the idea of his success rather than calling out the harassment. I found this strategy to be both effective in deterring future incidents, while also reinforcing my comedic "roasting" skills.

Some respondents defend themselves against unwanted touching at work by downplaying gender difference coupled with direct confrontation. "I remember a comic kept kissing me on the neck when he hugged me. And then one time I asked, 'Do you always kiss people at work?'" says Mya, a 32 year-old Latina comedian. Mya uses direct confrontation to challenge the kiss by framing it as a breach of professional norms. In emphasizing her identity as a colleague, she rejects the gender-difference frame that foregrounds the sexual advance. Similarly, Ashley, a 28 year-old Black comedian, explains, "I have a no-hug policy. I always say, you don't hug the male comics; you don't need to hug me. And they can have an attitude. I'd rather them be mad than me be uncomfortable." In co-joining direct confrontation with gender parity, Ashley draws attention to the disparate ways men comics physically interact with other men comics to implicitly play up her status as a colleague. She also openly rejects physical touching. This discursive and physical posturing constructs bodily boundaries for women comics in defense

against the covert ways men comics often attempt to access their bodies.

Still, direct confrontation is not always a safe or practical defense strategy. Often, women comics must be able to stand-up for themselves without jeopardizing their personal safety or their professional reputations. Moreover, gender schemas that cast women as overly emotional or "bitchy" can limit the range of emotions available for women when they encounter dangerous situations. Ricki, a 36 year-old Black comedian explains:

> There was a comic who went up [on stage to perform] after me on a show and started making comments about how I was ugly and not funny in his set. I had done well, so the crowd wasn't having it. And after he got off, he came over and tried to offer me his business card and told me we should work together. I said, 'I thought I was ugly and unfunny,' at which point he aggressively got in my face and started cursing me out. I didn't know what to do because can I cry? No. Can I show I'm upset? No. Can I breakdown? I can't. I have to be strong. And what could I have done? If someone else is looking at that scene, then I look like a crazy ass bitch. So I sat there quietly. Finally, another comic came over and took him away. And this same comic offered to walk me to my car. But then as soon as we got to my car, he asked for my number! You walk me to my car and hit on me after I've been victimized. And it's like, I've gotta be nice so this whole exchange doesn't go south, you know? That's what it's like to be a female comic!"

Ricki engages several self-defense tactics in this sequence. When the heckling comedian attempts to later engage her offstage, she uses direct confrontation to challenge his affront to her talent and appearance. This tactic, however, escalates the encounter, and Ricki subsequently deploys passivity and silence as a safety precaution. She is also aware of the gender schemas operating that will position her as problematic if she is seen arguing with a male comedian. Ricki believes disengagement is the best defense against both a physical attack and gender stereotyping and understands her ability to remain quiet as a strength. Additionally, Ricki must navigate the intervention from another male comedian that ultimately results in a romantic overture. To avoid what she perceives as a potentially precarious situation, she swallows her frustration and displays appreciation. Ricki notes that these circumstances are both gender specific and commonplace for

women comedians. Her experience highlights the interpretive work women comics must do to resist various forms of physical advances in the workplace.

Sexuality also shapes the ways women respond to sexual harassment. While each of the lesbian women in the study reported incidents of sexual harassment, gender nonconforming lesbian comedians feel they are hypervisible and vulnerable to more derisive sexualized teasing. Indeed, masculine presenting lesbians often face open hostility because of their gender presentation (Moore 2006). Andi, a 29 year-old white comedian, says "I feel my sexuality makes me more of a target, so I keep boundaries with guys." Differently, some lesbian women did report feeling included among men coworkers but argue that lesbians, more broadly, are susceptible to sexual teasing by men comics during shows. Leila, a 44 year-old Latina comedian says, "I see lesbians [audience members], attacked by male comics on stage, and it's always the same thing: 'You think you're a lesbian, but wait 'til I give you this dick.' Or some version of that." Aftan, a 28 year-old white lesbian comedian explains, "That's always the joke. That their penis is gonna "fix" me." Both comedians note the ways men map heterosexual desire and feminine sexual compliance onto lesbian women's bodies. Briana, a 35 year-old Black lesbian comedian says self-defense strategies must be context specific:

> I was at a show sitting in the audience, and [celebrity comic] was performing. And outta nowhere he asked me to go to the bar and get a drink for him. In the middle of his performance. And I was offended, you know, because I'm a comic. And I said I was a comic and that I wasn't gonna' get the drink. But he kept asking and got the audience involved, so I felt pressure. Then as I went to the bar he was like, "See, I like butch dykes. I already got her getting me drinks. I'll have her turned out in no time. Next time ya'll see her, she'll be wearin' a dress." And the whole crowd is laughing. And it's like, what am I gonna do? Challenge [celebrity comic]? What can I do but laugh and go get the drink? I hated that I did it, but at the same time, it was easier for me to just get the drink so I didn't look like I was being difficult.

Briana points out the ways women comics deploy self-defense tactics using a situational awareness of how multiple positionalities operate. While Briana is an established working comedian, the celebrity status of the performer trumps her position. After refusing his initial request and asserting her status as comedian, the performer draws on the audience to persuade Briana to oblige his demands. In this instance, direct confrontation is ineffective. The male performer subsequently targets Briana's gender presentation and sexuality then uses her compliance to make further claims about her deviance from appropriate femininity. Concerned that any additional efforts to resist would expose her to more public critique, Briana understands compliance to be more expedient than resistance.

Feminine-presenting lesbian comedians, in contrast, report experiencing a fetishization of their sexuality, particularly if they are perceived as conventionally attractive. Melanie, a 28 year-old Latina comedian, explains, "They always be like 'Are you sure? You're just so pretty.'" Then I tell them I'm married, and they get even more interested and wanna know all these inappropriate things about my sex life. So when that happens, I quickly make a joke to change the subject and just generally try to avoid having conversations with male comics." When men link Melanie's attractiveness to heterosexuality, she uses her marital status to prove and defend her sexuality. They subsequently, map their heterosexual erotic desire onto her marriage, and Melanie deploys humor as an aversion mechanism but ultimately contends that maintaining an appropriate distance is key to avoiding sexist encounters.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on interviews and participant observation with a diverse sample of comedians, this article examines how the organizational work culture of stand-up comedy shapes the ways women experience and respond to sexual harassment. Previous work shows that definitions of

what constitutes sexual harassment vary depending on occupational context. The boundary between acceptable and inappropriate behavior is determined by a complex interplay between the identity positions of individual workers, the structural features of an organization, and the cultural norms in a workplace. In stand-up comedy, the entrenchment of joking in the definition of work complicates the interpretive process of defining and defending oneself against unacceptable behavior. This study builds on existing work that highlights the ways gender schemas about women's irrationality make women vulnerable to gaslight (Sweet 2019). By reframing inappropriate behavior as 'joking,' and labeling women as overly emotional and sensitive, men simultaneously invalidate women's professional identities as comedians and increase their exposure to sexual harassment and assault. Moreover, the lack of institutional protections in stand-up comedy leaves women without formal redress for sexual harassment.

In light of this context, I show that women in comedy engage in a variety of context-specific strategies to challenge verbal and physical threats they encounter at work. Men often couch sexual advances in humor. These, sometimes ambiguous, behaviors, veil the operation of sexual harassment, and women must skillfully engage in acts of self-defense. Accordingly, women challenge these affronts by strategically using distancing and direct confrontation. While distancing is the most effective protective strategy against sexual harassment, direct confrontation allows women comics to assertively curtail ongoing and future breaches of professional conduct. Similar to women in other male-dominated professions, women comedians suppress gender difference by emphasizing their occupational identities (Denissen 2010b). But women in comedy reinforce their professional status by openly shaming the gendered nature of the disparate treatment they experience and by framing inappropriate conduct as a violation of workplace norms. Women comics also draw on masculine displays to confront sexual

harassment and affirm their identities as competent comedians. By adopting aggressive talk and performing humor in response to transgressing behaviors, women comics reject men's sexual invasions and reroute threats to their professional integrity.

Women's experiences of sexual harassment are also shaped by tenure, celebrity status, relationship status, sexuality, and gender presentation. I provide evidence that men enact toxic masculine behaviors in different spaces based on the social capital they gain from participating in sexualizing women in the presence of comedians with public fame. These breaches of acceptable behavior help men gain visibility and acceptance with comedians of higher professional and social strata. In this way, sexual harassment in stand-up comedy takes on a performative nature that mirrors the performative work comedians do on stage. Moreover, men's behaviors are also conditioned on the identity positions of their victims. My findings show that lesbian comics and unpartnered novice comics are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment.

Previous research suggests that sexual harassment decreases when an organization makes concerted, and highly visible efforts to address the problem (Gruber 1998). Without formal organizational safeguards, women in comedy experience sexual harassment as an individual problem rather than an organizational issue. My findings suggest that, in some ways, the #MeToo movement in provides the only symbolic recourse for sexual harassment for women in comedy. Fear of public censure and potential material losses provide the only corrective to men's behaviors in some instances, as evidenced in the findings. When violating comedians suffer visible consequences, it sends a message that can have potential disciplinary effects on fellow comics. The influence of #MeToo is limited, however. Average, unknown comedians, however, have little to lose materially or in occupational reputation. Thus, #MeToo provides little accountability outside of the elite spheres of stand up comedy. Still, future work should further

examine the impact of The #MeToo movement on workplace climates in various occupational

settings. These studies should pay close attention to other informal professions without

institutional mechanisms in place to proactively address sexual harassment. More broadly, this

research invites scholars to expand our understanding of how organizational culture informs the

inequalities of gender-based and sexual harassment in the workplace and the meaning-making

and response strategies workers deploy in response. Focused on the processes by which

organizations and workers are raced, gendered, and sexualized we can also see how other

intersectional identity positions differently shape men and women's work experiences.

References

Antoine, Katja. 2015. "Pushing the edge: Challenging racism and sexism in American
    stand-up comedy." Phd Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Appier, Janis. 1997. *Policing women: The sexual politics of law enforcement and the
    LAPD*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Barber, Kristen. 2016. "Heterosexual aesthetic labor in the masculinization of the hair salon."
    Gender & Society 30(4): 618-642.

Bingham, S. G., and Scherer, L.L. 1993. "Factors associated with responses to sexual
    harassment and satisfaction with outcome. *Sex Roles* 29, 239-269.

Brown, J., E. Campbell, and C. Fife Schaw. 1995. "Adverse effects experienced by police
    officers following exposure to sex discrimination and sexual harassment. *Stress
    Medicine* 11:221-228.

Dellinger, Kirsten, Williams, Christine L. 2002. "The locker room v. the dorm room:
    The cultural context of sexual harassment in two magazine publishing organizations."
    Social Problems 49:242–57.

Denissen, Amy M. 2010a. "Crossing the line: How women in the building trades
    interpret and respond to sexual conduct at work. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*
    39:298-327.

Denissen, Amy M. 2010b. The right tools for the job: Constructing gender meanings and
    identities in the male-dominated building trades. *Human Relations* 63:1051-69.

Denissen, Amy and Saguy, Abigail 2014. Gendered homophobia and the contradictions

of workplace discrimination for women in the building trades. *Gender & Society* 20 (10): 1-24.

Dziec, B. W., Weiner, L. 1990. The lecherous professor: Sexual harassment on campus (2nd ed). The University of Illinois Press.

Deitch, C., and H. Fechner. 1995. When sexual harassment is unwritten policy: The District of Columbia Department of Corrections and the role of the union. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Fitzgerald, L.F., Gold, Y., and Brock, K. F. 1990. "Responses to victimization: Validation of an objective policy. *Journal of College Student Personnel*. 27, 34-39.

Fitzgerald, Louise F., Suzanne Swan, and Karla Fischer. 1995. "Why didn't she just report him?: The psychological and legal implications of women's responses to sexual harassment?" *Journal of Social Issues* 51 (1): 117-138.

Fulton, DoVeanna. 2004. "Comic views and metaphysical dilemmas: Shattering cultural images through self-definitions and representation by Black comediennes. *The Journal of American Folklore* 117 (463): 81-96.

Gilbert, Joanne. 2004. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Cultural Critique*.
Greenbaum, Andrea. 1997. Women's comic voices: The art and craft of female humor. *American Studies* 38(1): 117-138.

Giuffre, Patti A., Williams, Christine L. 1994. "Labeling sexual harassment in restaurants." *Gender & Society* 8:378–401.

Gruber, James. 1998. "The impact of male work environments and organizational policies on women's experiences of sexual harassment." *Gender and Society* 8 (3): 378-401.

Grusky, David, and Charles, Maria. 2004. *Occupational Ghettos: The Worldwide Segregation of Women and Men.* Stanford University Press.

Gutek, B. 1995. *Sex and the workplace.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Harris, Deborah and Giuffre, Patti. 2015. *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen*. Rutgers University Press.

Kein, Kartherine. 2015. "Recovering our sense of humor: New directions in feminist humor studies," *Feminist Studies* 41(3): 671-681.

Krefting, Rebecca. 2014. *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Laftontaine, E., and Tredeau, L. 1986. The frequency, sources, and correlates of sexual harassment among women in traditional male occupations. *Sex Roles*, 15: 433-442.

Martin, Susan and Nancy Jurik. 1996. *Doing justice, doing gender: Women in law and criminal justice occupations.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mizejewski, Linda. 2015. *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*. University of Texas Press.

Moore, Mignon. 2006. Lipstick or timberlands: Meanings of gender presentation in Black lesbian communities. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32 (1): 113-139.

Niebuhr, R. 1997. Sexual harassment in the military. *Sexual harassment: Theory, research, and treatment.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Oliver, B. 2013. *The Tao of Comedy: Embrace the Pause.*

Owen, Barbara. 1988. *The reproduction of social control: A study of prison workers at San Quentin.* New York: Praeger.

Pape, Karin and Vryenhoek, Leslie. 2018. "Workplace violence and harassment: Informal workers also need protection." WIEGO.

Parker, Kim. 2018. "Women in majority-male workplaces report higher rates of gender discrimination." Pew Research Center.

Pryor, J., C. LaVite and L. Stoller. 1993. A social psychological analysis of sexual harassment: The person/situation interaction. *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 42: 68-81.

Pryor, J., Christine M. LaVite, and Lyneette M. Stoller. 1993. "A social psychological analysis of sexual harassment.

Rubenstein, M. 1992. Combating sexual harassment at work. *Conditions of Work Digest* 11: 285-290.

Stainback, Kevin, Ratliff, Thomas N., Roscigno, Vincent J. 2011. "The Context of workplace sex discrimination: Sex composition, workplace culture, and relative power." *Social Forces* 89:1165–88.

Sweet, Paige. 2019. "The sociology of gaslighting." *American Sociological Review* 84(5) 851-875.

Texeira, Mary Thierry . 2002. "'Who Protects and Serves Me?' A case study of sexual harassment of African American women in one U.S. law enforcement agency." *Gender & Society* 16:524–45.

Valian, Virginia 1998. *Why So Slow: The Advancement of Women*. MIT Press.

Welsh, Sandy. 1999. "Gender and sexual harassment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 169-190.

Wong, MML. 2005. Subtextual gendering processes: A study of Japanese retail firms in Hong Kong. *Human Relations* 58(2): 249-276.

Yoder, J. D. and Aniakudo, P. 1995. "The responses of African American women firefighters to gender harassment at work." *Sex Roles* 32: 125–137.

Yoder, J. D. and Aniakudo, P. 1996. "When pranks become harassment: The case of African American women firefighters. *Sex Roles* 35: 253–270.

Yoder, J. D. and Aniakudo, P. 1997. "Outsiders within" the firehouse: Subordination and difference in the social interactions of African American women firefighters. *Gender & Society* 11: 324–341.

Double Binds and Punchlines: How Women Navigate the Comedy Writers' Room

Researchers have given some attention to the structural issues women face in securing work in Hollywood writers' rooms. Yet, few studies have examined the cultural contexts and internal politics of writers' rooms to theorize how these dynamics may impact the larger inequalities in the representation of women in the industry. Drawing on participation in two comedy writers' rooms, this article argues that the masculinized organizational norms of writers' rooms impose double binds on women that constrain their ability to effectively integrate into workplace milieus. I argue that race, class, physical attractiveness, and more tentatively, relationship status shape these constraints.

The recent spotlight on diversity in Hollywood has uncovered chronic inequalities within the industry and the attendant practices that sustain them. Extant work reveals a gross underrepresentation of women and minority professionals across all sectors of the industry, but particularly in the executive ranks, in director's chairs, and in writers' rooms (Hunt, et. al. 2019). The writers' room has long been a site of curiosity for scholars and the mainstream press, yet, critical study of the television writers room is still lacking. Writers' rooms are fiercely protected spaces where artistic freedom supersedes political correctness, professional norms, and sometimes, personal boundaries. In the comedy writers' room, the pursuit of laughs at any cost, further complicates rules about acceptable behavior and the ways writers can respond.

Indeed, a writer's authority is determined by complex interplay between the writers' room dynamics and socio-political contexts that inform it. Writers' rooms are complicated spaces where ideas are negotiated, consensus is formed and issues of gender and race play out (Henderson 2011). Writers must also learn to navigate the internal politics and pre-existing hierarchies of the room. Therefore, writing skill alone does not determine a writer's success. Rather, writers must possess the cultural toolkit and embodied self-presentation styles that appropriately correspond with the workplace climate of a particular room. I argue that women face complex choices when managing impressions in the writers' room, with competing demands that depend on their identity positions and a host of contextual factors.

While we know that women confront myriad obstacles around access and representation in television writers' rooms (Bielby 2009; Henderson 2011; Hunt et. al 2019), we know less about how they navigate these barriers. Yet, how women manage interactions in these spaces bears significant weight on their professional trajectories. Drawing on participant observation, this article examines the organizational norms of the television writers' room to explore how women navigate the structural and self-presentation dilemmas they confront at work. Building on existing literature on writers' rooms, I show the ways women's experiences and coping strategies shift based on markers of social class and attractiveness.

The Organizational Culture of the Writer's Room

The dearth of scholarly research on writers' rooms is largely a result of their exclusivity. Because writers' rooms are so fiercely protected, previous work on television writers has been narrowly focused on industry how-to-guides describing the process of screenwriting (Blum 1995; Cook 2007; Douglass 2005; Epstein 2006) and interviews with producers and head writers of prominent television shows (Frough 1991; Meyers 2010; Prigge 2005). While this work provides insight into the production process, it fails to critically explore the organizational and interactional dynamics of these rooms that are creatively autonomous and culturally exclusive. Other demographic studies documenting the representation of women and minority television writers offer a picture of slow-changing diversity in Hollywood and the institutional policies that support these inequalities (Beilby & Bielby 2001; 2002, Hunt et. al 2018; 2019). Drawing on the these data, popular newspapers, mainstream magazines and trade publications have recently shed light on a number of serious problems in the Hollywood writers room such as gender and racial discrimination (Carter 2009; Lisotta 2004) as well as a culture of sexual harassment (Silverman

2004). Still, few studies have analyzed the organizational culture of writers' rooms and the ways writers are included in or excluded from workplace routines and informal activities.

Existing work suggests that cultural homogeneity tends to structure most writers' rooms (Henderson 2011). Writing is a collective action, and writers' rooms are cast much like a television show, accounting for personalities, skills, and overall chemistry. While every show has a unique culture, the highly collaborative writing process for producing show scripts relies on achieving consensus. This method of relational creative production forges quasi-familial workplace norms, and these local institutional practices and learned expectations regulate relationships among writers (Phalen & Osellame 2012). A writer's ability to successfully assimilate into the room is largely dependent on the degree to which they share the same cultural milieu with the dominant group of writers (Henderson 2011). Still, how writers interpret, display and negotiate cultural similarities and differences has yet to be examined.

Indeed, writers' rooms have historically been racially homogenous and overwhelmingly male. Grugulis and Stoyanova (2012) show how entertainment industry labor markets favor white male and middle class candidates whose social positions signal legitimate professional identities. They argue that shared cultural capital, norms and reference points facilitate strong workplace relationships (Bourdieu & Passeron 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992) through 'bonding capital' (Putnam 2000). In his analysis of political movements, Putnam defines 'bonding capital' as the shared identities, interests and cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds within a group or organization. Putnam argues that 'bonding capital' reinforces strong ties among community members, which results in group homogeneity and the exclusion of diverse individuals. While Putnam's work centers on political networks, 'bonding capital' also explains the strength of homogenous networks and the privileging of white men in securing writing jobs.

Indeed, for middle class white men, embodied behaviors, appearance, and university prestige serve as proxies for competence, creativity and compatibility with workplace climate (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012). These presumed indicators of potential workplace assimilation make white men appealing candidates in a television industry dominated by men in decision-making positions (Bielby 2009). White middle class men are, thus, far more likely to participate in networks that provide access to quality industry work than working class or non-white middle class industry professionals, whose networks are more fragile. Because 'bonding capital' is such a salient determinant of white men's access to writers' rooms, I expect that these shared cultural norms and characteristics also privilege white men inside the room as they navigate the informal interactional contexts that solidify a writer's legitimacy in a room.

Industry practices that rely on familiarity and stereotyping to evaluate writers result in typecasting in hiring as executives make decisions about who can best appeal to specific audiences and meet the creative demands of writing genres (Bielby 2009). Consequently, racial diversity in the writers' room has been slow to progress (Hunt et. al 2018; 2019). Diversity initiatives aimed at shifting room demographics do help writers of color secure staffing positions but often fail to address the enveloping cultural deficits of the workplace climate. Henderson (2011) contends that on the one hand, writers of color are tokenized and professionally pigeonholed around race when assignments are allotted. On the other, writers of color must learn to present ideas that align with the perspective of the room if they want to survive. This silencing of divergent points of view further entrenches the cultural homogeneity of writers' rooms. Writers who have been othered learn to assimilate to achieve inclusion.

Women of all ethnicities face similar occupational challenges in gaining access to writers' rooms. (Bielby & Bielby 1996) identify distinct aspects of the industry that pose barriers to women writers, namely: a highly imbalanced sex ratio in writers' rooms and up the industry ranks, constrained networking opportunities, and wage gap inequalities that result in cumulative salary disadvantages over time. Moreover, in a masculine context of studio and network executives, men writers are better known and perceived as better risks than equally successful women writers. Writers' room culture can also be particularly inhospitable to women. Television comedy, in particular, tends to draw on masculinized styles of humor, and writers are expected to share common sensibilities that can be difficult for outsiders, namely women, to penetrate (Bielby 2009). These sensibilities often go unchecked to protect the creative process against any form of censorship. Women are routinely talked over, ignored, tokenized and assigned to projects that require 'a woman's perspective,' or excluded from off-site work-related activities (Henderson 2011). Gendered hazing practices such as sexual teasing and constant exposure to inappropriate jokes (Phalen & Osellame 2012) create myriad workplace dilemmas for women in the writers' room. Henderson (2011) finds that women writers must either participate in the behavior by offering jokes or audibly laughing to signal that they are capable of taking a joke, and thus, a good fit.

Existing work also suggests that women of color are particularly disadvantaged in both gaining access to and successfully navigating writers' rooms (Henderson 2011). Heuman (2016) suggests that the workplace climate of writers' rooms can be hostile spaces women of color. In the 2006, Lyles v. *Friends* lawsuit, a Black woman who served as the writers' assistant for the show, accused *Friends* of cultivating a hostile work environment of sexual harassment and racial discrimination. According to Lyles, writers repeatedly made rape jokes in reference to women

cast members, discussed explicit details about their sex lives, and made racist jokes, such as mocking "Black ghetto talk" (Silverman 2004). Lyles articulated the behavior in the *Friends* writers' room as an ongoing hazing ritual. As writers performed culturally offensive behaviors and consistently invaded her privacy, they created an ongoing initiation process that resulted in Lyles's marginalization. Given her minority status as the only Black woman and her subordinate position as a writers' assistant, Lyles had few avenues for professional recourse. The court dismissed the case, ruling in favor of free speech and creative expression. This extreme latitude given to artistic expression makes writers' rooms particularly complicated spaces.

Yet, artistic expression in comedy has historically been limited for women (Finney 1997; Gilbert 1997; Greenbaum 1997; Stoddard 1977) despite massive gains in film, television and stand-up comedy (Mizejewski 2015; Stanley 2008). Women navigate patriarchal norms and gendered ideas about performativity (Krefting 2014; Rowe 2001), and Black women, in particular, confront racialized stereotypes when performing comedic material (Zack 2013). On the one hand, Hill-Collins (2004) contends that conceptions of Black women are bound in controlling images that tend to circulate around hyper or asexualized femininities, deviant motherhood, and inherent aggressiveness. On the other, discourses of Black respectability challenge these stereotypes but call on Black women to enact white, middle-class femininities (Moore 2011). Black women are constantly positioned between these dominant frames, and Black women's comedy draws attention to their unique position at the intersections of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2004). Black women comics have been tasked with deconstructing sexist ideologies and racist imagery while maintaining cultural legitimacy (Fulton 2004). These competing mandates have shaped Black women humorist's forms of speech, gesture, dress, and other elements performative embodiment (Finley 2016; Fulton 2004).

Drawing on the tradition of Black comedy, Black women comics have traditionally appropriated language and performance styles conventionally attributed to men, which draw heavily on culturally relevant narratives, working class identities, and raucous physicality (Fulton 2004).

The entrenchment of these humor modalities in mainstream culture has shaped expectations for the ways Black women can engage in comedy. Finley (2016) explores the complexity of self-representations in Black women's humor and argues that Black women who perform restrained wit, dark, conceptual or other forms of alternative material, subvert gendered and racist stereotypes and expand the boundaries of the Black comedy tradition. But the racialization of comedy genres often marginalizes Black women who perform sarcasm and dispassionate wit, instead favoring sassy and aggressive styles of comedy. Black women must present themselves as non-threatening and familiar (Antoine 2015; Fulton 2004), which can constrain the comedic identities available to them. The performative tensions that arise between Black women performers and the audience, both local and in larger mainstream reception bring into relief expectations about Black women's humor, personality structures, and class identities. This study examines how these same performative and interactional tensions around race, gender, and class impact the ways Black women engage in humor in comedy writers' rooms, how they are perceived by other writers, and the ways women marshal gendered, embodied, and cultural resources in hopes of achieving integration at work.

Data and Methods

Data for this article come from a larger study examining how women navigate sexual harassment and construct professional identities offstage as stand up comedians. To investigate how ideas about race, gender and social class influence evaluations of women in writers' rooms, I conducted ten months of participant observation as a paid staff writer at *Showtime Tonight*, a

61

predominantly white comedy writers' room in Los Angeles, and six months of participant observation as a paid staff writer at *The Spot*; an all-Black unscripted comedy variety show based in Los Angeles. This racial and socio-cultural homogeneity made the writers' rooms ideal sites for observing how organizational culture, gender norms, and ideas about race and class combined to shape workplace interactions and expectations for women.

My work as a comedy writer began before I pursued this research in earnest. After working as a stand-up comedian for two years, I was hired to participate in 'punch up' sessions for 4 consecutive unscripted comedy television shows. In these sessions, a head writer calls in freelance writers and comedians to help the existing writing staff 'punch up' or improve the working show script. These sessions serve as de facto auditions for new writers looking to secure more permanent positions on television shows. It was in these 'punch up' rooms where I identified areas of thematic overlap with my experiences as a comedian. I then, crafted research questions while pursuing prospective writing opportunities and gained access to my first staffing position at *The Spot* by recommendation from a mentor who was the head writer of the show. After writing for *The Spot* and a handful of other one-off television projects, I submitted application materials and secured a staff writer position at *Showtime Tonight*.

At the time of my hire, *Showtime Tonight* had a specific mandate to recruit Black women in an attempt to diversify the largely homogenous writing team. Of the 17 writers, 12 were white men, with 3 white women. I was one of two Black writers and the only Black woman on the writing staff at the time. In stark contrast, all of the 8 writers for *The Spot* were Black. Of the three women, one woman held a senior writing position, I worked as a staff writer, and another woman served as writer's assistant.

62

Despite substantial differences in staffing diversity, the writers' rooms for *Showtime Tonight* and *The Spot* were similar. Unlike traditional scripted comedy shows that adhere to a regimented process for submitting scripts along a linear timeline, *Showtime Tonight* and *The Spot* followed a looser organizational structure. In a conventional writers' room, writers work collectively to pitch story ideas followed by a period of independent writing once script assignments are given. Differently, unscripted comedy shows tend to be highly collaborative with multiple writers developing concepts, pitching jokes and building additively toward the final product. This patchwork process is highly interactive and decentralized.

Working as a paid staff writer at *Showtime Tonight* and *The Spot* allowed me to spend considerable time with coworkers both inside and out of the writers' room. I participated in a wide span of work-related activities including happy hours, dinners, field trips, and comedy shows. At both sites, I handwrote fieldnotes in my notebook between assignments, discretely recorded field notes during breaks using a voice recorder on my phone, and dictated additional notes into my voice recorder on my commutes home. Data were transcribed and analyzed inductively as relevant themes emerged. Pseudonyms have been applied to writers and show titles to ensure confidentiality.

Because I draw on my own experiences for this article, my positionality in relation to both sites is central to this analysis. Compared to most typical television writers, my background as a stand-up comedian positioned me as writer-performer. In writers' rooms where jokes are in great demand, comedians are perceived to have an advantage. As a degreed Black woman, I shared a similar educational background with many writers at *Showtime Tonight*, despite deep cultural differences. Conversely, my shared racial identity with the Black writers at *The Spot* situated me as an insider, despite my atypical academic pedigree. But my conventional

63

attractiveness, by local industry standards, meaning being tall, thin, and generally "pretty for a comedy writer," was of great salience in both writers' rooms. I therefore, have especially had to consider the ways this status, as well as my own thin privilege intersects with race, sexuality and class to shape my role as both a subject and researcher.

Findings

Below, I detail the ways women navigate workplace dilemmas in two male-dominated comedy writers' rooms. First, I establish the context of sexually charged humor and sexualized talk that pervades these rooms showing the ways race, gender and cultural background shape the interactional resources available to women as they attempt to build relationships and reaffirm their professional identities at work. I then discuss how performing traditionally feminine tasks can help bolster their inclusion and prove their indispensability in the workplace. Yet, performing these duties can also pigeonhole women professionally by locking them into support staff roles. In the following section, I discuss the embodied behaviors that penalize women in the writers' room, giving specific attention to the ways race, class, relationship status, and attractiveness inform how these behaviors are interpreted. Finally, I examine how men also use their workplace privilege to push women to do work that receives little recognition and the collective action efforts women deploy to thwart these attempts.

Navigating Raunchy Humor

At *Showtime Tonight*, most of the writers were degreed white men with long professional resumes in unscripted television comedy. In this room, the intersection of industry pedigree, intellectual pretension, and frat-house humor created a complicated workplace landscape for women writers to navigate. But different than the hegemonic masculinities traditionally displayed among privileged men (Gruys & Munsch 2018; Sherwood 2010), writers' room

masculinities skewed toward nerdiness and eccentricity. *Showtime Tonight* cultivated a space for performances of pretentious non-hegemonic masculinities that benefited from white privilege but did not embody the conventional displays of physical or emotional strength, sexual virility, or bravado. In my first few weeks as a writer, I quickly learned that the expectation was for writers to exhibit intellect in their jokes coupled with lewd punch lines or references. 'Dick jokes' were abundant along with other juvenile references to breasts, vaginas and sexual acts. Women writers who performed this offbeat, raunchy-frat identity assimilated better into the room than those who did not. Yet, as we will see, not all women writers were equally able to perform this sort of humor.

Women at *Showtime Tonight* took an active role in pitching, and not just laughing at, "dick jokes" and making other sexually vulgar references, they positioned themselves as primary creators of suggestive content, rather than sideline participants. For instance, Stephanie, a staff writer at *Showtime Tonight*, had the reputation of pitching more "dick jokes" than any other writer. White and college educated, Stephanie shared a similar cultural background with many of the men on the writing staff. The fact that she was not conventionally attractive (and partnered with a man) seemed to desexualize her, allowing her to actively participate in raunchy joking. Stephanie enthusiastically volunteered to write an on-going show segment that required phallic illustrations and became the 'go-to' writer for similarly raunchy content. In addition to jokes offered for daily scripts, Stephanie also performed off-color humor in non-work related discussions in the writers' room, thus solidifying this style of humor as part of her personal identity. "All of your stories involve you being drunk somewhere in your twenties," noted Mark, a senior writer, in reference to Stephanie's anecdotes during a pitch meeting. These histories further ratified Stephanie's membership in a cultural class of white men writers based on shared

reflections of college drinking, sexual exploits, and other activities affiliated with white, middle-class collegiate identities. By invoking these sexual cultures through self-deprecating reflections, Stephanie positioned herself as non-threatening. In short, Stephanie possessed the 'bonding capital' conducive to successfully integrating into the writers' room.

In solidifying her competence as a writer by becoming 'one of the guys,' Stephanie, in turn, heightened her status as a writer. By performing masculinity, through the performance of "dick jokes" and discussions of sexual exploits, Stephanie established herself as competent in a masculine-dominant field. Her status as married and sexually nonthreatening further solidified her accessibility and likeability among the writers. In securing this status, Stephanie was given priority over other women writers for niche assignments. For instance, in one meeting when we needed an immediate pitch and script for a developing story on women's health, a senior writer entered the meeting and said, "We need a woman on this one." He then frantically looked around and said, "Shit! Stephanie's not here." Meanwhile, two other women writers, including me, were present in the room. After noticing the obvious slight, a show producer remarked, "Uh, Stephanie's not the only woman here." This interaction demonstrates the extent to which Stephanie's performance of masculinity and femininity made her so palatable in the writers' room and that she rendered other women writers nearly invisible.

Performing raunchiness was also an effective strategy for women who worked in ancillary positions. Nicole, a recurring guest on *Showtime Tonight,* would often join writers' meetings to flesh out material for her appearances. In these meetings, Nicole, a Black woman who described herself as fat, consistently shared stories about her private dating life and desire to have sex and the type of men she found sexually appealing. For instance, "Joel Osteen could get this pussy. It would be a blessing to me and him, honey," remarked Nicole in one of our pitch

66

meetings. On another occasion, Nicole "improved" an existing picture of male genitalia that had been drawn on the writers' announcement board by enlarging it. The production staff invited Nicole to the show more than other women guest performers. "We love Nicole and want her on as much as possible," petitioned one senior writer when discussing the developing production schedule. Here, the coupling of Nicole's physical appearance and embodied humor allowed her to integrate into the workplace culture of the writers' room. By pitching sex jokes and engaging in highly sexualized rapport with writers, Nicole performed a familiar comedic style for Black women that led to repeat professional opportunities.

In contrast, women who did not perform raunchy jokes relied on displays of wit and professional responsibility to reaffirm their status in the writers' room. Melanie, a white staff writer at *Showtime Tonight*, told me, "I show up early, pitch solid jokes, do the work. But I just can't with all the douchebag stuff, and I know that means it'll always be like, 'oh, Melanie's this or that,' but whatever." Melanie discursively distances herself from the valued presentations of humor in the writers' room, fully recognizing the social cost. While failing to participate in sexualized humor is not career ending for Melanie, it does preclude her from full workplace inclusion. Despite her aversion and choice to not routinely perform raunchy humor, Melanie did occasionally offer "dick jokes" to the room without penalty.

Still, some women were not granted equal access to performances of raunchy humor. I came to understand that my degreed background and the presumed attendant middle-class status position effectively precluded me from benefiting from engaging in lewd styles of humor. For example, at *Showtime Tonight*, the predominantly white writers' room, I learned that some writers formed expectations about my humor before I felt I had even established a solid joke reputation. "You're above all of this ridiculousness, like Michelle Obama. When we go low, you

go high, Amberia," explained the head writer in a particularly sexually vulgar joke meeting early on in my tenure at the show. While intended as a compliment, it highlighted the ways writers perceived my self-presentation and social class as they related to sexually explicit jokes. Indeed, my status as married and conventionally attractive further reinforced gendered ideas about acceptable enactments of sexuality in my jokes. In an aim to achieve inclusion, I made several subsequent attempts to pitch sexually explicit jokes, but never made inroads into the room. During a separate, closed writing session, I joked that a women in a video clip "looked like she just swallowed some cum." The head writer with whom I was working keeled over in laughter, but also in disbelief, and repeated the joke to the room. In essence, the joke got the laugh, not me. After the room received the joke, he leaned in and said, "I'm not gonna tell anyone you said that." This type of gendered and classed policing of behavior disguised as reputation protection signaled that I had breached the embodied demands of appropriate femininity associated with my self-presentation of socio-economic status.

On the one hand, my attempts to perform raunchy humor rarely landed successfully. On the other, my innocuous exchanges were often unexpectedly mislabeled as sexual. At *Showtime Tonight*, I discovered that writers sexualized interactions between men and women deemed conventionally attractive. Tim, a staff writer, explained, "when you're hot, the things you are just gonna be seen a certain way." For example, during a show meeting, I was speaking with a celebrity guest [a Black man], joking about why I had missed the previous day. When I told the guest I was out sick, he launched into a funny bit about how worried he was, and I responded saying, "Well, you didn't call." We laughed, but the room did not. Later that day, Tim told me that I "made that exchange weird, like it was a date or something." I told him that if any other writer in the room had delivered the same joke, he would have no issue. Tim reframed a

68

harmless joke shared between the guest and me as a sexual advance based on or shared attractiveness, the guest's celebrity status, and presumably, our shared racial identity. In this way, attractiveness bears significant weight on how interactions are read in writers' rooms.

In contrast, "dick jokes" were far less ubiquitous at *The Spot*, an all-Black writers' room. The men did, however, consistently engage in sexualized talk about women, more broadly. This talk included commentary about women referenced on the show, women from their personal relationships, and women who worked on the production staff. Frequently, the men writers scrolled through pictures of women on social media profiles and offered ratings on their physical appearance. "She doesn't want me to respect her," argued one staff writer to another in reference to a picture of a woman on Instagram. "How can I when you dress like this and have this kind of body? I like it. But all I'm thinking about is fucking you," he explained. Men writers would often call these women's intentions into question creating imaginary circumstances in which these women were pursuing them romantically. This routine of searching out and scrutinizing attractive women's bodies was a constant practice in the writers' room. Whereas men typically engage in 'locker room' talk in separate masculine spaces, the men at *The Spot* engaged in sexualized talk as if no women were present in the room, implicitly laying sole claim to the writers' room. This gendering of the workspace through objectifying talk solidified the invisibility of women in writers' room.

However, women perceived as conventionally attractive could challenge this sexualized talk in ways that penalized other women in the writers. For example, during a dress rehearsal for a show, two men writers commented on a guest performer's body, saying, "She looks like she will put it on you," referring to the performer's presumed sexual prowess. Nina, an attractive staff writer at *The Spot,* responded incredulously saying, "Now you know, those titties are outta'

69

your league. Those are the kind of titties you gotta' take out to a pre-fixe dinner. Those ain't no Chick-Fil-A titties." The two writers laughed and resigned to Nina's assertion that the guest performer was unattainable. They subsequently engaged with Nina about failed dates, and asked for her advice and insight on "how women think" in regard to romantic relationships. Indeed, Nina symbolically held insider status to women whom the men writers desired sexual access.

Accordingly, I learned that my status as married and conventionally attractive also allowed me to stifle sexist talk through jokes. For example, during a casting production meeting, writers perused pictures and resumes of actresses for prospective roles on forthcoming shows. Two married, middle-aged staff writers consistently interrupted these discussions, identifying particular actresses that "could definitely get it [sex]." After several disruptions, I interjected saying, "First of all, ya'll know you're way too sleepy to do any of that. And she don't want none of that 'mortgage is due,' 'gotta' pick up my kids from school,' sex anyway." By drawing on their identities as husbands and fathers, and implicitly, my own position as a wife, I used the joke to undermine their self-aggrandized virility and delusory ideas of the actress's sexual interest and availability. One of the heckled writers responded to me saying, "Don't conspire against me, Amberia. I know all you little cute, young chicks are in a club. Plus, I'm gonna have the mortgage paid and a babysitter for the kids." Assigned to a class of other attractive women, I was thus given access to engage sexist jokes in jest.

But, for women not deemed conventionally attractive, ignoring the ongoing sexualized talk presented as the safest response. Leyna, the writer's assistant for *The Spot* admitted, "I just don't say anything because I don't want them turning it against me and saying I'm jealous. It's just easier to pretend they're not even there sometimes." Other women writers avoided disrupting the exchanges after witnessing another woman attacked for interjecting. On a live show day

70

when we were rushing to meet a script deadline, Tina, a senior writer interrupted two men as they were ranking pictures of women on their phones. In a moment of frustration, Tina shouted, "Ya'll know ya'll aren't exactly 10s, right?" Tina, who is unpartnered and in her late 50s, immediately became the target of a deluge of jokes about her appearance and presumed jealousy of women who were conventionally attractive. In this instance, Tina's tenure or seniority did not protect her from critique. Women writers—especially if they were not conventionally attractive—thus opted to disregard misogynistic conversations as a protective mechanism.

Feminine Tasks as Tools for Workplace Assimilation and Exclusion

In writers' rooms, some women found ways to fit into isolating workplace climates by performing conventionally feminine duties at-will. At *Showtime Tonight*, the predominantly white writers' room, the fast-paced work-environment meant new hires faced a substantial learning curve in adjusting to the daily schedule, assignments, and technical language for the show. Because there was no designated training, writers learned these skills and expectations over time on the job. But women writers at *Showtime Tonight* filled in these organizational personnel gaps by serving as informal training coaches for new hires. One woman with former experience in unscripted television, created an unofficial writer's handbook for new and recent hires to reference as they adjusted to the room. Despite being a recent hire, another woman became a quasi-office coordinator, answering questions ranging from the show's process to administrative issues around payroll, computer software and other work-related logistics. "If I don't know something, I usually just go to her," explained Chris, a staff writer, during my first week in the room. In performing these voluntary, unpaid administrative tasks, women writers positioned themselves as indispensable to the mechanics of the writers' room.

Another way women leveraged inclusion at work was through organizing work-adjacent activities. One writer adopted a role reminiscent of an elementary school 'room mother,' scheduling after work game nights, weekend sightseeing tours, and other field trip-type activities for the writers. She coordinated birthday card signings, gifts for holidays and other special occasions, and corralled writers together for weekly in-office games during breaks. The writers' room came to rely on this gendered supplemental labor to boost morale and increase workplace cohesion. Moreover, by associating themselves with desired activities, women writers created space for themselves in a workplace climate where writers were constantly trying to establish their place. Women at *Showtime Tonight* did not perceive the extra work as an undue burden. In fact, some women understood this labor as remedying the tense and fast paced work environment that typically encompasses writers' rooms. "I'm the go-to girl for all things fun, and we need that around here," she admitted." One writer, who had expressed concerns to me about fitting in, told me that she enjoyed organizing weekly trivia games because it was "a way for people to see my personality and the fact that I'm really fucking smart." In this way, these informal work-adjacent activities helped women establish competence in low threat environments, which subsequently strengthened rapport with other writers at work.

While performing feminine tasks helped women build rapport with fellow writers, it did not facilitate professional advancement. For instance, Leyna, the writers' assistant at *The Spot*, an all-Black writers' room, also served as the unofficial personal assistant for the head writer. The formal responsibilities of a writers' assistant include: 1) assisting the head writer with essential office-related duties, 2) extensive note-taking during meetings, 3) compiling scripts and script revisions, and 4) assisting the writing staff in routine work-related tasks. But at *The Spot*, Leyna was responsible for coordinating the head writer's personal schedule, running his personal

errands, and fielding non-work related phone calls. Leyna would routinely take his coffee and lunch orders, take calls from his doctors and dentists, and remind him of events with his family. She completed these tasks unpaid in hopes of securing a promotion to a staff writer position. When I insisted that she discontinue working as a personal assistant, Leyna told me, "I think if he [the head writer] learns that he can trust me with all of his personal stuff, and that I'm reliable, he knows I can be a solid writer as well." Similar to the women *Showtime Tonight*, Leyna was hoping she could demonstrate competence through non-work related tasks and leverage it to secure professional gains. "I've picked up his daughter from school, and ordered anniversary gifts for his wife," admitted Leyna, who frequently participated in conversations with the head writer about his personal life at work. And while performing this labor allowed her to gain access to intimate details of head writer's life, it ultimately undermined her professional identity as a writer. On a show day, Leyna wrote and submitted a concept for consideration for the script. Rick, the head writer, said, "This is a cute idea, but stick to getting coffee and let us do the heavy lifting." Indeed, Leyna's work as a personal assistant overshadowed her formal work as a writers' assistant. Additionally, because Leyna was not yet a writer, performing the role of an assistant further compromised her promotion.

Women with seniority also failed to gain recognition through performing support role tasks at *The Spot*. Nina, a senior writer at *The Spot,* undertook several informal administrative tasks such as: organizing dinners for the writing team, coordinating travel, and ensuring writers were aware of important professional development events sponsored by writers' unions. Nina also reviewed and revised her own work in addition to all scripts from the writing team before they were submitted to show guests and hosts. Despite her tenure and the rigorous spadework she completed on top of her assignments, Nina was not considered for a promotion when the existing

73

head writer became an executive producer on the show. Nina told me, "I was told no one could do my job like me and that they needed me where I was. The crazy part, is half the stuff I do isn't even my job." For Nina, performing supplemental labor resulted in self-sabotage that confined her to her existing role.

Self-Presentation as an Obstacle to Inclusion

Women engaged a number of tools to help foster assimilation into the male-dominated writers' room, but some barriers were beyond their control. At *Showtime Tonight*, I found that women were often penalized for engaging in the same behaviors that benefited men in the writers' room as a result of the gendered ways these behaviors are read. While eccentricity greatly advantaged men writers, it further alienated women in the room. Men who performed oddness were perceived as having niche and valuable perspectives and wit. "Chase is always going to say 58 wildly inappropriate things that make everyone uncomfortable before we land on the gold," explained an executive producer about a seasoned staff writer on the show. Chase was often praised for his outlandish pitches and jokes. Thus, for Chase, a man, being eccentric was professionally resourceful.

I also witnessed examples of oddness being read as disarming and endearing when embodied by men in the writers' room. Jeff, a young and relatively new staff writer, at *Showtime Tonight*, was able to effectively solidify his position through consistent acts of odd behavior. Jeff would invite himself into private conversations by lingering in doorways or entering the room and lying down on the floor. Writers remarked at how strange his behaviors were, but would also laugh. "How do you have a girlfriend, man?" joked one of the writers when Jeff started a daily routine of wrapping his office chair with bubble wrap. This became Jeff's signature behavior, and it would allow him entrée into discussions with head writers, executive producers and

directors, spaces that are very difficult to penetrate as a newer writer. One of the senior writers told me, "Jeff is like the weird little brother I never had." Jeff was able to successfully capitalize on his age, tenure and personality resource to leverage relationships and job security, which is crucial for new writers.

In contrast, Alise, a former staff writer at *Showtime Tonight*, had recently been fired in part because her personality made the room uncomfortable. Alise was an offbeat and energetic middle-aged, white woman with years of comedy writing experience. Like Jeff, she would often lay down on the ground in the middle of writers' meetings when she was trying to work through a joke pitch. Alise was bookish, and would routinely co-join obscure facts and niche references her joke and concept pitches. Yet, these exact behaviors and characteristics ostracized Alise from the writers' room. Very few writers ever volunteered to partner with Alise on assignments, and her pitches were often met with silence and awkward stares. In my view, Alise was no more unusual than any of the men, but her gender and age arguably shaped how she was perceived and ultimately limited her bonding capital and successful integration into the room.

Similarly, At *Showtime Tonight*, I found that my position as a conventionally attractive, degreed Black woman precluded me from performing sarcasm in ways other writers could. Most writers at *Showtime Tonight* would describe their comedy as dry, ironic or sarcastic. But I learned that stereotypes about Black women's humor coupled with my speech, dress, and bodily comportment, often befuddled other writers and created symbolic barriers to my full integration into the writers' room.

For instance, when discussing my jokes over lunch with another writer, he explained, "Amberia, when you're sarcastic, it actually feels like you think you're better than us." Pressing him on this assumption, I described the ways the head writer was demonstratively sarcastic, to

which he replied, "yeah, but we know Chad's not better than us. I mean, look at him [laughs]. He's doesn't care about anything. I think Chad has worn the same outfit for the past five years." Thus, Chad's embodiment of carelessness in his sartorial choices and disposition disarmed his sarcastic humor, where other writers seemed to perceive me as smug or self-important based on my appearance. Another writer described my demeanor and dress as "very together," where most writers "look like shit or like they just rolled out of bed." In the writers' room, my self-presentation as composed and sophisticated threatened my relatability.

Gendered Recognition Politics as Exclusionary

Writers often skillfully angle at 'getting credit' for the particular ideas or jokes they offer to a script. Pitching jokes aloud to the room, 'punching up' scripts, and making casual jokes are ways writers publicly establish themselves as funny. At both *Showtime Tonight* and *The Spot,* I observed that men used the collaborative nature of comedy writing to their advantage by leaning into the performative elements of the job to gain recognition and credibility. In this process, men maximized public opportunities to showcase their humor, while women picked up the work of writing and editing.

Men writers routinely used public pitch meetings to silence and delegitimize women writers. On one occasion, Jason, the head writer for *The Spot,* the all-Black writers' room, was tasked with creating a musical concept for a show opening for two show guests. During the pitch meeting, however, he told the show guests that assigned the script to me saying, "She's a diversity hire. We gotta' give them a lot of chances so we don't get sued." The room laughed at the joke, and the guests remarked at how hilarious Jason was. By using humor to deflect from his failure to complete a task, the head writer maligned my competence, redirected responsibility to me, and emphasized his identity as funny. In doing so, Jason was attempting to position himself

76

as a performer among performers, rather than just a writer. This type of recognition provides professional currency for men, who already benefit from the stereotype that men are funnier than women. Women writers always have the dual task of proving their competence as writers but also as performatively funny and likeable. Men leveraged their privilege in this regard to center themselves in the writers' room and coerce women into doing extra work without recognition. This mimics conventional gender norms and symbolic gender expectations wherein women are subservient to men.

Men also found ways to subtly railroad through sabotage novice writers or writers with whom they were unfamiliar into performing support roles. At *The Spot,* writers worked in pairs to complete script assignments before show deadlines. At the end of the writing process, writers reviewed scripts with the host, or talent slated to perform for a particular show segment. Overwhelmingly, men writers at *The Spot* would eagerly engage in this performative aspect of the writing process. The script review process provided opportunities to showcase humor and build rapport with show talent, compared to the private process of scriptwriting, which is often thankless and anonymous. Mike, a senior writer at *The Spot*, was particularly adept at pitching funny concepts to talent and executive producers in meetings, drawing laughs and recognition. Once his pitches were approved and script deadlines were set, he regularly asked me to remind him of deadlines and notes from his own pitches, and sometimes, write his scripts in full, for which he would take credit. Mike framed these requests as normative rules of the collaborative decentralized writing process. Recognizing my position as a novice writer with little influence, Mike used his seniority to silently extort my labor.

Women pushed back on these affronts through context-specific situational displays of undermining jokes. During women's history month, I was partnered with John, another staff

writer at *Showtime Tonight,* on a script about reproductive justice. Despite having been

employed for over a year at *Showtime Tonight,* John was particularly unskilled at typing and had

not fully learned the software functions of program we used to compile script. Consequently, I

contributed most of the jokes and stepped in to type the script when his laborious typing created

a time conflict with our deadline. But when it was time to submit our work to the head writer,

John enthusiastically delivered all of the select jokes and described the overall substance of the

piece. When I attempted to interject, John cut me off by raising his voice and speeding up his

delivery to beat me to the punch lines. Effectively, by assuming the role as spokesperson for the

script, John was attempting to take full creative credit, despite having contributed very little.

Once he wrapped up his pitch, I remarked, "Nice! Now, once you learn how to type and what a

uterus is, you'll really be on your way." The head writer responded, sarcastically saying, "way to

pull your own weight, John." I used a joke to both undermine John's attempt to overstate his

contribution and knowledge of the topic and reaffirm my own reputation as funny. Men writers

often attempted to capitalize on moments of solidifying their place performatively, even if they

didn't do the work, but sometimes women were able to use humor to undermine their efforts.

Sometimes, when men tried to reroute their writing responsibilities to women, women

used collective action to stymie these efforts. Chase, a staff writer at *The Spot*, repeatedly failed

to bring his laptop to pitch meetings because he "knew one of the girls would." In response, all

of the women left our laptops at home for an important script reading with celebrity guest hosts.

When the show coordinator asked who was responsible for making live edits and revising the

script, we all publicly reminded Chase that he had "asked to take the lead on this assignment."

Consequently, the guest hosts replaced Chase with two women writers. On another occasion, a

senior writer exclusively emailed the women writers asking if any of us could "type fast" to

assist him on an assignment. One woman replied-all to the email with a link to typing software, another chimed in with a link to a job posting for an administrative assistant. Hours later, I concluded the email chain with a note saying, "would have responded faster, but it took me three hours to write this. Good luck." These acts of solidarity through humor reject the gendered redistribution of labor that relegates women to working as symbolic secretaries in the writers' room.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on participant observation in two culturally different unscripted comedy writers' rooms, this article examines how cultural meanings around race, class, attractiveness, and relationship status, inform the constraints women confront in comedy writers' rooms and the ways they pursue inclusion at work. I show that writers' rooms impose masculinized expectations on writers that limit the range of embodied behaviors and professional demeanors available to women at work. Women who possess the 'bonding capital' that appropriately corresponds to the organizational culture of the writers' room are better able to integrate into male-dominated spaces. This 'bonding capital' depends on how women writers can access and deploy gendered and racialized femininities and masculinities that produce acceptable and non-threatening self-presentations. Lastly, I explain men's attempts to marginalize women writers' performative and written work as attempts to reinforce normative gender relations and male privilege, and how women are sometimes able to fight back.

Previous work has shown that women in male-dominated professions must endure a culture of sexualized jokes to fit in at work (Denissen & Saguy 2014; Harris & Guiffre 2015; Henderson 2011). I demonstrate that some women find agency in actively participating in the performance of sexualized jokes. In both predominantly white and all-Black writers' room

79

contexts, successful engagement in sexualized humor is conditioned on race, attractiveness, and the 'bonding capital' (Putnam 2000) women possess. While previous work has shown that 'bonding capital,' or shared characteristics and cultural backgrounds, helps white men gain access to industry jobs (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2012); I show that 'bonding capital' privileges men and some women inside the writers' room who can successfully deploy culturally relevant self presentations. For instance, at *Showtime Live,* white women who strategically embodied locally valued elements of white middle-class male masculinities, such as pitching dirty jokes and invoking self-deprecating sexual histories better co-existed with their coworkers in the writers' room. Wade (2017) argues that participation in this type of 'hookup culture' allows women to perform masculinized displays of carelessness and indifference. These narratives disarmed men coworkers and positioned women as likeable and non-threatening.

Findings also suggest that Black women deemed unattractive who adhere to expected gendered tropes of Black humor integrate better into predominantly white comedy rooms than those who do not. Through familiar displays of sassiness and self-deprecating sexual availability, Black women can position themselves as non-threatening and thus, likeable. While existing theories of 'bonding capital' are conditioned on what is shared within a group, these findings show that performing mutually recognizable and understood traits associated with race and gender identities can provide access into homogenous work groups. Thus, 'bonding capital' is not limited to shared cultural background. In contrast, Black women who did not fit appearance norms around attractiveness or dress, and who did not perform sassy humor were nearly precluded from engaging in sexualized jokes at *Showtime Live*, the predominantly white writers' room. For example, in comparing me to Michelle Obama, the writers implicitly construct a new controlling image (Collins 2004) that prevented me from performing raunchy jokes or

embodying displays of carelessness that often provided social capital for white women in the workplace. Black feminist literature has critiqued the ways respectability politics force Black women to conform to standards of white femininity (Johnson 2013; Moore 2011; White 2001). This article further highlights the limitations of respectability politics by showing how images of idealized Black femininity are deployed and constrain ways Black women engage in humor and the self-presentations available to them in the workplace.

Differently, attractiveness allowed women to use sexually explicit jokes to confront sexist talk at *The Spot*, an all-Black writers' room. Conventionally attractive women used situationally appropriate identities such as marital status to challenge misogynistic commentary about other women. But gendered ideas about women's jealousy silenced older women deemed unattractive who were penalized for responding to men's sexualized talk. Hegemonic gender norms and aesthetics infiltrate writers' rooms sorting women into hierarchies. In both predominantly white and all-Black homogenous writers' rooms, Black women experienced privilege and disadvantage differently based on diverging socio-cultural understandings and interpretations of attractiveness, relationship status, and embodied behaviors.

Attractiveness and self-presentation also informed the ways writers perceived displays of sarcasm. At *Showtime Live,* informal appearance norms driven by an ethos of aesthetic indifference made me hypervisible, and coworkers redefined my sarcasm and wit as derisive. While other writers, both men and women, could engage in sarcasm without consequence, I was perceived as stuck up. This research suggests that attractiveness provides social currency in some comedy rooms but not others. Indeed, beauty limits the ways women writers could engage in particular styles of humor. This is an important and unique contribution to the literature on beauty, which has tended to argue that conventional attractiveness ascribes power to women

81

across social and professional contexts (Wolf 1991, Mears 2010, Weitz 2009). Future work should further examine the ways attractiveness, bodily comportment, speech, style, and other socially informed behaviors can shape power differentials and co-produce inequalities in writers' rooms and for marginalized groups in other professional settings.

In an attempt to integrate into writers' rooms, women performed traditionally feminine tasks in addition to the required tasks of their jobs. Gender and work scholars have long argued that women in male-dominated professions are often expected to assume support roles, and that these dual responsibilities can result in poor job performance, low workplace cohesion, and overall job dissatisfaction for women at work (Kanter 1977; Wingfield 2007; Valian 1998). But I found that this voluntary work helps some women interact with coworkers in low threat environments and strengthen informal associations that help enhance their reputations at work. Others were locked into service-oriented roles, ultimately limiting their professional mobility. It is important to note than none of the women performing this extra labor held parenting responsibilities. Writers' rooms tend to demand long hours, and most of the supplemental labor performed by women in the study was done after work hours in bars, restaurants and comedy clubs. This informal labor would arguably burden mothers, particularly unpartnered mothers who require childcare. We know that women are responsible for undertaking paid work in addition to the unpaid labor performed at home (Hochschild 1989). Accordingly, this article invites scholars to explore how women meet the demands of motherhood in addition to the supplemental labor they perform in writers' rooms.

This article also highlights the ways men push women into performing administrative tasks through undermining jokes, sabotage, and strategic grandstanding. Men outsourced their work to women and often took advantage of the fragile credibility women have as comedy

writers. Indeed, men symbolically reframed common writer's tasks such as note-taking and typing as feminine labor and, instead, leaned into the performative aspects of the job. In doing so, they monopolized on public displays of humor that bear significant weight on rapport building and reputation in the workplace. These subtle, and sometimes, hostile, interactional barriers constitute forms of gender discrimination. In response, women writers often performed acts of solidarity such as sabotage and open rejection of sexist division of labor. These findings highlight the power of women's collective action in rejecting attempts to threaten their professional identities.

Writers' rooms are informal workplaces where jokes and embodied behaviors can seem innocuous. But findings reveal that the symbolic exchanges between writers are consequential in how women perform their jobs. Some women were held at a distance, despite their best efforts, while others succeeded but with massive time investments and constant gender management. While previous work has documented the underrepresentation of women and minorities in writers' rooms, this study gives insight into the interactional contexts that may give rise to the structural inequalities in gaining access to these rooms.

References

Antoine, Katja. 2015. Pushing the edge: Challenging racism and sexism in American stand-up comedy. Phd Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Bielby, Denise. 2009. Gender inequality in culture industries: Women and men writers in film and television. *Sociologie du Travail,* 51 (2): 237-252.

Beilby, D. D. and Beilby, W. T. 2002. Hollywood dreams, harsh realities: Writing for film and television. *Contexts: Journal of the American Sociological Association*, 1 (4): 21-27.

Beilby, W. T. and Beilby D. D. 1994. "All hits are flukes:" Institutional decision making and the rhetoric of network prime-time program development. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 99 (5): 1287-1313.

Beilby, W. T. and Beilby D. D. 1996. Women and men in film: Gender inequality among writers in a culture industry. *Gender and Society*, 10 (3): 248-270.

Beilby, W. T. and Beilby D. D. 1999. Organizational mediation of project-based labor markets: Talent agencies and the careers of screenwriters. *American Sociological Review,* 64 (1): 64-85.

Beilby, W. T. and Beilby D. D. 2001. *Audience segmentation and age stratification among television writers. Journal of Broadcast & Electronic Media*, 45 (3): 391-412.

Blum, R.A. 1995. *Television and Screenwriting: From concept to contract*. (3rd ed). Boston, MA: Focal Press.

Bourdieu, P. 1985. The forms of capital. In J Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood.

Bourdieu, P. 1992. *The logic of practice.* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. and Passeron J. C. 1990. *Reproduction in education, society and culture*. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. 1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Blair, H. 2005. *Women's experiences of personal networks in the UK film and TV sectors: full research report*. Swindon, UK: Economic and Social Research Council.

Caldwell, J.T. 2008. *Production culture: Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carter, B. 2009. Among late night writers, few women in the room. *The New York Times.*

Caven, V., Lawley, S., and Baker, J. 2013. Performance, gender and sexualized work: Beyond management control, beyond legislation? A case study of work in a recruitment company. *Equality Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 32, 475-490.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 2004. *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism.* New York: Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. 1991. Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241–1299.

Denissen, Amy and Saguy, Abigail 2014. Gendered homophobia and the contradictions of workplace discrimination for women in the building trades. *Gender & Society* 20 (10): 1-24.

Douglass, P. 2005. *Writing the TV drama series: How to succeed as a profession writer in TV*. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions.

G. Finney, ed., 1994. *Look who's laughing: Gender and comedy*, Vol. 1. Langhorne, Pennsylvania: Gordon and Breach, 315-334.

Finley, Jessyka 2016a. Raunch and redress: Interrogating Pleasure in Black women's Stand-up comedy. *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49 (4): 780-798.

Finley, Jessyka (b). 2016b. Black women's satire as (Black) postmodern performance. *Studies in American Humor*, 2 (2): 236-265.

Fredrickson, B. L., and Roberts, T. A. 1997. Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks. *Psychology of Women's Quarterly*, 21 173-206.

Fulton, DoVeanna. 2004. Comic views and metaphysical dilemmas: Shattering cultural images through self-definitions and representation by Black comediennes. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 117 (463): 81-96.

Gilbert, Joanne. 1997. Performing marginality: Comedy, identity, and cultural critique. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 17: 317-330.

Greenbaum, Andrea. 1997. Women's comic voices: The art and craft of female humor. *American Studies*, 38 (1): 117-138.

Grugulis, Irena and Stoyanova, Dimitrinka. 2012. Social capital and networks in film and television: Jobs for the boys? *Organization Studies*, 33 (10): 1311-1331.

Grugulis, Irena and Stoyonava, Dimitrinka. 2009. "I don't know where you learn them' skills in film and TV. In A. McKinlay and C. Smith (Eds) *Creative labour: Working in the creative industries.* Basingtoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harris, Deborah and Giuffre, Patti. 2015. *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen*. Rutgers University Press.

Henderson, Felicia. 2011. The culture behind closed doors: Issues of gender and race in the writers' room. *Cinema* Journal, 50 (2): 145-152.

Heuman, Josh. 2015. What happens in the writers' room stays in the writers' room? Professional authority in Lyle v. Warner Bros. *Television & New Media,* 17 (3): 195-211.

Hochschild, Arlie, 1989. *The Second Shift.* Penguin Books. New York.

Howlett, Neil, Pine, Karen, Cahill, Natassia, Orakcioglu, Ismael, and Fletcher, Ben. 2015. Unbuttoned: The interaction between provocativeness of female work attire and

occupational status. *Sex Roles* (72): 105-116.

Hunt, Darnell, Ramon Ana Christina, Tran, Michael, Sargent, Amberia and Roychoudhury, Debanjan. 2018. Hollywood diversity report 2018: Five years of progress and missed opportunities. UCLA College, Social Sciences.

Hunt, Darnell, Ramon, Ana Christina, Tran, Michael. Hollywood diversity report 2019: Old story, new beginning. UCLA College, Social Sciences.

Johnson, Maria. 2013. Strength and respectability: Black women's negotiation of racialized gender ideals and the role of daughter−father relationships." *Gender & Society* (27) 6: 889-912.

Kanter, Rosabeth M. 1977. *Men and women of the corporation*. New York: Basic Books.

Kelsey, G. 1995. *Writing for television. (2nd ed.)*. London: A&C Black.

Krefting, Rebecca. 2014. *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Lisotta, C. 2004. Opening up the writers' room. *Television Week*, 23 (42): 42-43.

Phalen, Patrica and Osellame, Julia. 2012. Writing Hollywood: Rooms with a point of view. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 56 (1): 3-20.

Putnam, R.D. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York and London: Simon & Schuster.

Meyers, L. (Ed.). 2010. *Inside the TV writers' room: Practical advice for succeeding in television*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Mizejewski, Linda. 2015. *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*. University of Texas Press.

Moore, Mignon. 2011. *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Munsch, Christin L. and Kjerstin Gruys. 2018. What Threatens, Defines: Using Emasculation Narratives to Trace the Symbolic Boundaries of Masculinity. *Sex Roles* 79 (7-8): 375-392.

Reisert, S. P. 2006. Let's talk about sex baby: Lyle v. Warner Brothers Television Production and the California Court of Appeal's creative necessity defense to hostile work environment sexual harassment. *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law,* 15 (1): 113-145.

K. Rowe. 2001. The unruly woman: Gender and the genres of laughter, in B. Arrighi, ed., *understanding inequality: The intersection of race/ethnicity, class, and gender.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 271-285.

Sherwood, Jessica. 2010. *Wealth, Whiteness, and the Country Club*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books

Silverman, S. M. 2004. Sexual harassment at 'Friends': Lawsuit. *People*.

Stanley, Alessandra. 2008. Who says women aren't funny? *Vanity Fair.*

Stoddard, Karen, M. 1977 "Women have no sense of humor" and other myths: A consideration of female stand-up comics, 1960-1976. *American Humor* (4) 2:11-14.

Wade, Lisa. 2017. *American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. New York, NY.

White, E. Frances. 2001.*Dark continent of our bodies: Black feminism and the politics of respectability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Wingfield, A. Harvey. 2007. The modern mammy and the angry Black man: African American professionals' experiences with gendered racism in the workplace in *Race, Gender, and Class*, (14) 2: 196-212.

Zack, N. 2013. Black female crossover comedy: Freedom, liberty, and minstrelsy, in S. Crasnow & J. Waugh, eds., *Philosophical feminism and popular culture*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books.