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# Laughing Against White Supremacy: Marginalized Performance of Resistance Comedy

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**WOOSTER**

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**LAUGHING AGAINST WHITE SUPREMACY**  
**THE MARGINALIZED PERFORMANCE OF RESISTANCE**  
**COMEDY**

By  
Caren Holmes

An Independent Study Thesis  
Submitted to the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies Program  
At The College of Wooster

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Advisor: Dr. Christa Craven



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## Abstract

This study examines the political influence of charged standup comedy as a form of protest in resistance movements against white supremacy. It examines the experiences of seven marginalized comics who confront oppression through this non-traditional and humor based form of protest. Over the course of two months I conducted and filmed eight in-depth, semi-formal interviews with seven comics of color; six women and one trans-non-binary person,<sup>1</sup> as well as an academic who specializes in studying the production of “charged humor.” I attended more than 30 standup shows and filmed several performances. In my analysis I explore four major themes, (1) the revolutionary power of standup examining its properties, which both facilitate and inhibit anti-racist dialectic, (2) the ways in which dissident comedy, like protest, is subject to silencing and the extent to which standup comedy has been weaponized to mobilize white supremacist efforts, (3) the relationship between tragedy and comedy within marginalized communities examining comedy as a survival mechanism and source of community, and (4) the role of resistance comedy in reconsidering identity politics. In conclusion I argue that there is an important future for charged comedy as a mechanism for resistance to combat white supremacist political organizing, particularly in the Trump era.

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<sup>1</sup> This particular person uses the term trans-non-binary to identify themselves, others use these terms separately as trans and/or non-binary

## Dedication

*Nobody in the world, nobody in history, has ever gotten their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of people who are oppressing them*

–Assata Shakur

This project is dedicated to all those participating in resistance movements, to those participating in “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, collective action of ordinary citizens trying to change their world.”<sup>2</sup> From Ferguson to Palestine,<sup>3</sup> from Standing Rock to JFK Airport, from the Mexican border to the Supreme Court, from the Capitol to the comedy club; I dedicate this work to those carving out a space for resistance, risking their livelihood to fight racism, fascism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, transphobia, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.

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<sup>2</sup> T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Angela Y. Davis and Frank Barat, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016).

## **Acknowledgements**

I want to express the utmost gratitude to the many comedians who participated and expressed interest in my research. It was their artistic displays of comedic resistance, which first inspired me to focus my project on standup comedy. The comedians I reached out to were incredibly receptive and supportive of my process. It was remarkable to have the opportunity, not only to speak to some of my favorite standup comics, but to engage them in conversations about modern day anti-racist resistance. I was touched by their willingness to be vulnerable and discuss their experiences openly.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Christa Craven, who encouraged not only intellectual exploration but also creative expression. It was Craven who encouraged me to create a documentary portion of this study, which will provide additional layers of interpretation and accessibility to this project. Along the way, Craven provided substantive critique of my work, challenging me to consider the intersectional, feminist capacities of my research. Craven's support has been instrumental to the production of this study.

Michael Forbes and Thomas Tierney have also been incredibly supportive of me throughout this process. Both engaged with me in critical conversations in efforts to evaluate and produce cohesive theory relevant to the many facets of my research. Tierney was particularly helpful in exploring the complexities of Deleuze and his theories of territorialization. Forbes, challenged me to consider Africana Studies theories and their relevance to this work. Both Forbes and Tierney have greatly influenced the lens through which I engage topics of resistance, anti-racism and revolution.

Finally, I would like to thank the many friends, and friends of friends, who supported my study in every capacity during my time in New York City. My good friend, Mamoudou N'Diaye

not only housed me free of cost for several days, but also introduced me to several comics, took me to shows and engaged in critically influential conversations about research. His comedy has also been influential to shaping the focus of my study. His standup performance is founded on anti-racism in ways that brilliantly discomfort all of his white audience members.

## Introduction

Protest art transforms the messages of resistance into prose, absurdist imagery, theatre and sometimes laughter. Art supplements grassroots organizing, street protest and boycotting traditionally associated with activism and resistance efforts. Protest art occupies territory not traditionally associated with protest, bringing the messages of anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia into art museums, coffee shops, or comedy clubs. While there is an extended history of protest art, it remains underrepresented in historical accounts of resistance movements.<sup>4</sup> My research explores standup comedy as a form of protest and its modern contributions to current anti-racist resistance movements in the United States. According to social activist, scholar and author of *The Art of Protest*, T.V Reed, social and resistance movements are defined as “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, collective action of ordinary citizens trying to change their world.”<sup>5</sup> I look specifically at anti-racist comedy in conjunction with Black Lives Matter and Muslim solidarity movements that have emerged in response to rhetorical and physical violence against Black and Muslim communities. I engage with the experiences of seven comics of color whose comedy is explicitly critical of white supremacy. I explore their experiences engaging with comedy as a means of resistance considering their unique motivations, challenges, fears and triumphs.

Throughout the process of conducting this research, I have split my time and my computer screen between observing political protests, riots and outcries and watching subversive standup comedy. Often these two worlds feel in contradiction with one another, fundamentally opposed in their very nature of performance and methods of message delivery. However, protest and resistance are not only taking place in the streets but also in the comedy clubs, with a single

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<sup>4</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*. 2005

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

microphone in front of an exposed brick wall. Standup comedians participate in resistance movements taking place around the country. Protesters and comics alike are calling for justice for victims of police brutality, demanding an end to sexual violence, asserting the human dignity of Muslim Americans, and undermining the legitimacy of an increasing fascist political regime.<sup>6</sup> While comedy is not typically associated with protest, there is something profound in the juxtaposition between resistance and comedy, the ways in which they interact and build upon with one another. Standup comedy transforms the territory of protest, its methods of message delivery, and its strategy. Its participation in mobilizing resistance plays a critical role in advancing the current political revolution. Twentieth century playwright, George Bernard Shaw once said, “If you’re going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise they’ll kill you.”<sup>7</sup>

When Donald Trump secured his victory in the Presidential election on November 8, 2016, I doubted the significance of this project and the power of mockery and satire as political artillery. A man endorsed by the Klu Klux Klan who promoted xenophobia, Islamophobia and misogyny openly throughout his campaign, was a joke to the comedy community who refused to seriously this showcase of white supremacy. Despite their efforts to delegitimize him, the American electoral system (an a minority voting contingency, impassioned by his implicit and explicit messages of white supremacy) elected him to the highest political office in the United States. This was the culmination of my doubts surrounding the purpose and meaning of this project. Is comedy really a meaningful tool of revolution? Is it a means by which we effectively rehearse and mobilize in efforts to progress anti-fascist resistance? Or has comedy simply functioned to normalize fascism, white supremacy, and Islamophobia, enabling the rise of a

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<sup>6</sup> Chomsky, Noam Chomsky: Trump’s Victory Recalls Memories of Hitler & Fascism’s Spread Across Europe. 2016

<sup>7</sup> Kevin Willmont, *Confederate States of America*, 2005.

political demagogue? I could not have predicted the degree to which Trump's tweets would breathe life back into the validity of this project. His Twitter account, a source I had not anticipated citing in my undergraduate research, exposes the power of comedy, to do if nothing else, embarrass an egotistical fascist leader. After the election millions of protesters took to the streets throughout the country. Trump responded on November 10<sup>th</sup> tweeting, "Just had a very open and successful presidential election. Now professional protesters, incited by the media, are protesting. Very unfair!"<sup>8</sup> It is evident that Trump feels his legitimacy compromised by the mass protests throughout the country. He has also taken to Twitter to attack Saturday Night Live (SNL) and Alec Baldwin, for his satirical impersonation of Trump. On December 3, 2016, soon after his electoral win, Trump tweeted, "Just tried to watch Saturday Night Live- unwatchable! Totally biased, not funny and the Baldwin impression just can't get any worse. Sad."<sup>9</sup> His rhetorical attacks against the SNL sketches and late night hosts illustrate the internalized threat of satire and mockery, the extent to which its power and influence is felt by our political elite. Trump, contrary to his political intentions, has emboldened the comedy community, enlivened a platform from which to harvest political elitist disempowerment. Feminist and anti-racist comedians have responded in kind to Trump's ongoing political campaigns against marginalized people with hilarity.

In the wake of capitalist-infused, widely-marketed feminism, articles entitled "Top 10 Feminist Comedians" have become common click-bait stories. While simply the title of such a click-bait article may give you pause, the content of this "journalism" is perhaps even more dubious. These lists, of which there are many, generally include popular standup comedians, such as Sarah Silverman, Chelsea Handler and Amy Schumer, among others. In the wake of

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<sup>8</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter Post, Nov 10, 2016. 9:19pm

<sup>9</sup> Donald Trump, Twitter Post, Dec 3, 2016. 7:13pm

“feminism is for everyone,”<sup>10</sup> a sentiment designed to promote increased accessibility to feminist thought and action (a good thing), the basic tenants of gender inclusive liberation are often lost and misappropriated. These comedians in particular, exemplify the problematic narratives of white feminist expression masquerading as women’s self love promoting forms of individualism and lacking intersectional or revolutionary critique.<sup>11</sup> I am not the first to reject their claims to feminist performance. However, I want to affirm the real danger in misappropriating feminist ideology or falsely attributing claims of feminist thought to this genre of often self-deprecating, homophobic, racially divisive, white feminist comedy. Instead, I argue that comedians who wish to associate themselves with feminist revolution must hold themselves accountable to feminist critique and practice meaningful intersectional, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist resistance in their performance.

This study engages with feminist revolutionary performers, many of whom produce their art on the fringes of society, in dingy club basements, participating in abolitionist, anti-racist, community organizing in their life on and off stage. I consider the importance of collaborative feminist practice drawing from the work of Angela Davis, among others,<sup>12</sup> who reject individualist feminism in exchange for intersectional, collective resistance. It is imperative that feminists continue to critique the ways in which mass-marketed, capitalistically-exploited modes of “feminism” in comedy are antithetical to revolutionary feminist values and the exclusion of anti-racist voices.

In my work I seek to highlight the performers who embody historically marginalized identities, who have chosen the platform of standup comedy to combat white supremacy,

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<sup>10</sup> bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> This is a point was discussed at length by Joanne Frye, founding faculty of the WGSS program at the College of Wooster, during *Senior Seminar: Feminist Pedagogy in Action*

<sup>12</sup> Davis and Barat, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*. 2016

homophobia, Islamophobia, and misogyny. The comedians in my study not only fight oppressive forces from behind a mic but are also involved in community organizing, running a comedy school for girls, training community members about filming the police, organizing NYC's Kwanza Crawl, producing educational webinars, attending protests, curating diverse performance spaces, and participating in the liberation oriented comedy collectives. They are active in organizing against white supremacist forces both on and off stage.

For my research, I interviewed seven comedians in person or via Skype. Each comic I interviewed was a person of color. Six of the participants were women and one identified as trans-non-binary. In addition to the seven comedians, I interviewed academic Rebecca Krefting whose research in *All Joking Aside* focuses on the production and influence of “charged comedy” or, comedy that subverts standards of social inequality.<sup>13</sup> In selecting my comedic participants, I searched for individuals whose material was intentionally and unapologetically feminist and anti-racist.

This type of resistance comedy takes on new meaning when performed by the marginalized comic, whose lived experiences become an asset in their comedic narrative. Using the works of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Charles Mills and Sara Ahmed, I consider the revolutionary power of identity based charged comedy. I organize my analysis into four parts focusing on several aspects related to charged comedy performance and response. In the first section, I examine the properties of standup comedy performance, which both facilitate and inhibit radical, anti-racist dialectic, considering accessibility of comedic material and infiltration capabilities. In the second section I explore the subjugation experienced by marginalized comics who risk their own livelihood to perform dissident comedic material. I examine attacks against

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<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

individuals and institutions that platform radical or revolutionary comedic performance. In the same section, I reflect on the extent to which comedy industries are complicit in providing platforms for lucrative performances of modern day minstrelsy, which reinforce rather than deconstruct social inequalities. I explore the weaponization of comedy used to mobilize white supremacy and other fascist political regimes. In the third section I consider the role of comedy in providing relief for oppressed communities, using standup comedy as a survival mechanism. I examine the ways in which marginalized comics responded within their art to tragedies affecting their communities. I also consider the extent to which standup comedy provides a platform upon which marginalized people can “clap back” and respond directly to their own political subjugation. Finally, in the last section, I consider the influences of identity politics in shaping, motivating and mobilizing charged comedy performance. In addition, I make predictions for the future of charged comedy and its participation in ongoing anti-racist resistance efforts.

# Theories of Humor/ Standup Comedy as Protest Art

## Theories of Humor

Within this chapter, I will explore the meaning and influence of humor and standup comedy by considering the unique relationship between comedic cultural and political critique. Prior to engaging critically the subject of standup comedy, it is imperative to consider the conceptual frameworks of humor itself. There are several recognized philosophies of humor, which attempt to explain how humor is produced, what humor is successful and why we as human beings are motivated to produce and consume humor. Here, I explore three major philosophies of humor and their function within perceptions of resistance comedy. Each provides a distinctive lens through which to examine the comedy within this study.

Superiority theory is attributed to the work of Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes.<sup>14</sup> This theory suggests that the production of laughter results from the observed misfortune and suffering of others. It postulates that through laughing at the adversity of others, we are able to position ourselves as superior to those experiencing misfortune. Within the production of standup comedy, superiority theory is exhibited when a comic produces self-deprecating humor, allowing the audience to feel superior to the performer. More commonly, this theory manifests in the production of humor exploiting the suffering of other people for the entertainment of more privileged performers and audience members. This theory is widely rejected as a universal explanation of comedy by modern humor theorists.<sup>15</sup> Superiority theory is in many ways antithetical to the comedy I engage with in this study, comedy that seeks to uplift marginalized peoples and critique systems of power and domination. Feminist critique of superiority theory challenges comedy produced from within a position of hierarchal status as serving only to

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<sup>14</sup> "Philosophy of Humor." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

entertain the white male gaze and those who benefit from existing social stratification. The comedy I explore in this study aims to combat the type of humor categorized within superiority theory, in the sense that it attempts to dismantle societal hierarchies and standards of superiority rather than reinforce them.

Relief theory, most prominently endorsed by Sigmund Freud and Herbert Spencer, considers laughter a response mechanism designed to maintain homeostatic order within the body.<sup>16</sup> Humor, within relief theory, acts to relieve tension and expend suppressed or built up energy.<sup>17</sup> Humor is a means of confronting cultural taboos in efforts to transcend and overcome sociocultural inhibitions. Humor is an avenue through which we engage in subject and thought deemed unsuitable for traditional forms of public discourse. Laughter, by extension, is a response to discomfort, through which comfort may be re-affirmed. Relief theory works to explain the ways in which humor is an escape from grim and oppressive realities. Comedy in this sense is used to make the world tolerable and digestible as a form of necessary self-care.

Incongruity theory, made famous by James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard and Victor Raskin amongst other philosophers, theorists and psychologists, is now considered the dominant theory of humor within academia.<sup>18</sup> Incongruity theory suggests humor is established within the liminal space between expectation and reality. Humor according to this theory comes from the production of material, which “violates our mental patterns and expectations.”<sup>19</sup> Humor is generated at the site of collision, in which two radically different frames of reference are engineered to strike with one another.<sup>20</sup> While a joke

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<sup>16</sup> “Philosophy of Humor.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Moniek Buijzen and Patti M. Valkenburg, “Developing a Typology of Humor in Audiovisual Media,” *Media Psychology* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2004):151

<sup>18</sup> “Philosophy of Humor.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Pan Books, 1971).

may begin within a familiar structure, comedians have the power to manipulate the expectations of the audience causing a collision between assumed structure and dismantled anticipations. Jokes are, according to John Limon, professor of English Literature at Williams College, “successful to the extent that they impose the form of thought on disarray.”<sup>21</sup> Humor is engineered through, “a contrast in meaning between two incompatible views of a scene. Humor results from the audience resolving these two conflicting images in a way that makes sense, given the distorted logic of humor. Humor is a puzzle, a problem that must be solved for mirth to result.”<sup>22</sup>

Comedy aims to generate conflict within the psyche of the audience. Standup comics operate under the model of bait and switch, drawing the minds of the audience to anticipated conclusions only to take the rug out from under them, forcing the audience to reconstruct their own ideological foundations. Standups may play into societal expectations in order to produce a more dramatic shift in narrative, in turn challenging audience perceptions, debasing the very ground upon which they laugh. Twentieth-century Hungarian-British author and journalist Arthur Koestler asserts, “laughter is a luxury reflex which could arise only in a creature whose reason has gained a degree of autonomy from the urges of emotion, and enables him to perceive his own emotions as redundant – to realize that he has been fooled.”<sup>23</sup>

In my study I do not engage with these theories in isolation. I do not wish to claim one as adequately or sufficiently conceptualizing the complexity of comedic material in conjunction with resistance efforts. Rather, I look to provide feminist critique of the androcentric underpinnings of humor theories, demonstrating the ways in which marginalized people not only

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<sup>21</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 69

<sup>22</sup> McGhee and Goldstein, *Handbook of Humor Research*, 160

<sup>23</sup> Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 96

challenge but also dismantle these philosophical frameworks. In the tradition of Sarah Ahmed and her feminist methodology surrounding the study of happiness, I do not want to define humor but rather follow it, watch where it goes and see who it engages with it.<sup>24</sup> Comedy is simultaneously an incredibly complex theoretical territory and simplistic form of human interaction. As one theorist puts it, “[p]ure comedy is Euclidean form imposed on debris.”<sup>25</sup> While it is imperative that feminist scholars continue to engage traditional theories of laughter and comedy, much is lost in the scientific codification of humor. As feminist scholar Rebecca Krefting states, “humor is not a science. It is subjective and shifting; that is why we have a ‘sense’ of humor.”<sup>26</sup> Humor and comedy must be considered as both universal human experiences, and a concept that engages uniquely with individuals, communities and populations. Humor has culture, history and context.

### **The Art of Standup**

Standup comedy is an absurd and unique art form. Limon theorizes that comedians, above all other performing artists, “most hate their audiences, because as performers their audience is not entirely distinct from them.”<sup>27</sup> The standup artist is put on a stage to engage in a public conversation with themselves, occasionally interacting with an audience ripe with expectations. Audience laughter is perhaps the only form of validation for the standup artist. The performer wants to make the audience laugh but perhaps not as profoundly as the audience desires to be made to laugh.<sup>28</sup> The audience and the performer feed off one another, building a supportive or tumultuous relationship over the course of a set.

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<sup>24</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), Introduction

<sup>25</sup> Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory or Abjection in America*, 69

<sup>26</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 9

<sup>27</sup> Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory or Abjection in America*, 13

<sup>28</sup> Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory or Abjection in America*, 107

The performance of standup comedy reveals nuances within the fabric of a given society or community. Humor exposes cultural patterns, social hierarchies and taboos. Humor is an artistic tool that can be used both to subvert and reproduce the status quo. The standup comedian is both political and apolitical, often hiding genuine cultural critique behind the guise of humor. “Stand up comedy does not require plot, closure, or point”<sup>29</sup> but when it does, it has not only the power to generate laughter but also the power to develop legitimate political thought and criticism.

The standup comedian is politicized through their engagement with vulnerability. While they may construct themselves within a stage persona, standups generally perform a theatrical embodiment of themselves. They perform their identity, experiences and personality on a stage speaking candidly to an audience of strangers. The standup stage has become a space for radical self-disclosure. It was on a standup stage that standup comic Tig Notaro first announced publically that she was suffering from breast cancer, Jim Jefferies disclosed having Asperger’s syndrome and Maria Bamford, Chris Gethard and amongst others expressed their challenges with ongoing mental illness and neurodiversity. While it is a concern that the nature of radical self-disclosure on stage has lost its meaning with its trendy and edgy appeal illustrated in the examples provided above, this practice nonetheless challenges the ways in which performers make themselves vulnerable and dismantle standards of proper stage etiquette. For this reason, the standup stage is inherently political, radical and transformative. While some standup artists deny the political influence of their performance, even dick jokes can be formatted as politicized statements. Dark basements full of folding chairs, with lonely mic stands against exposed brick walls become revolutionary spaces.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid,13

## The Comedian's Code of Ethics

The standup stage has housed innumerable comedic performances filled with hateful and oppressive content that masquerades under the veil of humor. Racist, sexist and homophobic comedy remains lucrative despite the wide spread fear that comedians are censored under certain standards of “political correctness.” In this sense comedy can manifest in the production and reproduction of repressive ideology. Humor can be used to excuse even the most offense hate speech. One scholar argues that traditional comedy, being that produced by white males, "was made through Black face... through the Black body, the homosexual body and the female body."<sup>30</sup> “Through” in this sense, insinuating by means of abjection and exploitation. Comedy, undeniably, has a long history and established foundation producing laughter at the expense of the oppressed and marginalized people. “Punching up” (defined in terminology section) is a phrase commonly used within the modern world of standup comedy. It refers to a practice or ethical standard stressing that comics should not build their content upon the backs of populations who have been historically marginalized. “Punching up” rather than “punching down,” emphasizes that jokes be made only at the expense of those within positions of higher socio-political status. This practice requires that comics be conscious of their own positionality and access to privilege.<sup>31</sup> Feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins articulates this point when she asserts, “No scholar can avoid cultural ideas and his or her placement in intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nation.”<sup>32</sup> In other terms, a person must consider their own socio-economic position as essential to guiding their worldly analysis. The wide use of “punch up” suggests the existence of a universal code of ethics within the American comedic

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>31</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*

<sup>32</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 253

community, expectations that oppressed comics empower one another, and take aim instead at those most explicitly participating in oppressive forces.

This is not to say that jokes are no longer made by people in positions of privilege at the expense of those subject to societal marginalization. There are many comedians who both consciously and subconsciously reject the concept of “punching up” and gain their notoriety from offensive, “shock value” content.<sup>33</sup> Some of these comics are referred to as “equal opportunity offenders” and seek to appeal to a reactionary backlash of “political correctness” by producing an active counterculture to “liberal safe spaces”. These comedians remain profitable by asserting a position of being nihilistically neutral, offending no one by offending everyone. Emboldened by political rhetoric found in public discourse, they appeal to those who feel their right to produce offensive rhetoric is inhibited by social censorship of “political correctness”. This term is used within right leaning political discourse, to describe the ways in which comics (and people in general) feel limited by audiences who are “too sensitive” or “unable to take a joke.” Political correctness is considered to be a plague of censorship sweeping the nation, particularly in spaces of elite higher education. Many comics have looked to capitalize on the backlash against this wave of “political correctness” coming out with content designed to offend.

I argue, however, that the alleged culture of “political correctness” surrounding comedy does not employ standards of censorship infringing upon individual freedoms of speech. Rather, what is referred to as “political correctness” in standup comedy culture reflects a societal demand for “high brow,”<sup>34</sup> cerebral comedy that challenges societal norms rather than capitalizing on “low hanging,” purposefully offensive comedy. The demand for “political correctness” in comedy may not be the result of hypersensitivity, but rather a demand that comedians educate

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<sup>33</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 3

<sup>34</sup> “High Brow,” a colloquial term used to describe intellectual, high culture comedy

themselves about the subject matter they wish to engage. Patricia Hill Collins amongst others elevate experience as criterion for meaning<sup>35</sup> considering exposure and education as pathways to cultural competency for those who do not directly experience particular forms of oppression. Comics should expect to be held accountable for their material and the extent to which it either trivializes or progresses social movements and the experiences of marginalized people. The demand that comedians produce “politically correct” material is not a mode of censorship but rather a consumer demand for self-critical content; content which does not rely on the low hanging fruit of gender, racial, sexual, or religious stereotypes. Artists have the freedom to produce the comedic content of their choice, but similarly, consumers and critics have the freedom to denounce tasteless forms of comedic art.

### **Standup as a Trojan Horse**

The influence of standup is elevated by its ability to masquerade as meaningful political critique under the semblance of humor and joke. Feminist philosopher and analyst, Amy Billingsley suggests, “this refashioning can thus serve as a ‘war machine,’ warping the wonted words in such a way that they are initially seen as a familiar formation (like the Trojan Horse) but then revealed as revolutionary and shocking.”<sup>36</sup> Within the guise of standup performance, comics masterfully infiltrate meaningful political, cultural and societal discourse. In preserving the Trojan Horse metaphor, audience members of a comedy show play the role of eager recipients. Eager to accept expected pleasure from a comedic performance, audience members become naïve and vulnerable to the ways in which the comedic form is manipulated to insight

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<sup>35</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 257

<sup>36</sup> Amy Billingsley, “Laughing Against the Patriarchy: Humor, Silence and Feminist Resistance,” n.d.

resistance and revolution. Refashioning itself as a disguised war machine, "satire [becomes] a backdoor to arguing"<sup>37</sup> and serves a persuasive and educational function.

In the wave of modern late night comedy news analysis, made famous by standup comedians such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, political discourse takes refuge in standup as it fuses and intermingles with forms of humor and satire. There are many critics and scholars who dismiss the role of comedians as being politically insignificant.<sup>38</sup> However, comedians are able to expose social idiosyncrasies in a unique and engaging manner. Texas A&M University communications professor David Gurney suggests that comedians, "function as supplemental gatekeepers and gamers in the agenda-setting work of the media."<sup>39</sup> In many cases, politically relevant standup is distributed through viral media sharing and used in the production of genuine, substantive political debate.

Communications scholar, Joanne Gilbert suggests that standup comedy generates space for "play" in which comics are able to navigate dangerous terrain within emotionally, charged political discourse in a way that reduces its risks and repercussions.<sup>40</sup> This argument is in part, dismissive of the very real influence of standup and the extent to which comedians are susceptible to repercussions for subverting standards of performance. As the online harassment and "trolling" of marginalized people on internet forums has become increasingly prominent, sharing one's standup performance on YouTube becomes a dangerous endeavor. White supremacist and patriarchal voices hiding behind aliases wish to police the ways in which marginalized bodies engage in social activism. The misogynistic, homophobic and racist nature

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<sup>37</sup> Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into A Bar: The Politics of Political Humor* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12

<sup>38</sup> David Gurney, "Everything Changes Forever (Temporarily): Late-Night Television Comedy after 9/11," in *A Decade of Dark Humor*, ed. Ted Gornelos and Viveca Greene (University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 3

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Joanne R Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 18

of YouTube comment trails and Reddit forums expose the degree to which the existing kyriarchy (defined in terminology section) is threatened by the influence of marginalized comics and the production of counter culture comedy.

# Standup as Means of Resistance

## Inciting Revolution

While “punching up” is an ethical framework that rejects the exploitation of the standup platform to trivialize and perpetrate violence against marginalized or oppressed communities, “charged humor” requires explicit qualities of a performer. Charged comedy demands that comedians “intentionally produce humor challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion.”<sup>41</sup> Comics who “punch up” avoid producing material that normalizes societal hierarchies. Charged comics, on the other hand, use their platform to deliberately confront these systems of power. Charged comedy is designed to incite radical thought and critical discourse through both laughter and discomfort. English scholar and professor, Andrea Greenbaum argues that, “standup comedy is an inherently rhetorical discourse; it strives not only to entertain, but to persuade.”<sup>42</sup>

Comedians who use their standup routines to promote feminist and anti-racist ideology challenge the taboo nature of issues associated with race and gender by explicitly entering into a rhetorical discourse surrounding the destruction of oppressive kyriarchical structures. The dingy comedy club basement becomes not only a place for laughter but also a space for radical exchange of ideas and the production of revolutionary dialectic. “Satire is not only for escaping the real world but for learning about it,”<sup>43</sup> through an exchange that meaningfully challenges the worldviews of audience members. Charged humor acts as resistance, not only to the status quos of standup performance but also to the social inequalities it seeks to linguistically dismantle. It is a convenience to the performance of resistance comedy that, “human beings find it funny when a

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<sup>41</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 2

<sup>42</sup> Andrea Greenbaum, “Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument: An Investifation of Comic Culture,” *Humor* 12, no. 1 (1999), 33

<sup>43</sup> Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar*, 3

social phenomenon threatens to break down into the elements out of which they had previously organized it.”<sup>44</sup>

Many scholars throughout history have theorized about the revolutionary power of performance art, its coercive influence and palatable appeal. Augusto Boal, author of *Theater of the Oppressed* (inspired largely by Paulo Friere), asserts that, “perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.”<sup>45</sup> The marginalized performer transforms the stage into a space for practice, seizing the means of comedic production in efforts to dismantle forms of oppression.

Humor aimed at subverting the status quo, has produced a long history of resistance comedy. Mark Twain explained the weaponization of comedy when he said, “We often hear that the political joke is an offensive weapon with which an aggressive politically engaged person makes the arrangements or precautions of an opponent seem ridiculous. But even when political jokes serve defensive purposes, they are nonetheless weapons.”<sup>46</sup> The arsenal of humor includes satire, absurdism and mockery, stock piling means of social critique. Charged comedy is explicitly armed and dangerous, influential and revolutionary.

### **The Territory of Standup**

In theorizing about the complexity of standup performance, considering its transformative and revolutionary power, it is useful to conceptualize the performance of standup within Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of the process of territorialization. Their theory, outlined in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, posits that social transformation occurs as a symptom of ongoing processes of coding, stratification, deterritorialization and

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<sup>44</sup> Davis, *Sociology Through Humor*, 107

<sup>45</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, New ed, Get Political 6 (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 122

<sup>46</sup> Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar*, 9

reterritorialization.<sup>47</sup> Coding, according to their theory, is a process of ordering matter or meaning, imposing identity and subject onto people, places, things or concepts. Stratification is the process of determining hierarchal status amongst the coding. Territorialization is then imposing order upon those hierarchies as assemblages, imposing consistency and heterogeneous categories upon people, places, things or concepts.<sup>48</sup> Deterritorialization as a theory, has a diverse range of practical applications, though in its most basic function is understood as the process of breaking habits, disavowing patterns and rejecting boundaries. Reterritorialization is, in both contrast and collaboration to and with deterritorialization, the processes of reformation, the prescribing of new boundaries and the assimilation within new territory. These phenomenons occur simultaneously with one another, directing the transformation of physical or symbolic territory. Territorialization processes describe the ways in which disruption traverses prescribed boundaries resulting in the amassing of new assemblages. Standup comedy, while often considered an absurd and unorthodox art form, is located within repressive and limiting assemblages, which must be deconstructed and reconstructed to serve as a stage for revolution. Standup comedy, when understood as terrain, has prescribed boundaries, which regulate the content performed on stage, the comics who perform and the stage itself. The process of reterritorialization and deterritorialization facilitate an explanation of the ways in which resistance comedy or charged comedy produces social transformation within these spaces and through particular bodies. “As a specific affective-culture assemblage, stand-up comedy operates

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<sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Smith and John Protevi, “Gilles Deleuze,” ed. Edward Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, no. Winter 2015 Edition (2015).

as both constrainer and enabler of racial and heteronormative order through the bringing together of a variety of diverse logics and practices.”<sup>49</sup>

The standup stage, which acts as both physical and figurative territory, is bound to certain standards of production and performance. These standards are subject to societal norms and modes of social hierarchy. For instance, the marginalized person performing standup must account for the extent to which they may be considered trespassing on patriarchal territory when they demand space on the standup stage. Dialogue that traverses and deconstructs these territories provokes challenge to existing societal hierarchies and inequalities within this space. They are simultaneously reterritorializing the standup stage engaging in a constant flux in which norms and standards are never fully solidified. This process of territorialization in resistance comedy facilitates confrontation between the conquered and the conquerors. The silenced speak to and with the silencers. And within a performance of charged comedy, the silencers may even laugh, though perhaps they may not fully understand why. James Thomas uses incongruity theory to explain the process through which,

The seriousness of political life is often brought into direct relationship with the supposed unseriousness of humor. The bringing together of these divergent practices and logics produces a particular type of assemblage often centered on an active configuration of desire, bound up in shifting configurations of embodied cultural order. This helps to explain how some comedy routines can be critical of existing power relations, while others reproduce racial rule and heteronormativity.<sup>50</sup>

The marginalized standup engaging in resistance comedy, replicates modes of oppression while simultaneously deconstructing them. This material may be performed and interpreted through polysemic understanding. Racial rule and heteronormativity may be simultaneously emboldened and deconstructed.

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, *Laughing Through It*, 166

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 167

## Audience Interpretation

Many scholars who engage with the subject of charged comedy express the need to register and analyze the ways in which audiences absorb standup content. While some seek to understand the intent of the comic, others consider the intent of the performer inconsequential when considering the influence of standup material. Interpretation relies not only on the intent of the comedian but also the positionality of the audience. Comedians who perform in diverse spaces must be conscious of the ways in which their material may be interpreted differently based on the various lived experiences of audience members. The polysemic interpretations of comedic material may influence the meaningful social critique being put forth within charged comedy. What then can be said for the effectiveness of this performance art in producing resistance and revolution?

While staring in *The Colbert Report*, political pundits and viewers debated the lived political ideology of actor Steven Colbert. On air, in character, he brilliantly satirized the ideological incongruities of American conservatism. Despite the degree to which his program critiqued the political Right, its leaders and the Republican Party establishment, the nature of satire left many viewers confused by Colbert's personal political perspectives.<sup>51</sup> His show was often considered to be the conservative counter weight to the openly leftist nature of *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Was he able to productively influence the Right through his Trojan Horse style political critique? Or did he simply feed into the narrative he wished to dismantle?

Comedian Dave Chappelle famously dropped a 50 million dollar television show contract due to concerns about the ways in which his comedy was being misappropriated.<sup>52</sup> While the intent of his comedy was to challenge and make racism and racial stereotypes absurd, he feared

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<sup>51</sup> Jason Linkins, "Colbert Study: Conservatives Don't Know He's Joking," *Huffington Post*, January 29, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Christopher Farley, "Dave Speaks," *Time Magazine*, May 2005.

that white audiences were interpreting his work to reproduce and reinforce racial inequalities. While shooting a sketch in which Chappelle appears in satirically in Black face, he was disillusioned by the laughter of a white production assistant. He is quoted in a *Time Magazine* interview explaining, "when he laughed, it made me uncomfortable"<sup>53</sup> despite intending to produce comedy.

Both Chappelle and Colbert illustrate the challenges of producing satire designed to challenge and dismantle systems of power. There are dangers associated with the polysemic nature of humor. What are the consequences that arise from the Trojans believing, beyond the battles and violence that occurred, that the wooden horse was still in fact a generous gift on behalf of the Greeks? There are dangers to arming the oppressors with misinterpreted satirical weaponry.

It is for this reason that I hypothesize a comedic practice of litmus testing one's audience. Comedians may ask themselves as they perform, "Is this audience culturally competent? Are these white people indiscriminately validating my experiences as a marginalized person? Are they laughing with me or at me? Am I currently performing in Alabama?" A comedian may change their set or performance according to audience demographics or in response to informal litmus test results. If the goal within charged comedy is to promote resistance, comics may have to adjust their material to meet audience members at their perceived levels of cultural competency.

Paying to be made to laugh, the privileged audience member may be put off by the extent to which their own identity is challenged within a standup routine. Perhaps struggling with a degree of cognitive dissonance, the audience is forced to reconcile their discomfort. Incongruity theory, as discussed above, accounts for this process of ultimate resolution. Feminist and anti-

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

racist comics disrupt the tranquility of funny spaces as they intentionally produce discomfort. Gender and race anxiety arises from people within positions of dominance feeling their privilege questioned and exposed. This uneasiness is often resolved through laughter, if only to generate discomfort reproducing this cyclical structure, toying with relief and incongruity frameworks. For this reason, uncomfortable laughter or silence may not be the result of an unsuccessful comedic performance (in that it did not produce particular versions of expected response) as audience members may experience prolonged reconciliation processes. The residue of discomfort, especially amongst a privileged audience, indicates disarray, which requires reconstruction, perhaps in a progressive or revolutionary direction.

### **Feminist Buzzkills and Angry Black Women**

Women who participate in comedy are forced to contend with gendered societal tropes, which label marginalized people who bring to light issues of race, class or gender as “feminist killjoys” or “angry Black women.” These categories assert that these women are not only disruptive of societal tranquility but also that women who assert their opinions in public spaces cannot also be considered humorous. Male comedian, Christopher Hitchens goes as far as asserting that women and comedy are “antithetical.”<sup>54</sup> He suggests men are biologically predisposed to produce humor while, “women, bless their tender hearts, would prefer that life be fair, and even sweet, rather than the sordid mess it actually is.” Without giving much attention to his unoriginal genre of pseudo-scientifically backed essentialist claims, it is important to recognize the degree to which this common sentiment is reproduced by both creators and consumers of stand up comedy. Hitchens believes that female socialization has “softened women around the edges”, a claim that would suggest women were disengaged from both comedy and

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<sup>54</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2007.

protest. As feminist intellectual Sarah Ahmed puts it, “my experience of being a feminist has taught me much about rolling eyes.”<sup>55</sup>

Author Sharon Weinstein uses the Jewish tropes of *schlemiel* (a person who causes misfortune) and *schlimazel* (a person who experiences misfortune) to illustrate women’s historic role in comedy production, “woman’s experience [is] not only akin to the schlimazel’s (granted the schlemiel is no more than inept, he is just active, rather than passive in his ineptness) but akin also to the Black experience.”<sup>56</sup> Performance art comedy has long barred women from participation. Women and people of color have been the historic subjects of comedy, not those who are expected to produce it. Produced at their expense and in the name of their own misfortune, comedy has reaffirmed the stereotypical tropes of humorlessness.

Sarah Ahmed theorizes how women, in particular women of color, are associated or more often disassociated from perceptions of happiness due to their positioning within societal hierarchy and assumed condemnation of societal inequalities. While Ahmed focuses primarily on philosophies of happiness, many of her concepts can be extended into conceptualization of comedy and humor. For instance, Ahmed suggests that people who exist within oppressed or disenfranchised identities are more likely to be conscious of social inequalities concluding that, “we [marginalized people] can witness the relationship between consciousness of injustice and being attributed as the cause of unhappiness.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, those who experience injustice are most frequently those who bring attention to injustices and are therefore ascribed and characterized as the root of societal dissatisfaction and unhappiness. For this reason, people existing within marginalized bodies are perceived as happiness “buzzkills” to those who consider

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<sup>55</sup> Ahmed, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 65

<sup>56</sup> Sharon Weinstein, “Don’t Women Have A Sense of Comedy They Can Call Their Own?,” *American Humor* 1, no. 2 (1974), 9

<sup>57</sup> Ahmed, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 61

our existing society to be functionally egalitarian. This correlation between marginalized bodies and unhappiness can be extended to perceptions of humor and comedy. Women and other marginalized communities, as the notorious bearers of bad news are thus out of place on the standup stage. Feminists and anti-racist activists are believed to be those who “police” comedy as opposed to those who intentionally produce humor. Ahmed describes women as being “troublemakers”, disrupting the happiness of those who experience comfort in existing distributions of privilege. Happiness, like humor is associated with privilege, embodying maleness, whiteness and wealth. Charged comedians embodying marginality directly confront tropes of the “feminist killjoy” or the angry Black woman, often incorporating these stereotypes into their humor, both claiming and deconstructing these concepts.

As James Baldwin famously said, “to be conscious is to be in rage almost all the time.”<sup>58</sup> His quote is meant to explain the degree to which social consciousness is linked to frustration with world order. However, it also reproduces the idea that oppressed people produce rage. I would argue that rage itself is not antithetical to humor. Instead rage may facilitate the production of humor, humor created and directed towards the people and structures that produce oppressed rage. Ahmed asserts, “there can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy we must do.”<sup>59</sup>

### **Identification and Disidentification**

Standup comedy demands that comics engage with their assumed and undetected identities and experiences, analyzing the world through their own unique perspectives.<sup>60</sup> Specifically, charged humor demands an “identification with struggles and issues associated with

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<sup>58</sup> Baldwin et al., *The Negro in American Culture*, 205

<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 87

<sup>60</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

being a second-class citizen” in efforts to, “[rally] listeners around some focal point be that cultural corporeal, or racial/ethnic similarities; that requires drawing from personal experience, if not first-hand than at least access to, understanding of, or empathy with those having these experiences.”<sup>61</sup> In this sense, marginalized comics are expected to acknowledge and engage in dialogue surrounding struggles with which they are associated merely by embodying certain forms of marginalization. However, as gender theorist Judith Butler explains, the performer, “is understood differentially depending on its race, the legibility of that race, its morphology, the recognizability of that morphology, its sex, the perceptual verifiability of that sex, its ethnicity, the categorical understanding of that ethnicity”<sup>62</sup>. Butler articulates the fundamentals of feminist standpoint theory and its impositions on the individual.

Identity politics is in many ways forced upon the marginalized comic, who is pressured to address their own performed marginalization on stage and consider the degree to which their persona is legible and illegible. The concept of identity politics has been both embraced and rejected by feminists. The concept is praised for the extent to which it encourages marginalized peoples to embrace the liminal identities they occupy. Political movements have been shaped by individual and populous identification to and with common experiences of injustice. Examples of such movements include the Black Lives Matter Movement, #NODAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) focused on Indigenous liberation, immigrant rights movements, or more recently the protests in solidarity with Muslims and refugees in response to deportations and immigration bans under the Trump administration. However, within the modern movement for intersectional, community based feminist liberation, identity politics is critiqued for its appeal to factional individualism. It dictates authority of experience to marginalized people in a way that suppresses

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<sup>61</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 5

<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2004),14

critique and progressive dialectic exchange. In the era of embracing hyphenated identities, are we simply regenerating the very assemblages and systems of categorization we wish to deconstruct? While the erasure of identity statuses works to silence the unique experiences of marginalized people, Angela Davis advocates for the deconstruction of individualistic identity politics and in favor of producing intersectional movements, recognizing the shared struggles and aims of oppressed groups of people, i.e. “From Ferguson to Palestine.”<sup>63</sup>

Within the debate about the value of identity politics, Patricia Hill Collins theorizes about the essential nature of standpoint theory in knowledge production. She suggests that the subversive discourse has been instrumental to the production of knowledge in marginalized communities. The production of knowledge in this sense comes from the authority of experience, validating a diversity of expressions of oppressed realities. Collins explains that “traditionally, the suppression of Black women’s ideas within White-male-controlled social institutions led African-American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness.”<sup>64</sup> Standup comedy can certainly be included as a location for alternative consciousness and knowledge production. Collins goes on to explain that, “like other subordinate groups, African-American women not only have developed a distinctive Black women’s standpoint, but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge.”<sup>65</sup>

While identity is in many ways a centerpiece of standup comedy and specifically the performance of charged comedy, so is the process of disidentification. The negotiation between identification and disidentification can be understood once again through the Deleuzian and Guattarian theory of territorialization. Charged comics both engage and disengage aspects of

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<sup>63</sup> Davis and Barat, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*.

<sup>64</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 251-252

<sup>65</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 252

their identity, deconstructing and reconstructing their very meaning. The body of the comedian becomes itself a territory, its identities engaged, challenged and questioned. One's identity, gender and race, become consciously and subconsciously, an aspect of one's theatrical standup performance. As Butler explains, "if gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint."<sup>66</sup> Gender, for Butler, is a mode of performance, with which to engage, disengage and reassemble under the pressures of societal expectations and critique. Butler, among many other feminist scholars encourages a poststructuralist perspective of identity.<sup>67</sup>

In theorizing about the influence of women's standup, John Limon suggests, "the humor of women seems to me at its best when the artificial and the authentic exchange places."<sup>68</sup> Gender and race as concepts are socially constructed and therefore artificial in nature yet they are made authentic by their societal reinforcement. The marginalized charged comic uses their ability to navigate the authentic and inauthentic for their advantage "abstracting what is the essence of the concrete."<sup>69</sup> Marginalized comics are able to bring into question the performance of self, "when they deliberately fail to repeat expected race and gender identities."<sup>70</sup> The body and identity of the comic becomes the vehicle of social critique and societal transformation. It is through the performance and anti-performance of marginality that the comic, with "her authority

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<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 13

<sup>67</sup> Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2007), 57

<sup>68</sup> Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory, or, abjection in America*, 105

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>70</sup> Antoine, *'Pushing the Edge' of race and gender hegemonies through stand-up comedy*, 39

to subvert the status quo; in this way, deviance from social norms and dominant cultural traits serves as a license for social criticism.”<sup>71</sup>

Deleuzian theory rebukes concepts of essentialized identity politics or “macropolitics” suggesting that these processes of categorization solidify the limitations and boundaries they seek to deconstruct. The marginalized comic may experience instances in which they must navigate both identification and disidentification of oppression and struggle. Feminist criticism of the Deleuzian theory of territorialization in gender politics articulates concern with the functional role of disidentification and deterritorialization. Feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti posits,

Although I see the consistency in Deleuze's argument—from his global rejection of binary oppositions to the rejection of the man/woman dichotomy in favor of the continuum of interacting embodied subjectivities—I am puzzled by the consequences that this may have for women. Can feminists, at this point in their history of collective struggles aimed at redefining female subjectivity, actually afford to let go of their sex-specific forms of political agency?<sup>72</sup>

In other terms, deterritorialization and disidentification threaten the momentum established within shared oppressed realities, potentially compromising the community and life force that has motivated liberation and resistance movements of marginalized people. In addition, marginalized bodies are not often granted the opportunity to disengage from assumed or apparent identities. Marginalized people do not hold the privilege to disidentify with Blackness or womanhood or transness, rejecting ones own skin color or visible sex characteristics. Identity is both embraced and forced upon the marginalized comic. While the work of Deleuze and Guattari remains relevant to understanding social transformation, as author and feminist philosopher

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<sup>71</sup> Joanne R Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 18

<sup>72</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 120-121

Elizabeth Grosz articulates, “the value of their [Deleuze and Guattari] work for women and for feminism remains unclear.”<sup>73</sup>

### **Risks of Charged Comedy**

The capitalist lures within the comedy market suggest that “profitable comedy appeals to the largest swath of the American public,” however, “charged humor can have a polarizing effect on audiences, diminishing its widespread appeal.”<sup>74</sup> In other terms, the economics of charged comedy or revolutionary comedy are not directly correlated with professional success, on the contrary producing charged, political humor may be a dangerous career move. Despite this, it has been hypothesized by professor and author Rebecca Krefting among others, that marginalized bodies more frequently produce charged comedy in standup performance.<sup>75</sup> A reading of Sara Ahmed’s theoretical framework of happiness would suggest that high levels of women’s participation in resistance comedy result from women’s embodied lived experiences of oppression, which inform their political intent and therefore their personal anecdotes on stage. However, the production of charged comedy must be understood as a financial and professional risk. Charged comedy, while intended to cause societal transformation, inevitably produces audience discomfort and while “comics have the right to free speech ... the consumer ultimately decides whose speech to support.”<sup>76</sup> For comedians, this means having to confront the economic incentive to produce crowd-pleasing, mainstream, widely appealing calls for laughter. Unlike apolitical comedy, which has a nearly universal appeal, charged comedy is often divisive as it calls attention to particular modes of political and societal ideology. For this reason, the economy of charged humor is unforgiving, perhaps more so for marginalized comics who already face

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<sup>73</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 198

<sup>74</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*, 3

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 9

isolation within comedic realms. Yet female comics and comics of color, continue to produce radical, charged, resistance comedy. This suggests that many marginalized comics are willing to sacrifice their universal marketability in efforts to use the stand up stage as a transformative space to promote feminist and anti-racist humor. These comics strategically resist the capitalist appeal for lowbrow, apolitical comedy and maintain the purity of their art and its political meaning.

Racial contract theory developed by Charles Mills,<sup>77</sup> and sexual contract theory developed by Carole Pateman<sup>78</sup> were produced as feminist and Afrocentric critiques of the social contract theory, a theory developed during the age of enlightenment by 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century theorists including Rousseau, Hobbes, Kant and Locke among others. Social contract theory in its most rudimentary form, explains the ways in which individuals consciously and subconsciously ascribe to certain modes of behavior in exchange for societal benefits. Racial contract theory and sexual contract theory critique and further develop this theory examining the extent to which beneficiaries of race and gender privilege agree to participate in certain modes racial and gender discrimination in exchange for the privileges of white supremacy and patriarchy. Participants (whites and men) sign on to figurative racial and sexual contracts, observing particular standards of behavior, denying the existence of hierarchy and discrimination, in turn benefiting from existing kyriarchical structures. Those who stray from these contractually prescribed boundaries are considered traitors to their privileged group identities and may risk socio-political isolation. Racial and sexual contract theory explain the extent to which privileged groups police one another, producing echo chambers that simultaneously deny the existence of and reproduce societal hierarchy and privilege. While these

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<sup>77</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Nachdr. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011).

<sup>78</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1988).

boundaries are reconfigured in the wake of social transformation, they constrain and police both liberal and conservative discourse surrounding race and gender.

These modes of social contract assimilation are made evident in mainstream, white male-dominated, standup performance. For white and/or male comedians these contracts are renewed in ongoing agreements between performer and audience, agreements that reaffirm entitlements to white male comfort. While male comedians may dabble in the critique of misogyny, they rarely challenge patriarchy in efforts to dismantle it. Similarly, white comedians may satirize racism of their family and friends, but they rarely confront racism in ways that challenge seriously, societal reliance on racial hierarchy. These contracts foretell the degree to which white and male comedians experience pressure to disengage from methods charged comedy that seriously challenge kyriarchical systems. These comedians gamble their individual privilege when they rebel against prescribed modes of appropriate discourse surrounding race and gender.

People who are not beneficiaries' gender privilege (women and trans or non-binary people) do not expose themselves to the same risks when they rebel against the sexual contract, as they never benefited from its exclusionary structure. Similarly, people of color, as subjects of the racial contract rather than its signatories, do not compromise the same privileges when dissenting from the doctrine outlined in the racial contract. This provides another lens through which to analyze the seemingly disproportionate participation of marginalized people in charged/resistance comedy.

The success of a standup comedy routine relies heavily on the ability of the audience to relate to a performer and their articulated lived experiences. In this sense, the identity of the audience becomes important to delivering palatable material. "In the case of comic personae as commodity, what sells and what does not lends commentary about a country that likes to imagine

itself as a harbinger of democracy, even as its constituents eagerly declare post-racial bliss and pooh-poohs the need for feminism.”<sup>79</sup> Due to the risks of employing charged humor, comics must tread carefully, in a calculated manner, to protect their spot on stage and simultaneously maintain their ethical and moral position. This may mean at times, compromising one’s comedic goals to solidify one’s comedic reputation by performing crowd-pleasing, apolitical jokes. It may mean adjusting ones presentation of identity, playing up and playing down aspects of oneself or a routine. The “comics may need to slide back and forth between racial palatability and racial saliency for 'better fit' depending on the audience,”<sup>80</sup> flirting with demands of comedic capitalism.

### **The Marginalized Comic**

As Deleuze famously said, “a brick is concept. It can either be used to build a court house or reason of it can be thrown through the window.”<sup>81</sup> Marginalized standup comics interact with bricks in both ways. Their comedy is used to build new assemblages that account for their existence. They also hurl comedy through patriarchal, white supremacist and capitalist structures. However, as one scholar so eloquently explains, “the current zeitgeist has been called postmodern, postfeminist, postcolonial... but certainly, it cannot be called ‘postdickjoke.’”<sup>82</sup> In other terms, the remnants of patriarchal comedy remain intact. Navigating unsolidified terrain, the marginalized comic dabbles in both assimilation and resistance. For it is, “when a person can ‘master the dominant discourse’ but stand on the fringes of society, [that] they are in the best position to critique it.”<sup>83</sup> The marginalized comic may take refuge in familiar comedic

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<sup>79</sup> Krefling, *All Joking Aside*, 7

<sup>80</sup> Antoine, *‘Pushing the Edge’ of race and gender hegemonies through stand-up comedy*, 38

<sup>81</sup> Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, xii

<sup>82</sup> Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 68

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 5

structures or modes of performance, which are inherently white or patriarchal. When humor is understood as a tool of the oppressor, inherently misogynistic and oppressive, it becomes a language foreign and inaccessible to women and people of color. It is for this reason that marginalized comics are often critiqued for assimilating into white and male methods of performance. Civil Rights activist, Black writer and Womanist, Audre Lorde discusses this notion in her essay *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* suggesting that tools of oppressor, in this case certain structures of comedy, cannot be reconfigured to dismantle a foundation of oppression.<sup>84</sup> In direct opposition to this sentiment, feminist activist and poet Adrienne Rich expresses necessity of linguistic assimilation asserting, “this is the oppressor’s language yet I need it to talk to you.”<sup>85</sup> The question must then be posed, should the efforts of resistance comics work to produce an entirely new language of humor and comedy, or reassemble the existing infrastructure? Shall resistance comics lay bricks or hurl bricks?

Though often considered a passive form of resistance, marginalized performers are challenging expectations of race and gender merely by demanding space for themselves on the standup stage. For the marginalized comic, “to speak is already a form of defiance [when] you are supposed to recede into the background.”<sup>86</sup> Comedy is a unique medium through which marginalized people denounce their oppression in conversation with their oppressors. In doing so they become visible to those who are the cause of their marginalization. Resistance comedy is unique in its “deployment of humor and creation of space where marginalized groups can speak outside of oppressive discourse.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 1984, 110–14.

<sup>85</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Burning of Paper Instead of Children*, Poem, 1971.

<sup>86</sup> Ahmed, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 61

<sup>87</sup> Billingsley, *Laughing Against the Patriarchy*, 20

## **Methodology**

Conducting preliminary searches for comics who perform feminist and anti-racist material, I quickly discovered that this brand of comedic performance was concentrated in major cities including New York City, D.C and Los Angeles. During the months of December 2016 and January 2017, I embedded myself in the niche world of standup comedians, based primarily in Brooklyn, New York. I attended 10s of shows and saw 100s of comics perform in grungy bar backrooms, cellars and comedy clubs. While the standup scene in New York is vast, I quickly learned the names of performers and clubs, realizing the interconnected nature of comedy communities in this ever-expanding city. The interconnectivity of these performers is perhaps best illustrated through experiences of trauma and hardship, which I witnessed ripple through the Brooklyn comedy community. When I first arrived in New York to do some preliminary research in August of 2016, a sexual assault scandal involving an owner of a comedy club had just surfaced. Sitting outside of the Experimental Comedy Gallery (Ex Comedy Gallery) in Williamsburg, I listened to several comics discuss how this news was affecting their mental health and their desire to stay in this particular comedy community. Comics I spoke to in the city mentioned this incident as having “shaken the comedy community.” When I returned to New York in December, individuals continued to bring up the many ways that this incident had continued to impact the community, becoming an increasingly divisive issue as several comedians chose to return to perform at the comedy club of the accused assailant.

While many of the clubs and venues I attended were small, sitting as few as 20-30 people, the talent in these spaces was extraordinarily high. Unlike many of the larger, more recognized clubs in Manhattan; locals rather than tourists occupy these smaller spaces. Many of the audience members in these venues are other performing comedians, often familiar with the

work of their comedy coworkers with whom they frequently perform. While small and full of familiar faces, these venues attract a diverse and supportive audience of people who laugh loudly and often. Several comics mentioned to me at various venues, “the audience here is great.” This isn’t to say there aren’t sustained periods of awkward silence that arise after a joke falls flat. However, comedians I spoke with frequently mentioned the importance of curating a positive energy in a particular room and being supportive of one another. As both performers and audience members, the comedians I spent time with were some of the hardest laughers, supporting their fellow comics, sustaining a comedic energy through the entirety of a given line up. It was through this informal dialogue and participant-observation that I developed a deeper understanding of standup in the city, reflecting on its influence, its unique community formation and culture.

To conduct this study I sought out comics whose material explicitly challenges notions of white supremacy and American racism. I looked for individuals whose comedy contributes to ongoing dialogue combating these issues. I discovered my participants in literature, on YouTube, at NYC/DC open mics or through word of mouth. While my initial interactions focused on comics who identify as women, during my study, I also encountered a performer who identifies as trans-non-binary and uses “they/them” pronouns. As their material was incredibly relevant to my study I expanded my demographic search to include their work. I asked them at the beginning of our interview if they were comfortable being identified as a “person socialized as a woman,” to which they agreed. For this reason, the demographics of my study shifted slightly from looking exclusively at people who self-identify as women to include trans and gender nonconforming individuals who identify with the experience of being socialized as women in the United States. I attempt to preserve standards of inclusive language surrounding gender identity

that is relevant to all of the participants in my study. Reflecting on my initial objective of looking exclusively at women, I recognize my own shortcomings in considering the unique experiences of trans and non-binary comedians and the ways in which their experiences are important to my study of marginalized peoples use of standup comedy. The expansion of my demographics was instrumental in producing research reflective of this diversity.

Finding research on women and trans people of color performing charged and specifically anti-racist comedy proved to be challenging. As illustrated in the title of the 1982 book edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: But Some of Us are Brave*,<sup>88</sup> representation of racial and gender diversity in academia is limiting. Not only was it challenging finding literature relevant to the demographics of my study, but it also proved somewhat difficult to collect material on comedy and its use to combat racism and white supremacy. Much of the literature I found focused on historical uses of comedy to combat racist power structures, for instance Blacks during American slavery or Polish Jews during the Holocaust. However, I encountered a book early on which not only provided foundation for my theory and background, but also introduced me to a long list of comics, many of whom performed material relevant to my study. I researched the entire list of comics found in Rebecca Krefting's, *All Joking Aside* and selected several comics of interest. I sifted through countless hours of standup footage, including everything from HBO specials to five-minute sets from YouTube, focusing my attention on comics whose material was unapologetically feminist, anti-racist and hilarious.

In sifting through the seemingly never-ending pool of YouTube standup content, I discovered several comic collectives around the country whose mission explicitly affirmed a

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<sup>88</sup> Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds. 1982. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury, N.Y: Feminist Press.

commitment to the production of resistance comedy and representation of diverse voices. The *Diverse as Fuck Festival* and *Affirmative Laughter*, both shows based in New York City, highlighted a line up of comics whose material was intentionally empowering to gender minorities and people of color. I researched many of the performers and organizers in each of these shows and contacted comics whose material was relevant to my study inquiring about their interest in participating in a filmed interview for my paper and documentary. After getting in contact with some of their organizers, I was given access to pools of comics whose material was specifically relevant to my work. While geographically, my study was limited to in person interviews and set recordings in DC and New York, I was able to connect with a few comedians based elsewhere to record interviews via Skype.

I reached out to comics through social media or email, explaining the intentions of my documentary and research, gauging their interest in participating in a filmed interview. I set up interviews with comedians in comedy clubs, residencies, or other locations of their convenience. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form acknowledging their commitment to being interviewed on camera, outlining the specific goals of my study. They also agreed for footage of their interviews to be used in my final documentary, giving myself, as the producer, full control over produced content.

As a student studying Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Africana Studies, it was imperative that my methods and practices throughout my study reflect the values and standards of intersectional feminist research. Practicing feminist research methods means, as a researcher, being conscious and critical of one's interactions with participants, the determined interview format and individual positionality. In practice this means employing reflexivity, being

constructively self-critical and introspective throughout my research process.<sup>89</sup> As my research involved collecting interviews from women and trans-non-binary people of color, it was imperative that I consider seriously my role in shaping the narratives of my participants throughout the interview process. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule as a general guideline for questioning. Having viewed the standup sets of my participants prior to our interviews, I asked them to comment specifically on the intentions, motivations, responses and ramifications of particular jokes. In addition, I tried to work off of my interview agenda flexibly, allowing the participants' to guide the direction of the interview, generating additional questions based on their responses<sup>90</sup>.

The majority of questions I asked were purposefully open-ended: How do you incorporate aspects of your identity into comedy? How does the current political climate influence how you want to participate in comedy? When is it most challenging to perform resistance comedy? Why do you choose comedy as a platform to put forth your social justice messaging? I intended to generate an understanding of each participant's use of comedy for means of social justice, their objectives, challenges, risks and successes. I also encouraged participants to reflect on their comedy considering its influences in larger political action movements developing around the country. I asked questions designed to draw parallels between comedic performance and existing resistance movements. This influenced my comedian selection, my development of questions and ultimately my analysis of the research itself.

While I had seen the content of many of the comics I interviewed on YouTube or other online platforms, I made an effort to see as many in person shows as possible with the purpose of engaging in participant-observation as an audience member. With permission of both the comedy

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<sup>89</sup> Kim England, "Getting Personal: Reflectivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research," *The Professional Geographer* 46, no. 1 (1994): 80–89.

<sup>90</sup> Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *Feminist Research Practice*, 115-116

club curator and the performer, I personally filmed several of the sets of my participants. It was important for me to see these live shows, and experience the reactions of a live audience. This helped me to appreciate their experience, the variety of venues and the types of audiences that attend these shows.

In conceptualizing the final product of this project, I worked to establish a “braided narrative,”<sup>91</sup> which offers both autonomy to individual identities and stories while simultaneously engaging shared struggles and collective resistance efforts. As a feminist researcher, looking to highlight the experiences of comics of color, I have made it a priority to remain critical of my role engaging with the topics of anti-racism and white supremacy as a white person. On one occasion I was asked by a participant, “why are you focused on women of color?” I believe this focus reflects the extent to which I am inspired by the resistance of marginalized people, the historic and modern manifestations of such resistance. Standup comedy has the power to be a platform for radical self-disclosure and self-definition. It has been my aim throughout this study to highlight the radical voices of comics whose struggles as marginalized people are turned into political strategy through the use of comedy.

Standup comedy does not translate well through written text. To truly appreciate the structure and production of a joke, one must be able to hear and see its delivery. Pauses, inflections, sarcasm, body language, impersonations and other aspects of comedic delivery are lost when presented through written text. For this reason, I decided to produce, in addition to my written independent study, a short documentary. The documentary, which complements the themes of my paper, features clips of standup performance and filmed interviews with the participants of my study. I hope that the video helps to fill in the gaps produced by written

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<sup>91</sup> Richa Nagar, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

comedy interpretation. For this reason, it is important that readers of this study recognize the limits of comedic delivery in written text.

### **Participant Bios**

**Pat Brown** has been a comedian for over 20 years. Pat won the title of Best Female Comic at the Las Vegas Comedy Festival in 2007. In her comedy she discusses being a lesbian Black woman, hurricane Katrina, dating and gentrification. She has been featured on The Late Night Show with Steven Colbert, BET and Comedy Central amongst others. While she grew up in Kansas City, Pat now lives in Harlem, New York. I was put in touch with Pat Brown through comedian Kerry Coddett who suggested Pat would be an important voice to include within my project. We conducted a Skype interview in late January 2017.

<http://comedianpatbrown.com/>

**Kerry Coddett** is a comedian “indigenous” to Brooklyn in New York City. Raised by Caribbean parents, Kerry’s comedy is influenced by her “colorful surroundings.” Kerry has been a cast member of MTV’s Joking Off. Her comedy has also been featured on The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore, Huffington Post Live, The New York Comedy Festival and Why? w/ Hannibal Burrell. She has also been a co-host of The Young Turks. She has written for news sources including BuzzFeed, Salon, The Atlantic and the Huffington Post amongst others. I discovered Kerry’s comedy online after searching through the line up of several comedy shows in New York City. I began following her comedy on Twitter and reached out to her via email to inquire about participating in an interview. I met her at her apartment in Brooklyn in early January 2017 where we filmed an interview accompanied by her small teacup poodle.

<http://www.kerrycoddett.com/>

**Nadia Iqbal** is an up and coming standup comedian. She recently graduated college where she majored in bioengineering. She attends workshops and performs with the Muslim Writers Collective in New York. In addition, she performs at open mics all around the city. In her standup she talks about her experiences dating as a Pakistani-American woman in the United States and her relationship with her parents. A friend who wrote an article about Nadia's performance at the Muslim Writers Collective put me in touch with her. We scheduled an interview at her apartment in the Upper East Side during my time in New York City.

Article about Nadia's standup: [https://broadly.vice.com/en\\_us/article/reclaiming-what-it-means-to-be-muslim-one-open-mic-at-a-time](https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/reclaiming-what-it-means-to-be-muslim-one-open-mic-at-a-time)

**Rebecca Krefting** is the author of *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents*. She is an associate professor of American Studies at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York. Her research specializes in humor, women's history, pop culture and social identities. In her book she focuses on the social impact and economy of "charged humor." In her research she interviews comedians from all over the country. As her book became so foundational to my study, I decided to reach out to her via email to inquire about participating in an interview. While I could not travel to Skidmore for an in person interview, we scheduled an interview via Skype in late January 2017.

<http://rebeccakrefting.com/>

**Zahra Noorkabsh** introduces herself as a Feminist Muslim, Iranian-American comedian. She is the cohost of an internationally acclaimed podcast, #GoodMuslimBadMuslim. She has produced

several one woman shows including, “Hijab and Hammerpants”, “On Behalf of all Muslims” and “All Atheists are Muslim” which was directed by Kamau Bell and featured in New York City’s Fringe Festival. She was also the featured comic at the Muslim Funny Fest Comedy All-star Showcase. Zahra is the only comic with whom I was familiar prior to doing research for my project. While Zahra primarily lives in L.A, she enthusiastically responded to my email request for an interview. We organized a Skype interview in early February 2017.

<http://www.zahracomedy.com/>

**Milly Tamerez** is a Brooklyn based comic, born and raised in Hollywood, Florida. She grew up in a Buddhist family where she says she learned to appreciate laughter and comedy. She splits her time between standup, sketch and improv comedy. She is one of the founders of the all women of color improve team, Affirmative Action. She is also one of the co-creators of the *Diverse As Fuck Festival*, a comedy festival dedicated to skilled and diverse talent. She has trained and performed at the Upright Citizens Brigade. In her comedy, Milly talks a lot about her experiences as a Black woman and is generating a lot of Internet attention from her YouTube video and fundraising effort entitled “White Forgiveness” in which she offers public forgiveness for white sins in exchange for a Venmo donation. I met Milly at a gathering in Brooklyn where a mutual friend introduced us. We talked about comedy and she agreed to participate in an interview that week. We meet at a theater in East Village Manhattan during early January 2017.

Her sketch comedy piece “White Forgiveness” can be found below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PedMqQTl49Y>

**Jes Tom** is a self proclaimed “weird, queer comedy babe.” Jes is a trans-non-binary, fifth generation Asian American comic based in New York. Jes uses “they/them” singular pronouns. When asked about their main objectives as a comedian in an interview, Jes replied, “to hurt the feelings of the oppressor.” Jes is frequently asked to perform at political fundraisers and travels to perform at colleges around the country. They have shared the stage with not only acclaimed comedians such as Aparna Nancherla and Judy Gold but also gender theorist Kate Bornstein. In their comedy, Jes addresses talked about issues related to straight white men, gender pronouns, their familial ties to Japanese internment camps and more. I was introduced to Jes’ comedy online. After following them on Twitter, I reached out to them via social media. We scheduled an interview in mid January 2017 at the historic Stonewall Inn Night Club where they later performed that night.

<http://www.jestomdotcom.com/>

**Elsa Waithe** is a standup comic based in New York City. Outside of standup Elsa teaches at the Comedy School for Girls and runs “Cop Watch” workshops, educating New Yorkers on how to film police activity. She has lively, hilarious and politically active social media sites and is a dedicated activist in the city. Elsa was the victim of a publicized act of police violence in 2015, which resulted in her hospitalization. Elsa helped to run the Experimental Comedy Gallery in Brooklyn, NY, a venue that was recently closed after being reported for fire regulations. Curators of the space suspect that the space was reported by conservative groups looking to shut down spaces of radical organizing and free speech.<sup>92</sup> In her comedy Elsa talks about being a lesbian Black woman, navigating stereotypes, police brutality and much more. She has also been

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<sup>92</sup> Donnelly, “The Experiment Comedy Gallery Has Been Shut Down, and Supporters Fear the Alt-Right Is to Blame.”

featured on National Public Radio's, This American Life. I found Elsa online through her connection to the Ex Comedy Gallery. I began following her on Twitter and eventually reached out to her for an interview over email. We met up at her day job where she is a security guard at a dance school in Manhattan in December 2016. I filmed her set at the Ex Comedy Gallery later that week.

Tumblr: [ElsaJustElsa.tumblr.com](https://www.tumblr.com/elsajustelsa)

This American Life: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/contributors/elsa-waithe>

## Analysis

### Part One: The Influence of Standup

*You guys seem cool so I'm going to come clean to you all, I don't trust white people. I don't trust white people not because I don't know when they're being racist but because they don't know.*

— *Jes Tom, comedian*

#### *Affective Properties of Resistance Comedy*

Several of the comics I interviewed discussed standup comedy as being the antithesis of preaching. The performance of charged comedy and preaching share similar properties, both generally involve a single speaker in front of an attentive audience, transmitting ideas within a given agenda. For this reason, I was intrigued by the number of interviewees who intentionally distanced themselves and their art form from the manner of message delivery associated with preaching. Kerry Coddett explains, “sometimes I have to reevaluate that in my delivery and how I say certain things and I have to choose certain words because I don’t want it to come off as a Ted Talk, I don’t want it to come off as preachy. So I have to make sure its littered with all the funny stuff and then when you turn around, its like ‘oh she was kickin’ some real shit too.’”<sup>93</sup> Many of the comedians with whom I spoke emphasized, that while they performed with a particular political agenda of highlighting feminist and anti-racist themes, it was imperative that they maintain their relationship with the comedic structure. Elsa Waithe explains that too many comedians—both “shock jock” (comedians whose comedy relies on the value of explicitly offensive material) and “social justice” performers—“blow past the funny to get to [their] point.”<sup>94</sup> This, she explains, diminishes the impact and influence of the joke itself. It is the properties of humor that facilitate the effective transmission of anti-racism ideology. Coddett

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<sup>93</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>94</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

suggests, “if you’re doing political humor you have an idea, an opinion, a message that you’re trying to communicate but if it comes across as more message than joke, you have to reevaluate.”<sup>95</sup>

In the era of “echo chambers” and political isolation, methods of communication across these uncompromising social boundaries are challenging if not dangerous. The grassroots work of conversing with those outside of a leftist ideological circle is imperative to mobilizing a populist movement against fascism in this country. This is not to say that shared laughter and hugs will heal a country torn apart by racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic and xenophobic ideology, but that perhaps that the resistance of marginal voices through protest and through comedic performance empowers and humanizes the marginalized body in a way traditional dialectic cannot.

In a country dichotomized between Black lives and blue lives, these comedians use comedy to facilitate their critiques of white supremacy, of patriarchy and of fascism. Waithe questions, “even if I’m laughing *at* them, even if its me turning the gaze back onto white people or men or straight people or whatever, how can I make its so that those people still want to hear what I’m trying to say?”<sup>96</sup> Waithe believes standup performance facilitates effective transmission of this critique even to those who are beneficiaries of race and gender privilege. She explains, “if you can get people to laugh, you can also get them to listen, ‘Oh, that was funny, what else you got?’ and that’s powerful and its dangerous.”<sup>97</sup> That is to suggest that comedy is somehow a universal language, one we all speak in different dialects. Standup is “dangerous” in the sense that, the audience, through participation in laughter, is more vulnerable to accepting the presented ideas. This is not to suggest that audience members laugh indiscriminately at standup

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<sup>95</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>96</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

comedy, as audiences are often extremely critical of political performances. However, in attending a standup performance, the audience engages in the signing of an unofficial social contract in which they agree to temporarily participate in a community of laughter, knowing their boundaries may be breached and taboos exposed. It is for this reason, that the medium of standup comedy is dangerous and effective. Jes Tom explains, “I think that comedy is actually one of the most effective tools ... and its because people don’t take it seriously.”<sup>98</sup> They explain that, in the same way that comedy is dangerous in normalizing racism or misogyny through humorous portrayals of oppression, the nature of comedy is similarly important to comics promoting messages of social justice.

Tom compares good comedy to a parasite or worm that infiltrates into your mind undetected, getting stuck in your head like a catchy tune. Comedy, they believe, allows for anti-racist ideology to infiltrate the mind without the same red flags and barriers produced in explicitly political discourse. This reflects the Trojan Horse narrative, highlighted by Amy Billingsley who explains comedy as disguising political intent. She suggests that refashioning social justice messaging within a comedic framework, “can thus serve as a ‘war machine,’ warping the wonted words in such a way that they are initially seen as a familiar formation but then revealed as revolutionary and shocking.”<sup>99</sup> However, reconfiguring the realities of oppressive forces and harnessing what James Baldwin refers to as the inevitable rage of consciousness into comedic narrative is perhaps easier said than done. Waithe posits, “just like its hard to be mad at something you laugh at, its hard to laugh at something you’re mad at.”<sup>100</sup> Translating anger and oppression into humor requires a unique ability to redirect the targets of a joke, refashioning oppressive language and discourse in efforts to confront them.

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<sup>98</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>99</sup> Billingsley, *Laughing Against the Patriarchy: Humor, Science and Feminist Resistance*

<sup>100</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

## *Exposure Therapy*

For the marginalized comic whose comedy invites audience members from privileged backgrounds, their performance becomes an opportunity to debase stereotypes and humanize the performers who occupy marginalized identities. For people whose social circles resemble their own identities, representation in entertainment is exposure therapy, introducing white people to the experiences of racial minorities. This combats dehumanization of marginalized people in the media and in politics. As Elsa Waithe explains, “the ten minutes I have on stage might be the only time that a person gets to hear from a queer Black woman all week, all month.”<sup>101</sup> Pat Brown explains that current manifestations of racism and Islamophobia reflect the degree to which white America refuses to interact cross culturally with people of color. This lack of exposure leads to fear, which she asserts has led to policies restricting immigration rights of refugees and individuals from Muslim majority countries into America.<sup>102</sup>

Jes Tom explains the tangible impact they hope to have representing bodies of color on stage. They assert,

If I can get the audience to fall in love with me because I make them laugh, they’ve fallen in love with a non-binary, trans person, Asian American, woman adjacent person. And maybe, I don’t know if this is a direct correlation but maybe if those people see somebody like me getting hurt or harassed or something, they’ll think more about intervening or getting involved.<sup>103</sup>

In this sense, the humanization derived from marginalized representation in comedic spaces acts as exposure therapy to privileged persons. Jes Tom hopes that this might correlate to increased instances of bystander intervention disrupting violence and harassment perpetrated against historically marginalized peoples. If marginalized performance of charged comedy does have

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Brown, Pat. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 31, 2017

<sup>103</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

this impact, comedy becomes a means of self-defense training, acting to confront violence against oppressed communities.

### *Accessibility*

As a “universal language” comedy maintains a degree of accessibility unfamiliar to intellectual modes of discourse. Jes Tom explains, “I like comedy because it’s, well, I don’t know if this is actually true, but it’s regarded as unpretentious and a lot of critique of social justice discourse and anti-racist discourse is that it’s pretentious, it’s intellectualized and comedy is very accessible.”<sup>104</sup> The criticism of inaccessibility reflects contemporary social justice movements, criticized for developing language to talk about systems of oppression in spaces of elitist privilege. And while Tom mentions this inconsistency, Coddett goes further to explain how the production of pretentious language permeates standards of comedy. She criticizes the widely recognized comedic practice of “punching up” when she explains, “I think that that whole thing is also from people of a certain privilege to be like, ‘these are the things that are allowed to be funny’ and those who are ‘down’ are not nearly this sensitive and are often the best laughers.”<sup>105</sup> Coddett, like many of the comics whom I interviewed, is positioned within the lower realms of social kyriarichal order. As a Black woman, the opportunity to produce jokes, which “punch down,” is actually more limited as individuals who embody crossroads of oppression have fewer demographics that could be considered “lower” than Black femininity. This is not to delegitimize the criticism brought about by Coddett who acknowledges the degree to which language surrounding oppression is inaccessible to oppressed people but rather to suggest that “punching down” is a less of a problem for comedians who embody lower realms of social order.

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<sup>104</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>105</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

Several comics discussed comedy as a means of facilitating discourse about racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia or transmisogyny. Waithe explains that in her comedy, which confronts issues of white supremacy and police violence, she is, “trying to add lube to the conversation.”<sup>106</sup> This metaphor illustrates the challenges associated the initiating dialogue about racism, white supremacy and police brutality. The role of comedy, in this sense, is to relieve the many barriers that prevent the production of critical discourse. Waithe goes on to suggest that, “its hard to be angry and defensive, hard to be scared of a thing that you’re laughing at. So if I can get you to laugh about it first then I’ve also got you to think about it differently. That’s what laughter is, like chemically in ours brains. Its just ‘you’ve presented a new way for me to think about a thing and ‘oh!’ that kind of delights me.”<sup>107</sup> This reflects incongruity theory as privileged persons are forced to reconcile their own worldview with the experiences of marginalized people.<sup>108</sup> This process is facilitated by humor, which not only triggers different methods of cognitive processing but also helps to open up space for dialogue as it deconstructs taboos and social norms. Humor acts to produce vulnerability in both the performer and the audience member. It is in this state of vulnerability that comedy becomes a dangerous tool of political influence.

It is perhaps because it is not taken seriously, that comedy becomes such dangerous territory. Even for comedians who wield their satirical power against systems of power, the ability of the audience to interpret their work as normalizing, threatens the very objectives of charged comedy. Coddett articulates her experience occupying both camps. She illustrates this point as she discusses the polysemic interpretations of a bit she performs about police brutality, “I’m being critical but I’m also trivializing it. I’m trivializing back men being shot.” She goes on

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<sup>106</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> “Philosophy of Humor.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2012.

to suggest, “[comedy], it literally is the art of trivializing, of bringing it down to its simplest form which is laughter. So, I think that we over philosophize and intellectualize, it strips it from what it is which is comedy.”<sup>109</sup> Her comments to a degree, debase the very foundations of my study, suggesting that comedy, regardless of its usage, will always work to trivialize the experiences of marginalized and oppressed people. It is for this reason that Elsa Waithe emphasizes the importance of ensuring that a joke has the right “target.” While a joke about police brutality may include the death of an unarmed black person, in anti-racist comedy the “punch” must be directed towards the systems of oppression, in this case, institutionalized racism in law enforcement.

## **Part Two: Attacks on Charged Comedy**

*It's so good to be here in Brooklyn.... But then again I never left. I was born here, I was raised here, I'm going to die here. Hipsters call me indigenous.*  
– Kerry Coddett, comedian

### ***The Economics of Modern Day Minstrelsy***

Charged comedy or resistance comedy is not a lucrative business. Comedians who participate in charged performance sacrifice wide spread appeal when they perform politically divisive material. Pat Brown, who regularly performs on TV and in major New York City comedy venues, details her own experiences with self-censorship. Prior to performing on *The Late Show* with Steven Colbert, Brown explains, “I’m going to do the safest material, actually that’s not true, but I’m going to do a lot of material that is safe because if you have that large number of people watching you, you want them to know that you are digestible.”<sup>110</sup> Some may interpret this sentiment as Brown appeasing privileged audiences and in turn compromising her

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<sup>109</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>110</sup> Brown, Pat. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 31, 2017

political standpoints for professional success. While much of Brown's comedy is politically divisive, she expressed that she, "wouldn't take those chances [performing more radical material] in a bigger venue or a bigger platform."<sup>111</sup> Brown is one of the most successful comics I interviewed considering her popularity and notoriety. It is perhaps her willingness to code switch, and to adjust her sets to appease particular audiences that has facilitated her wide success. Other comics I interviewed expressed an unwillingness to modify their material in efforts to achieve greater notability. Waithe explains, "if my subject matter or political stance on and off stage keeps me off stage, than there is a lot I can do at this level and that's enough for me."<sup>112</sup> She continues, "if I made it big and didn't say the things I wanted to say, I would feel fraudulent. I would rather fail, maybe not fail but not reach upper echelons, I would rather not make it there and still be authentic to myself."<sup>113</sup> The difference in their comedic mentality is perhaps a matter of motivation. To what degree is a comic's performance motivated and reflective of social justice messaging? To what degree is social justice messaging foundational to their comedy?

While comics of all colors and creeds produce charged material, Krefting highlights the unique political risks for marginalized bodies engaged with resistance performance. She details, "its riskier because they're talking about themselves, they're putting themselves out there. And if society doesn't change, if it doesn't react as they are telling these truths, if they don't change society to adapt, to modify some of these concerns, they're the ones who are going to lose. It's not going to be the white guy who loses out."<sup>114</sup> People of color engaging in resistance comedy perform their marginality, recognizing the risks associated with dissenting from standards of

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

submissive behavior expected of oppressed people. Krefting explains, “I think when we see charged humor coming from these marginalized voices, it means something a little bit deeper.”<sup>115</sup> Marginalized people engage in charged comedy, which reflects their lived experiences of oppression. In choosing to perform resistance comedy, comics may be coerced into censoring their experiences and identities, which are interpreted as inherently political as a result of their embodied racialized and gendered identities. Performing marginality in a way that challenges oppressed invisibility is not a lucrative business. For this reason, several comics express the degree to which they feel they must choose between mainstream success and maintaining their uncompromising political platform. Jes Tom, who expresses their mainstream ambitions, suggests that most producers wouldn’t consider them regardless of their politically divisive material, as they will never embody “normal” intersections of identity.

Marginalized comics whose performance of identity conforms and appeases the white, hetero-patriarchal standards of race, gender and sexuality may find their performance to be more profitable. Krefting discusses this phenomenon in terms of “modern day minstrelsy.” She explains, “you can see comics all over television who occupy marginalized form of identity who play into the stereotypes and they are performing in ways consistent to stock characters that are very problematic.”<sup>116</sup> In conforming to and appeasing the desires of white hetero-patriarchal society, marginalized people are participating in the reproduction and normalization of their own dehumanization, coerced by financial incentives within the business. Their performance gives agency to oppressors whose laughter trivializes and perpetuates the grievances of the marginalized body. Krefting briefly touches on the historical foundation upon which modern day minstrelsy receives precedent when she explains, “minstrelsy emerged as a way to bring people

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

together and unite people but it was also uniting people against other people. And modern day minstrelsy is just a reification of this practice, a buffoonery of other races, ethnicities, genders. And you can see that marginalized folks will still do that because it's profitable."<sup>117</sup> White comedy consumerism fuels this offensive performance. If minstrelsy continues to be profitable for the marginalized person who agrees to perform and reaffirm racial "buffoonery", this market will persist. Krefting affirms that, "unfortunately to get paid in this day and age, it's much more lucrative to perform in ways the uphold a modern day minstrelsy kind of ethos."<sup>118</sup> Satisfying the demands of the industry within a capitalist market reproduces the oppression upon which capitalism is built. As a comedian, Jes Tom explains,

As a marginalized body, the temptation to make fun of your own, the marginalized parts of you, in a way that's harmful is always present. The temptation is always there, because it's easy to do, those structures are already in place. And actually making jokes that are against that are a lot harder to do because you have to rewrite all these structures and still make it accessible to people.<sup>119</sup>

The structures of racism are well-established, racial stereotypes embedded into the fabric our culture. The production of charged comedy, as Tom explains, requires the destruction and reconstruction of such assemblies. To return to the work of Deleuze, the production of charged comedy produces the deterritorializing of colonized foundations upon which racism within comedy has been built and reproduced. However, it is not only the comic who decides how structures will be reassembled, but also those involved in funding the construction project. The consumers, who continuously purchase modern day minstrelsy strengthen existing oppressive structures and deter radical performers from investing in their own artistic form of resistance.

### ***Abusing the Art***

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

The art of standup has been exploited throughout its history to give platform to racist discourse. Comedy, being an influential means of transmitting ideas, is a major threat when utilized to promote racist, sexist or otherwise fascist ideology. Zahra Noorbakhsh articulates that, “right now, standup and comedy are being weaponized as kind of tools of fascist, alt-right messages which is really scary and unsettling.” She goes on to detail her experience covering the Berkeley protests of fascist public speaker, Milo Yiannopoulos, “they were describing Milo Yiannopo-fuck as this comedian, as a comedian! They labeled him an entertainer and a comedian. And I thought, ‘Well that’s really clever.’ That’s a really clever way of introducing violence and fascism and radicalizing a bunch of white men for your cause.”<sup>120</sup> Zahra recognizes the extent to which comedy facilitates the normalization of racism and violence against her own community as a Muslim. Joking about radical Islam, deportations and police brutality, as Milo does, effectively dehumanizes and normalizes the violence and oppression perpetrated against Muslim, immigrant and Black communities in this country. Zahra explains, “of course they’re using comedy to introduce this really dubious message. And of course they’re using comedy because comedy is a way to connect with people and say, ‘this is harmless,’ ‘this is just entertainment, it’s harmless.’”<sup>121</sup> The charismatic, Nazi sympathizers of the alt-right engender fascist ideology amongst their audiences, exploiting the properties of standup comedy, which facilitate its influential capabilities. They too, recognize comedy’s power to effectively transmit ideas. Noorbakhsh recalls thinking to herself at the Berkeley protests, “you [Milo] are not my colleague, what are you doing here?”<sup>122</sup> Her experience reflects the ability of comedy to mobilize audiences. The platforms for alt-right, fascist “comedians” is growing within our current political climate. The market for white supremacist comedy is indeed lucrative.

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<sup>120</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. Interview with Caren Holmes. February 3, 2017

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

While not all comics who reproduce the structures of white supremacist culture in their comedy have such an explicitly fascist or racist agenda, the narrative of “harmless comedy” is often used to justify comedy that reaffirms stereotypes and trivializes the experiences of oppressed peoples. Milly Tamerez explains that when comedians structure their jokes to target the oppression of marginalized people that, “You’re being lazy. You’re not using [comedy] in its power.”<sup>123</sup> Tamerez asserts a belief in the power of comedy to confront oppressive powers but believes many exploit the art form to platform harmful modes of discourse. She explains that often the mere existence of gay or Black people becomes the joke when she questions, “is the punch line that “oh my god, the twist is he’s gay?” Yeah, people are gay. People are Black. There are women.”<sup>124</sup> Oppressed identities should not stand in as a punch line for a joke. Elsa Waithe argues that it is for this very reason that “punching up” becomes a standard practice within standup comedy. She explains, “if I’m discussing racism, who is the target of this joke? Is racism the target of the joke, the absurdity of racism? Or are we laughing at Black people? Are we laughing at white people?”<sup>125</sup> In fact, Waithe suggests that no topic is “off limits” to comedians. Rather she explains that comedians should closely examine the targets of their joke considering who or what is being trivialized within their comedic narratives. Tamerez explains that while working against oppressive narratives, she is able to utilize white supremacist structures within her comedy, switching the script and reversing the gaze to expose the hypocrisies of racist ideology.

### ***Silencing Dissent***

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<sup>123</sup> Tamerez, Milly. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 10, 2017

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

Each of the comedians I spoke with expressed dire concern about their future participation in charged comedy given the current political climate. Stories have already circulated regarding the harassment of Black and Muslim comics since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Rebecca Krefting, who has studied charged comedy and its influence over recent history, explains, "I'm concerned that we're going to see more of a repression and silencing of voices who are speaking truth to power."<sup>126</sup> She believes the gag orders placed on political institutions by the Trump administration sets a precedent for artistic performers who must now openly disobey authority in order to speak of their experiences. Elsa Waithe details that, "Trump has already discussed tightening libel laws or whatever that means, attacking Saturday Night Live."<sup>127</sup> She expresses the extent to which this political climate threatens comedic resistance suggesting, "Comedy is sort of the last bastion of free speech."<sup>128</sup> As an outspoken activist, on and off stage, Waithe understands the risks associated with challenging political and state authority. In April 2015, Waithe sustained hospitalizing injuries when a police officer pushed her into a garden rail during an otherwise peaceful protest. A video of the incident can be found online.<sup>129</sup> Waithe has felt both the physical and psychological trauma associated with challenging white supremacy and police brutality.

However, the subjugation of dissident voices in comedy does not usually manifest in explicitly physically violent forms. Jes Tom discusses an article written by Toni Morrison, which was circulated online shortly after the 2016 election.<sup>130</sup> Tom suggests that, "what really stuck out to me was, that this is how a fascist dictatorship comes to power. The first thing they do is take

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<sup>126</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

<sup>127</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Stepansky, "NYPD Probing Video Purportedly Showing an Anti-Police Brutality Protester Being Violently Shoved by Cop."

<sup>130</sup> Morrison, "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear."

away art, and they take away culture. They make it so that the people who are under control can only imagine this sort of limited world.”<sup>131</sup> Tom’s comedy includes anecdotes about their ancestral connections to American Japanese internment camps. For them, the reality of incarcerating people due to one’s race, is only a few generations removed. Tom explains, “I feel that, if it comes to it that artistic voices get silenced, mine is up there and its up there close to the top.”<sup>132</sup> Many of the comics I interviewed embody identities that are inherently politicized under our neocolonial political structure. The mere embodiment of Muslim, Black or trans identity has become an explicit threat to white supremacist political narratives. Zahra Noorbakhsh fears, “I don’t know at what point this country is going to flip and criminalize, you know, ‘Muslim sympathetic language.’”<sup>133</sup> The spread of Islamophobic ideology continues the process of dehumanizing Muslims, highlighting them as threats to American democracy. Noorbakhsh explains, “That’s a problem, when your existence just by itself, is dangerous.”<sup>134</sup> When I asked how the current political climate affects her motivations within comedy she replied, “it makes me want to run, pretty much run far, far away.” For comedians who feel their basic existence threatened under persistent and increasing Islamophobic ideology in America, censorship is both enforced by institutions and self-inflicted by individuals who feel their lives are threatened by their participation in resistance efforts. Generating fear within these marginalized and actively resistant communities is a primary objective of fascist political regimes.

### ***Harassment***

Individual standup artists and comedy communities have already begun to witness the ways in which fascist ideology has limited and threatened their artistic mobility. The participants

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<sup>131</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. Interview with Caren Holmes. February 3, 2017

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

in my study emphasized that they have witnessed a distinct increase in the frequency and severity of harassment towards women, people of color, Muslim and trans people in recent years. Racist, misogynistic and Islamophobic hecklers feel emboldened by the rhetoric of Donald Trump and prominent white nationalists who claim to be “speaking the truth” and challenging standards of political correctness. For comics, this politically supported hate speech manifests in forms of verbal and physical threats of violence. Kerry Coddett articulates that, “people have been getting yelled at, people have been calling people ‘nigger’ on stage. I heard that they had to stop a show because a man and his wife were heckling a Muslim comic.”<sup>135</sup> Elsa Waithe explains that, “some of my comrades have been accosted by other comedians, other audience members.”<sup>136</sup>

Elsa Waithe recalls a first hand experience in which she was harassed by an audience member for mentioning the existence of the Black Lives Matter movement, “I was setting up the joke and essentially just said ‘Black Lives Matter’ in the set up of the joke and somebody booed. Somebody in the audience booed.”<sup>137</sup> This is not to say that standup comedians shouldn’t be prepared to handle the occasional heckler. Audience members frequently interrupt a standup performance in efforts to insert their own perspective or reactions. This is often expected at intimate standup venues “because as performers their audience is not entirely distinct from them.”<sup>138</sup> I have personally witnessed audience members heckle performers. However, the heckling and harassment endured by marginalized comics is not an attack on their comedic material but their person. These identity-based attacks are efforts to police and recolonize the standup stage effectively pushing back efforts by marginalized voices to reterritorialize. Several

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<sup>135</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>136</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Limon, *Stand-up comedy in theory or Abjection in America*, 13

of the comics discussed the ways in which they have responded to these increased harassment and threats of violence. Waithe recognizes the extent to which her comedy contradicts the attempts by political elite to white wash the American narrative. However, she explains, “I have no intentions of toning it down. What I might be doing is being a little less available for all locations [performing only in certain venues].”<sup>139</sup> Waithe acknowledges the real and perceived threats she faces in continuing to perform and embody resistance. She suggests that while New York City is often perceived as a liberal safe haven, comedy clubs which cater to tourists, are often more explicitly hostile to diversity and social justice messaging. Coddett reflects on the extent to which she must consider the political positioning of her audience before she performs her more charged material. In her interview she considers her experience performing for a crowd in New Hampshire, “There were a lot of white people there. Trump was there the week before I was. There were 200 people there and I was like, ‘all right, just let me know where you stand; is this a Trump protest or a Trump rally? Just let me know which whites you are so I can get my stuff together.’”<sup>140</sup> What she describes is administering an informal political litmus test on white audiences, to understand their political positioning before making herself vulnerable to potential backlash and violence. Considering that a majority of white voters in the United States supported Trump, whose rhetoric has explicitly dehumanized women, Muslims, Blacks and immigrants, among others, it should come as no surprise that people of color are developing their own informal white-people-vetting-processes to determine “which whites” they are performing for.

In addition to threats against the safety of individual performers, radical organizing spaces and comedy venues have been targeted and shut down in a trend many fear is tied to their leftist political leanings. During my short time in New York City, Decolonize This Place and the

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<sup>139</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>140</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

Ex Comedy Gallery were both forced to shut down their operations. Elsa Waithe was a foundational comic and organizer at the Ex Comedy Gallery but chose not to comment on its permanent closure for this study. However, one of the owners of the Ex Comedy Gallery explained in a recent *Brooklyn* online article that the New York Fire Department responded to an anonymous tip suggesting that the venue did not have proper fire exits. The space was shut down permanently that night. The owner believes a “right wing agitator” and “Trump supporting comic” who had been banned from performing at the venue the night prior to the “surprise inspection,” called in the tip.<sup>141</sup> The venue had developed a reputation for radical organizing, hosting a 31-hour “Fuck Donald Trump Comedy Marathon” prior to the inauguration. It was advertised that all Muslim audience members could attend for free. Those “gloating” over the closure of the venue online circulated a cartoon of alt-right and fascist icon, Pepe the frog, conducting a fire safety test.<sup>142</sup>

Decolonize This Place, an activist-oriented artist space, held a closing party on December 17, 2016. The space, which hosted a number of radical comedic performances, planned a party to commemorate its many accomplishments after its lease had been terminated. The space which was similarly recognized for its devotion to radical social justice messaging, hung large banners in support of Black Lives Matter and the Israeli Boycott, Divest, Sanction movement. Having visited the site a few days prior, community organizers of the space invited me to the closing party. It featured musicians from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, Palestinian poets and a number of speakers. The morning after the event, I woke up to social media messages explaining that self-proclaimed Trump Supporters had attacked four activists leaving the event.<sup>143</sup> Many suspect

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<sup>141</sup> Donnelly, “The Experiment Comedy Gallery Has Been Shut Down, and Supporters Fear the Alt-Right Is to Blame.”

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Towle, “Activists Targeted in Brutal Homophobic Assault by Men Yelling ‘Trump, Trump, Trump.’”

the assaults were motivated by racism and homophobia as the assailants were heard chanting racist and homophobic slurs.<sup>144</sup> Pictures of the assaulted activists circulated on social media depicting their bruised and swollen faces.

It is evident that violence and harassment against social justice and radical leftist organizations has already impacted these communities. Venues are being shut down, individuals are targeted for their political beliefs. Comedians express fear of facing violence in response to their comedic material and marginalized existence. These turf wars between the fascists and the anti-fascists take place not only in the streets but also in comedy venues, where humorous bones are developed in the arms that will one day punch Nazis, an anti-fascist practice revitalized by the infamous punching of white nationalist Richard Spencer during protests of Trump's inauguration.<sup>145</sup>

### **Part Three: Hurting and Healing**

*I live in Harlem by choice, too much pressure living around white people. Y'all survey too much, asking too many damn questions. How did your hair get like that? What does ashy mean? Leave me alone, dammit.*

– Pat Brown, comedian

#### ***Comedy as a Survival Mechanism***

As a platform often used to trivialize and delegitimize the grievances and basic existence of marginalized people, Jes Tom details the broken relationship between comedy and oppressed communities. They explain that, “comedy is not a safe space, it’s just not... comedy in general I consider to be an unsafe place, not that there is such a thing as safe space but comedy is

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> “White Nationalist Richard Spencer Punched in Face on Camera.”

unsafe.”<sup>146</sup> This is to say that comedy has a long history of weaponization against marginalized communities. Oppressed people have long been the subject or punch line of a joke rather than the producers and consumers. Tom specifically addresses the tarnished relationship between comedy and the queer community. They suggest, “queer people don’t get a lot of comedy and we forget that we need it or that we like it or what we want it.” They go on to explain, “a lot of times queer people, trans people, hate standup comedy because we are the ones that are always the butt of the joke.”<sup>147</sup> Being subjected to delegitimization and harassment under the guise of “comedy” has, in the long run, hurt the relationship between queer communities and comedic art forms. Tom explains their desire to be apart of mending that relationship, producing comedy for queer communities rather than about queer people. They explain, “I’m not going to hurt people who are hurting already.”<sup>148</sup> In this sense, there is recognition of communal pain on the basis of shared identity. Tom, who is a queer, trans-non-binary person, wishes to reverse this pattern of queer comedic exploitation and instead work toward a mutually respected relationship between marginalized communities and comedy. Communities in pain need comedy, perhaps more than privileged communities. Communities, whose struggles are less prominently represented in mainstream media, deserve a space to laugh together at their unique shared experiences.

Rebecca Krefting explains the history of comedy and its use as a survival or coping mechanism within oppressed communities. She discusses the use of comedy within slave communities, producing and performing live comedy for one another. She suggests that during the slave era, comedy was used, “as a survival tool, a coping mechanism and I would say the same thing is going on right now. That these [marginalized] communities where charged comedy is coming from, these communities, they’re functioning in exactly the same way. They are

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<sup>146</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>147</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

building community, they are trying to establish an identity for the community and a value, that we're not just this assemblage of people but 'our culture is meaningful and our connections are meaningful.'"<sup>149</sup> Throughout my research I discovered several collectives of marginalized comics building working to build such a community around the goal of reclaiming shared identities, history and culture. *Affirmative Laughter*, the *Diverse as Fuck Festival*, *Laughing in Color* and the *Muslim Writers Collective* exemplify this type of community building which is founded upon both shared oppression and laughter. Standup produced by and for marginalized groups serves to relieve the tensions associated with navigating the world as a disenfranchised American. Krefting explains,

[Comedy] also functions as a survival tool and a coping mechanism for people who genuinely move through this world at a disadvantage and have to contend with that. 'Why was that person following me in the store again? Why was I pulled over again? Why am I being profiled at the airport again?' So these are the experiences that are awful, they're dreadful. They're an assault on who we are. And so humor is a force of remedying. It's an amelioration from that kind of pain that stems from those experiences.<sup>150</sup>

While Jes Tom suggests that standup comedy is an unsafe place, this sentiment perhaps reflects the makeup of modern standup bars and clubs that are dominated by white, male bodies whose experiences reflect narratives of privilege. However, communities are being built to combat patriarchy and white supremacy in the comedy world, creating spaces designed to promote the liberation comedy.

### ***Comedy in the Wake of/in Response to Tragedy***

The standup artists with whom I spoke discussed the complexities of performing comedy in wake of tragedy. Black, Muslim, trans and queer bodies have been at the center of politically motivated violence, highlighted in the media over the last several years. I asked each of my

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<sup>149</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

interview participants, “When is it most challenging to perform your brand of charged comedy?” Many referenced the experience of performing standup shortly after a tragedy, recognizing that their respective communities were preoccupied with the mourning and anger associated with racial violence or discrimination. Jes Tom explains “I’ve learned, particularly in the past year, that as a queer, trans comic who is a person of color, a lot of times what I’m tasked with is coming into spaces where a community is in mourning about something and doing comedy there and making those people laugh.”<sup>151</sup> Tom details their experiences performing at an LGBTQ homeless shelter the day of the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting. One week later they were asked to perform at a queer Hilary Clinton benefit event. They explain, “We [the queer attendees] are literally scared because there’s rainbow shit outside for this huge lesbian benefit that’s happening and there’s all of these police cars outside. And that doesn’t make people feel safe either, that makes people feel upset.”<sup>152</sup> The concept of police protecting queer spaces and events is almost comical in itself, as Tom and I conduct our interview at the Stonewall Inn, a historic gay bar known for the infamous 1969 police raid attacking queer and trans people. Other comedians relayed this sentiment, discussing their experiences performing shortly after a viral video circulates depicting an unarmed black person killed by the police. Black comics are then tasked with performing for their communities before the blood of victims is even dry. A few comedians mentioned being more tactful with their material after a tragedy, for instance, not mentioning police brutality after publicized killings of Black and Brown bodies at the hands of the police state. While the jokes of these comedians combat and confront the realities of racialized police brutality, comedians recognized that at times, wounds within the community were too raw. If comedy, as relief theory suggests, is meant to be an escape from the traumas of

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<sup>151</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

everyday life, then separating trauma and standup, at times, provides that oasis. Kerry Coddett recalls a period of time during the summer of 2016, when a sexual assault scandal (mentioned in methodology) spread through the Brooklyn comedy community. She explains, “there was a huge rape scandal in the comedy community at the time and it was on everyone’s mind.” She details, “I’m doing a line up, there are ten other women on it, all just have been talking about rape for the last three days, ain’t nobody trying to hear my rape joke. So out of respect for those comics and what I know was top of mind and a very sensitive issue, I won’t do it.”<sup>153</sup> This is to say, that even when the target of a joke aims to disqualify oppressive powers, individuals and communities create access to spaces in comedy venues where people can escape from discussions of their own oppression. The comedians I spoke with recognized the need to give communities in mourning or experiencing tragedy, time to breath before reentering social justice discourse. For some, tragedy does not necessitate escaping the comedy world or comedy community, but rather transforming comedy space to serve the needs of performers in mourning. Milly Tamerez discusses how the Upright Citizens Brigade (UCB) responded to the highly publicized police killings during the summer of 2016. She explains, “after all of the police shootings, especially after Philando Castile and Alton [Sterling], we had a healing meditation group at our comedy school.”<sup>154</sup> The comedy school sponsored an expert in meditation who specializes in racial healing, to lead guided meditation for comics of color at UCB. Tamerez describes the collective feelings of trauma shared by all those who witnessed the killings of Black people on Facebook Live and other social medias. She describes the importance of stepping away from being politically active when she says; “sometimes you retreat and take care of yourself in order to fight again. All of that, you can’t just constantly be fighting. Learning that lesson at this point has

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<sup>153</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>154</sup> Tamerez, Milly. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 10, 2017

been super valuable to me. And sometimes I can do the racial jokes or the ‘all dick is trash’ patriarchy stuff and sometimes I can’t, I need to not do that.”<sup>155</sup> Self-care is not necessarily escaping comedy communities or vacating radical spaces, but rather coming together in a different manner to support each other through periods of sustained tragedy. Jes Tom explains that, “the thing about queer community is the queer community is always hurting.”<sup>156</sup> The ongoing psychological pressures of oppression are not mitigated by the lack of publicized mass murders of police shootings.

While tragedy and suffering elicits a diversity of individual responses, many comics suggested that witnessing injustice has motivated their participation in comedy, influencing their comedic and political objectives. Jes Tom suggests that marginalized communities are, “used to people’s performances about trauma” they explain, “we’re used to hearing about trauma over and over again. We’re used to crying together in a big room. And that’s right. There should be space for that but my comedy is about trauma too. And there has to be a way to laugh about things. We have to have a way to release some of this shit that not just painful.”<sup>157</sup> Kerry Coddett reiterates the importance, even necessity of comedy in the wake of tragedy. She recalls being tasked with performing the day after the murder of Philando Castile. She explains, “it was like four unarmed Black men in a week. And I remember waking up that morning crying, calling my congress person like ‘what can I do?’ and then I had to do my comedy show that night and all the comics were like ‘how can we be funny at this time? What is there even to laugh about?’ and I’m just like, ‘we need this.’”<sup>158</sup> She explains that at that particular moment, her community needed an opportunity to laugh together, to find a way to release their shared pain in the wake of tragedy, “I

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

did my race jokes, I did my jokes about the cops killing us... we needed it.”<sup>159</sup> As unique individuals, who occupy different identities, perspectives and experiences, these comedians respond differently to the many tragic events of 2016 and those transpiring now at the beginning of 2017. Some express feeling a call to action, others suggest they needed to take a break from the comedy scene to regroup and remobilize. However, many have found ways to mobilize their messaging to reflect radical resistance against the powers that have emboldened tragic hate crimes, such as the mass shooting at a gay bar in Orlando during June of 2016, the many police killings of unarmed Black bodies that took place throughout that summer or the increased threats against Jewish and Muslim community centers and spaces of worship at the beginning of 2017.

### ***Clap Back***

The term “clap back” is a slang term commonly used on social media. Urban Dictionary defines it as “to fire back.”<sup>160</sup> This is perhaps the very nature of charged comedy, to “clap back” at the powers that be to delegitimize their forms of systemic oppression. Milly Tamerez suggests, “[comedy] gives people, oppressed people, a chance to express themselves and be like ‘fuck you.’”<sup>161</sup> Standup comedy provides a platform for people who embody marginalization to punch directly towards the people, practices, institutions, policies and systems that disenfranchise their communities. The dynamics of standup comedy foster “clap back” performances in which the oppressed speaks without interruption. Elsa Waithe explains how comedy facilitates her ability to confront the President Trump and his direct threats against her communities. She articulates the role of jokes in trivializing the legitimacy of a fascist presidency even in simply acknowledging Trump’s insecurities, “while [comedy] may not change culture and while that

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Urban Dictionary, s.v. “clap back,” accessed Feb 26, 2017

<sup>161</sup> Tamerez, Milly. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 10, 2017

may or may not dethrone him [Trump], I feel better. Because I know I'm going to the death camp but at least my lips look good." While extraordinarily dark in nature, Waithe finds comfort in delegitimizing the structures that call into question her own humanity.

#### **Part Four: Charged Comedy in Action**

*When I say I'm Iranian, people get scared by that. I like to have fun with it, I like to sit in the front of classes... nuclear physics classes and say [raises hand] "excuse me professor, this plutonium, do you find that on like the Craig's list?"*

— Zahra Noorbakhsh

#### ***Identity***

While my study focuses on marginalized comics who perform resistance comedy and protest art, not all marginalized comics engage with their identity in order to challenge systems of interlocking oppression. As it was discussed above, many comics perform expressions of modern day minstrelsy, which utilize existing structures of race and gender stereotypes in ways that reaffirm their own dehumanization. The economic lure of this type of identity performance is reinforced by the consumer demand for comedy that perpetuates white supremacy and patriarchy. Identity, however, is also a centerpiece to the performances of charged comedy in which individuals engage in both identification and disidentification, disrupting expected performances of race and gender.

Comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh explains, "I open by saying I'm a feminist, Muslim, Iranian comedian, proud anchor baby.<sup>162</sup>" She goes on to say, "Just by virtue of talking about my experiences, my background comes up anyway. And I do that because I know there are some comedians who try not to do that, that try to say, 'I'm just like everyone else.' But I just don't

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<sup>162</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. Interview with Caren Holmes. February 3, 2017

feel like that's true for me.”<sup>163</sup> The aversion to discussing one's identity as Noorbakhsh discusses, is perhaps an attempt to depoliticize and make one's performance accessible to white audiences unfamiliar with the experiences of Muslim Americans or other minority groups. Pat Brown explains, “being Black has affected me over the course of my life and not to talk about it seems almost disingenuous.”<sup>164</sup> That is to say that the process of disidentification is not necessarily an abstraction or neutralization of one's gender and race performance, but rather an attempt to whitewash the unique and diverse experiences of people of color. Several comedians mentioned the degree to which their identities motivated their participation in resistance comedy. However, as comedians with a diversity of unique interests, Elsa Waithe explains, “Being a lesbian, being a woman, being Black is only slices of who I am. So it need not dominate all my comedy. I *do* want to tell you a dick joke. I *do* want to tell you this joke about a corn dog. But I also know I can't *not* talk about the other things.”<sup>165</sup> Jes Tom explains that through embodying trans-non-binary, Asian American and queer identities, their words become inherently politicized and are automatically perceived as being “social justice minded.”<sup>166</sup> Their ability to disengage from embodying politicized identities is limited by the legibility of their marginalization.

Racialized and gendered bodies do not have the privilege to be apolitical. Their identities are politicized by either their participation in political discourse or their decision to remain silent. Deleuze articulates this sentiment when he explains, “Repressive forces don't stop people from expressing themselves, but rather, force them to express themselves. What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing.”<sup>167</sup> Kerry Coddett articulates the obligation of performing politically, comparing her material to that of apolitical white comics when she says,

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Brown, Pat. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 31, 2017

<sup>165</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>166</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>167</sup> Stivale, *The Two-Fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari*, 82

“I’m jealous that I can’t talk about like... rubber bands. I see some comics, they’re usually white comics, they have great jokes about like cheese and it’ll be great.” However, she explains, “I wish I could do that but I’ve got cops shooting me every time I turn around so I can’t get to cheese yet.”<sup>168</sup> Coddett explains why comedians of color, specifically Black comedians, are unable to compartmentalize their comedy and their experiences of racism. Speaking truth to power becomes an obligation for the body whose existence is threatened by power structures everyday. However, it is frequently the apolitical standup comics who receive the most notoriety and whose material is most widely consumed. While Coddett mentions that this type of comedy is important and credible, the lucrative market of apolitical comedy is inaccessible to Black and Brown bodies whose material becomes inherently politicized. Jes Tom suggests, “now that this election has gone the way that it has, I feel like I don’t have the luxury to not be political anymore.”<sup>169</sup> For the marginalized comic, speaking truth to power becomes an obligation and a survival mechanism.

Critics from the right and the left have criticized the role of identity politics in transforming our political landscape. However, Rebecca Krefting explains that identity is, in many ways, foundational to the formation of resistance movements and specifically, charged comedy. She explains, “You can’t talk about social inequality that stems from an identity-based position based on a subordinate position and not be talking about identity politics. So anybody engaging in charged humor is engaging with a form of identity politics.”<sup>170</sup> Modern day minstrelsy is also intertwined with the complexities of identity politics, though it manifests in a different way. Krefting explains, “Its all about identity politics so whether you are doing one or the other. The question is, which form of identity politics are we going to give voice to. Which

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<sup>168</sup> Coddett, Kerry. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 6, 2017

<sup>169</sup> Tom, Jes. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 7, 2017

<sup>170</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

one are we going to throw our Hamiltons [financial capital] towards?” Krefting criticizes comedy consumers for perpetuating the lucrative market of stereotypical identity representation, paying to watch modern day minstrelsy rather than subversive political expression.

### ***The Future of Funny Resistance***

The political landscape is ripe for the production of anti-racist charged comedy. With flamboyant showcasing of white supremacy within our highest political offices, most are not appeased when Donald Trump reminds us, “I’m the least racist person you’ve ever met.”<sup>171</sup> Rebecca Krefting explains that we are going to continue to see “reactionary comedy,” attacking political attempts to restructure and recodify white supremacy. “Based on the overwhelming response from people for marches, the day after Trumps inauguration, I think it bodes really well [for charged comedy] but one never knows because its easy to fall back into that rut of everyday living and not necessarily pay attention or not put yourself out there so I’m not sure.”<sup>172</sup> Krefting goes on to explain, “I will say that the conditions are good for comics to be able to emerge and have a critical voice and a body politic that’s eager to hear that but it will all depend on whether it gets shut down or not.”<sup>173</sup> Zahra Noorbakhsh suggests that her new show *On Behalf of All Muslims* has been drawing crowds unlike ever before. She explains, “I think there’s a new sense of urgency and sense of pride in showing up to a show particularly a show like mine.”<sup>174</sup> Comedy communities are forming in solidarity with historically and contemporarily marginalized people, promoting and protecting the right for Black and Brown bodies to continue to express political dissent. Despite this support Noorbakhsh reaffirms the real threats she continues to face as an outspoken Muslim comic. I asked about her desire for her comedy to be

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<sup>171</sup> Trump, Donald. Interview on CNN. December 9, 2015

<sup>172</sup> Krefting, Rebecca. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 30, 2017

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. Interview with Caren Holmes. February 3, 2017

affiliated with “radical” politics and resistance movements to which she responded, “if this is going to get played at my tribunal, the neo-Nazi tribunal of 2017, the answer is ‘not at all sir, not at all.’ Otherwise by virtue of who I am in my identity, absolutely. And it needs to.”<sup>175</sup>

The comics I spoke with had varying outlooks on their future within resistance comedy. Elsa Waithe explains, “I’ve been trying to give myself a month and some change to let myself calm down [since the election].”<sup>176</sup> Waithe canceled several of her shows following Trump’s election. She recounts, “I had dinner with a friend the other night and found myself talking like this [moves arms frantically] and this is too much and I’m like, ‘I feel like a conspiracy theorist here.’ I’m sure if you came back to my house I could show you my billboard where I’m connecting things with red yarn. I’m trying to channel my emotional response to this. Not to not be angry but to find the funny.”<sup>177</sup> These comics are working to mobilize and direct their comedic voices against the rising presence of fascism in their daily lives. For those who are angry and scared of the current state of American politics, this process is a complex reconfiguring of emotions, filtered through comedy and hilarity .

Milly Tamerez explains that her participation in comedy, her commitment to challenging the powers that be on stage, is her contribution to current resistance movements. She explains, “in a way, being me, being a woman and doing what I do is a way of resistance.”<sup>178</sup> Tamerez continues, “The fact that Donald Trump won and I’m still doing whatever the fuck I want is still a big fuck you to everybody... it terrifies so many people.”<sup>179</sup> Under a fascist political regime, dissent becomes increasingly risky. Existence and survival becomes acts of resistance for the marginalized resister.

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Tamerez, Milly. Interview with Caren Holmes. January 10, 2017

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

Tamerez explains that in the current political moment she hopes to expand her comedic influence. The current state of racial tensions she explains, “just makes me want to do more and fight more and take things outside of my New York circle.”<sup>180</sup> She expresses a desire to infiltrate comedy communities on a grassroots level, bringing her anti-racist narrative to communities beyond the New York City liberal bubble. Though the resistance continues to manifest around the country, it remains concentrated in specific geographical regions. Elsa Waithe believes comedy plays a role in resistance movements as it elevates the voices of marginalized people and activists in peculiar spaces. The resistance is about occupying new spaces, bringing anti-racist narratives, decolonizing narratives, into every aspect of life. Banner drops and protests around the country disrupt daily life and force people to confront the realities and lived experiences of oppressed people. Resistance comedy occupies another necessary space, infusing the narrative of resistance onto unsuspecting attendees.

## **Discussion**

White nationalist insurrection continues to experience a profound resurgence in the United States. Emboldened by an executive office endorsed by the Klu Klux Klan, racism, Islamophobia and xenophobia are gaining access to mainstream platforms as they mobilize white America. Alt-right, white nationalist spokesmen such as Richard Spencer and Milo Yiannopoulos are given the opportunity to speak in the mainstream media, on college campuses and at political conferences inciting violence against people of color. Protests and resistance movements around the country are mobilizing to dismantle their fascist platforms, organizations and constituencies. Sometimes this resistance takes the form of riot, smashing windows at the University of California, Berkeley when college republicans promoted Milo Yiannopoulos under

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

the guise of “comedian.” It is here that we witness fascism disguised as harmless satire, weaponized as a tool to mobilize white supremacy as comedy punches down at those most marginalized in society, criminalizing and dehumanizing people of color.

However, there is an army of anti-racist comedians participating in a turf war to reclaim comedy and its territory as spaces for mobilizing resistance in opposition to white supremacy and fascism. As Elsa Waithe explains that this resistance movement requires engaging anti-racist dialogue in all facets of life,

It’s about keeping the conversation going. I would like for you to wake up in the morning, turning on your TV or your radio or look at your phone and its on your phone. And then you go to work and it’s at your job. And then you get back in your car and its there again. And then you think, “I’m gonna have a night off and watch some comedy,” and then we talk about it there too. There should be no where for you to get away from this problem unless you decide to deal with it.<sup>181</sup>

Resistance comedy is about infiltrating unsuspecting territory, mobilizing audience members to think and act against white supremacy. Waithe describes the need for resistance discourse to occupy new spaces, ensuring that people cannot escape the realities of oppression faced by marginalized people.

The marginalized comic, who uses their platform to address issues of racism, misogyny, xenophobia or Islamophobia, participates in a reclamation of their humanity under political conditions which deny their personhood. As Sara Ahmed explains, “to speak is already a form of defiance [when] you are supposed to recede into the background.”<sup>182</sup> The conditions of standup comedy performance facilitate a unique opportunity in which the marginalized comic has the opportunity to speak and to be listened to. It is under the conditions of this power dynamic that privileged persons listen to the experiences and perspectives of women, trans or non-binary

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<sup>181</sup> Waithe, Elsa. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>182</sup> Ahmed, *The Pursuit of Happiness*, 61

people of color. The intimate setting of the standup venue fosters a dialectic that gives unique voice and power to marginalized people.

Participating in a form of radical protest, the charged comic faces subjugation, silencing and even violence. As it was discussed, venues that platform radical performance and organizing have been shut down by individuals and groups looking to instill fear into those who challenge white supremacy. Comics of color speaking out against white supremacy, racialized police brutality and racist political leaders have been attacked both verbally and physically. Several of the comics I interviewed discussed that the fear of retribution for their political stances has already led to self-censorship and the avoidance of venues known for their hostile audiences. Yet they persist.

Despite this, author and scholar of charged comedy Rebecca Krefting explains that the political climate is ripe for charged comedy performance. The resistance mobilizing in the streets is reflected in comedy clubs, where comics choose to engage in comedic forms of dissident performance. Comics explain, that while they are harassed and persecuted for their political rendering in certain spaces, individuals participating in resistance efforts are supporting their work like never before. As Zahra Noorbakhsh explains, there is a new sense of urgency to address issues of white supremacy and support the work Black, queer and Muslim artists. People are turning up to support anti-racist comedy in support of marginalized comics and in solidarity with anti-racist movements.

Throughout my study I draw parallels between protest and resistance comedy, understanding it as a unique form of political activism. Several comics did however draw a distinction between activism and comedy. Zahra Noorbakhsh explains, “when we get into the

space of wanting comedy to do the work of activism, that's not my favorite."<sup>183</sup> I do not attempt to argue in this piece that comedy alone can be the driving force behind modern anti-racist resistance movements that aim to meaningfully challenge political, educational and legal institutions. Rather, resistance comedy acts to supplement street protest and grassroots organizing in order to spread anti-racist discourse into uncharted territory. Charged comedy is carving out a space for resistance and activism in comedy clubs, theaters, bars and other venues. The resistance cannot be ignored when activism infiltrates every corner of society.

The future of marginalized performance and anti-racist standup is both threatened and emboldened by the current political climate. On one hand, violence against marginalized communities may continue to spiral out of control. Mosques have been burnt down,<sup>184</sup> Jewish community centers have received an unfathomable number of bomb threats,<sup>185</sup> four Black trans women were killed in a span of seven days between February 22- March 1, 2017.<sup>186</sup> The pursuit of basic survival is threatened by this increased violence against marginalized communities and bodies of color. For this reason, we may see comics resend into the shadows in order to protect their very existence.

On the other hand, we may see an increase in dissident comedy as comics ban together to confront racism in their performance. We have witnessed the mobilization of comic collectives rallying together with the common goal of promoting liberation comedy. These comics are not only providing a sanctuary for their own communities to laugh and produce art but also to mobilize and fight back against creeping fascist presence in the United States. These collectives

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<sup>183</sup> Noorbakhsh, Zahra. Interview with Caren Holmes. December 13, 2017

<sup>184</sup> Yan and Cuevas, "Spate of Mosque Fires Stretch across the Country."

<sup>185</sup> Levenson, "Jewish Center Bomb Threats Top 100; Kids Pulled from Schools."

<sup>186</sup> Morlin, "Four Transgender Murders in a Week 'Alarming Trend.'"

form the humorous bones in the army of anti-fascist arms “punching up” at neo-Nazis and racists like Richard Spencer.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> “White Nationalist Richard Spencer Punched in Face on Camera.” 2017

## Terminology

**Assemblage** - derived from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1983), an assemblage refers to socially contrived territory, which is fluid and ever changing.<sup>188</sup>

**Kyriachy** – the intersectional and connected systems of societal domination and oppression. I employ this term in my paper interchangeably and as a short hand for “imperialist-white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy,” a phrase made popular within Women’s Studies by feminist theorist, bell hooks (1981).

**Charged comedy** - I use this term as defined by Rebecca Krefting (2014) as comedic material produced by comedians who “intentionally produce humor challenging social inequality and cultural exclusion.”<sup>189</sup>

**Resistance comedy** – this phrase is used interchangeably with “charged comedy” used to progress the objectives within existing resistance movements.

**Insurgent comedy** - comedy that significantly disrupts the status quo, engaging with radical or revolutionary material.

**Punching up** – a standard within an informal comedic code of ethics under which comics direct their comedic intent towards those positioned to benefit from societal hierarchy.

**Identity Politics** - the use and/or exploitation of identities (on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, age, gender expression or sexual orientation) with the objective of political gain.

**Comic/Comedian/Standup** - a person who performs comedy. Within this study, I use these three terms interchangeable to describe people who perform standup comedy.

**Social Movement** – defined by T.V Reed in *The Art of Protest* as, “the unauthorized, unofficial, anti-institutional, collective action of ordinary citizens trying to change their world.”

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<sup>188</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

<sup>189</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontent*, 2

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