

The Performance of Intersectionality on the 21st Century Stand-Up Comedy Stage

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Abstract

In 2014, Black feminist scholar bell hooks called for humor to be utilized as political weaponry in the current, post-1990s wave of intersectional activism at the National Women's Studies Association conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her call continues to challenge current stand-up comics to acknowledge intersectionality, particularly the perspectives of women of color, and to encourage comics to actively intervene in unsettling the notion that our U.S. culture is "post-gendered" or "post-racial." This dissertation examines ways in which comics are heeding bell hooks's call to action, focusing on the work of stand-up artists who forge a bridge between comedy and political activism by performing intersectional perspectives that expand their work beyond the entertainment value of the stage. Though performers of color and white female performers have always been working to subvert the normalcy of white male-dominated, comic space simply by taking the stage, this dissertation focuses on comics who continue to embody and challenge the current wave of intersectional activism by pushing the socially constructed boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and able-bodiedness. Utilizing performance analysis, gender theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and humor studies, this dissertation unpacks the ways that stand-up performers engage the comedic stage as their own form of public intellectualism and social critique in the #BlackLivesMatter era.

This dissertation is driven by a central question: what performative strategies – defined throughout as ways in which comics structure the content, delivery, and space of their performances in specific ways that convey meaning – do stand-up comedians use to invite audiences to see them as intersectional subjects that live in the wholeness of their identities? Throughout the dissertation, I examine how comedians are using specific tactics of performance that reflect a fullness of identity as intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability.

The first chapter examines the work of specific performers to demonstrate ways in which stand-up comedians blend public intellectual work with social activism through their comedy to convey intersectional standpoints in the 21st century. The second chapter explores the work of Black female American stand-up comedians as a challenge to the ways in which the normative whiteness of fourth wave feminism fails to acknowledge the labor of women of color, despite its purported ethos to do so. Chapter three considers the work of performers examining gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability from a white positionality and critiques such work in terms of ways it does or does not engage with race and whiteness as a core component of intersectionality. The final chapter ponders how the use of humor, as a tool of intersectional activism, loses or gains efficacy when performed from transnational perspectives. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that 21st century stand-up answers hooks's call, serving as a site to address and perform social justice activism by using humor as the connective tissue between these spaces of social discourse, comedy, and traditional street protest.

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“There is nothing stronger than a broken woman who has rebuilt herself.”

– Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*

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Introduction

“Do you know what [comedic] self-deprecation means when it comes from someone in the margins? It’s not humility, it’s humiliation.” – Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*

“There’s no such thing as the arc of history bending towards justice...people do that.”
– Jesse Young, *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*

My heritage is a mix of Western European and Ashkenazi Jewish, and I was raised in cultural and religious Judaism from birth (with a generous helping of humanism thrown in for good measure). Growing up Jewish, with an educated, single mother who worked multiple jobs to support us in Tulsa, certainly plays a strong role in my perspective. As a young child, living in Tulsa as a Jewish-American girl meant that I persistently felt a vague, indescribable sense of otherness. I also had an imprecise awareness that my whiteness unfairly accorded me insider status in a way it did not for persons of color.

These privileges of whiteness framed my Jewish ethnic identity and working-class status, both of which were constantly scrutinized as “other” identities within a predominantly white, wealthy and Christian community. Tulsa, Oklahoma ranks among the top in the nation for the highest number of Southern Baptist Convention churches in relationship to its population, and is home to Oral Roberts’ ministry and University. I was consistently reminded of my abject ethnic and class status in ways both subtle, and less so, such as finding a Christmas tree in every classroom at my public elementary school (with no decorations that spoke to either my own or any others’ cultural heritage). In other instances, my choice to not participate in an event, social

outing, or school trip due to financial constraints, also painted me as an outsider in an otherwise mostly affluent neighborhood of two-parent, heteronormative households. Today, my insider-outsider status is an unavoidable aspect of my positionality in regards to my scholarship. This straddling of identity brought me insight at a young age: race never was, nor could it be, intrinsically tied to skin color. Later in my life, I would learn the intricacies of theories of social construction that would confirm and provide language for my early inklings that race is a social fiction.

In the summer of 1995, I was given the great gift of attending the Martin L. King Jr. Workshop on Non-Violence, a week-long conference held at the King Center in Atlanta, Georgia. This was an incredible opportunity in which I was able to participate because of generous funding from Tulsa Public Schools and the recommendations of Bobbie Booker and Juanita Williams: two Tulsa-area educators who gave me opportunity after opportunity to grow professionally and to whom I will always be indebted. Students passionate about social change from across the U.S. were invited to work with members of the King family and other teachers/guest artists in a collective celebration of inclusion. It was here that I first heard Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King speak, and it was here that I met many like-minded individuals who shared my passion for social justice. More importantly, it was here that I learned racism exists systematically embedded in our institutions. Racism came into focus for me as a societal disease that infects each and every power structure that shapes our culture, rewiring even those of us who work to fight against such things.

My chief academic lens for this dissertation – intersectionality – is the term coined by Black Critical Race theorist Kimberlé W. Crenshaw and further defined by Black Feminism scholar Patricia Hill Collins. Intersectional identity denotes that multiple facets of identity –

namely race, class, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, religion, etc. – oppress and marginalize subjects in limitless ways as these identities are marginalized within larger systems of social and institutional inequality. In an article focusing on the bias resulting in the mass incarceration of Black women, Crenshaw states:

Intersectional dynamics are not static, but neither are they untethered from history, context, or social identity...At the same time that intersectionality transcends an exclusive focus on identity or mere categorization, the lived experiences of racially marginalized women and girls are shaped by a range of social and institutional practices that produce and sustain social categories and infuse them with social meanings. It is precisely these processes that help explain the ways in which certain girls and women are disproportionately captured and disciplined ("From Private" 1426).

Crenshaw developed this term in response to what she saw as overlapping areas of discrimination that fell through the cracks of anti-discrimination law; this particularly affected Black women who were simultaneously subject to racism, sexism, classism, and gender discrimination. Crenshaw states, "Intersectionality, then, was my attempt to make feminism, anti-racist activism, and anti-discrimination law do what I thought they should – highlight the multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression were experienced so that the problems would be easier to discuss and understand" ("Why Intersectionality").

As I set out in this study to understand the performative strategies of comics who forefront their intersectional identities in their work, I acknowledge my positionality as someone who lives in privileged intersections of able-bodiedness, cisgender, and whiteness. In the words of Jonathan P. Rossing, a white male critical race theory scholar, "I am sensitive to both the

complexities of intersectionality and the need to reflect on my own limitations, privileges, and participation in oppressive systems” (23). It has been of the utmost importance to me that as I enter spaces of performance and dialogue with performers of varying intersectionality, that I do not attempt to create an ownership over their narratives surrounding their intersectional identities. My critical eye for the ways in which race, gender, sexuality, class, (dis)ability, religion, etc. create intersections of oppression within identity, in ways both visible and not, was certainly shaped by my early experiences in life. My writing is also informed by the ways in which my single womanhood has at times subjugated me professionally and personally in a culture that values and financially rewards coupled individuals in a lawful state of heterosexual marriage; it is influenced by my many years as a performer and director in theatre, including performing stand-up comedy; finally, it is fueled by my love and passion for comedy, and my fervent belief in its ability to speak truth to power. At the end of the day, however, I still live with the privileges of whiteness, able-bodiedness and cisgender presentation, and cannot truly ever know what it is to live life otherwise.

It was in 2005 that I began to consider stand-up comedy as more than merely entertainment. I was living and working in London just after graduating college, bartending in a West End pub to pay my rent while I assistant directed theatre. One day, puttering around Fopp bookstore I saw a copy of *American Scream: The Bill Hicks Story*, by Cynthia True.¹ I picked it up, and immediately felt a kinship with the subject of stand-up comedy and with Hicks himself. In the tradition of social critic personas like those of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, here was a

¹ Bill Hicks (1961-1994) was an American stand-up comic prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. He was a socially progressive satirist and social critic (Hicks).

comic who released angry, funny, intelligent pleas to audiences to evolve into more compassionate beings. Reading about Hicks's work was transformative for me. In this sense, *American Scream* essentially became my introduction to Performance Studies and a world of the theoretical beyond traditional theatre performance. I could see that Hicks was a performer who fought for social justice through his work, and who challenged his audiences to consider their prejudices, social constructions, and culture no less than a serious philosopher might. Suddenly, stand-up comedy felt like a whole new world replete with intellectual and emotional reward for the taking.

Nonetheless, like every other industry or system, stand-up comedy has its own history of discrimination, segregation, and exclusion.² In 2014, at the National Women's Studies Association conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Black feminist scholar bell hooks called for humor to be utilized as political weaponry in the current, post-1990s wave of intersectional activism.³ Her call confronted current stand-up comics who continued to ignore intersectional perspectives, particularly those of women of color; she asked comics and scholars alike to intervene in disrupting the notion that race and gender no longer matter.

This dissertation asks five key questions that interrogate ways that bell hooks's call to action is and is not being implemented by 21st-century performers. First, what performative strategies – defined throughout this dissertation as ways in which comics structure the content,

² The very fact that women of color have been largely ignored in stand-up comedy speaks to the intersectional oppression they face (inclusive of all other facets of life). At the time of writing this study in fact, Tiffany Haddish, a Black comic artist, became the first Black female stand-up comedian to host popular comedy program *Saturday Night Live* in late 2017, ending an exclusion that spanned forty-three seasons and included 566 previous hosts (McFarland).

³ I do not capitalize scholar bell hooks' name out of respect for her own practice of not capitalizing her name, which she does "to emphasize the importance of the substance of her writing as opposed to who she is" ("Bell Hooks").

delivery, and space of their performances in specific ways to convey meaning – might stand-up comedians use to invite audiences to see them as intersectional subjects that live in the wholeness of their identities? In other words, how are comedians using specific tactics of performance that reflect a fullness of identity as the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability? Second, how do stand-up comedians blend public intellectual work with social activism through their comedy to convey intersectional standpoints in the 21st century? Third, how do Black female American stand-up comedians challenge the ways in which the normative whiteness of fourth wave feminism fails to acknowledge the labor of women of color, despite its purported ethos to do so? Fourth, what performative strategies do white comics use to explore their experience regarding intersections of gender, sexuality, and disability? To answer this question, the dissertation considers whether or not these comics' white positionality limits a full embrace of an intersectional view of identity by examining how performative strategies shift as such comics do or do not acknowledge their whiteness as a racial intersection. Finally, how does the use of humor, as a tool of intersectional activism, lose or gain efficacy when performed from transnational perspectives?

This dissertation analyzes the work of stand-up artists who forge bridges between comedy and political activism, using intersectional perspectives that expand their work beyond the entertainment value of the stage. Performers of color and white female performers have traditionally worked to subvert the normalcy of white male-dominated, comic space simply by taking the stage, but the comics discussed in the following pages challenge the current wave of intersectional activism by pushing and often rejecting the socially constructed boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability. Utilizing performance analysis, gender theory, queer theory, critical race theory, and humor studies, this dissertation unpacks the ways that

stand-up performers engage the comedic stage as their own form of public intellectualism and social critique in the #BlackLivesMatter era and argues that 21st century standup-up comedy serves as a site to address and perform social justice activism through using humor as the connective tissue between these spaces of social discourse, comedy, and traditional street protest.

Socio-Historical Context for an Intersectional Revolution

I began thinking through this dissertation in late 2015, early 2016. I was looking at intersectional identity as lodged in a late-Obama era, speaking to specific movements in relationship with a specific moment. However, by late 2016, Britain had voted to leave the European Union (the political move known as Brexit) and the United States had elected its next president, Donald Trump. Both events highlighted what became a more visible resurgence of conservative, right, and alt-right politics that appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. With the move from a pre-Trump, pre-Brexit era into a post-Brexit, post-Trump world, suddenly stand-up comedy's ability to speak truth to power is more relevant and widespread in American culture than even before, as more and more people depend upon comic performance to unpack and make sense of our current political climate. I situate this study in the 21st century as an increasingly firmer foothold of intersectional awareness on the comic stage, as well as the social and political movements that frame this comedy, beginning in the early aughts (2000s). The 21st century describes a wave of social progress that is tied to the cultural and historical moments of the last fifteen years or so through to today, such as the elections of Presidents Obama and Trump, and the developments of Black Lives Matter and fourth wave feminism. Comedy has been thrust into the dialogue of these politics and social moments, so much so that director and political activist

Michael Moore cited “Join our army of comedians” as one of the top ten ways to “combat Trump politically” (Moore).

Moore, whose film work generally focuses on white liberal social activism, is only one recent example in a growing list of writers, activists, and scholars framing comic performance as a tool used in political activism. This historical moment is evocative of a significant turn from where I initially began my research; in undertaking my research trip to London, UK in

November 2016, nearly every stand-up comic I saw addressed Brexit and Trump in the same set, and frequently even in the same breath. The world has shifted from when I began this project: as my research stretched over the transition of the U.S. presidency from Obama to that of Trump, I



Figure 1: Intersectional protest focusing on Black, disabled persons in New York City. Photograph: (Blackburn "Black and Disabled Lives Matter Protest in Herald's Square").

note how these comics have already adapted to reflect the world in which we now live.

In notable ways, the intersectional work of the stand-up comedians explored in this dissertation reflects the ways in which the demarcations that once framed social justice movements are also collapsing and caving in on one another to some extent, blurring the lines between who is fighting on behalf of whom. In essence, the social justice movements that create the activism to which intersectional comedy is speaking, are striving to become intersectional themselves. To provide more specific contextualization for the intersectional work happening on comedy stages, I'd like to take a closer look at the social movements of Black Lives Matter and fourth wave feminism as speaking to the elements of our culture with which today's comedians are wrestling.

#BlackLivesMatter

The phrase “Black Lives Matter,” which became the movement, was born online as a twitter hashtag, #Blacklivesmatter. #BlackLivesMatter was a response to the tragic death of unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin, murdered February 26, 2012, and the eventual acquittal of his murderer. #BlackLivesMatter was founded by three Black, queer women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, as an “ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza). The hashtag and the movement became the response to the ongoing police brutality and state-sanctioned killing of Black men, women, and children.

Social media site Twitter invented the handy hashtag (#), to denote the overriding theme of a “tweet,” a 140-character statement. The power of this hashtag is that it connected all tweets to a singular theme or subject, and could be read together, collected in one space, enabling Black Lives Matter activists to come together.⁴ It is also an indication that today’s social justice movements are in relationship with their social media activist component. Online social justice activism is frequently accused of not truly making a difference, but instead appearing as a collection of voices in a virtual world, one which is considered separate from real life in three dimensions. As we now know, the birthplace of #BlackLivesMatter simply served as an online, collective meeting-place, for those like-minded voices to come together and build strategy

⁴ When the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) tweeted, “The Resistance Will be Live-Tweeted,” it was a play on the original phrase, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” a poem by activist and writer Gil Scott-Heron (Baram 74). “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” was Scott-Heron’s comment that, in order for real revolution to happen, the first major social breakthrough had to occur in the minds of the people.

together offline. Due to the birth of #BlackLivesMatter on the internet, Black activists were able to coordinate protests in record speed, using the internet to collaborate on protests that were then taken immediately into the streets of Ferguson, Baltimore, and other sites where an unarmed Black person had been killed by local police. According to MappingPoliceViolence.org, from the beginning of 2013 to June 2018, law enforcement across the U.S. have killed 1,603 Black men, women and children to date (Sinyangwe).

#BlackLivesMatter is of great significance: not only for its incredibly important work, but also for the fact that #BlackLivesMatter was founded by three self-identified Black queer women who have materially molded the #BlackLivesMatter movement to address intersectionality of Black identities. The following excerpt from the official #BlackLivesMatter website by Alicia Garza speaks to the founders' attention to intersectional identity, but also reflects where she feels the movement has unfortunately moved away from the founders' intentions in some ways:

HerStory

The Theft of Queer Black Women's Work

When you design an event/campaign/et cetera based on the work of queer Black women, don't invite them to participate in shaping it, but ask them to provide materials and ideas for next steps for said event, that is racism in practice. It's also hetero-patriarchal. Straight men, unintentionally or intentionally, have taken the work of queer Black women and erased our contributions. Perhaps if we were the charismatic Black men many are rallying around these days, it would have been a different story, but being Black queer women in this society (and apparently within these movements) tends to equal invisibility and non-relevancy... As

organizers who work with everyday people, BLM members see and understand significant gaps in movement spaces and leadership. Black liberation movements in this country have created room, space, and leadership mostly for Black heterosexual, cisgender men—leaving women, queer and transgender people, and others either out of the movement or in the background to move the work forward with little or no recognition. As a network, we have always recognized the need to center the leadership of women and queer and trans people. To maximize our movement muscle, and to be intentional about not replicating harmful practices that excluded so many in past movements for liberation, we made a commitment to placing those at the margins closer to the center (Garza).

While Garza’s language points directly to an intersectional identity, it also points to the ways in which these intersections of identity are not always successfully recognized even within the confines of a social justice movement like #BlackLivesMatter. Indeed, perhaps the most well-known face of the Black Lives Matter movement became an activist named DeRay Mckesson, a male who became the go-to guest on late night talk shows, national news programming, etc. (Akhtar). In 2018, he could even be seen as the face of Black Lives Matter on a mural painted at 116th St. & 3rd Ave. in Harlem, NY, depicting the major figures in Black American history.

During the events of the Black Lives Matter protest in Ferguson, MO, after the death of Michael Brown (2014), tweets and social media became a key organizing component for protestors. According to historian Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Social media extended the reach of the activist. It both allowed people in faraway localities to have a minute by minute view of what was continuing to happen in Ferguson, and it also meant that activists could communicate

immediately about where demonstrations were. It just accelerated the role of activism surrounding this case [Michael Brown].” Tweets even came from former Arab Spring protestors across the Middle East and North Africa to the protestors in Ferguson, advising them on how to heal from the effects of tear gas, etc. (Grant). The use of social media and the goal of intersectional awareness – while not always successful with intersectional awareness in the execution of the movement – are also two of the major elements that are a part of fourth wave feminism.

Fourth Wave Feminism

Increasing numbers of scholars and journalists have posited that we are currently working within the fourth wave of the feminist movement, including Ealasaid Munro, Kira Cochrane, Richard Carrier, and Jennifer Baumgardner. One of the primary distinctions that characterizes fourth wave feminism is the advent of the internet and online activism becoming intrinsic to daily life, thereby dating the beginning of fourth wave feminism in the early aughts (2000s); though Baumgardner places the beginning of the fourth wave as late as 2008, when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton faced one another in the Democratic Primary debates. Directly linked to internet culture is another characteristic of fourth wave feminist activism known as “call-out” culture – which began online by Black queer femmes – in which activists respond to everyday sexism with immediacy, and for a global audience (Munro 23; Riley). Since the emergence of “call-out” culture, there are those within the feminist movement who have critiqued call-out culture as adhering too rigidly to the binary thinking that creates an “us vs. them” mentality, and an overreliance on who is right or wrong when it comes to the ways in which we use language to address systematic oppression. Some have even argued for the language of “calling-in” culture to

replace call-out culture, making a “less disposable way of holding each other accountable” (Tran).

Websites such as Feministing and The Everyday Sexism Project – both of which are predominantly white feminist platforms – provide spaces from which writers address the misogyny seen in the daily rhetoric of advertising, entertainment, cable news, and other media outlets (Solomon). In calling out everyday sexism, we are also seeing an increase in the diversity of purpose and political concerns. Newer terminology such as “rape culture,” “cisgender,” and “person of color,” all denote specific concerns that attempt to address a more specific realm than simply equal rights among all the genders (Cochrane). In addition, the Internet has allowed for a more interconnected, global community to emerge; protests have transgressed national border lines, much in the way that Black Lives Matter has transgressed national borders as well (Cochrane; Jackson). Fourth wave feminism has become a globalized, transnational movement, seen in the coordination of major online and street protests such as the Slutwalk protests, the Pink Chaddi Campaign, and the #MeToo movement (Kapur; Cochrane). The vocabulary of feminism has also expanded parallel to the specificity of fourth wave feminist activist fights in an effort to become more inclusively intersectional. Fourth wave feminism, in its ideologies as stated by Cochrane and others, isn’t just about cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual white women; it is supposedly fighting for everyone to experience political and social equality, in all matters of race, gender, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability. Fourth wave feminists in particular are concerned with disposing of the binary view of gender, and advocate being inclusionary of transgender communities (Carrier).

However, in its attempt to demonstrate intersectional awareness, fourth wave feminism has often revealed its own shortcomings in regards to race. While fourth wave feminism posits

that it aims to be an intersectional, transnational movement, white feminism appears to be creating conversation and protest around feminist concerns without bringing women of color into the discussion, especially at the outset. The Women's March (2017) example reflects a representation of this shortcoming that, unfortunately, will continue to echo throughout this study. When the first Slutwalk protest of 2011 (explored further in Ch. 1) was in the planning stages, similar to the Women's March, women of color were left out of the conversation, and consequently these women made their voices heard in critical response to both of these activist projects. When Black Women's Blueprint was founded in 2008, an organization that addresses the specific political and social interests of Black women, their formation was in response to growing "cultural tendency to erase Black women by conceptualizing white women as speaking on behalf of the rights of the sex and Black men as speaking on behalf of the race" (Blueprint). The organization's history reflects an intersectional pathway to their core mission of helping women of color:

We began meeting in sister circles in 2008 in living rooms, backyards and around kitchen tables, where we grappled with the state of Black women in the U.S. across ethnicity/nationality, class, sexual orientation, identity, etc. Our main focus was the 2008 Democratic Primaries. While we developed our personal, critical consciousness, parallel to this process was the political and public debate around the Obama/Clinton primary elections where Black women were being asked whether we were voting our race or our gender. Both democratic candidates presented their "blueprints" for change but neither took full stock of the particular problems Black women are facing within their communities and in greater society

(gender-violence, poverty, the over-criminalization of Black women and girls among others). (Blueprint)

Their statement reflects the ways in which Black women are frequently forced to choose between their race or their gender as most fully representative of their identities, while whiteness is defaulted for women categorically, unless otherwise noted as “Black women,” or “women of color.”

Finally, intrinsic to this study, fourth wave feminism touts humor as one of its defining characteristics. This call for humor can be found in several spaces: it comes from feminist scholarship (see “fumerism” in the literature review), it is present in feminist street protests (see Ch. 1), and it is certainly onstage in stand-up comedy. In Kira Cochrane’s “The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women,” she references an interview she conducted with Laura Bates, founder of The Everyday Sexism Project, who concludes “modern feminism is defined by pragmatism, inclusion, and humor.” When bell hooks voiced her public call for humor in 2014, she stated: “Where would we be if we couldn't release so much through laughter? I think that is so important; because many people felt like the feminist movement, especially the contemporary feminist movement, was one of the most humorless movements on the planet, like you couldn't say anything without people letting you know what you didn't say, you didn't say it right, so let us remember to have as much humor as possible in our future movements” (“hooks”).

Comedy in the 21st Century

How do Black Lives Matter and fourth wave feminism relate to intersectional identity and stand-up comedy in the 21st century? In looking at stand-up comedy performance as a site in which to examine intersectional identity, we can begin to see the public dialogue not just

between performer and audience, but between performance genre and public discourse. How much of this is conscious on the part of comedians? It turns out to be very intentional, with comics drawing attention to intersectionality and making it real and visceral through involuntary bodily responses: laughter. The stand-up comedy stage – and its virtual equivalent, Twitter – serve as sites for teasing out the relationship between social criticism, intersectional identity, and the performance of our social discourse. More than ever before, comedy is intersecting with social justice movements with increasing speed. Within moments of a major public event, from politicians’ speeches to major award ceremonies such as the Emmys, comedians tweet their jokes commenting on the proceedings and how they reflect the narratives we tell in our U.S. culture, something that has led to the rise in popularity and visibility of comics such as Leslie Jones. Comedians then take to the stage that night or the next, testing out new material. One of the reasons why this kind of comedy is so salient to public discourse is that we no longer even need be at the club to hear what they have to say: social media creates instant access and collates jokes by subject matter via hashtag so that Twitter users interested in something after the fact can easily find it. Our online world and our offline world are growing closer and closer, begging chicken and egg questions about how particular social attitudes now develop over time.

A mere fifteen years ago or more, it might have been difficult to imagine all of this. Comedy is folding into our social discourse more and more, acknowledging our inequities in a capitalist, white-supremacist, ableist heteropatriarchy. Many audience members for shows such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* claim that these comedy-based programs are their only source for national news consumption (Cosgrove-Mather). When I first began seriously researching comedy back in 2011, I noted that comedy was beginning to enter spaces where it had previously not been given access, such as CNN news programming. *The*

Daily Show had become a serious reference point for political discourse in casual conversation. Netflix, the behemoth of in-home film and television streaming, is now producing an average of one comedy special every other week (Fox "Is Netflix"). We are now in the midst of what noted popular cultural critic Jesse David Fox refers to as the "Second Comedy Boom," and it has become inseparable from social discourse in the 21st century.

Marginalized and subaltern communities reclaiming of humor serves as a direct refutation to the prejudiced yet persistent notion that they are not funny. This is a message promulgated throughout the centuries by misogyny and racism, up to and including Christopher Hitchens' 2007 essay, "Why Women Aren't Funny" (Hitchens).⁵ Tellingly, a decade after Hitchens' article, noted intersectional feminist writer Lindy West penned "Why Men Aren't Funny," in response to the accusations of sexual harassment surrounding stand-up comic Louis C.K. Hitchens's and West's article serve as neatly placed bookends in the spectrum of political and social progress on the front of comedy throughout this ten-year period, bringing us to today's social landscape. West's words from "Why Men Aren't Funny" summarily argue why intersectionality in comedy is critical for social progress:

One of comedy's defining pathologies, alongside literal pathologies like narcissism and self-loathing, is its swaggering certainty that it is part of the political vanguard, while upholding one of the most rigidly patriarchal hierarchies of any art form. Straight male comedians, bookers and club owners have always been the gatekeepers of upward mobility in stand-up, an industry where 'women

⁵ For an economic reading on the pervasiveness of "women aren't as funny as men," see Krefting.

aren't funny' was considered conventional wisdom until just a few years ago...The solution is putting people in positions of power who are not male, not straight, not cisgender, not white. This is not taking something away unfairly – it is restoring opportunities that have been historically withheld. And if we address the power imbalance in comedy, in this art that shapes how people think, what jokes they repeat to their families, who they believe deserves to hold a microphone and talk out loud, other imbalances might follow.

How do the comics in this study intervene with their performative strategies into comedy's power imbalances? Each chapter will explore a different set of performative strategies by a different grouping of comics, all of whom transgress the normalcy of white, able-bodied, cisgender, male supremacy on the stand-up stage.

Chapter Summary

In chapter one, “Comedians as Public Intellectuals: The New Triangulation of Comedy, Scholarship, and Social Activism,” I explore ways in which stand-up comedians blend public intellectual work with social activism through their comedy to convey intersectional viewpoints in the 21st century. The chapter considers four comics – Ava Vidal, Francesca Martinez, W. Kamau Bell, and Hari Kondabolu. – who have begun to explore a new frontier for the stand-up comic: the artist/scholar/activist. Comics have been social activists for years; no one can deny what Richard Pryor did for discussing race in the U.S., or Lenny Bruce for freedom of speech. However, the comics of color examined in the first chapter depart from the early history of activist comics by subverting the so-called “universal” norms of traditional, normatively white avenues of scholarship: debating at Oxford University, publishing in academic journals,

producing critical documentary films, and finding other ways to engage with people beyond the confines of the stage and occasional movie. In so doing, they blur the lines between spaces of comedy and journalism, manifesting their work as public intellectual output, challenging how knowledge is produced and who has the right to research and report it. As a result of these comics' audacity, their role in public discourse is expanding beyond providing comic commentary: they are among the new faces responsible for the dissemination of news and information.

My second chapter, "Black Female Comedians Changing American Topical Norms," inventories and analyzes performative strategies Black female American stand-up comedians use to challenge the ways in which, despite repeated claims to the contrary, fourth wave feminism fails to acknowledge the presence, labor, and value of women of color. This chapter acknowledges not only the historical and current marginalization of Black women in the feminist movement, but also the marginalization of Black women in comedy. This chapter seeks to trace the critical genealogy of Black women's comedy from Moms Mabley, Wanda Sykes, and Whoopi Goldberg to more recent comics including Sommore, Tiffany Haddish, Kerry Coddett, and Sam Jay. In addition to chronicling the marginalization of Black women comics and their responses to systemic oppression, the chapter argues that these comics examine intersections of their racial identities, womanhood, sexuality, and class explicitly through performative strategies such as creating characters, creating self-definition, creating entire stand-up shows with line-ups that celebrate Black womanhood, and addressing today's cultural gaps rooted in America as a country built on slave labor. Finally, the chapter argues that such intersectional performative strategies respond directly to scholars who have discussed Black womanhood on the page including Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, and others.

The third chapter, “Exposing Explicit Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Disability from White Positionality,” investigates performative strategies used by white comics interested in intersections of gender, sexuality, and disability and ultimately interrogates how their white positionality often limits a full embrace of intersectionality when such performers fail to consider their whiteness as a core component of their intersectional identities. Borrowing from Rebecca Schneider, the chapter uses the term ‘explicit bodies,’ to indicate that these comics are positioning their bodies in such a way as to “peel back the layers” of gendered, sexualized, and ableist histories (2). Some of the strategies seen here involve literally using their body in innovative ways, as exemplified by my discussion of Tig Notaro, Adrienne Truscott, and Bridget Christie. Still others, such as Ian Harvie and Josh Blue, include whiteness in their work, forwarding a discussion of the way their bodies subvert notions of “normal” as always already white, straight, cisgender, or able-bodied.

My fourth and final chapter, “Comedy in the Contact Zone: Critical Race Humor from a Transnational Perspective,” looks at the following comics: Tehran Von Ghasri, Aziz Ansari, Trevor Noah, Gina Yashere, Stewart Lee, and Aamer Rahman. The chapter considers the use of humor as a tool of intersectional activism and explores performative strategies these comics use to invite audiences to see them in their fullness as subjects whose racial construction is frequently untethered from nationality as the offspring of immigrants or as comics performing across many different nations. What does this mean for their comedy when they have to address themselves as part of the African diaspora (or in the sole case of white-positioned Lee, who refuses to let his audience remain ignorant of the African diaspora)? What performative strategies do these comics use to navigate taking their comedy across national borders? I refer to this brand of comedy as “comedy in the contact zone,” a term developed by Transnational

American studies scholar Mary Louis Pratt that refers to her identification of a transnational contact zone in which the colonized and the colonizers meet (34). The contact zone is also a place where different cultures intersect and overlap. One of the frequent performative strategies of these comics is to play what African American theatre scholar Faedra Chatard Carpenter theorizes as “aural whiteness” and “linguistic whiteface,” wherein sonic, vocal techniques are used to signify whiteness (24). Their voices become a critical component in this chapter as they attempt to engage in what white scholar Jonathan Rossing has termed “critical race humor” (17).

Literature Review

The following literature situates my project by providing the theoretical backdrop for these performances. My dissertation draws on the work of theorists working in Black feminist studies, performance studies, critical race theory, feminist studies, (dis)ability studies, transnational studies, community studies, and all of their related intersections.

Black Feminist Studies

While looking at the performance of intersectionality on the stand-up comedy stage, I draw heavily from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s seminal definition of intersectional identity to discuss how comedians refuse to limit their identity to one marker alone, such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and/or (dis)ability. Instead, comics I identify as intersectional work to negotiate the fullness of their identity in performance by drawing the audience’s attention to the fact that they cannot sacrifice one aspect for the other, but are whole humans simultaneously negotiating the interlocking constructions of – and systems of oppression regarding – race, gender, sexuality, class and/or varying abilities. Crenshaw states, “Intersectionality...points to the relationships between established hierarchies that structure the relative vulnerability of subjects to the public

and private exercises of social power” (“From Private” 1426). These performances chronicle a progression of our evolving conceptions of identity, and of the ways in which we interrogate who is allowed to be funny, and *how* they are allowed to be funny.

Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* was indispensable to the creation of this dissertation, crystallizing the necessity and beauty of self-definition within Black womanhood. The scholarship and artistry of Alice Walker’s work as womanism, and Audre Lorde’s work around difference as strength predate and clearly inform the work onstage discussed in this dissertation. Lorde famously wrote, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). I cannot help but see many of these comics discussed herein creating and using their own tools for dismantlement.

Performance Studies

In looking at artists that undermine the white heteronormativity of the mainstream comedy scenes that I explore in NYC, LA, and London, I borrowed from Performance Studies scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification. Muñoz crystallizes the notion of a disidentificatory process that is both a modality of performance and a survival strategy for subjects who do not recognize themselves in the dominant, white, heteronormative culture (4). His scholarship enabled me to think through comic performance as a mode in which the “encoded message of a cultural text...exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities” (31).

Discerning the performance of identity in this study has also been reliant on the work of Judith Butler, who calls our attention to the performativity and social construction of gender. Butler notes that the construction of womanhood is dependent upon limitless

cultural/political/social factors and every manner and variety of hegemonic power at play (5). I use this in the basis of my approach to the work of many comics in this study.

Jonathan P. Rossing's "Critical Race Humor in a Post-racial Moment: Richard Pryor's Contemporary Parrhesia," helped me situate the discourse surrounding racial construction and comedy. The term "parrhesia," comes from ancient Greek, via Foucault, and denotes free speech; a parrhesiastes is one who "speaks the truth" (106). Rossing pairs parrhesia with the truth telling of the late Black stand-up comic Richard Pryor and his profound deconstruction of race in his comedy, as a means of defining critical race humor. Critical race humor – central to the work of theorists working in both Performance Studies and American Studies – is a theoretical tool by which to understand the ways that today's stand-up comedians create a "transformation of the power relationships, institutional practices, cultural beliefs, and ideologies that shape material realities of race and racism" (17). Parrhesia has an etymological history that pertains to truth, holding nothing back, and a critical view to stating things as they are, including the critique of social and/or political hierarchy. Combined with an embedded knowledge of social constructions of race and racism, critical race humor "challenges and supports the conditions for audiences to embrace the truth of racial realities" within the dominant culture (28).

Donna Goldstein's *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* provides a contextualization for my project as it considers humor through a lens of intersectionality: one of these humor theories is carnivalesque humor theory. Carnivalesque humor derives in part from Goldstein's use of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the "carnivalesque": a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos (11-12). Rio de Janeiro is home to the largest carnival celebration in the world. It is a crucial intersection that while Rio is host to the largest, most vibrant celebration

of dance, color, costume, and the merriment of Carnival, this event masks one of the deepest gaps between great wealth and great poverty on its streets. Goldstein found that “carnavalesque” humor gets behind both the literal and the figurative mask of Carnival, and contextualizes this dichotomy, negotiating the space between. In Goldstein’s words, “unable to revolt, they [the women of Rio’s shantytowns] use their laughter to oppose official Brazilian racial, class, and gender ideology. Laughter reveals the fault lines in social relations” (35). Carnavalesque humor however may be distinguished from gallows humor by its use of an implied intersectionality. Carnavalesque humor stems from a class-based hierarchical structure, and encompasses gender, sexuality, and race, all of which are classed within the greater culture. This comedy is more than just survivalist, or laughing at the absurdity of the situation these women find themselves in as residents of a Rio shantytown: it forms “...a shared oppositional aesthetic forged within a class-polarized context...[while it] may not necessarily lead directly to rebellions and political revolutions, it does open up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced” (10). Goldstein suggests that these women were creating work that was not just about class, or gender, or sexuality, or race, but the intersection of where they all meet.

Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body in Performance*, Richard Schechner’s *Performance Theory*, and Victor Turner’s *From Ritual to Performance*, laid the foundation for my ability to move from theatrical performance to stand-up comedy, and to help identify the elements of performativity which are neither tethered to medium nor genre. This dissertation demands that, when assessing performance strategies and the work of comics, we think beyond the traditional confines of theatre, performance, and even the comic stage. This is a theoretical endeavor for which these performance critics supplied much in the way of vocabulary and

approach. Additionally, Anne Bogart's *A Director Prepares: 7 Essays on Art and Theatre* provided two assertions central to my efforts to think through every comic here: first, that the way we listen and respond to performance is culturally rooted, and, second, that every time a performance is staged, a memory is embodied. The intersectional lives on these comic stages embody their creator's memories and play with them for their audiences. The audiences, in turn, create a memory of the comedy. It is in this way, we the audience are given an opportunity to stretch our minds, and remember the moment when we experienced connection – itself an intersection – as a comic's story related to our own in some manner.

Lastly, Rebecca Krefting's *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents* enabled me to unpack humor that is rooted in social activism, an activity crucial to the work of the comics explored in the following pages. Krefting defines “charged humor” as a performance that not only specifically and explicitly challenges social inequality and cultural exclusion, but potentially offers “strategies and solutions for combating cultural and legal exclusion...[it] relies on identification with struggles and issues associated with being a second-class citizen and rallies listeners around some focal point be that cultural, corporeal, or racial/ethnic similarities; this requires drawing from personal experience, if not first-hand than at least access to, understanding of, or empathy with those having these experiences” (5). This definition provided ways to consider comedy as public intellectualism, cultural criticism, and more traditional forms of intellectual activism.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory as forwarded in Performance Studies scholar Faedra Chatard Carpenter's *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* provided an indispensable vocabulary for this study. Carpenter's dramaturgical breakdown of race and

performance enabled me to identify and cite physical and aural performative tactics by comedians – particularly those who toy with audience’s perceptions of Blackness and whiteness – in a transnational, diasporic understanding. More specifically, Carpenter breaks down specific performative strategies using the terms “linguistic whiteface” and “presumed aural whiteness” (24). These terms have enabled me to describe with great specificity the ways in which some of the comedians herein use these tools as part of extended performative strategies.

Disability Studies

While analyzing the work of comics in this study who identify as differently abled, I turned to the work of Vic Finkelstein, Mike Oliver, and Michael Rembis. My analysis of Francesca Martinez and Josh Blue is dependent on the emergence of the social model of disability as advanced by the work of Finkelstein and Oliver, in which the social construction of “disability” is defined by the culture, and not rooted in an individual’s impairment. This model “focuses on the concept that disability is not an individual possessive trait, but rather an external socially mediated phenomenon which can be challenged and changed” (Esmail 1148). The social model of disability focuses its activism on the changes needed in society, such as accessibility to buildings and social services, and the individual’s rights to these accessibilities. It is in conversation with the social model of disability that Rembis centers his reflections on disability as an interrogation of normalcy. The question of “what is normal?” informs the work of comics Martinez and Blue; Rembis’s work assists me in identifying, describing, and analyzing the performative strategies enabling this through-line in their comedy.

Transnational Studies

The global perspectives of transnational studies are critical to my discussion of comics who perform across borders of the nation-state as well as comics who are shaped by their

family's identity as people who crossed borders. These works include Mary Louise Pratt's "Arts of the Contact Zone," which helped to contextualize the liminal space that hovers around a nation-state border. Stuart Hall and Ferial Ghazoul's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* speak directly to experiences of Blackness across borders of nation-state. *The Black Atlantic* enabled me to think through a Black Diaspora, which was critical both to creating my discussion of Black and Brown comics who navigate global audiences and assessing the complexity of Blackness and Brownness within the U.S. These texts informed my discussion of comedians who have experienced being read as bodies tethered to Blackness while travelling through multiple nation-states, and the ways in which these experiences both translate to and transmit through their comic performances. Finally, the work of these scholars assisted in my discussion of performers' abilities to shift performative strategies within persona as a result of their global perspectives.

Gender Studies

Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman's "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter," locates the call for "fumerism," (a specifically feminist, fuming humor), in the newest incarnation of feminism. Other discussions of fourth wave feminism, specifically Kira Cochrane's "The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women," Ealasaid Munro's "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?", and Richard Carrier's "A Primer on Fourth Wave Feminism," provided the most comprehensive discussion of fourth wave feminism. Jennifer Baumgardner's "Is There a Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?" has been critical to overlapping the question of where one wave ends and another begins regarding the work of stand-up comedians. Finally, the work of Ratna Kapur – most directly in "Pink Chaddis and SlutWalk Couture: The Postcolonial

Politics of Feminism Lite” – assisted me in understanding the intersections of global, intersectional feminism and street protest.

Community Scholars

The writing and activism of queer Black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi that created and defined the work of Black Lives Matter, a movement to which many of these comedians speak – some overtly and some less obviously so – forged connections between the comic work discussed in this study and the movement in which their work traffics, helping me to situate these comics in and of the moment.

Methodology

Largely borrowing from ethnography, dramaturgy, literary theory and performance studies, my study utilizes a mixed-methods qualitative approach. My methodologies include participant observation, interview, analysis of live performance, analysis of recorded performance, and dramaturgical investigation of performers. Borrowing from my survey of participant observation ethnography, I also locate and make visible my own positionality in this study as a white, cisgender, female arts professional who has worked in theatre, (and on occasion, stand-up comic), for many years.

Additionally, I observed the live performances of stand-up comics from the standpoint of an audience member. Stand-up comedy is a performative medium that lives in a state of ephemerality; a moment that has passed as soon as it has arrived. To effectively engage the relationships between performer, audience, and space/site, my personal presence was required. Sitting among the audience during performance allowed me to properly engage with the dynamics of the performances, something not afforded by viewing filmed performances wherein

one's access is mitigated and controlled entirely by the camera and subsequent editing. Over the course of 2016 and 2017, I undertook three research trips to Los Angeles, New York City, London, (as well as visited clubs in Kansas City); in each city, I attended shows in a variety of comedy clubs and theatres. I visited a total of sixteen clubs and witnessed performances. In LA, I visited The Comedy Store, The Laugh Factory, and Comedy Union. In NYC, I visited The Stand, Eastville Comedy Club, Brooklyn, Stand Up!!, Comedy Cellar, Gotham Comedy Club, Caroline's, and Dangerfield's. In London, I visited Top Secret Comedy Club, Monkey Business Comedy Club, the Palace Theatre (Southend-on-Sea), and Leicester Square Theatre. In Kansas City, I attended Kansas City Improv, and Stanford and Sons Comedy Club.

Additionally, I visited the Comedy Museum in London and, in every city, interviewed professionals in the stand-up comedy industry. I interviewed a total of twelve stand-up comics as well as one comedy manager, one business club owner, and five audience members. The comics, manager and owner are as follows: Dr. Hannah Ballou, Josh Blue, Gina Brillon, Kerry Coddett, Ian Harvie, Leon Henderson Jr., Sam Jay, B.T. Kingsley, Stewart Lee, Susanna Lee, Adrienne Truscott, Tehran Von Ghasri, manager Krystal Stark, and Martin Besserman, owner of Monkey Business Comedy Club in London, UK. In conducting these interviews, I built my own archive of primary research.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend every performance with which I wished to engage in my dissertation; therefore, my analysis of certain performances will rely on previous filmed recordings and other image-based documentation. Though these media are not ideal when compared with the primary research of in-person attendance, utilizing filmed recordings allowed me to broaden the scope of my research, and contextualize performances within the trajectory of comics' careers.

Significance of Study: Rationale and Value

This study contributes to the fields of Performance Studies, Humor Studies, Critical Race Studies, and Gender and Sexuality Studies by offering a comprehensive look at how intersectional identity, resistance movements, and stand-up comedy intersect in the current moment. To date, there is no major work that focuses solely on the intersectional identities of stand-up comics and how they forefront intersectionality in their comedy and social activism. Additionally, intersectional identity and stand-up comedy have yet to be explored and theorized together. There is a gap in scholarship connecting stand-up comic performance with fourth wave feminist activist strategies and agendas as they function in global communities, both online and at sites of political protest. In addition to mapping the passageways between intersectional identity and stand-up comic performance, I am also problematizing the ways that intersectional feminist performance is most frequently attributed to white feminists in mainstream fourth wave feminist discourse. While fourth wave feminist discourse claims to embrace intersectionality more so than any previous wave of feminism, the voices gaining the most media attention for fourth wave are predominantly white, female comic artists (such as Amy Schumer, Tig Notaro, and Bridget Christie), while comics of color, particularly Black female comedians such as Whoopi Goldberg and Sommore, have been doing this work for decades with no credit at all.

In addition to marking these shifts in social context around stand-up performance, this dissertation examines the contemporary performative strategies – markedly different from those of their predecessors – through which contemporary stand-up comics are advocating for racial equity, gender equity, and other forms of social justice within current resistance discourse. This dissertation seeks to fill a current gap in scholarship that has yet to connect current resistance

movements with expressions of intersectional identity and stand-up comedy. I have yet to see scholarship forge connections between what is happening on the ground in street protest with what is happening on the stage as part of the social moment within which we find ourselves in the 21st century.

Kira Cochrane's article "The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women" briefly mentions white, British comic Bridget Christie and her award-winning show *A Bic for Her* and the move toward humor as part of political protest, but Cochrane does not elaborate on the intersectionality of social change and performance, nor the blurring of those categories at their intersections. This is where my dissertation seeks to stand in the gap: there are many comics of color who are doing the work of Black Lives Matter and fourth wave feminism onstage, and I seek to give them "mic time" here. I would also add that, for an article listing intersectionality and humor as part of fourth wave feminism, Cochrane only cites one comic: Christie, who is white. This limited approach serves to reify that white comics are credited for the feminist work that women of color are not given credit for, whitewashing ostensibly intersectional feminism in the comedy sphere.

Since 1989, when Kimberlé W. Crenshaw coined the term "intersectional identity," as the study of "overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination," there has been much performance theorization across a multitude of genres ("Why Intersectionality"). Scholars such as Faedra Chatard Carpenter and Jonathan Rossing argue that performance does not merely mirror social discourse: it interrogates, intervenes, and challenges our social dialogue. However, comics of the 21st century aren't just keen social critics that intervene; they are creating and leading the public discourse in many instances, whether it is from a news platform, an Oxford University debate, a public university

dialogue, an op-ed in the newspaper, or onstage in the club. The comics explored in the following pages have moved into and beyond traditional, normatively white spaces as platforms for speech; such work, when combined with their comedy and a refusal to adhere to outdated delineations of identity, warrants my scholarly attention.

Chapter 1 – Comedians as Public Intellectuals: The New Triangulation of Comedy, Scholarship, and Social Activism

The comics discussed in this chapter – Ava Vidal, Francesca Martinez, W. Kamau Bell, and Hari Kondabolu – are all artists and activists of color who produce publicly intellectual work beyond their stage performances. They embody a new strain of stand-up comic: the artist/scholar/activist. My primary question for this first chapter is: what are the ways in which these comics are taking up intersectionality in their work both on and *offstage*? Historically speaking, a number of stand-ups have been progressive social activists for years, either overtly or through their comedy; no one can deny what Richard Pryor did for discussing race in the U.S., or Lenny Bruce for the freedom of speech, for example. However, where current comics depart from social critic into the realm of the scholar/activist is that they are using their comedy to subvert so-called “universal” norms in normatively white and traditional avenues of public intellectual spaces. In debating at Oxford University, or presenting at conferences, producing critical documentary films, etc., these comedians are creators of public intellectual output, a mode of discourse and comedy that signifies and requires a different performative strategy than those of their predecessors. These comics blur the lines between spaces/sites of comedy and journalism, manifesting their work as public intellectual output and thus, challenge how and where knowledge is produced and who has the right to research and report it. Because of their audacity, they are being recognized as among the most relied upon sources for the dissemination of news and information by traditional news networks (such as CNN). Before I discuss these four comics however, I would like to set the stage for their work by first discussing the collapsing traditional boundaries between worlds of comic performance with journalism and street protest.

Comedy has spilled out from stand-up stages and into once no-nonsense spaces, such as street protests, newsrooms, and documentary-style reporting/filmmaking. Not only has comedy been injected into these once-solemn realms where humor may have previously been perceived to delegitimize the space, but scholars and reporters alike are calling for activists to engage humor as a tactic for the social work of protest, reporting, and academic scholarship. These pleas are voiced by bell hooks, Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman, who have all called on scholars and activists to utilize humor as weaponry in the fight for civil rights, representation, and equity (hooks; Willett). Journalists who have documented this trend of comics shaping public discourse include Mary O'Hara in *Quartz Magazine*, who recently declared "In the 21st Century, Comedy is Our Greatest Tool for Progressive Change." O'Hara asks, "...and can humor, as comedy, change how we feel, what we think or even what we do?" She cites an increasing number of examples wherein comedy enters the public discourse, such as social policy analyst Negin Farsad's memoir *How to Make White People Laugh*, which she describes as a "social justice comedy manifesto" ("21st Century"). O'Hara also cites several current stand-ups as examples of performers who place social justice activism at the center of their work including Stewart Lee, who I interviewed for this study. In addition, she cites academics such as Sophie Quirk (author of *Why Stand-Up Matters* and professor at the University of Kent, UK) who describes the stand-up stage as the space wherein "discussion and reinterpretation" of recent political events begins.

Megan Garber writing for the *Atlantic* penned "How Comedians Became Public Intellectuals" in 2015, highlighting a shift in the prominence that comedians have obtained in recent years via their intervention in social discourse. Garber states, "...comedy...the stuff that is firmly rooted in traditions of sketch and standup—is taking on subjects like racism and sexism

and inequality...issues including police brutality and trigger warnings and intersectional feminism...its jokes double as arguments” (“How Comedians”). Garber locates the origins of the new publicly intellectual comic in the paired thrust of “comedy with moral messaging, and comedy with mass attention.” In part, this mass attention derives from the new technologies of 21st century internet, such as Twitter and Instagram, but the comics explored in this chapter reach into other, more traditional academic avenues, such as university debates, public dialogues, and journal publishing. In the comedy of Dr. Hannah Ballou for example, the theoretical work most helpful in unpacking some of her performative work was published by herself in 2013, in a leading academic humor studies journal, *Comedy Studies* (Ballou).⁶ These comics also give TED Talks, publish in newspapers, produce documentaries, contribute web content, and frequently engage in real-time back and forth conversations with dissenters, critics, and fans alike. The entry of professional comics into these new spaces is part of the backdrop of comedy in the 21st century. These newly utilized spaces, such as the TED talk, or a newspaper article, or university-sponsored talks, provide new sites for the comics in this chapter (and others) to take up intersectionality in their performances across a variety of mediums. This is their performative strategy: taking their comedy off the stage and, by doing so with a presence that is inarguably intersectional, subverting other normatively white spaces with activism and scholarship that reaches different audiences. In short, comedy now occupies a space that doesn’t just comment on social change; it can create that change, and these comics seek to bring their comic work into

⁶ Dr. Hannah Ballou is a London-based stand-up comic who wrote and performed a trilogy of shows, *hoo:ha*, *goo:ha*, and *moo:ma*, (2015-17) in which she explored gender, pregnancy, childbirth, and the dissonance between sexy and funny. Ultimately most helpful to me in unpacking the performative strategies of these shows was her own article, “Pretty Funny: Manifesting a Normatively Sexy Comic Female Body.”

new spaces to achieve just that, all while carrying aspects of their embodied, performative, intersectional selves – developed on the stage – into these endeavors.

This chapter discusses the ways in which stand-up comics’ strategically extend their work beyond the stand-up stage and into other spaces. I discuss the contemporary newsroom and how it has given way to comedy and satire in new ways. The traditional categories that once ruled how information was disseminated – print news, television broadcast journalism, academic/book publication – have all been disrupted in the 21st century by the use of humor. The following comics and satirical news figures are responsible for bringing humor into these once-normatively not-so-funny spaces, *as professional comics*. When I asked comic Ian Harvie about comics as activists and public intellectuals, Harvie stated, “Just because you’re making ‘art,’ it doesn’t mean that you’re not a part of the resistance. You’re a part of it, it’s just more subversive – people don’t realize that it’s happening to them.”

The Funny Papers

One arena in which we can see comedy affecting change is the newsroom, where comedy and political news have collapsed boundaries between news that is made funny and comedy that is informed by current events. Television ratings suggest that audiences are clamoring for culturally critical comedy and charged humor as part and parcel of news dissemination, as the ratings would suggest (Obeidallah). Comedy Central Network’s *The Daily Show*, which premiered in 1996, is the longest-running parody news program on the network. It was created by comedians Lizz Winstead and Madeleine Smithberg, and it launched the careers of many of the late-night hosts we now see with their own shows that blend news, media coverage, in-depth reporting, and charged humor (O’Neill). Hosts and correspondents in the show’s history are

many stand-up comedians, including, among others, Neal Brennan, Michelle Wolf, Lewis Black, Wyatt Cenac, John Oliver, Jessica Williams, Trevor Noah, and Lizz Winstead; several correspondents have gone on to have their own similarly formatted shows. Recent and currently running programs of this nature include: Larry Wilmore (*The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*), Samantha Bee (*Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*), John Oliver (*Last Week Tonight*), and Stephen Colbert (*The Colbert Report*, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*), and the new incarnation of *The Daily Show* featuring host Trevor Noah. Adding to this list of news/comic programming is comic Kerry Coddett (discussed in Ch. 2), writing for a new show called *Problem Areas*, which features stand-up Wyatt Cenac. *Problem Areas* is produced by John Oliver for HBO (Wright). In our current moment, the only show currently produced among this genre of news-satire programming that is hosted by a Black woman – or has ever been hosted by a woman of color – is a show called *The Rundown with Robin Thede*, running on the Black Entertainment Television Network. Thede was formerly head writer and a performer with *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* on Comedy Central. *The Rundown* also features Coddett as a performer, and is produced by acclaimed stand-up Chris Rock (Allen).

The line between media coverage of the news and comedy in these programs is so blurred, in fact, that Garber noted the irony in Jon Stewart rebuking the press in his guest appearance on Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (2017). Were he and Stephen Colbert themselves "...not part of the media? To whom exactly was Jon Stewart speaking?" ("What Is")? Given these collapsing categories and the popularity of comic vehicles discussing current events, what criteria do we now use to distinguish between traditional, non-partisan news sources, alternate programming within mainstream news media, comedy-based news programming, and the shows that occupy a liminal space between?

Not only has the sheer proliferation of comedy/news television programs increased in parallel with comics' more pronounced public intellectual output, these kinds of shows have seen a major increase in ratings since the election of Donald Trump as President in 2016. CNN, a once-all-serious news organization whose program *Crossfire* was famously "killed" by an appearance by comic Jon Stewart, has increasingly edged toward bringing humor into serious, non-partisan news content (Meredith Blake). CNN published an article on their website in March 2017, titled "Making America Laugh Again: the Yuge Trump Bump for Political Comedy," a headline embedded with not one, but two jokes, "Making America Laugh Again" itself a parody of Trump's campaign slogan to "Make America Great Again," and "Yuge," a mocking, phonetic spelling of Trump's pronunciation of the word "huge" (Obeidallah). The article's author, Dean Obeidallah, suggests that fear is at the root of more people needing the catharsis of laughter: fear from Trump's policies which affect disenfranchised populations, such as persons of color, Muslims, women, and the disabled. Obeidallah expands his argument for the ratings increase to the level of coverage and nuance that comedy achieves: "[fear] could also explain why *SNL* [*Saturday Night Live*] is seeing its best ratings in over 20 years. But *SNL* has also stepped up its comedy. Impressively, the show isn't just serving up funny material about Trump -- they're often covering political issues the mainstream media has failed to cover, or were distracted from covering in detail" (Obeidallah). Whether it is because of the new President or the quality of such comedic journalism, the Pew Research Center has published recent findings that note that one in ten adults receive their news entirely from satirical political news programming, such as *The Daily Show* (Gottfried).

With Trump's election, many news organizations produced coverage over the recent ratings increase of both comedy-based news shows such as *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*

and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, but also, tellingly, the only “Late Night” weeknight mainstream show hosted by a former comedy-news program host, *Late Night with Stephen Colbert*. Josef Adalian of *The Vulture* writes:

Perhaps the most high-profile beneficiary of a Trump bump, Colbert’s CBS *Late Show* pushed ahead of NBC’s *The Tonight Show* during the first full week of the new administration — and has been the most-watched show in network late night ever since. It’s a huge development considering Fallon had been beating Colbert consistently, save for Colbert’s very first week on CBS back in September 2015. *Late Show* has now averaged 3 million same-day viewers for three weeks in a row, with last week’s audience tally jumping an eye-popping 33 percent versus the same period a year ago.

Similarly, more traditional news programs have begun to incorporate significant gestures toward humor as part of their regular programming on news-based networks, such as *The Rachel Maddow Show* on MSNBC, Jake Tapper (CNN) and Anderson Cooper’s shows (also CNN), who have seen increased ratings as well (Adalian).

Performing the News

Vox Media, an American news website, recently explored the specific relevancy of comedians covering national news in a piece aided by video titled, “Comedians Have Figured Out the Trick to Covering Trump: Why Political Satire is the Antidote to Trumpism.” In this piece, authors Carlos Maza and Coleman Lowndes collaborated with Dr. Sophia McClennen, Associate Director of School of International Affairs and Professor of Comparative Literature and International Affairs at Penn State University, to discuss some of the findings from her books, *Colbert’s America* and *Is Satire Saving Our Nation?* Maza and Lowndes state, “Late

night comedians have become rock stars in the Trump era...comedians are playing a big part in how we talk about politics.” Maza proposes that Trump poses a challenge to traditional, serious news networks and journalists, given the absurdity of his claims on occasion. The video is a comparison in how comedians (Robin Thede, John Oliver, and Samantha Bee among them) cover the news, versus more serious network programming. Maza’s assertion is that in the presentation of the premise of the news story, there is essentially no difference between the comedians’ and news networks’ coverage of news, but that the commentary is then explored in a very different way: comedians do not hesitate to call out the failed fact checking in a humorous way that goes straight to the heart of the matter, whereas serious news networks tend to engage in endless panel debates and “talking heads” in an effort to demonstrate non-partisanship. Maza uses one of Trump’s tweets as an example to examine these differences, in which Trump claimed that former President Obama had wiretapped Trump’s phones. While both serious networks and comedians all begin with the established facts surrounding the tweet – namely, that there was no evidence to support Trump’s claim – Maza argues that “serious” networks, in their efforts to be credible, waste audiences’ time with debates over debunked information: “It would be like hosting a serious debate about whether the Earth is flat.”

Maza cites McClennen’s work to demonstrate that debate over easily debunked claims leads audiences to see rumors and falsehoods as potentially credible, given the amount of air time given to exploring these falsehoods. To date, this is one of the more interesting pathways into a discussion of the cognitive reception of news. This suggests that the format in which information and news is disseminated, and the responsibilities to style that dissemination holds, may influence the ways in which we cognitively receive and process that information. Tied to that reception is the notion that when comedy shows rid themselves of these debates, there is

more time to devote to in-depth reporting and journalism. “Satire is powerful, because it trains your brain to be skeptical, to think critically about what politicians are saying,” states McClennen. Furthermore, as Maza and McClennen claim, satire doesn’t just call attention to falsehoods, it calls attention to the performative tactics used in deception by politicians (Maza). Satire, at its heart, does not belong to any one political party: it only seeks the truth, wherever that truth lies, and only seeks to uncover dishonesty, wherever deception lies. For today’s news landscape, it may just be that comedy has become a critical component in our knowledge of current affairs.

Jake Tapper is one such newscaster from the CNN network who has begun to use humor and sarcasm as part of his reporting style, central to his non-partisan approach. Interestingly, Tapper’s approach means that he isn’t afraid to hold anyone accountable during his hard-hitting interviews, regardless of their political affiliation. This has led Tapper into accusations of partisanship from both liberals and conservatives, viewing his sarcasm as aimed at whichever side of the political spectrum where they reside. His news show situated in the larger CNN network can be extrapolated as an extension of his professed lack of bias: “While there are certainly people, Trump among them, who reflexively scoff at the notion of CNN’s nonpartisanship, it is still the only cable news network with notable segments of its audience that voted for Trump or for Hillary Clinton. Channeling the ethos of his network, Tapper is combative less about party than the ‘truth’” (Paskin).

Amusingly, when Tapper appeared as a guest on Trevor Noah’s *The Daily Show* in March 2017, Noah asked Tapper how he keeps his composure, his straight face, and his ability to remain impartial in the face of obvious deception. Tapper responds in both jest and seriousness: “Well first of all on the face thing, a lot of Botox. But the truth of the matter is, it’s not partisan

to want facts, and the truth. And it's not partisan to expect decency from people, especially our leaders" (Preza). For a moment suspended in time, it's challenging to place Noah and Tapper in their traditional roles of just who is the comedian, and who is the "serious" news journalist. McClennen states, "We think that the journalists' job is to show all sides of the story. But the journalists' job is to show the truth. And sometimes...going after the truth is going to be funny" (Maza). We can see an example of this when Tapper was interviewing a woman who criticized Tapper for "beating down on certain one-word sentences" of Trump's speech. Tapper responds, without even looking up from his notes, "How dare we cover the comments he makes" (Maza). Overall, it seems there is infiltration in the news room by professional comics, as well as the influence of this comic infiltration on other journalists.

The Foregrounding of Comedy in Sites of Protest

Public intellectualism, public dialogues between comics and scholars, and comics publishing scholarship are not the only indications that humor is quickly becoming embedded in the social landscape in ways not previously seen. While comedy has certainly always been a home for social activism, social activism is now turning to comedy in direct ways, foregrounding humor at the front lines of battles in social progress in the streets. Comics are organizing politically, and street demonstrations are using humor as fundamental elements of protest.

One recent example is stand-up comic Lizz Winstead (former head writer for *The Daily Show*) who toured with Sarah Silverman as recently as 2016, and founded an organization called the Lady Parts Justice League. LPJL, a self-described "comedy war room," seeks to take U.S.-based political action on reproductive health for women. "Lady Parts" is a reference to a 2012 incident on the statehouse floor of the Michigan State Legislature, in which Rep. Lisa Brown

said the word “vagina,” and was barred from speaking on the floor the next day; “lady parts” was suggested by house members as a less-offensive terminological substitute (Winstead). This instance appeared amid discussion on legislation regarding a “transvaginal ultrasound” bill, and in the words of Winstead herself, what transpired followed “a politician who was offended by the word vagina, yet felt an absolute entitlement to legislate it” (Winstead). This event led to the founding of LPJL. What truly makes LPJL distinctive from other organizations catering to women’s reproductive health (Planned Parenthood, etc.) is the foregrounding of *humor* as a fundamental part of the political fight. This organization’s tag line additionally speaks to intersectional feminism, thereby making these two components – humor and intersectionality – as inseparable allies in this new wave of social activism: “LPJL is a cabal of comics and writers exposing creeps hellbent on destroying access to birth control and abortion. Inclusive. Intersectional. Fun as fuck” (Winstead). Comedy is inherent in all of LPJL’s outreach materials, including videos featuring active supporter and stand-up comic Sarah Silverman, and even in the form of their mascot: a Muppet-like character member of their team, Eunice the Uterus.



Figure 2: Eunice the Uterus, LPJL. Photograph: (Batman).

Humor has entered the political arena in other ways in recent years, with more attention paid to the stand-up comics regularly performing sets at the annual White House Correspondent’s Dinner. Comedians have long performed at this event since the 1940s, but Stephen Colbert’s controversial 2006 performance (under President George W. Bush) ushered in a new era of pointed humor around the relationship between the presidency and the media. Declared Vox, “The WHCD nowadays is more akin to a roast. News organizations bring celebrities and other notables as guests to the dinner event. The president makes a few

jokes...and then is usually followed by a comedian who gets to be a bit more glib and ruthless” (Abad-Santos). 2017 saw stand-up comic and correspondent for *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, Hasan Minhaj, provide a twenty-five-minute set for the year’s White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Minhaj’s jokes largely spoke to racism, the inherent value of the First Amendment, and the freedom of speech to critique that racism. Minhaj went on to create a joking metaphor within his speech that likened the press to a minority group: “...you [the press] are how the president gets his news. Not from advisors, not from experts, not from intelligence agencies—you guys. So that’s why you gotta be on your A game...because when one of you messes up, he blames your entire group. And now you know what it feels like to be a minority” (Busis). The following year, stand-up comic Michelle Wolf delivered a searing and much-discussed performance, leading Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone* to title his review, “Michelle Wolf Slays at Useless White House Correspondent’s Dinner: could this be the long-overdue end of the Sycophant’s Ball?” (Taibbi).⁷ The Democratic National Convention of 2016, arguably one of that year’s biggest political events, saw stand-up comics as speakers there as well, including Sarah Silverman and former Senator Al Franken (Panzar).

Ealasaid Munro posits that the fourth wave of feminism could be a reflection of how media frames issues (24); Kira Cochrane refers to this contemporary wave of activism as “defined by pragmatism, inclusion, and humor.” Subsequently, the social protest organizers for many fourth wave feminist protests have used humor as a tool to galvanize support. One of the first instances representing this new comic brand of protest was the Pink Chaddi (underwear)

⁷ For more on Wolf’s MUCH-dissected speech and a recording of it, see Elliot.

Campaign. The Pink Chaddi began as a viral campaign in India, 2009, organized in response to an attack by the Sri Ram Seva (SRS) on women patronizing a pub in Mangalore. The Pink Chaddi Campaign was created on Facebook, by the self-proclaimed and funnily titled “Consortium of Pub-going, Loose, and Forward Women.” The Consortium conducted their response as the mass mailing of pink underwear (chaddis) to the headquarters of SRS. As a result, the SRS was inundated with chaddis on none other than Valentine’s Day (Dhawan).⁸

An example of the carnivalesque in contemporary protest includes the “Cocks Not Glocks” protest in Texas, which challenged the law that forbade the possession of dildos or other sex toys on a state college campus, while other law allowed the concealment and carry of guns on state campuses. According to one participant and organizer, Rosie Zander, “We have crazy laws here but this is by far the craziest, that you can’t bring a dildo on to campus legally, but you can bring your gun. We’re just trying to fight absurdity with absurdity” (Dart).

⁸ The level of unprecedented involvement of this transnational protest (underwear was sent from all over the world), combined with the absurdism of chaddis in response to great violence may be seen through the lens of Goldstein’s characterization of carnivalesque humor. Carnivalesque humor may be applied to a range of protests carried out in the U.S. and abroad in this new wave of comic activism, in which protestors use methods of disruption and chaos rooted in irony to bridge the gap between the space of oppression and the protesters’ daily lives. Certainly, the aim was to create chaos at SRS headquarters, and indeed the images of SRS men opening package after package of pink underwear created a discursive space from which to bridge the oppression felt by the Consortium. The humorousness of this act was intentional both for the SRS, and the members of the Consortium as well. One of the Consortium organizers, Nisha Susan, stated the following about the protest design: “‘Chaddi’ is a childish word for underwear and slang for right-wing hardliners...it amused us to embrace the worst slurs, to send pretty packages of intimate garments to men who say they hate us” (Collective).

In another example of the increasingly transnational, carnivalesque nature of protest, activists in the U.K. held the Face-Sitting Protest, which took place outside Parliament in London in December of 2014. Quite the tongue-in-cheek (wordplay intended) demonstration, protesters gathered en-masse and sat on the faces of their partners, displaying a specific sexual position. Demonstrators gathered to protest changes made in UK pornography regulation, which administered ratings to sex acts on film (similar to the U.S. Motion Pictures Association of America, which in turn determine the markets in which such films may be distributed). Many felt that the sexual positions targeted for these higher ratings were those that centered female-driven pleasure, such as face-sitting, and that



Figure 3: Face Sitting Protest, London, UK. Photograph: (Le Caer). The Guardian.

the policy was tantamount to sexism (Association). Not only did these new regulations affect the porn industry in the UK, but also internet content as well, thereby affecting sites produced for sexual health and education. The Face-Sitting Protestors indeed caused chaos, also taking humor into their signs and posts (“Squirt Doesn’t Hurt”) and even collectively singing “Sit on My Face,” a song penned by Monty Python (a UK-based comedy troupe) about the virtues of the practice (Hooten).

Similarly, the Slutwalk, another carnivalesque and humor-filled protest began as a reactionary response street protest in 2011. In this instance, a Toronto police officer had lectured college students on how to protect themselves from rape, advising them to “avoid dressing like sluts,” a move noted as “victim blaming” (rather than advising students not to commit rape). Toronto’s Slutwalk quickly became viral and transnational, with Slutwalk marches organized in

countries including but not limited to South Korea, Switzerland, the U.S., the UK, Brazil, and India. Ratna Kapur, author of “Pink Chaddis and Slutwalk Couture: The Postcolonial Politics of Feminism Lite,” describes these protests as representative of “feminism’s metamorphosis into another embodiment” (17). These protests used fourth wave terminology such as rape culture and victim blaming, and created a humorous, powerful, global protest in response. These protests “focus attention...on the global impulses that are informing such responses...” (17). Comedy was at the center of these protests; they were replete with sarcasm in the use of signage, examples of which include “I am a slut: of the people, by the people, for the people;” “my dress is NOT a yes,” (a play on the title of popular reality-television program *Say Yes to the Dress*). Luce Tomlin-Brenner, a white stand-up comedian, performed at these events, centering stand-up as a major feature of the protest.

However transnational, funny, and inclusionary as these protests strove to be, they provide us with an example of intersectional feminists challenging fourth wave feminism for its inclusivity. This is an echoed refrain, heard recently as a critique of the Women’s March which took place the day after President Trump’s inauguration, as well as the social media #Metoo campaign in 2017 (Tolentino). There is an organization that seeks to address these inequities, called Black Women’s Blueprint. In response to the initial wave of the 2011 Slutwalk protests for example, Black Women’s Blueprint wrote an open letter to the organizers stating the following: “As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves ‘sluts’ without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is” (Holden). These protests and their subsequent criticism of the lack of inclusion gets at the heart of fourth wave feminism’s attempts to be inclusionary coupled with their shortcomings in those attempts.

These comic street protests, like stand-up comedy itself, demand an audience and may be viewed as forming a public, historical archive that documents shifting politics, social attitudes, and our ever-developing epistemologies and embodied knowledge. What does stand-up have in common with demonstrators and their counterparts in the media? The shared experience may be what David Román would refer to as a “conditional we”: sharing a collective moment in performance together. According to Román, “These new social formations constitute a counterpublic that offers both respite and change from normative structures of being and belonging assumed both in the national culture and in the subcultural worlds that form a part of it” (2).

The comic work of all the heretofore mentioned comedians, protestors, and public intellectuals blurs the lines between comedy and news dissemination; they are collectively changing how our political and social landscape appears before us. We can see this social shift in the work of stand-ups who bring their scholarship and activism into the heart of their professional work performed on stage. What are the performative strategies they use to make legible their intersectional identities? How is their publicly intellectual output outside of stand-up a performative strategy of its own? The following comics: Ava Vidal, Francesca Martinez, W. Kamau Bell, and Hari Kondabolu, all use interesting performative strategies not only within their stand-up, but create a host of output offstage that challenges the normative white, traditional spaces of scholarship and journalism.

Funny or Die: Performing at the Risk of Exclusion

Ava Vidal

If you had been in Cambridge, England in the spring of 2018, you may have been able to catch a presentation by Ava Vidal given at a research conference known as “Imagine 2027.” Imagine 2027’s tagline asserts that it “Presents positive visions about how we can build a better, fairer future, for all of us, in ten years’ time.” Vidal’s presentation was called, “Intersectional Feminism for a Fairer 2027,” and is described as: “...how we can move our society away from multiple, intersecting, compounding discriminatory attitudes and practices, to build a fairer society in 2027” (“Intersectional”). A quick glance at the work of Vidal suggests that she is equal parts social activist, public intellectual, and stand-up comic; these facets of her work bleed into the others and defy separation.

Vidal is a Black, British, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied stand-up comic of Caribbean heritage. She appeared as a speaker at an Oxford University Union debate, arguing how white feminism has traditionally neither understood nor included intersectional identity while outlining struggles specific to non-white women (“Feminism”). As a TED talk speaker, she offered audiences a talk titled “Should Comedy Have a Conscience?” while holding her baby daughter. Her writing on intersectional matters of race, class, and gender, has been published in U.K. newspapers *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Guardian*. She has appeared as a stand-up comic all over the U.K., where she performs anywhere from specific-themed shows such as London’s “Stand-Up Against Racism,” to mainstream venues such as the televised, “Live at the Apollo” (McIntyre). It is worth noting Vidal’s work, not only because she is the embodiment of a woman who self-identifies at the intersections of Blackness, female, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and as a transnational figure (living in both Britain and Jamaica), but because her work is centered as public intellectualism that uses humor as methodology to discuss intersectional identity. In the comedy club and on the page, she performs social activism.

In Vidal's "Stand Up for Racism" set in 2010 London, she opened with the following joke: "Racism was different for me growing up. I went to school in Sussex, in a place called Haywood's Heath, and it was this boarding school – classy racism, you know. Because my cousins grew up in East London and they'd walk down the street and hear stuff like, "'Go back to where you come from.' But round there, it was more like, 'Return from whence you came.'". To unpack this joke, Vidal's brief reference to racism encapsulates a truism of racial hatred: that its borders shift over time, as evidenced by her reference to how racism behaved in slightly different ways for her growing up, as opposed to the racism her children and children's generation currently face. As Michael Omi argues in *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, "We continue to emphasize the instability of the race concept. This condition derives from the multiply determined 'social space' – both very broad and very deep – that race occupies. Race operates at the crossroads between social structures and experience. It is both historically determined and continually being made and remade in everyday life" (qtd. in Hosang 307). Additionally, Vidal's "Return from whence you came" joke takes a unique approach to the punchline by drawing attention to the class of the racists, as opposed to the class of the victims of racism. Finally, Vidal's joke points to the conflation of immigrant status with race, something I'll explore further in Ch. 4.

Vidal's discussions of intersectional feminism are a large part of her public intellectual output offstage, including her published writings, public debates, presentation at Oxford, and the aforementioned Cambridge talk. These presentations are frequently peppered with her humor, used as a method for driving home her most salient points. In her debate at Oxford, Vidal discussed that the necessity of intersectional feminism was that it acknowledged and embraced the struggles of all women, not just those of white women and asserted that, indeed, Black

women's struggles are different from those of white women. Vidal references Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech (1851), stating: "...because basically we are treated as though we are not. There's this idea of femininity, that women are supposed to be shy, retiring, quiet, demure people which is not applied to women of color very often at all. For instance...if I'm carrying something, and I'm struggling with it, there's no guy that's going to go, 'Oh let me take that for you,' it's 'Look at the size of you, carry it for yourself'" ("Feminism").⁹ Vidal grounds her writing in her intersectional identity as a Black female comic as exemplified in the titles of articles published in London's *The Telegraph* including "'Intersectional Feminism.' What the Hell is it (And Why You Should Care)," and "As a Black Female Comedian, I Do Loathe Ukip. Promise...."

Humor is intrinsic to Vidal's activism; her public intellectual output on matters of intersectional feminism is always parsed through a transnational lens. She frequently refers to "both sides of the Atlantic" as shorthand for the struggles with oppressive forces that the U.S. and the U.K. face in common. Vidal incorporates the scholarship of such African-American activists as Sojourner Truth (as mentioned above) and Kimberlé Crenshaw into her writings, speaking, debate, and comedy, and frequently writes on the experience of racism and sexism coming from all over the world, not just the U.K. Her writing particularly frames racism in specific ways that are dependent upon the country of origin, referring to racism here in the U.S. as "American-style dystopia, with its roots embedded in slavery" ("What Colour?"). Britain,

⁹ Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech, delivered in 1851, has historically become a rallying cry for Black women, as Truth's words spoke to the intersectional oppression she faced as both a woman and an African-American slave. Truth was a public intellectual, speaker, writer, and social justice activist whose speeches have been frequently referenced throughout history since its initial delivery, and continue to be so today (Ware).

with its imperialist, colonial history, has its own racial and social dynamics; however, Vidal's commitment to creating awareness around intersectional identity on a transnational scale firmly places her in the scope of this study.

In a *Guardian* piece penned after the murder of Trayvon Martin, Vidal asserts that “Martin’s death has had an impact on both sides of the Atlantic, and around the world. It struck fear into the heart of many parents. And so, this Saturday we will gather outside the American embassy in solidarity with the Martin family.... Martin Luther King Jr. said, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ We are all Trayvon Martin” (“Trayvon”).¹⁰ Vidal remains true to her commitment to fighting injustice on all fronts of identity. Her writing on Black oppression is inclusive and considers the multiplicity of oppressions across African diasporic spaces. Paul Gilroy discusses the Black Atlantic as a place where “striving to be both European and Black requires some specific forms of double consciousness” (gesturing to the W.E.B. DuBois term) (1). Vidal’s work speaks to the philosophy of what Black oppression means, and how it transcends borders. She also remains true within her own career to the words she spoke in her TED Talk: “You can be a comedian, and have a heart. You can be funny, and be socially responsible” (“Should Comedy”). There’s a moment in Vidal’s stand-up when she tells the audience, “I don’t want any feedback. I remember this guy going to me once, ‘Hey you! You’d be a lot funnier if you stopped all your Black shit.’ Well, wooh. This Black shit’s my life,” and the audience laughs (“Best”). Much like her publicly intellectual output, it’s difficult to tell *structurally* where the line is between her humor and her serious plea for racism to end. Perhaps

¹⁰ Trayvon’s murder sparked Black Lives Matter, which became an international movement (as discussed in the introduction). For a comprehensive text on the murder and the aftermath, see Iglesias.

there isn't one. Meanwhile, while Ava Vidal has been performing sets at *Stand Up Against Racism*, there is another comic who resignifies what "stand-up" means by drawing our attention to the ways that this genre of performance centers able-bodiedness.

Francesca Martinez

Francesca Martinez has pioneered what one might call "sit-down" comedy, and I would like to credit her as such. Martinez, a biracial, heterosexual, cisgender woman was born to a father originally from Spain, and a Swedish/English mother. She is a London-based British comic who, due to cerebral palsy, challenges the very term "stand-up comedy" which ultimately caters to an ableist world-view (assuming all comics stand upright when performing). Martinez, in addition to performing as a sit-down comic, gave a TED talk titled, "Being Happy is a Political Act," in which she proposed that the world of ableism is intrinsically tethered to capitalism and consumer culture. Martinez proposes instead an intersectional approach to alleviating poverty and inequality, which would in turn dismantle some of the culturally-imposed distinctions between abled and disabled, and breaks down the status quo's focus on the so-called normalcy of the body.

Martinez not only brings visibility to the disabled community as a comic, she embodies social activism, publicly voicing concerns about intersections of class as a foundation upon which the social inequality of race, gender, sexuality, and able-bodiedness is able to thrive. It is worth noting that Martinez is a female-identified, disabled person who self-labels as a biracial woman of color, though she is widely perceived as white passing due to her light skin, a fact of which she is keenly aware ("Official"). Within disability studies, there is much consideration given to what constitutes 'normalcy,' or normality in regards to notions of "citizenship, membership, and belonging," since disability disrupts an able-bodied understanding of

“normality” (Rembis 197). Martinez’ message is that perceived differences and social constructions keep us separate. She challenges us to consider able-bodiedness and disability as a continuum, rather than a binary, thus sustaining a world in which we, all of us “belong.” In this world envisioned by Martinez, notions of citizenship or membership are not reliant upon the distinctions we currently use, namely that of race, class, gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability. In this manner, her comic work is in conversation with theorists such as Mike Oliver who developed the social model of disability, examining disability as a social construct (Durell 20). In describing her eventual shift in focus to what she *had* over what she felt was missing in her life, Martinez embodies Michael Rembis’s notions of decentering ‘normalcy,’ and challenges her audiences to do the same. For example, she tells jokes about her parents fighting to get her away from a “special” school (denoting outside of normalcy), and successfully getting her into a “mainstream” school. The natural punchline here is that it was revealed her “mainstream” school was “...shit. I hated it,” after all (Dee). This normalizes her reaction to school as that of many a teenager, and destroys the notion that “mainstream” is inherently better.

Martinez’ public intellectual work includes an active speaking schedule in a variety of capacities, including not only TED talks but large-scale social protests, bleeding into her social activism. In her keynote address at the Anti-Austerity Protest on June 20, 2015 (more popularly known in the U.S. as the Occupy Movement), Martinez spoke about the crux of an intersectional understanding in relationship to major economic and environmental issues (“Speech”). Her writing on these matters can also be seen in major UK newspapers such as *The Independent*, where Martinez stated:

We’re told to fear difference in ourselves and others... It became clear why this mass worship of conformity dominates our culture... The sinister truth is that this

slavish adherence to superficial values not only fuels the endless fires of consumerism, it also disempowers people so that they are unable to focus on the really important stuff like protecting human rights, reducing inequality, tackling an unjust economic system, challenging the corporate takeover of our democracies, and averting environmental destruction. Promoting "normality" is a political choice that serves the powerful, while leaving the rest of us (i.e. "good citizens") dissatisfied and insecure...That's why accepting yourself as you are is an act of civil disobedience. ("I've Accepted")

Martinez's sit-down comedy is activism in and of itself. Her first performative strategy is to sit down while performing, destabilizing the "normalcy" of stand-up comedy being performed while standing and only by people for whom standing is comfortable. She frames this decentering of normalcy by discussing her desire to be defined by what she can do, as opposed to what she cannot do. By centering her abilities, she disrupts an able-bodied/disabled binary. Martinez' comedy brings out these notions in comic form, and she refers to her condition as "wobbly," which frequently gets conflated with drunkenness by others who see her in public. "Get this, I'm about to get into my car, and this taxi driver pulled up beside me, and he says, 'Don't do it love!' And I'm going, 'Do what?' [Taxi driver:] 'Don't drink and drive!'" The joke negotiates her place on a spectrum of ability by placing her ahead of someone who is temporarily impaired from alcohol.

Another performative strategy for Martinez is that she dismantles notions of normalcy by framing herself in context with other "abnormal" situations, which thereby cast her as "normal" within the context. A joke which illustrates this performative approach is when, in her performance on *Live at the Apollo (UK)*, she describes her time as a cast member of a popular

television show called *Grange Hill*. The studio where *Grange Hill* was filmed was also used to film a popular music show titled *Top of the Pops*, and “One day, I came out of my dressing room, and David Bowie was standing there. Now we were always told to ‘act normal’ around the celebs. So I just said, ‘Alright, Dave?’ And he said, ‘OH MY GOD IT’S ‘RACHEL’ FROM *GRANGE HILL!*’ I said, ‘Calm down Dave, we’re all human!’” (Dee). According to notions of normalcy, it is Bowie who doesn’t follow the rules around celebrity; Martinez has managed to switch who embodies normality between herself and David Bowie. In doing so, she displaces the notion of normalcy, and signifies “how the impaired body confronts/functions/holds up/survives within these spaces that are as material as they are social” (Rembis 177).

A comedian who works to destabilize the so-called normal practice embedded in American culture – racism – is African American comedian/activist W. Kamau Bell.

W. Kamau Bell

W. Kamau Bell is an African American, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied stand-up comedian who is also a journalist. He forefronts the intersections of his identity in all of his work, and also frequently engages other publicly intellectual work, such as delivering the keynote lecture at a “School Climate and Culture” summit, and publishing a book, *The Awkward Thoughts of W. Kamau Bell: Tales of a 6’4, African-American, Heterosexual, Cisgender, Left-Leaning, Asthmatic, Black and Proud Blerd, Mama’s Boy, Dad, and Stand-Up Comedian*. Bell began the third season of his show called *United Shades of America with W. Kamau Bell* in 2018 for CNN. *United Shades of America* is formatted similarly to a travel show. Bell travels to places and engages with people who may be uncomfortable with him because of his racial identity or political proclivities. Sometimes, these places are site-specific for racist output, but always he

investigates communities within cultures, many of which do not uphold racist ideology as a collective. He has held conversations with everyone from members of the disabled community, volunteers at Standing Rock, Sikhs, Gullah African-Americans, and more. His goal is to reveal the ways that systemic inequality is part of the fabric of America, and the ways in which everyday citizens across racial and class lines have experienced normalized discrimination.

Bell's work is his social activism, shedding light and educating the public about the people behind the issues we face every day in the news. Bell recently told NPR's Code Switch, "I've always been a fan of [*Parts Unknown* host Anthony] Bourdain. I always thought if I had a show like that, you would replace food with racism. Instead of sampling the food, I would sample the racism or the culture" (Demby). Bell's dialogues with his subjects are news journalism, utilizing first-person research methodology through interview. Bell covers topical subjects within his show's interviews that find themselves in the recent news, such as immigration and refugee status, gentrification, and protest.

As a comic, Bell brings light-hearted jokes into his conversations and reporting, adding levity to very serious subject matter. In addition to his *CNN* show, Bell co-hosts *Politically Re-Active*, a politically-minded podcast, with fellow stand-up comic Hari Kondabolu. Each episode is a conversation between the two of them and a guest expert – frequently a journalist or activist – relevant to a specific issue affecting current news. Guests have included journalist Alia Malek, #BlackLivesMatter co-founder Patrisse Cullors, and others (W. Kamau Bell, Kondabolu).

His stand-up comedy also works much like his interviews and journalism, unpacking racism in America and exploring how politics and various communities in America all intersect, while centering his identity as a Black American man. For example, in his comedy special *Semi-Prominent Negro* (2016), Bell dissects white responses to racist acts, framing their responses as

absurd when they question his knowledge of a story that happened to him directly. “Well how do you know it was racism?” they ask...well I’m kind of an expert, I’ve been studying it my whole life whether I wanted to or not...that would be like if you said, ‘Well I got up, I ran some errands, and I had pizza for lunch.’ ‘How did you know it was pizza?’” (Spurlock).

Bell’s major performative strategy is to use investigative journalism to question communities not as monoliths or homogenous groups of people, but as various and distinct individuals who happen to share membership within a particular community. In his work on *United Shades of Color*, he’ll focus on a particular community, and uncover the ways in which racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, etc. play a role in the lives of the members of that community. He always forefronts the intersections of his identity with everyone he interviews, and his audiences as well, stating that he identifies as “A Black, heterosexual, cisgender, dad man” (Hartman). Episode titles of *United Shades of America* give you a sense of who he will be talking to and learning about as a community throughout the episode: “Gentrification of Portland: A Tale of Two Cities,” “The South Carolina Gullah,” “Muslims in Small Town America,” “Appalachian Coal Country,” etc. (“United”). Focusing on learning about communities is also exactly what he shares in his stand-up comedy and is at the heart of his social activism.

In Bell’s 2018 comedy special *Private School Negro: Jokes to Power*, he interacts with the discourse of news, politics, and communities.¹¹ His stand-up is a more comedically focused

¹¹ The subtitle “Jokes to Power” on Bell’s 2018 comedy special is a reference to the phrase “speaking truth to power,” which has become a prominent expression for acts of social justice through writing, street protest, and dialogue (John Green).

dissection of the political and social news that translates directly from his work as a news journalist. Where his programming with CNN is peppered with his humor, his stand-up comedy trades in the joking dissection of news and political discussion around communities. In a serious moment of *Private School Negro*, Bell states:

I travel around a lot in this country, and I can see that one of the challenges of this country is that we all live in our communities. And some of us love our communities so much, that we start to think that everyone else should live like we live in our communities, and if they're not living like that, then they're doing America wrong...but it opens up my ideas of what this country is. We have to expand our idea of what an American is, so that we don't think other people are doing it wrong when they just have different ideas than us. (Hartman)

Bell reminds us that just as we can see different faces and perspectives within one group, so too can people just as easily lump groups together and form prejudices. As an example, he spends a large section of *Private School Negro* discussing the political news of President Trump, and finds a way to use Trump's politics around communities to form the butt of many jokes about him, such as the following:

Man, President Trump, there's so much to discuss...I don't have the time, I'm not doing four Dave Chappelle specials. So many things – some of it gets washed under the tidal wave of more things we don't even have time to examine it. After the State of the Union [Address], he tweeted that it was the most-watched State of the Union ever. First of all, no it wasn't...also, just because people watched it doesn't mean they like you. We just need to know what you're going to say, and how it affects our lives. Or maybe you're going to hate a new group that we didn't

know you were going to hate. [Acting out Trump] ‘We have to go after the cantaloupe farmers.’ What? (Hartman)

Unpacking hatred is another major performative strategy of Bell’s, in both his public intellectual work and in his stand-up comedy. For example, he describes a racist incident that occurred to him and his daughter in a store in an airport, and relates racism to how anyone being challenged by prejudice may respond:

I had this moment of when the outside world gets in the way of your family; a moment where I realized I had to think about how to defend my family, and how to let my family know I was on their side...when racism happens to me.

Historically, people of color just hold it. This is true of all the hates – like transphobia, like homophobia, like ableism – you just hold it, and you have to take it home. But in 2018, I’m playing hot potato, I just toss it right back. Nope! I don’t have time...going to toss the racism back to this lady. So I looked at my daughter and said, ‘That’s okay, we have to go, because apparently [yelling loudly] THEY DON’T SERVE BLACK PEOPLE HERE.’ (Hartman)

Bell’s joke here reveals the ways in which dominant society normalizes racism within everyday practices, yet penalizes Black people and other marginalized groups for drawing attention to their oppression and wanting fair treatment. Bell’s partner from *Politically Re-Active*, Hari Kondabolu, provides an example of how a comic constructs entire sets around intersectional identity, consistently tackling it as performative strategy of his comedy, his public intellectual work, and his social activism.

Hari Kondabolu

While Bell imports strategies from stand-up directly into mainstream contemporary journalism, Hari Kondabolu is a stand-up comic whose sets and albums seep into academia. He is a South Asian-American, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied comic whose public dialogue with Black feminist scholar bell hooks at St. Norbert's College is an example of stand-up comedy's ever-expanding role in public intellectualism. Kondabolu makes a joke in his first comedy album (*Waiting for 2042*) in which he lists roles in Hollywood that he'd be well-suited for, including a liberal arts professor in Vermont:

Now the third role I'd be perfect for...is the role of a former leftist activist who is compromised, and is now living as a middle class, middle-aged father of three in suburban New York, and here is a scene from that movie... [imitating a little girl] 'Daddy, I wanna [sic] be a princess for Halloween!' [Taking on his own voice:] 'No, you will not be a princess, because we do not believe in a monarchy in this house, do you understand me Gloria Steinem Kondabolu? ...Now you bring your sister bell hooks Kondabolu out here...'

Here, Kondabolu comically refers to the women he names his future children after, and in so doing, is challenging his audience to recognize the contributions of one major Black feminist activist/scholar (hooks), and a white feminist activist who has been consistently vocal that feminism was begun by Black women (Steinem).¹² Therefore, the dialogue between hooks and Kondabolu at St. Norbert's College appears as a conversation naturally born out of comedy's

¹² See Fessler.

increasing relationship with intersectional theory and academia, but also from the affinity that hooks and Kondabolu each share for the other's work.

In this public dialogue, hooks describes "laughter as [a site of] intervention," a space in which audience members are challenged to think beyond the conventions they currently understand for the greater political and social landscape (Center). Their dialogue covers a lot of social and political ground while contemplating how humor intervenes in those spaces. It becomes clear that while hooks and Kondabolu have differing methodologies for their explorations of activism and the subversion of white supremacy and patriarchy, there is a space between them wherein their humor, scholarship, and activism overlap.

Kondabolu is a comic whose stand-up material was an inspiration for the genesis of this study. When I first heard Kondabolu's *Waiting for 2042* album shortly after its release in 2014, I recognized that I was hearing a different approach to comedy. Kondabolu spoke from an intersectional understanding from start to finish. He was unafraid to tackle the interplay between racism, race, immigration, privilege, gender, class, sexuality, ageism, (dis)ability, etc., throughout the entirety of his set. He framed every topic of his set this way, from subjects ranging from the "ethnic needs" section of the supermarket to the band Weezer.

Kondabolu's work is also one of the examples that Rebecca Krefting holds up as a comic whose humor embodies charged humor, and indeed, Kondabolu's sets ask his audiences to understand the world intersectionally. For example, Kondabolu structures the following joke to unsettle notions of a gender binary:

There are men who say, 'Well we can't elect a woman, once a month she's going to get her period and go crazy, she'll ruin the country!' There are actually men who think a woman, because of her biology, has her judgement impaired once a month. Well I'm a

man who happens to have a penis and testicles, and my judgement is impaired every five to seven minutes...and that joke answers the question, ‘Hari Kondabolu, can you write a feminist dick joke?’ Yes, it can be done. ‘But can you write a joke that doesn’t reinforce gender binaries?’ Look, I’m doing the best I can. I did say, ‘happens to have’ a penis and testicles, which implies that not all men have a penis and testicles...perhaps I could write a postscript that acknowledges the trans community....(“Waiting”)

It’s important to note that as Kondabolu is South Asian American, he is a comic whose own body collapses racial binaries of Black and white (Blair). Kondabolu embraces discussions of race and racism in his comedy so often that he has been criticized as “obsessed with talking about race,” to which Kondabolu has responded, “Oh really? I think Trayvon Martin’s parents would disagree...telling me I’m obsessed with race in America is like telling me I’m obsessed with swimming when I’m drowning.”

Extending his body of work from stand-up into other public intellectual forms of activist output once again, Kondabolu also wrote and directed a documentary in 2017 called *The Problem with Apu*, which examined the racist tropes behind Indian character “Apu” in animated comedy television show *The Simpsons*. The documentary blended Kondabolu’s own commentary, mixed with his stand-up and interviews with many other important comics and actors, such as Kal Penn, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Aasif Mandvi, Maulik Pancholy, Hasan Minhaj, Sakina Jaffrey, and Whoopi Goldberg. Some of the most notable passages come from his interview with the U.S. Surgeon General from 2014-17, Vivek Murthy, who discusses his family’s immigration from South Asia to the U.S., growing up in U.S. culture, and how it was impacted by the most notable South Asian American character on television for many years. Kondabolu’s discussion with Goldberg delves into the history of minstrelsy, her collection of

racist artifacts (which she refers to as “Negrobilia”), and the impact of representation. The fact that “Apu,” while animated, is voiced by a white actor (Hank Azaria), prompts Goldberg to say in response to Kondabolu’s question about minstrelsy, “It certainly has all the qualifications of minstrelsy.” Kondabolu effectively demonstrates that Azaria’s vocal minstrelsy is not limited to Black minstrelsy, nor song and dance-vaudevillian performances of the past, but is still in effect today (Melamedoff).

In *Waiting for 2042* – the title of which references the predicted year of the U.S. census when minority, persons of color will become the majority in number – these issues and more are addressed in Kondabolu’s stand-up; he continues to do so in his follow-up album, *Mainstream American Comic*. Kondabolu’s body of work addresses homophobia, racism, sexism, ageism, and the specificities of navigating the world in a racialized otherness that doesn’t fit the Black/white binary, particularly those of Asian and Latinx heritage. “But here’s the bigger point [regarding 2042]: 49% doesn’t make you [white people] the minority, that’s not how math works. 49% is only the minority if you think the other 51% is *exactly the same*. It only works if you think, ‘Well, it’s 49% white people, and 51% *you* people.’” Kondabolu goes on to deconstruct race following this bit, discussing it as a social construct and referencing the history of signs that say things such as “No Irish, no Blacks, no Jews.” A major force in Kondabolu’s stand-up is his direct opposition to “post-racial” attitudes which “reject racial truths and obscure the persistence of racial hierarchies and privilege in favor of the belief that race no longer matters” (Rossing 16). Kondabolu’s comedy works to directly refute these attitudes, in line with Jonathan Rossing’s theory of critical race humor. Kondabolu’s critical race humor takes the form of public pedagogy, often explaining his own jokes within the frame of the joke; for example:

I saw a Black woman pushing a stroller with a white baby, and it's fair to assume she's a nanny and taking care of that child. Now there's other possibilities, right? It's possible this is the child of this woman's partner; also, genetics is very complicated, maybe that was her child. Now there's a third possibility which is the least likely but the one I really want it to be, which is that this is a rich Black woman who just bought herself the ultimate luxury item: a white baby. [Act out:] 'Well, we were in inner-city Stockholm last year and we just had to have one...' [self:]...I'm walking past when I hear what the woman is saying to the child [act out of woman using baby voice]: 'Your name is Toby! Can you say it? Your name is Toby.' [self:]...There's a book/miniseries by Alex Haley called *Roots*, and in *Roots*, a slave, Kunta Kinte is brought to America, and told his name is Toby, and refuses to be called Toby, so he's whipped repeatedly...absolutely horrific. Now, flash forward to...this Black woman telling this white child his name is Toby. Now, there are two possibilities for how *this* could have happened. One is that this woman has neither seen nor read *Roots* and doesn't understand why this is the best thing ever, or the second possibility is that this woman just found a revenge for slavery. Perhaps the best revenge since Jack Johnson – not the white acoustic guitar-playing Jack Johnson; I'm talking about the early twentieth-century Black boxer Jack Johnson, whose two major hobbies were having sex with white women and beating the fuck out of white men...[the other] Jack Johnson has had no impact on race relations.

Kondabolu's facility with balancing humor, history, social deconstruction, and ultimately activism within his work spurred James Yeh of *Vice Magazine* to name Kondabolu the "Perfect Comedian for Trump's America." In Yeh's interview, Kondabolu addresses comedy as activism, and like many of the comics interviewed for this study, considers himself a comedian first.

However, the very fact that comics who recognize their own intersections are on stage, means that we the audience are asked to see them as the complex intersectional selves they are. States Kondabolu: “My goal is to make people laugh...and the thing is, I’m a critical being. I’m a political being. I’m a racialized being. And as a result, you know, that double-consciousness, that double lens will show up in my work” (Yeh).

While not the only comic to address #BlackLivesMatter, Kondabolu took up the topic in his *Mainstream American Comic* album:

The cops have killed so many Black people, it’s caught on tape, and yet nothing happens. There’s no change. The one great thing that has come out of all this is the #BlackLivesMatter movement, right? Supports communities, pushes for justice, but the ugly thing is that when people say ‘Black lives matter,’ there are others who say, ‘No – all lives matter.’ First of all, no they don’t! We all have people we dislike. You watch reality television, all three Kardashians matter? Really?

The title of Kondabolu’s album, *Mainstream American Comic*, is itself a comment on the ways we inscribe whiteness on “default,” “mainstream,” and “American.” David Roediger states that the “concept of non-whiteness is thinking about race in the United States. On one level of course, non-whiteness is an offensive term. To refer to people of color as non-whites almost perfectly exemplifies the tendency to place whites at the normative center of everything, and to marginalize everyone else” (17). When Kondabolu positions his Brown body amidst a background of red, white, and blue Americana graphics with the words “Mainstream American Comic” emblazoned, he challenges us to reconsider what exactly constitutes mainstream dominance in the U.S....and that whiteness is not intrinsically dominant, nor centric to U.S.

culture after all. Where Kondabolu's comedy leaves off and his public scholarship begins, is a blurred line indeed.

Conclusion

The comics I have discussed in this chapter use their comedy across an array of other platforms, from university lectures to TED talks, to written publications and news programming. This particular group of comics grounds their personal intersectional standpoint in their work offstage as a matter of performative strategy. By having public dialogues at universities, publishing in newspapers, and speaking at major protest events, all of the comics in this chapter distinguish themselves from previous waves of comics because they seek to subvert a normative whiteness of stand-up comedy by taking space in other publicly intellectual avenues that were once traditionally white spaces. As a collective, they help shape intersectional discourse from a host of other platforms. We can see from Ava Vidal that she demonstrates how racism shifts from era to era, and from country to country, all the while disrupting attitudes which are grounded in anti-black racism. In the work of Francesca Martinez, we can see her subverting the normative whiteness and able-bodiedness of stand-up by centering her cerebral palsy and sitting down in a dissident act of defiance in what is categorized as "normal." W. Kamau Bell creates a through-line of community comprising distinct individuals whose distinctions are, at least to outsiders, masked by their community. Finally, Hari Kondabolu has a host of strategies, pointing to the ways we inscribe and default whiteness as "mainstream," deconstructing history through comedy, and forefronting himself as a racialized being that disrupts a Black/white binary. All the while, these comics foreground their intersectional identities and use their comedy to speak to intersectional identity as a way of being in the world. They have used multiple media outlets and

a multitude of performative spaces beyond the stage to discuss this topic, disrupting not only who can be funny onstage, but in what alternative spaces they may be funny, as well. Their public intellectual work such as publications and dialogues disrupt the normative whiteness of these spaces and broadens the margins of their intersectional discourse, making them public figures beyond simply “comic.”

In Chapter 2, I examine a group of comics who all identify specifically as Black American women. Their work continues a genealogy of Black female comic artists who have been fighting intersections of racism and sexism for far longer than they have been recognized for doing so.

Chapter 2 – Black Female Comedians Changing American Topical Norms

This chapter will focus solely on the work of African American female comics who disrupt perceptions of class, sexuality, and gender conformity. They use their stand-up comedy to challenge the ways in which Black women have been excised from conversations of feminism, while continuing to perform the labor of making the multiple intersections of women's identity visible because of their racial oppression. The comedians that I will discuss in depth in this chapter for performing intersectional work on the stage are Sommore, Sam Jay, Tiffany Haddish, and Kerry Coddett, beginning with Whoopi Goldberg's work as an introductory critical turning point in the performance of intersectionality on the stage. I will briefly acknowledge Moms Mabley, Wanda Sykes, and Margaret Cho in my introduction in order to trace the critical genealogy of female comics of color who have created space for the work of the 21st century's newest female comics across racial, class, and sexuality demarcations. This chapter archives the marginalization of Black women in U.S. comedy history as it seeks to spotlight the pervasive social inequalities that are a part of mainstream stand-up comedy space.

Part of the inspiration for this dissertation was the repeated media attention I saw given to white female comic Amy Schumer for her contributions to feminist comedy. While Schumer has an interesting body of work that certainly addresses feminist concerns, she is certainly not the first to do this; nor, significantly, does her comedy grapple with the intersectional feminist concerns of women of color but rarely. The comics discussed in this chapter must always confront Eurocentric cultural tropes of femininity as conflated with whiteness and heteronormativity, as well as Eurocentric beauty standards (thinness, pale skin, straight hair, and other dictates). The following Black female comics are creating radical gestures of performance

activism in response to a long history of psychological violence and oppression against their bodies in ways that are specific to living Blackness in America.

CNN's 2017 multi-part documentary on the history of comedy aired an episode titled "The Funnier Sex," which dealt primarily with women's struggles to be taken seriously as stand-up comics (Rivera). While the episode featured excerpts from interviews with Margaret Cho and Ali Wong, two comics who identify as Asian American, we were left without any Black woman's comic narrative in an episode devoted entirely to "women." The conflation of women with whiteness and the inclusion of Asian American women who are often read as women of color but gain the privilege of whiteness because of the model minority myth, speaks volumes to the ways in which Black women have been erased from comedy history.¹³ There has been no shortage of talented, Black, female stand-up comics over decades of stand-up history: there are mid-late 20th century comics such as Moms Mabley, Thea Vidale, Danitra Vance, Loni Love, Luenell, Kim Wayans, Ellen Cleghorne, Sommore, Kym Whitley, Whoopi Goldberg, as well as turn of the century and more recent performers such as Aisha Tyler, Zainab Johnson, Adele Givens, Amanda Seales, Mo'Nique, Sherri Shepherd, Gina Yashere, Sasheer Zamata, Sheryl Underwood, Yvonne Orji, Laura Hayes, Ava Vidal, Retta, Wanda Sykes, Leslie Jones, and others.

To highlight what an egregious omission was made by CNN, I offer a brief critical genealogy of Black, intersectional women's comedy which acknowledges the work of Moms

¹³ The model minority myth is a myth that ties academic and professional success to Asian American identity. See Chow.

Mabley, Wanda Sykes, and Asian-American comic Margaret Cho. I then shift focus to Whoopi Goldberg as the groundbreaker for the newest wave of Black female comics of the 21st century that have achieved mainstream success: Sommore, Tiffany Haddish, Kerry Coddett, and Sam Jay.¹⁴

The late Moms Mabley (Loretta Mary Aiken) had one of the longest careers in entertainment of anyone, having begun performing on the Chitlin' Circuit and in Vaudeville at fourteen years old (Dartis).¹⁵ She was the U.S.'s first female comic, and she became the first nationally recognized Black female comic, a trailblazer who also became the first female comic to perform at the famous Apollo Theatre in Harlem, NY. She wrote and performed with some of the best minds in her day, such as writer/playwright Zora Neale Hurston and actor/activist Paul Robeson. Mabley was a social critic who made commentary on racism in America (Watkins 225). In order for Mabley to cross over to white audiences but maintain her Black audiences, jokes that were intended for Black audiences were often presented in coded language, such that white audiences would not understand. Mabley frequently began her act with, "Hi, children. How you doin' tonight? I know! Moms is tired too." While a white audience might interpret that Mabley was simply tired, this language was a coded reference to the exhaustion that comes from living with constant oppression (Watkins). Her queer identity in her private life was not made

¹⁴ Other comedians that I would like to acknowledge, but do not have sufficient time to discuss include Leslie Jones, Adele Givens, Mo'Nique, and many, many more.

¹⁵ There were two performance circuits for variety live entertainment in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries in America: Vaudeville and the Chitlin' Circuit. Vaudeville was considered a white, "mainstream" performance circuit of theatres across the U.S. The Chitlin' Circuit was a performance circuit of theatres across the U.S. where it was considered safe for Black performers to perform, and for Black audiences to attend. Preston Lauterbach notes that "[t]he Chitlin' Circuit was African-Americans making something beautiful out of something ugly, whether it's making cuisine out of hog intestines, or making world class entertainment despite being excluded from all of the world class venues..." (Brown).

widespread public knowledge during her lifetime, but was known to her close friends and associates (Chibarro). Offstage, Mabley was known to wear slacks and jackets, which some have termed “androgynous,” and still others, “masculine,” particularly so for the era (Chibarro; Dartis). Her queer identity never became a part of her comedy. Mabley was raced, classed, and gendered as a Black woman in mid-20th century U.S.A., an era when legal segregation and Jim Crow laws were in place.

While a great many Black female comics came after Mabley, it wouldn't be until 2009 that comic Wanda Sykes released her comedy special *I'ma Be Me*, in which she explores intersections of her identity as an African American, lesbian woman. She speaks to her queerness as a Black woman who challenges the historical heteronormativity of Black comedy:

It's harder being gay than it is being Black. There are some things that I had to do as gay that I didn't have to do as Black. I didn't have to come out 'Black.' I didn't have to sit my parents down, tell them about my Blackness. 'Mom, dad, I have to tell you something. I hope you still love me...' (McCarthy-Miller).

Sykes proceeds with acting out what would happen if she came out to her parents as Black. In effect, she reframes the cliché of coming out to your parents, in which her parents wish that she “had cancer” rather than be Black, and accuse her of hanging around other Black people, making her think she herself is Black. The biggest punchline comes as Sykes, acting out her mother's role, says, ‘I knew I shouldn't have let you watch *Soul Train*, was it *Soul Train*?’ (McCarthy-Miller). By reframing the stereotypes of the coming out process to parents with Blackness, Sykes highlights the absurdity of the ignorance of non-heteronormative identity and its origins when conflated with another marginalized-but-visibly-marked identification. The questions from her parents which Sykes codes with Blackness instead of queerness point to the ridiculousness of

attempting control over something over which there is no control; in doing so, she comments on the ways in which parents frequently, mistakenly believe their child has made a choice over their sexuality, rather than simply expressing who they are.

Margaret Cho foregrounded her queer sexuality and Asian American identity in her stand-up, while navigating the ways in which her body is raced and sexed. Cho has, for many years, openly self-identified as queer. Cho penned an essay she published online titled “Queer,” explaining how she sees herself in terms of her own sexuality, while remarking on some of the choices she made regarding her relationships and sexual history. Cho states, “People are often curious about the fact that...I call myself ‘queer.’ ...I had sex quite a few times, and roughly half of the people have been men, and the other half women, and there were a few people in between those genders who identified in differing ways, so it’s up to me to define myself too, and so that would be queer” (Cho). Her stand-up comedy reflects this self-identification, as she challenged audiences to accept her on her own terms. In one of her sets, Cho presents her sexuality in the following terms: “On the [cruise] ship, I had sex with a woman. And I went through this whole thing, ‘Am I gay? Am I straight?’ And I realized, I’m just slutty. Where’s my parade?” (Coleman).¹⁶

Cho’s comedy, while queering her sexual identity and Asian-American identity, always aimed at triangulating the black/white racial binary as well, discussing everything from Korean stereotypes, her experiences racialized as other, her family, and the fact that she experiences

¹⁶ Cho in recent years did become a grand marshal for many a LGBTQIA Pride Parade around the U.S. This is my academic joke about her joke (Cho).

“something racial every day. Daily something happens” (Coleman).¹⁷ Susan Pelle writing in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, uses Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theory of transformational shame as performance, to discuss the intersections of Cho’s identity as performed: “The courage behind her unruly, humorous, and painful negotiations is exhilarating. In that exhilaration, there is not only a sense of empathy, but also a sense of recognition, a connection. And through that connection there is a revolution to be made” (34-35). Mabley performs in feminism’s second wave, followed by Cho and Sykes who were doing intersectional work in the third-wave. Their work laid the foundation for the next wave of performers to emerge, negotiating the nuances of their identity and actively using their bodies in ever more explicit ways.

Before I transition to discussing the most recent work of comics such as Haddish and Jay, I begin with the work of Whoopi Goldberg, and in doing so, I want to give scholarly attention to a performer who truly broke through social boundaries of stand-up. Goldberg was a performer who blurred the lines between stand-up comedy and theatre, and a performer who navigated intersectional identity onstage, creating *Direct from Broadway* – a show that I suggest may well be among the first – if not the first – of stand-up comic performances to perform intersectional identity in such a focused manner. *Direct from Broadway* and the work of Sommore, Haddish, Jay, and Coddett manifest the scholarly work of Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who all negotiate a Black feminism that is always already inclusive of gender, sexuality, class, and disability. While white feminism defaults itself as a feminism for everyone, this is not the case. Black women do not get to name their feminism as a feminism for all, even

¹⁷ The issue of Asian-American representation in comedy, and intersectional identity within this representation, has recently been chronicled by Kasia Pilat in the New York Times. See Pilat.

though it is more inclusive than most feminisms. Goldberg's characters in *Direct from Broadway* such as the Little Girl and the Jamaican Woman embody the ways in which white feminism fails to address the specific kinds of challenges they face as Black women.

Whoopi Goldberg

Goldberg's comedy special, *Direct from Broadway*, hails from 1985: a time before Black Lives Matter, before the internet, before fourth wave feminism, and before Kimberlé Crenshaw had officially coined the term "intersectional." While Goldberg: a Black, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied comic, performed this show prior to the 21st century, I include her in this chapter in order to bring visibility to her work, which has been foundational to many of the new comic's intersectional work that I explore in this study. For the most part, Goldberg's contributions to comedy and feminism have gone ignored and uncredited as the intersectional activism it truly is. *Direct from Broadway* serves as a reminder that Black female comics have been doing intersectional work for many, many years, and yet remain less-cited, less-visible, and receive less notoriety and accolades for the kind of disruptive work I am discussing in this dissertation. While Goldberg continues to stay active as a Hollywood personality (currently on ABC talk-show program *The View*), I have yet to find *Direct From Broadway* cited in humor studies scholarship in terms of intersectional activism, which it certainly was (Gorman). I endeavor to correct this. Goldberg's chief strategy for performing intersectionality on the stage is to embody multiple characters, each of whom explore their own intersectional identity.

In *Whoopi Goldberg: Direct from Broadway*, Goldberg enters the stage already in character as "Fontaine," and proceeds to spend the performance embodying four more distinct characters, one after the other. Using Goldberg's names for these characters, they are in

chronological order within the show: Fontaine the “Junkie,” the “Surfer Chick,” the “Little Girl,” the “Jamaican Woman,” and “the Cripple.” What makes this performance theatrical is that Goldberg is firmly committed to the inner lives of the characters throughout her performance. Certainly, many stand-up comics embody different characters throughout their stand-up performances, but within their set, they always return to a neutral personas as “themselves,” the performer (Auslander 4).¹⁸ Goldberg never reveals to us a neutral persona of “Whoopi Goldberg” until she bows at the end, in the same way we would see actors enter in character at the beginning of a play and not glimpse the actor until curtain call. The set behind Goldberg is merely the backstage of a theatre exposed: ladders, pieces of set, rafters, etc. Evocative of a theatrical space, her solo performance setting is meant to encourage the audience to do what audiences do in the theatre: suspend their disbelief, and buy into their theatrical imaginations. Several of Goldberg’s characters use a minimal prop or costume change to further suggest that character in performance: for example, the little girl wears a shirt meant to represent her hair.

Goldberg uses her tools as an actor to quickly delineate between these five characters, giving each a distinctive physicality and voice. In addition, she plays other incidental characters who interact with one of the main five characters from the periphery at various points. Though performed in the Lyceum Theatre in New York City’s Broadway district, the intense theatricality of embodying these different characters is evocative of a black box theatrical space, often host to smaller, more intimate productions. Each character’s physical mannerisms and posture reflect

¹⁸ For instance, Mike Epps in his comedy special *Don’t Take it Personal* embodies over one hundred characters throughout his set; however, it is understood by the audience that he always returns to Mike Epps, his original performance persona (Frazier).

some deeper aspect of the character; and while I'm not certain of the manner of Goldberg's specific physical preparation for each role, these movements with intention may be thought of as the "psychological gesture," an acting tool developed by theatre artist Michael Chekhov, which is a tool that physically expresses the "thoughts, feelings, and desires of the character, incorporated into one movement" (Dalton). In the case of Fontaine, his key distinguishing physical features are that he is slightly hunched over, paired with a rhythmic mild shaking of the torso and limbs. The hunched over quality of Fontaine's posture physically embodies how years of poverty and drug use have literally weighed on his back, forcing him to curl downward slightly in response. When Goldberg deviates from Fontaine, she releases the posture immediately to become other characters.

Likewise in the other four characters, Goldberg has chosen gestures that immediately tell us something deeply psychological about the person we are encountering. In the character of the "Surfer Chick," she has a consistent tendency to flip her hair back, away from her face. Other vocal and physical choices indicate the stereotype of a young woman who is part of the 1980s surfer culture on the coast of California. However, as Goldberg performs with each character, she gradually moves beyond the initial physical stereotype that the audience sees, into a more fleshed out, fully developed three-dimensional person. While the hair flip in the example of the Surfer Chick may come across initially as a stereotype, emblematic of the surfer culture at large, the audience comes to realize that the Surfer Chick has a lot of obstacles in her path to a better life: obstacles which are created by the sociocultural dynamics of sexism. For example, when Surfer Chick becomes pregnant, she goes to a Catholic priest in confession, seeking help and guidance. The priest doesn't understand her euphemisms for sex and pregnancy, and it is similarly so with the nun that Surfer Chick seeks out for help as well. The institutions in her life

that are meant to help her, such as the church, have a complete disconnect in their ability to help her with a specifically gendered problem. Finally, in desperation, Surfer Chick attempts and botches her own abortion. Surfer Chick must consistently spend her time trying to remove these obstacles in her life, as she does with the hair that is always falling in front of her face. Surfer Chick's psychological gesture is to attempt to move her hair out of her face, but it always falls back; likewise, the way Surfer Chick's womanhood creates perpetual obstacles for her that she tries to push aside at moments, unable to do so completely.

In the character of the Little Girl, we first see her with a t-shirt as a prop for her hair, which appears to be long and fine. But as Goldberg moves through her performance, it becomes clear that the Little Girl is Black, and she is idolizing blonde hair and blue eyes as Euro-centric markers of beauty, instead of her own presumably Afro-centric features, highlighted here in Goldberg's performance as her hair. The pressure on women to adapt their features to be more Euro-centric in order to become "beautiful" is a long-time feature of racism, and is an inherently intersectional topic revolving around race and gender. According to Patricia Hill Collins, "Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blonde, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (98). Goldberg's portrayal of Little Girl is heartbreaking, in that she performs for us the ways in which racism – embodied here as her desire to adhere to Euro-centric beauty standards – already has a firm foothold in her thinking patterns by early childhood. Little Girl's understanding of beauty has already informed her self-perceptions, and she is aware of her status as otherized, already making her feel inferior.

As Goldberg moves through these characters, we find that each character experiences otherization for specific reasons: Fontaine is a "junkie," a Black man who uses drugs and who

finds more acceptance abroad than domestically. The Surfer Chick is a woman whose reproductive health is undermined by institutional systems. The Jamaican Woman experiences otherness due to the intersection of her ethnicity, Blackness, and womanhood which exoticizes her as a Black woman from outside the U.S. (her romantic partner treats her in tandem with his perceptions of such a transnational figure, approaching her only as either a sexual partner or a maid with no in-between). The Cripple is physically differently-abled, and lives in an “old folks home because it makes the old people feel better about their lives” (Schlamme). All of these characters represent an array of intersectional identity, and the spine of Goldberg’s performance becomes clear in the text of her final character, the Cripple: “‘Normal’ must be in the eye of the beholder.” Suddenly, the through-line of Goldberg’s entire set is clear; these are all human beings whose intersectional identities straddling race, class, gender, (dis)ability, ethnicity, etc., have been disenfranchised and relegated outside of ‘normalcy’ by society. Goldberg’s performance turns our gaze directly onto their humanity and wholeness (Schlamme).

It is nearly impossible to overstate how much Goldberg’s show was ahead of the curve. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act wouldn’t occur until 1990; the centering of ‘normalcy’ within disability studies (Rembis) had not yet coalesced; the first Disability Studies program emerged in 1994 (Simon). Intersectionality as a lens for the study of oppression was newly emerging with “works such as *Women, Race, and Class* by Angela Davis (1981), ‘A Black Feminist Statement’ by the Combahee River Collective (1982), and Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider*” (Collins 21). Goldberg, embodying a lived experience as a Black woman seated in intersectional identity herself, took on five other identities in her show; and in so doing, she enlightened audiences on the complexities and humanity of those who live at various intersections of oppressive cultural forces. As Collins states, “Developing Black feminist thought

also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations” and Goldberg created this work drawing upon Audre Lorde and Alice Walker in an art space, on the stage (17). She paved the way for the next generation of Black female comics, including Sommore. While Goldberg’s chief performative strategy was to embody multiple characters, we can see in the work of Sommore that developing Black feminist thought not only involves alternate spaces, it can also involve the act of self-definition, as well, using no characters at all.

Sommore

Sommore, an African American, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual comic created an introduction to her comedy special *Chandelier Status* (2013) that features a voiceover recording of Sommore herself, speaking to the audience and introducing her metaphor of the chandelier. This metaphor begins with her description of a phenomenon present in current U.S. culture: those who are famous for being famous, regardless of intellect or talent. An excerpt from this introduction follows:

We are living in a celebrity-obsessed society, and I believe there are very few stars. You see a star has a unique talent that’s undeniable. Whereas nowadays a celebrity is someone who’s popular. You can have a million twitter followers and be considered a celebrity. There are no shortcuts to becoming a star. Now I won’t get ahead of myself and call myself a star. But what I will call myself is a chandelier. A chandelier is a constant fixture; in this ever-changing world, it remains the same. It shines no matter what. Yeah, it gets older, but that just increases the value (Layne).

The chandelier is an extension of Sommore herself, and the first image we see is of a magnificent chandelier hanging over the set, casting a black shadow. It sparkles and gleams, and the lighting

radiates pink tones – together creating a sparkly mixture of light and shadow, the camera focusing on this great big, steady, stable fixture as it shines upon everything below. Suddenly, entrance music begins to play, and the chandelier lights up brighter than before, illuminating many chandeliers around it on set, complete with shimmering drapes and fabric among the chandelier fixtures. True to theatrical design, the chandelier becomes a part of everything in the set: and as Sommore herself emerges, it becomes clear that the chandelier is part of her too, in concert with her costume, lighting, jewelry (chandelier-style earrings) and even her microphone, which is encrusted with black diamond-shaped jewels. She wears a long flowing black dress that contains the same jewels in the center as her microphone (Layne).

The first thing Sommore says is to thank her audience for coming out to support her, because Hollywood has not been inclusive of her: “For some reason Hollywood don’t fuck with me like that and have me do a whole lot of movies, so most of the time I’m on my own protest: they don’t put me in their shit, I don’t put ‘em in my shit. Any movie I ain’t in, I bootleg that bitch.” She goes on to say that despite this, she’s humbled she’s been doing stand-up for more than twenty years.¹⁹ Sommore’s discussion here of introducing her show by means of the chandelier, followed by discussing her career’s longevity, sustaining over decades, all the while simultaneously rendered invisible by Hollywood, speaks to something bigger.²⁰ While Sommore doesn’t elaborate any more on the root causes of her lack of legibility in Hollywood, she

¹⁹ Sommore is also known for having been one of four comics featured in *Queens of Comedy* (2001), a filmed performance featuring the stand-up comedy of Sommore, Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, and Mo’Nique (Purcell).

²⁰ Mike Epps, in his special *Don’t Take it Personal*, expresses a similar sentiment about his long-time consistency working in Hollywood, while never gaining major widespread, mainstream visibility (Frazier). What Sommore and Epps have in common is that they are both talented performers who have consistently held careers as entertainers; they both happen to be Black.

proceeds to spend the bulk of her special dissecting the ways her class, Blackness, and womanhood intersect to have forged her experiences and those of other Black women, speaking to the larger notion that these intersections are what have prevented her from gaining a stronger foothold in Hollywood: she is not a star per se, but a chandelier. This act of self-definition is Sommore's core strategy for performing intersectionality on the stand-up stage.

The whole of Sommore's content for *Chandelier Status* focuses on how class intersects with Blackness and womanhood. These intersections are drawn in her comedy both according to class distinctions among lines of wealth and prosperity, as well as class distinctions of behavior, drawing a line between the two. In so doing, Sommore demonstrates the social construction of race as dependent upon multiple factors, not limited to a singular factor alone, such as skin color or ethnicity. One of the first longer bits of her set is when she describes "n***er shit," a term that she uses to describe implied "lower" class behavior, while she is careful to note that this categorization lies outside of Blackness:

One thing I ain't spending my money on is n***er shit. Oh...you know what n***er shit is. Now n***er shit ain't got nothing to do with you being Black. N***er shit is when you do something that's so fucked up, you've got to look at your damn self in the mirror and be like, 'Really? Really.' You can't even believe it yourself. Here's an example. My neighbor keeps trying to get me to invest in his rap career. This motherfucker is 47 years old with grey braids. I'm like, 'Really? Really. Are you going to be Grey-Z? [Wordplay joke on popular rapper Jay-Z] (Layne).

In using the n word here, Sommore reclaims and reappropriates this word that has such a powerful, potent history as a derogatory racist slur, in order to make distinctions based on class, not Blackness. In doing so, she takes power out of the word and reassigns its meaning.

Further on in her special, Sommore addresses other behaviors that are the results of her intersections with class and Blackness, stemming from an economic position within U.S. culture. She discusses the realities of living with her single mother, who would send her kids to the movies and instead of being allowed to purchase popcorn at the concessions stand, she'd send them with pre-made tuna sandwiches. Sommore then complicates her discussion of class and race in discussing her grade school years:

But she [Sommore's mother] did make sacrifices to send me to some of the best schools she could afford. Most of my childhood years I went to predominantly white schools. So I didn't know the difference as a child in being Black or white. I really didn't. Until one Christmas holiday, I went home with a little white girl friend of mine. Saw some shit at the white people's house I hadn't ever seen in my life. They had their Christmas tree up – they had these things on the Christmas tree called popcorn balls. This was some of the jazziest shit I'd ever seen in my life....as soon as I got home, 'Get some popcorn mom, I've got something to show y'all!' We popped the popcorn, put the food coloring on it, put the syrup on it, rolled it up into a ball and hung it on the tree. We woke up the next morning...the roaches were stuck like 'The Matrix' [acts out a roach sprawled onto the popcorn ball] (Layne).

What Sommore does with this joke is to comment on how the systematic, economic disenfranchisement of Black men and women has created two disparate realities for white and Black housing. They may be decorated similarly for the Christmas holiday, with trees and ornaments, but those similarities only go so far: the economic and physical realities of forced and oppressive economic disenfranchisement (classism) reveal themselves anyhow within the living space.

I argue that *Chandelier Status* is not only a metaphor for Sommore as a consistently shining, valuable, sparkling entity, but rather, *Chandelier Status* is a metaphor that defines Sommore's intersectional identity as a Black woman, an oppressed woman within U.S. culture, who has continued to shine on despite not being welcomed into the white, dominant sector of entertainment. While many comics have discussed cultural nuances of Black culture vs. white culture onstage, Sommore spends a great deal of her special discussing the nuanced differences between white women's culture and Black women's culture, noting for example that "Black women work to keep their man. White women work to keep their man happy." Such observations highlight the privileges that white women hold in contrast to Black women. In so doing, she distances herself from a catch-all feminism of women, and makes a distinction specifically for Black feminism and how Blackness shapes her experience as a woman in U.S. culture. The distinction Sommore makes early on as "not a star, but a chandelier," is one that reflects Sommore's attempt to define herself in a framework as not just outside of Hollywood, but simply as a Black woman. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins, writing in *Black Feminist Thought*, states, "Maintaining the invisibility of Black women and our ideas not only in the United States, but in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, Europe, and other places where Black women now live, has been critical in maintaining social inequities" (5). Sommore is making this point as well in her comedy, using herself and her career as a prime example.

Halfway through her set, she comes back to the subject of what's going on in contemporary U.S. culture and the idea of fame as a thematic through-line for the arc of *Chandelier Status*: "We're living in a society where motherfuckers are famous with no talent. The next time you watch TV, look at it and ask, 'Now how is this bitch famous?'...My favorite untalented famous person is Kim Kardashian...she was known as the white girl with the big ass"

(Layne). Here, Sommore uses Kardashian as a specific example of a figure who has become a “star” according to white mainstream entertainment, without having put years of work into an entertainment-driven career (such as stand-up comedy) the way Sommore has. It is no accident that Sommore is highlighting Kim Kardashian, who has become known for capitalizing on the fetishization of Black women’s bodies, and the stereotypes of hyper-sexualized Black female bodies. The stereotyping of the Black, female body with associations of a large buttocks, and the subsequent exploitation of this stereotype dates back hundreds of years. Sarah “Saartjie” Baartman, for example, was a South African woman who was featured on display in touring circus “freak” shows during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, marginalizing and denigrating her body and features as that of outside mainstream, Euro-centric beauty standards (Chandler). It is not lost on critics that Kardashian, a non-Black woman, has used her derriere to help propel her stardom, which further exploits the images and stereotypes of Black women’s bodies and hyper-sexualization. Sally Kohn, a CNN political commentator writing for *The Washington Post* notes, “For centuries since (and likely before) Black women and their bodies have been smeared by stereotypes of hyper-sexuality simultaneously displayed and denigrated, their individuality and self-determination suppressed by the whims of the white male gaze,” also citing the life of Baartman as an example in her article, “How the Kardashians Exploit Racial Bias for Profit” (Kohn). Therefore, when Sommore cites Kardashian in *Chandelier Status*, Sommore is drawing attention to the fact that non-Black figures are catapulted into fame for reasons deriving from outside of talent or hard work, and even for exploiting the same Blackness that keeps Sommore on the margins, despite her mainstay career as a comic going back decades.

Patricia Hill Collins cites Maria W. Stewart as an early Black feminist intellectual in 19th century U.S., who advocated for Black women to create their own self-definitions as a means of

resistance, stating, “To Stewart, the power of self-definition was essential, for Black women’s survival was at stake” (4). In this comedy special, Sommore creates her own self-definition. She defines herself as a chandelier; and in so doing, the stage, lights, microphone, costume, and ultimate theatre of *Chandelier Status*, all elevate stand-up comedy with intersectional activism. “When you’re a chandelier, you know you’re a chandelier...and believe me, they see you” (Layne). The act of defining herself as a chandelier allows her audiences to see her in the fullness of her intersectional identity. In the work of Kerry Coddett and her *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* show, we see how intersectionality is performed within the context of a carefully curated line-up of multiple comedians, selected to represent different racial, ethnic, gender, class, sexuality, etc. identifications. This show is performed monthly for audiences, cultivating a community of performers and audiences alike.

Kerry Coddett

Kerry Coddett, a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied comic from Brooklyn, NY, and Krystal Stark, her manager, sister, and the owner of Stark White Entertainment, are the masterminds behind a monthly stand-up show in Brooklyn titled *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* that has been running for over three years now. Coddett is the emcee and host of the show, and Stark is the booker. Together, they’ve created one of the most consistently diverse line-ups of any reoccurring show in the country that doesn’t exclusively cultivate its line-up to be “ethnic,” such as the Laugh Factory’s “Chocolate Sundaes” show (an all-Black line-up), “Luck of the Irish,” “Comedy Bazaar,” featuring performers of Middle Eastern heritage, or Just for Laughs Festival’s

“The Ethnic Show” (Masada).²¹ The show has been host to some of the most exciting emerging and established figures in comedy, such as Hannibal Buress, Michael Che, Phoebe Robinson, and Roy Wood, Jr. This select group includes comics discussed in this dissertation as well, such as Sam Jay and Gina Yashere.

Coddett has been a long-time performer in New York City. When I interviewed her, she mentioned how, as a Black woman, she observed right away how her identity intersected with her work as a comic, even when taking classes in her early training:

...I felt like an outsider at UCB [Upright Citizen’s Brigade], because with improv, you know there’s no prior conversation that you and your scene partners are having about what’s going on. You all have to operate under the same assumption that certain truths are known. And culturally, there were some things I just didn’t understand. You know I’d never seen *The Matrix*, so if you want to initiate a scene where you’re talking about Orpheus, I’m like, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

Coddett’s experience at Upright Citizen’s Brigade is certainly not isolated for Black and Brown performers making their way through the major worlds of improv, primarily in LA, Chicago, and New York City. UCB and others are enveloped by the same normative whiteness as other performative strains, where any otherness can become tokenized in performance. Notable writers and performers have unpacked this specific site of major racism and segregation recently as well,

²¹ Historically speaking, these shows began as a way for Black comedians to create opportunities for themselves to perform stand-up at known “white” clubs. Comedy of course, as all of American performance, has been racially segregated for much of its history (Hodges Persley). These events today however, when removed from their historical context, are seen by some as tokenization, particularly as addressed by Kondabolu and others.

from Amy Seham in her book *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City* to several sketches in the catalogue of comedy duo *Key & Peele's* work. Coddett, however, continued improvising and developing her comic skills, eventually going full force into stand-up comedy. She now performs with a lot of clubs in New York City, including Caroline's and Gotham, as well as performing on television shows such as *Why? with Hannibal Buress*, and previously *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore*. As mentioned previously, she is currently a staff writer for the HBO docuseries, *Wyatt Cenac's Problem Areas*.

Coddett's comic perspective reflects her intersectional identity as a Black woman; as has been previously discussed with many comics here, her perspective offers audiences an engagement with her world. Coddett and Stark have consistently booked their shows to reflect comics who all have comedy coming through a racially-conscious lens, so that it's not just Coddett who performs, and then audience members are given leave to relax their thinking around these issues. Instead, each performer that follows – including the occasional white, cisgender man – addresses the intersectionality of the world at large. Coddett's comedy – and the *Brooklyn, Stand-Up!* shows as a whole – recalibrates dominant narratives through critical race humor. Curating a show to put these kinds of acts in conversation with each other, drawing attention to content, approaches, and performative strategy is, for my purposes here, an intersectional performative strategy unto itself. For example, her recalibration of dominant narratives around race can be seen in this joke concerning Afro-centric naming of children:

...so if I got a kid, I know what I want to name it...I'm going to name my kid some fuckin' like, colorful exotic mad Black name, like Je'wocka'tee;max. Yeah. With a silent x. Two apostrophes and a semicolon. What? Two apostrophes, a silent x and a semicolon? Yo, your parents put a semicolon in your name, they care, you know

what I'm saying? They put some thought into it. I feel like when your parents name you like a Kate, or a Ashley, they were like, 'Hmm. What's an average name for an average bitch?' And that's what happened. But 'Je'wocka'tee;max' is like, put some stank on it! ("Coddett Talks").

In this segment of her stand-up, Coddett is specifically responding to a statement that actress Raven Symone made on television show *The View*, in which she stated that she would not hire someone with a "ghetto name."²² Coddett speaks to Symone's attitude which negatively perceives Afro-centric names, and reframes them as positive; or in critical race humor parlance, she "critiques a post-racial frame that decontextualizes racial experience and dismisses racial realities with nonracial justifications" (Rossing 27).

All of the comics that Coddett and her manager/producer of *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* Stark select to perform for the monthly show are comics who are socially conscious in broad strokes on the show, reflective of the above material. The show's comics are among the most racially and gender-presenting diverse performance line-up, as well as their audience, with whom I've sat in attendance on multiple occasions. Tokenization is not a practice in the selection of comics. Stated Coddett of her work in our interview:

...I consider what I do some type of social activist comedy, because what I talk about is social commentary. And the things I say and the observations I make are not necessarily part of the mainstream; they aren't necessarily things that people are comfortable talking

²² This particular moment in *The View*'s broadcast was highly problematic in multiple ways: first, it must be noted that Raven Symone is a Black American woman, and was vocally supporting the notion of using discriminatory hiring practices based on applicant's names and how "African" they sound. She received much criticism from within the Black community pointing to internalized racism and self-hatred as possible motivation behind her statements.

about, or even acknowledging. So I think that just by virtue of speaking my truth, and getting people to laugh at it, it's opening up people's minds. Making them think, 'Oh, I never thought about x, y, and z in such a way.' It's challenging social norms, and challenging systems.

Coddett and Stark design and curate *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* with this ethos determining who we see throughout the show and whose voices reach our ears. Here, Coddett's comedy is not her only path to asking her audiences to see her in the fullness of her identity; the way that Stark and Coddett have structured their *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* shows reflects a disruption of the typical white male line-up that tokenizes one woman and one person of color, usually male. Coddett (and Stark's) performative strategy is not

only asking you to see her within her own comedy as intersectional, she is asking audiences to recognize the world of comedy in this way, as an intersectional landscape filled with a beautiful variety of experiences and perspectives. This performative strategy



Figure 4: Kerry Coddett performing at Brooklyn, Stand Up!!
Photograph: (Coddett "Kerry Coddett and Brooklyn Stand Up")

also disrupts the idea that the only kind of comedian who is good at determining the value of other performers is white and male (Vadnais).

Coddett, like Hari Kondabolu and Ava Vidal, is a published author of social criticism within mainstream media outlets, such as *The Atlantic* and *The Root*. Again, similar to the stand-up comics of Ch. 1, Coddett's performance on the page is difficult to distinguish from her performance on the stage, and the embodiment of another performative strategy. Her satirical

piece, “White on White Crime: An Unspoken Tragedy,” published with the *Huffington Post*, features an editorial coupled with a video that Coddett stars in. The video features Coddett and another actor as the hosts of a morning talk show on television, interviewing a media talking head who’s claiming there is no such thing as “white on white crime.” Coddett’s piece brings research to bear on the subject, all the while spoofing the commonly heard misinformation surrounding the false construct of “Black on Black crime.” Coddett states, “So why is white on white crime so prevalent, one may ask? Is it the music they listen to? Is it the white divorce rate, resulting in more white children coming from broken homes?” (“White on White”). The consciousness that Coddett brings to bear on this piece is the absurdity, injustice, and prejudice of conflating violence with Blackness. This is coupled with the illogic of categorizing crime in this manner when, even if taken to its logical conclusions, “white on white crime” is far, far more severe and detrimental to the national and localized safety of U.S. residents.

Coddett’s public intellectual output can also be seen in *The Atlantic*, in which she explores the relationship between *Saturday Night Live* and its casting of Black women (or rather, lack thereof). Coddett effortlessly floats between historian, social critic, and comic as she examines the continued narrative of the long-running, popular comedy sketch show. States Coddett:

With the advent of YouTube and digital media, if *SNL* isn’t finding great talent, it’s probably because the casting methods have lagged behind the times. Millennial Black comediennees might be getting overlooked because their progressive characters don’t fit the roles the show is used to. Perhaps it’s not that Black women aren’t ‘ready’ for *SNL*, it’s that *SNL* isn’t ready for a Black woman. And it won’t be – until

the show is ready to change the roles it asks Black actresses to play (“The Real Problem”).

The irony here, of course, is that *Saturday Night Live*’s casting directors need only attend Coddett’s *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* reoccurring show to discover a richly talented, inclusive line-up from start to finish (including Coddett herself) that would easily address their ongoing casting issues regarding intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc. While Coddett has been doing her work primarily in New York City, another comic has been doing important intersectional work across the country in Los Angeles: Tiffany Haddish.

Tiffany Haddish

Tiffany Haddish, a Black, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied comic was described by more than a few media outlets as a “break out” star of 2017. Though she’d already had a role on a major network television show and a leading role in Key & Peele’s film *Keanu*, 2017 saw the release of the comedy film *Girls Trip* (with Jada Pinkett Smith, Queen Latifah, and Regina Hall), her Showtime comedy special, *Tiffany Haddish: She Ready – From the Hood to Hollywood*, and her becoming the first Black female stand-up comic in history to host *Saturday Night Live*. It was these three comic offerings which truly catapulted Haddish into the national limelight. Prior to this, she had spent her previous years performing stand-up comedy throughout Los Angeles, where she is still currently based.

In Haddish’s interviews and new level of publicity, she revealed that she had struggled economically for a long, long time, through childhood and in young adulthood. Certain elements of Haddish’s “origin story” are now common knowledge from published interviews and her book, *The Last Black Unicorn* (2017): at age nine, her stepfather tampered with the brakes on her

mother's car with the intent to kill her mother, Haddish, and her three siblings. Haddish stayed home that day watching over her siblings, and her mother suffered the accident that Haddish and doctors believe triggered her mother's schizophrenia (Jeffries). Her life was never the same, and Haddish and her siblings were entered into the foster care system. Years later as Haddish was pursuing stand-up comedy, she was forced, at times, to live out of her car (Robinson).

These experiences inform the basis of Haddish's stand-up comedy, her perspective, and her voice as a comedian. Like comic Sommore, Haddish addresses the intersection of her Blackness, class, and womanhood to propel her comedy forward, forming a continuous undercurrent in her humor. As evidence of this, Haddish in her opening monologue for *Saturday Night Live* first addressed her role in the film *Girls Trip*, followed by this statement: "Before I was in *Girls Trip*, I grew up in foster care. I want to say thank you to anyone who paid taxes between 1990 and 1999, because if you wouldn't have paid your taxes, I wouldn't be standing here today" (Michaels).

In viewing Haddish's comedy special *She Ready – From the Hood to Hollywood*, it becomes clear that Haddish's comedy is very personal, and at first glance it may seem that Haddish relies more so on storytelling from her own life rather than commentary on broad social issues. However, it quickly unfolds that Haddish's social critique lies *embedded* within her storytelling: storytelling is her chief performative strategy. Haddish's experiences recount a great many events that would be considered painful by anyone unfortunate enough to experience them, but she turns them into comic fodder, and in doing so, lays bare the experiences of a Black woman living in current U.S. culture. As Donna Goldstein recounts in *Laughter Out of Place*, comedy is more than just a survivalist strategy, laughing at life's dark absurdities: "carnavalesque" is a humor that "forms part of a shared oppositional aesthetic forged within a

class-polarized context” (6). In her comedy, Haddish demonstrates a series of events in which she gains self-awareness of her being classed as other, and she uses humor to overcome these hurdles (both in the moment, and in her hindsight). *She Ready – From the Hood to Hollywood* captures a series of events in her life where her former life contrasts starkly with her presently situated new one, and her struggle to reconcile both reflects her intersections of class, Blackness, and her womanhood.

At the beginning of her special, Haddish dances onto a brightly shimmering stage, with six chandeliers and sparkling draped curtains as backdrop. Haddish states, “I’m feeling so sexy because of this background [gesturing to backdrop], everything in here is so beautiful... isn’t it beautiful? I feel so classy, I just want to Crip Walk in here,” contrasting the Euro-centric, white mainstream aesthetic of chandeliers and fancy drapes (which also indicate wealth), with a dance known for its origins in Crip gang ritual, hailing from 1970s Compton. In doing so, Haddish reminds the audience that although she has attained a new status of wealth that is typically raced as whiteness, she maintains her Blackness and proudly so (Koslow). This is a common thread throughout her special and all her work thus far: U.S. culture may have categorized her as a Black, poor woman, but through her rise to fame, she is now classed differently. Her new status in Hollywood classes her in a way that traditionally looks white in America. However, she continues to experience and live her Blackness, her womanhood, and her struggles, and she brings these with her however much she may advance economically. In essence, another of Haddish’s intersectional performative strategies is to blend her Blackness and womanhood with those accoutrements culturally associated with whiteness, such as wealth and fame, and recalibrate how her audience classes them.

Continuing with this strategy, Haddish consistently reframes the painful experiences in her life – growing up in foster care, dealing with abusive boyfriends, living out of her car and without a home – as adding to her worth, not detracting from that worth. Referencing her time in foster care, Haddish exclaims, “I grew up in foster care, anyone grow up in the system? [No one claps.] Oh, so I’m the only special one here? It’s cool. I was state property, I am valuable...the state of California paid so much money to make sure I didn’t die because they knew I was going to be special...I’m the last Black unicorn, bitch!” Haddish, typical of her comedy, expands what first sounded like an absurd punch line that was funny because it obviously wasn’t true into an argument supported by personal storytelling from her childhood:

This bitch Kyosha...she wouldn’t let me play tetherball. I walked up, she goes, ‘Nuh uh, Tiffany. Only kids with mommies and daddies can play.’ Three weeks of bullying me, not letting me play...I got mad. I decided I’d had enough. I got up to the front of the line, she was like, ‘Nuh uh Tiffany, only people with mommies and daddies get to play today.’ I was like, ‘You know what? You know what Kyosha? You know what?’ Because that’s what Black women do when we get upset, we repeat ourselves...and we throw this hand out here like this because we about to snatch your soul out your body. ‘Alright Kyosha, you’re right, I don’t have no mommy and daddy, but you know what I do got bitch? You know what I do got bitch? I got a judge and a lawyer. You know what else I got? I got a social worker that come and see me every two weeks. Do you got a social worker that come and see you every two weeks? No, because you’re not special, bitch. You know what else I got? Your momma and daddy been paying taxes since before you was born. And if you died tomorrow they will still be paying taxes. You know what those tax dollars do? Pay for my judge and my lawyer and my social worker, bitch. So it seems to

me that your momma and daddy love me way more than they love you, bitch’

(Robinson).

The ultimate punchline to Haddish’s comedy is that she is now gaining recognition and propelling upward economically, despite initially classed as a poor Black woman in present-day U.S. The joke is ultimately on you, America. American Studies scholar Michael P. Jeffries – to use casual parlance, “does the math” on the odds of Haddish’s rise to fame as a Black woman in comedy, remarking, “The stand-up and *Girls Trip* star had a breakout summer, and her success points to how comedy has – and hasn’t – changed for women and entertainers of color” (Jeffries). Jeffries’ article explores the sociology and economics of just what it took for Haddish to break through by reviewing the statistics of anyone rising to Haddish’s level of visibility in comedy as a woman of color. He notes a recent USC study that found of 21,000 characters in over 400 films and television shows, one-third of speaking roles were women, and only 28.3% of those were women of color. Jeffries explores this dynamic as it creates added pressure to succeed:

...Being funny isn’t enough to make it in comedy, especially for people of color.

Insecure cast member Amanda Seales told the *LA Times* that Black women in particular feel pressure to ‘figure out how to get into the mainstream...get the whites to like you.’

As Seales suggests, comedians of color often have to train themselves to ‘cross over’...in a way that white comics don’t have to. While Haddish’s relatively light skin and slim body type help distance her from racist stereotypes of sexually aggressive Black womanhood, she also refuses to tone down her act. She compliments her physical abilities with a sharp focus on Black women’s pleasure, both on stage and in *Girls Trip*.

Part of the strain of Haddish's humor is that she continues to move through life with the realities of her economic circumstances still ever-present mentally. A bit from her Showtime special concerned when she was on set for *Girls Trip* and used a "groupon." Groupon Inc. sells coupons for products and services at reduced cost by shopping them out to a "group" of people, thereby allowing the company to discount the product or service; Haddish relates a story about telling famous actress Jada Pinkett Smith that she bought a "groupon" for a swamp tour in New Orleans, and soon, Smith and her husband, equally famous actor Will Smith decide to join Haddish for the tour, not aware that a groupon is a publicly shared coupon. While the story is funny, it also allows Haddish to demonstrate the ways in which her careful handling of money – out of necessity – has carried over into her current, more financially prosperous life. In performing this material on national stages, Haddish forces us to reconsider the ways we class race, and the ways in which we race class, in contrasting the Smiths' obvious wealth with her own. Haddish's transition also notes these identity markers as social constructions, evidenced by a joke in her special in which she ticked the "white" box on a census form and changed many aspects of her life, including her credit score. Jokes Haddish: "You can be whatever you want in America! If all goes well, I could be the next leader of the KKK!" (Robinson). Haddish's personal storytelling is her performative strategy and she directs her stories to challenge our notions of race, class, and gender. Notes Donna Goldstein, "While the humor of the poor may not necessarily lead directly to rebellions and political revolutions, it does open up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced" (10). The comedy of Sam Jay, however, opens the cracks and crevices of intersectional identity by pointing to the minutiae of daily life, whether it be her own or that of others'.

Sam Jay

Sam Jay is a Black, queer, able-bodied comic currently based in New York City. What's remarkable about Jay's humor is that she investigates intersectionality and more specifically, how we in U.S. culture fall into these crevices in our society that have emerged out of the transition from a culture built on slave labor to one in which slavery is ostensibly illegal. By focusing on this transition, Jay's comedy points out behaviors stemming from oppression that have been passed down in both conscious and subconscious ways as a result, affecting everyone in U.S. culture. Jay's comedy, told from the vantage point of a Black, queer American woman, is a post-colonial approach to the question, "How do people behave today along demarcations of race, gender, and sexuality as a result of our shared national history?" One of Jay's performative strategies is a response to this question, reflecting deeply and insightfully by drawing on her own experiences; Jay's work onstage caters to what Jose Esteban Muñoz called the disidentificatory performance: "[which] strive[s] to envision and activate new social relations as a blueprint for minoritarian public spheres" (5). A great example of this can be found in Jay's bit in which she encourages her audience to embrace their individual stereotypes, including the specific ways in which white women cry:

Embrace your stereotypes. Stereotypes are the best thing, because they can help you if you play 'em up right. Like, how people think Black people are hostile. I use that to my advantage all the time. I ride the bus and the train, I blast music out my headphones, I look left and right real crazy while I do it. I bark every once in a while. No white people sit next to me for miles. It's the most peaceful ride of my life because I don't have to deal with your boogie boards and sailboats...the silly stuff you bring on public transportation,

like you don't know that people use this to get to work in the morning. 'Is that a canoe? What is this dude doing?'... White women, you guys cry and get whatever you want: beautiful. It's so dope. I wish people cared when I cry, I'd do it more often. Because as a Black woman, I'm still doing that 'Oppression/We Shall Overcome' cry where you get all stiff, and the one tear rolls down, and you don't know if she's holding in a fart or crying or what's going on. When white women cry, y'all break down, man. Your bodies go limp, your hair goes everywhere....(Fisher)

I interviewed Jay in Los Angeles about her work, where we discussed the various topics that inform her comedy, such as a more global empowerment of women, the ways in which white feminism has failed women of color, stereotypes, and the gaps in U.S. culture where identity falls through in strange ways, because of U.S. culture's colonial past (such as the previous example of how Black women cry vs. how white women cry). Her characterization of this failure on the part of white feminism to recognize the intersectionality of oppression that women of color face speaks to Jay's ability to tease out a specificity of interplay among identities, such as a white privilege of dragging your surfboard onto a subway car and (likely) not facing harassment for doing so.

To borrow from Muñoz, Jay's disidentification with white heteronormativity "offers a lens to view minoritarian politics that is not 'monocausal' or 'monothematic' – [it] is meant to discern a multiplicity of interlocking components of identity" (7). In Jay's own words to me (truncated for space):

It's always been kind of a white lady thing unfortunately [U.S.-based feminist movement], and I don't know what happened in its origins that framed it that way, the only thing I can think of is systematic oppression and racism that caused Black

women and women of color to be separate from that movement...in a sense, the movement itself feels like a privilege. The wage gap thing is bad, like all this stuff is bad, but I have to worry about just having a job, because I'm Black and a lesbian. Before I can even start this conversation about what you're going to give me when I get this job, I need the equal opportunity to even get these jobs. I guess there's some elitism in it, and not intentionally, either. It's like that's the unfortunate thing about building a society on slave labor...you're always going to have these gaps, you're always going to be working to try and get to this middle ground conversation. Because slavery created such a disparity, and society still builds itself amidst the disparity, so just because the disparity is now gone doesn't mean the effects of it don't remain and are socially passed down in a weird subconscious way. Like, I have this joke about how white women's tears are powerful...when white women cry, it demands things happen; but when a Black woman cries, nothing happens...white women demand attention in the way they cry – and I explained in the joke that's not a bad thing, they were just taught to cry differently. We were passed down an oppressive cry. You didn't want people to know you were broken...that was giving the master power over you.

At the time that I interviewed Jay in late 2016, she was still based in Los Angeles, performing regularly at comedy clubs there. Jay recorded a Comedy Central half-hour special, which further elaborates on her nuance of stereotypes and identity, extending her performative strategy of delving into the details of daily life. Jay calls on all of us humans to recognize where we sit along a marginalization/privilege continuum in relationship to other humans. For example, in her Comedy Central special, Jay jokes "...be white, live it up. It's your delusion that bothers

everybody...like, it's not that you gentrify a neighborhood – it's that when you do, you ride around on a unicycle in a gang territory” (Paul Miller).

In conversation with Jay, it becomes clear that part of what makes her comedy stand out amongst other comics with intersectional understandings and perspectives, is that Jay is incredibly specific about the various forms oppression and privilege may take among marginalized and dominant communities alike, destroying any sort of overly-simplistic oppression/privilege binary. Instead, Jay's comedy paints a picture of a spectrum that varies according to one's intersections of identity. Jay noted in our conversation, “I joke about getting an Asian baby over a Black baby, because I want the best...some people are going to say it's self-hating – so now I've got to be responsible for the identity of Black babies across America just because I say a thing? As long as I keep checking myself and I know that's not where I'm coming from...it's a joke about gay people and how we put value on everything, including babies. How we use our spending power.”

Jay's Comedy Central album recording in September of 2017 at The Stand (New York City) focused in large part on her life as a queer woman married to another woman for a time, and the tribulations of such a relationship; such as when their menstrual cycles synced (experiencing their periods at the same time). Jay's joke that “maybe there's something not natural about two women together after all,” speaks to Muñoz's assertion that minority subjects who must work with/resist dominant culture “must negotiate between a fixed identity position and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects” (6). Jay herself embodies an identity forged in response to misogyny, white supremacy, and heteronormativity, and uses her performative strategies to toy with the demarcations of how and where she disidentifies with the dominant culture or, in her synced menstrual cycle joke, even humorously questions the degree

to which she actually does disidentify (Muñoz). In the world of Jay's comedy, everyone's experience is valid, whether it's her own perspective, or someone whose intersection of identity is not her own. She playfully challenges, resists, and repositions these demarcations in her jokes, shifting where we assume the politics for a queer Black woman are supposed to exist in relationship to hegemonic notions of queerness, blackness, and womanhood.

Jay moved to New York City in 2017, becoming a staff writer for television show *Saturday Night Live*. She has since recorded a full-length comedy album for Comedy Central (Jay "Sam Jay Comedy Central Album Recording"), and was interviewed by HBO's *Vice News* as a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, where she discusses her position as a staff writer who lives at intersections of Blackness and the LGBTQIA community (Thomas). Jay's comedy speaks to the cultural impulse of many communities in fact, but it is her ability to find humor around them all with incredible nuance, specificity, and detail (like riding a unicycle in gang territory) which makes her such a unique comic trafficking in intersectional identity. Jay stated in our interview that comedy was her world, and she could build it as she wished: "In comedy...this whole thing is a hunt for identities and perspectives...all of these pieces are a part of who we are. We're connected, there's no way around it. Especially in our uniquely American identity."

Conclusion

Each of the comics in this chapter utilize their own performative strategies to address an intersectional identity. For Goldberg, it was creating a host of characters, each of whom embodied intersectional identities that explored Blackness, age, womanhood, disability, ethnicity, class, education, and more. Coddett's outlet for centering intersectional identity is not just in her own comedy but in her creation of an entire monthly show – an act that puts her in a

kind of artistic director role, itself a subversion of traditional power structures – featuring a line-up of comics who all speak to an intersectional world. Sommore’s work self-fashions and controls the terms of her intersectional Black womanhood by creating and performing her own self-definition while providing audiences with the necessary metaphors to understand it on her own terms. Haddish’s deeply personal focus on storytelling highlights the way class has intersected with her Blackness and femaleness while also drawing attention to how those things have and haven’t responded to the radical class changes she’s experienced as a successful comic. Finally, Jay’s comedy balances an intricate disidentification with white heteronormativity that plays with identities that overlay an American culture built on slave labor. What I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter is that while white feminism has the privilege of believing it fights for all women (e.g. the wage gap example), these women create a more inclusive feminism onstage that interacts with the scholarship of women of color, such as Alice Walker, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Hill Collins.²³ It is no accident that, in 1985, when Goldberg produced what I am marking as one of the first truly intersectional stand-up specials, she also played the lead character “Celie” in the film adaptation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*. Celie is a character who faces specific obstacles as a Black woman in America and speaks to Walker’s writing on Black feminism (Spielberg).

²³ The wage gap is an issue on feminism’s docket that relates to unequal pay for men and women in the U.S. (and worldwide). It is also a site on which we can read quite legibly that what is true for the white woman is likely not so for a Black woman or woman of color. Current figures from the American Association for University Women (AAUW) show that in 2016, white women’s earnings as compared with men’s earnings in the U.S. were at 79% of what men earned. However, Black women’s earnings were at 63%, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander women were at 59%, American Indian women were at 57%, and Latina or Hispanic women earned 54% of what men earned for 2016, thus revealing the intersectional realities of oppression for women of color just in this one arena (Miller).

White women comics who perform on the comedy stage aren't expected to address their race or aspects of white privilege because of the way whiteness is defaulted as "mainstream" or dominant and therefore not necessarily relevant to their experiences as an individual woman; Black comics do not get the same privilege. To be Black and female means to forever be caught in the crosshairs of both racism and sexism; these five performers have created comedy that addresses this intersectional embodiment in fascinating ways.

Comics discussed in the following chapter explore intersections of identity rooted in sexuality, gender, class, and (dis)ability, but do so positioned in whiteness. Some of these comics place a keen focus on sexuality and gender without racing themselves as white in their intersections of identity. Other comics do disabuse themselves of the privilege of not having to discuss race by foregrounding their whiteness as part of their identity. They all, however, encompass performative strategies that expose the body, literally or figuratively.

Chapter 3 – Explicit Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Disability from White Positionality

Some white comics embrace their critical opportunity to discuss race, privilege, and access; other do not. How do performative strategies shift when white comics *do* acknowledge their whiteness as raced, suggesting that it is a point of identity and not a racial default? The comedians in this chapter: Tig Notaro, Josh Blue, Ian Harvie, Adrienne Truscott, and Bridget Christie, all focus their charged humor to audiences in specific ways. Several of these comics – namely Notaro, Harvie, and Blue – have bodies that challenge so-called normative notions of gender, sexuality, and (dis)ability, as binaried constructs. Other comics in this chapter, such as Truscott and Christie, challenge social constructions of gender, race, etc. with dress/costume, and do so in turns by highlighting and/or diminishing attention to specific areas of the body. To unpack each of their performative strategies more specifically, I would like to consider how comics' manipulation of space and dress on stage reflects a rejection of sexist, racist, homophobic and ableist cultural messages in the U.S. and U.K., while considering the ways in which specific strategies either interrogate their experiences as raced or tend to ignore race as a core component of intersectional identity.

It is here that I would like to utilize Rebecca Schneider's concept of "explicit body" to implicate the body and its dress as a complex site of racial, gendered, sexualized and (dis)abled historical signification. Schneider analogizes the historical signification of intersectional oppression across the body to that of ghosts rising from the grave to remind us of the past:

...explicit body [is] a means of addressing the ways [performative] work aims to explicate bodies in social relation...unfolding the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage, the performance artists [here] peel back layers of signification that surround their bodies...bringing ghosts to visibility, they are interested to expose not an

originary, true, or redemptive body, but the sedimented layers of signification themselves (2).

Explicit comes from the Latin word *explicare*: to unfold (Schneider 2). There is a history of cultural directives that decreed that the disenfranchised did not deserve a place on a comedy stage. The comics examined in this section refute that by placing their bodies onstage, unfolding them literally and figuratively, explicitly, and speak – though sometimes through omission when it comes to race – directly to these cultural narratives. As is the case for all of the comedians in this dissertation, “It’s political to be who you are” (Zarum).

Tig Notaro

Tig Notaro, a white, queer, able-bodied, female comic performed a comedy set at LA comedy club Largo in August of 2012 that launched a new phase of her career in terms of notoriety and comic direction. Notaro had long been booked to perform there (she is based in LA), but the gig was a mere couple of days after learning she’d been diagnosed with breast cancer. Five months earlier, she had also experienced a near-fatal bout with C. diff, the breakup of a romantic relationship, and the unexpected passing of her mother (Goolsby). At the end of the documentary *Tig* (2015), which concerns her life since that performance, the following words appear in white text against a black screen: “Tig continues to push new boundaries with her comedy. In late 2014, she performed topless in New York with her mastectomy scars on full display. The show became another instantly iconic set” (Goolsby).

Notaro’s 2012 Largo set began with the words, “I have cancer,” and it was some time before her audience ascertained this wasn’t a set up for a future punchline; it was Notaro discussing her life. Notaro reassured the audience as they came to grasp the weight of her recent

experiences, stating, “It’s going to be okay. I mean, it might not be okay. But you’re going to be okay.” In a move that foreshadowed her future topless set, several comedy critics described this 2012 set in terms such as “naked,” “raw,” “exposed,” and “vulnerable” (Goolsby).

Late in 2014, reviewers in print and online publications began documenting that Notaro was beginning to perform the latter section of her comedy set topless (Katz). Then, in 2015, Notaro released her HBO special, *Tig Notaro: Boyish Girl Interrupted*, in which partway into her set, Notaro removes her jacket, followed by the removal of her shirt (Karas). Physically, it is not a flashy, flamboyant move that calls attention unto itself, nor to the particular details of her body. Notaro underwent a double mastectomy and has chosen not to undergo reconstruction of any kind. Her performance was bare, understated, casual and non-sexual. Immediately afterward, Notaro follows with airport jokes, which are completely at odds with the bold performative move she’s just made, inviting laughter at the absurdity of this contrast (Karas).

Notaro explained this choice as such: “It’s beyond being a woman, or a cancer survivor, or someone with a double mastectomy, no nipples, whatever it is – it’s just a human being and the human body. Healthy, sick, boobs, no boobs, cancer or no cancer. This is just life and this is my body, relax” (Cummings). Reviewers appear to pay deference to the tone that Notaro sets herself by downplaying her reveal in their reviews. For example, Jason Zinoman of the *New York Times* noted: “Comedians often show audiences their scars, but never so literally. The point here was not merely to shock, as quickly became clear. In fact, it was to convince us that there is nothing about which to be shocked. For the next thirty minutes, Ms. Notaro told jokes so funny and involving that any anxiety or tension in the room disappeared” (“Going Topless”).

Notaro builds the moment of removing her shirt with the material of the first half of her set, referencing her gender ambiguity. The title of her special, *Boyish Girl Interrupted*, offers

several potential interpretations of the ways in which Notaro views her body, and the ways in which others view her body. Given that Notaro's set content reflects how she was perceived as "boyish" prior to the removal of her breasts, it could follow that the "interruption" refers directly to her double mastectomy. Or interpreted more broadly, interruption could translate to the greater period of turmoil in her life, including her diagnosis, her mother's passing, and the C. diff hospitalization. Alternately, the interruption could be the removal of her shirt, interrupting the set to reveal herself. In this moment, she reminds the audience that breasts are not essential for her to claim womanhood; she is the same woman that she was before (Karas). She reveals through her body that it is a history of social construction that breasts are necessary to constitute womanhood. Judith Butler states, "...gender is the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'rediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (201). Notaro's work is evocative of Judith Butler, reminding us that gender performs; her body is made explicit, a "site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender..." (Schneider 2). Notaro's body challenges us to consider femininity and womanhood without one of their major cultural markers, breasts; and to reframe Notaro's body accordingly in an act of fumerism. Notaro engages what Schneider refers to as a "new ways of seeing:" in this case, she invites her audiences' gaze, but in turn, challenges us to see her just as she is without disruption to her performance of gender (Schneider).

Notaro jokes throughout her set about her gender, sexuality and body that play with her audience's perceptions of all three, untangling them from one another. When she mentions her fiancé, she leads with the pronoun "him" – shooting the audience a playful look when they audibly express confusion. Notaro has anticipated her audiences' perceptions of her sexuality prior to this moment, which rest on cultural stereotypes that conflate masculine dress and

appearance with lesbian sexuality. Notaro corrects herself: “her – I mean ‘she,’” and the audience laughs in relief for having their suspicions confirmed. This one of her performative strategies for toying with her audience’s perceptions of the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect – by separating them from one another, temporarily. One of her extended bits involves a pat down by a confused TSA agent at the airport, who obviously could not determine Notaro’s gender: “I knew that all I needed to do to help was to speak, to help her figure it out. But I didn’t” (Karas). When Notaro removes her shirt, she invites her audiences’ gaze, and makes her torso a site of “social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning” (Schneider 2).

Notaro, upon removing her shirt, begins the kind of jokes that are now considered so overdone in comedy, that they are passé: airline material. Airline/airport material is now considered so cliché as material in stand-up comedy, that comedians these days perform it to be ironic, which may very well be what Notaro does here in order to contrast comically with the bolder move of going topless.²⁴ The text of airline material in this moment signifies “normalcy” in stand-up semiotics around her toplessness, creating a subtext that states, “My body, just like my comedy, is normative.” Amid this innocuous material, she never references her chest or her body again. As Zinoman concludes, “She shows that comedy can not only transform tragedy into humor, but that it can also distract people from the most marketed and objectified image in popular culture: the naked female body” (“Going Topless”). Notaro’s performance lives in a

²⁴ Comic Paul Douglas once said of airline material, “Ah [airline material]...the stereotypical last refuge of the hack stand-up comedian. It’s the quintessential clichéd observational humor joke, the kind of thing you expect Jay Leno to come out with” (Douglas).

space which contests not only the politics, but the capitalist exploitation of breasts and womanhood for market gain. Lesa Lockford describes this corporeal space as “purposefully transgressing borders of propriety or social norms and thus intentionally engaged in acts of self-abjection...a contested space where agency and choice butt against political agendas and ideological constructs” (2-3).

However, Notaro has yet to discuss race explicitly onstage, nor integrate a discussion of how her whiteness intersects with her gender and sexuality. Seeing her perform in Kansas City on June 9th, 2017 at the Uptown Theatre, Notaro stated as part of her set that the “most political I would be,” is to walk alongside a street protest in action, carrying a sign that stated, “Whatever they said,” with an arrow pointing to other protesters (“Uptown Theatre”). In accordance with her white privilege, Notaro doesn’t need to acknowledge her whiteness onstage the way Black men and women are expected to, automatically. This joke is about letting others do the work of social activism, and then she will uphold it; but it reflects a choice on her part not to do the work of social activism outside of her comedy in relationship with bodies of color. This failure of acknowledgement is present in both her stand-up, and in her most recent television work, the series *One Mississippi*, which is set in the state of Mississippi. While fourth wave feminist ethos is to break down binaries of gender and sexuality and to be intersectionally-minded, this ethos has not yet presented itself in the performances of Notaro to date, and in this way she represents a problematic facet of social activism as performance in the context of this study (Cochrane).

When Notaro appeared on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* in 2017, he asked her about the shift from season one to season two of her show *One Mississippi*, and she stated: “The first season of *One Mississippi*, being originally from Mississippi, it was important to me to show the beauty of the state and the people. But season two, it felt kind of irresponsible to not go into the

reality of the darker sides of what's going on, with the election [of Trump]." There is possibly coded language in this statement. As *One Mississippi* did feature Black characters, Notaro could be referencing that despite the state's long, deep history with racism, she wanted to show the beauty of the people there, including persons of color, and white allies in the fight for racial equality. However, while the second season of *One Mississippi* thematically dealt with sexual assault (among exclusively white characters), it did not discuss racism, even when featuring an interracial couple in the lead cast. It is complex to untangle this aspect of Notaro's work, as she appears supportive in terms of Black representation, recently directing the HBO comedy specials of *2 Dope Queens* which features Black female comics Jessica Williams and Phoebe Robinson (Notaro "Queens"). I explore her work here because she does perform the untangling of gender from sexuality, and the disruption of a gender binary in interesting ways; but her performance of intersectional feminism does omit race. In the absence of explicit acknowledgment of her whiteness, her most powerful strategy – revealing her body to renegotiate the terms of normativity – can ultimately reify whiteness as normative, begging the question: is it then truly an intersectional feminist performance?

To see an example of a comic who does race himself as a white male, intersecting his disability with his race and gender as part of the performance of his identity, we can look to the comedy of Josh Blue.

Josh Blue

Josh Blue is a comic who, like Francesca Martinez, uses his body to disrupt an able-bodied/disabled binary on the comedy stage. Blue lives with cerebral palsy. Additionally, Blue is white, cisgender, heterosexual, and was born to white parents who had immigrated to Cameroon,

Central Africa prior to his birth. (He now lives in the United States.) For this reason, his comedy frequently addresses his status as an African American, and toys with untethering nationality and ethnicity from color. One of the things that makes Blue's comedy unique as an intersectional comic in this study, is that Blue's jokes lend themselves to depictions of his life as someone who lives both with a visible disability (cerebral palsy), and as someone who lives with a social designation (African American) which is typically tethered to Blackness and is not legible on his white skin. Blue's consistent acknowledgement that African Americans are treated unequally in American culture creates an interesting dynamic for his comic activism. In Blue's 2012 special *Sticky Change*, he jokes, "I gotta tell you, it's awesome being an African American. Especially a white one. I am pretty sure that has made it quite a bit easier on me, you know what I mean? I don't get pulled over for no reason. But when I do, I have lots of fun with it. [Imitating a policeman] 'You know why I pulled you over?' [Himself] 'Yeah, because I'm African American!' [Policeman] 'No, that's not why, no. You're driving on the sidewalk.' [Himself] 'Touché.' [Directing back to audience] I don't really drive" (Chapman). This joke forefronts his identity early on in his special, and acknowledges both his white privilege and his disability and how they might function together, intersectionally. Blue's jokes about being a white African American, which he makes consistently through his sets, serve to remind the audience that he is always able to eschew the label of African American in ways that those who are read as Black cannot. Simultaneously, the label of disability follows him everywhere, creating a social consciousness and awareness in his comedy of the ways in which he is included in dominant culture, and the ways in which he is also excluded.

In an interesting comparison with Francesca Martinez, Blue also discusses onstage the ways in which his cerebral palsy is perceived by strangers in public: in Martinez's case, she is

frequently misconstrued as drunk, whereas in Blue's case, his is frequently conflated with homelessness. It is difficult to discern without further research, but could the root cause of these misperceptions be of a gendered nature? Is it rooted in clothing or hairstyle? Both comics are read as white; how might this change if raced differently as well? In any case, it's a testament to intersectionality that Martinez is misunderstood in her failure to *behave* "properly" while Blue is misunderstood in terms of his perceived failure to provide himself with a home.

When I spoke with Blue in our interview, he told me that "when you have one disability, you live with them all," meaning that his physical disability was frequently conflated with other mental illnesses, as well as any and all physical impairments, which Blue suggested may contribute to perceptions of him as a man living on the street. Adding to these connotations, Blue shares two children with his ex-wife, who is originally from Japan: this creates another layer of confusion rooted in raced expectations when Blue is seen with his children. One of Blue's jokes discusses when he takes his two children out for a walk: "We got one of those double strollers, so we put them in there. And if I'm ever out walking them around by myself, it's always guaranteed that if somebody walks past us, they always look into the stroller like they're expecting to see a bucket of doorknobs. I gotta tell ya, the looks on their faces when they see little Asian babies is like, "What? Oh my god, the homeless man has some little Asian babies!" (Chapman). There is much to unpack in this joke: the conflation of disability with homelessness, the raced expectations of a white man having white children, and perhaps less obviously so, Blue is addressing the social stigma and ignorance which surround the sexual lives of persons living with disabilities. This stigma, particularly so for men, is rooted in a heteronormative, androcentric, and phallic notion that locates a fulfilling sexuality – and the performance of essentialized masculinity – in the physical capacity to "perform," prevalent in U.S. culture

(Esmail). Shaniff Esmail suggests that “[t]he analysis of sexuality and disability shows that cultural barriers may be more disabling than the physical impairment itself” (1148). Blue’s joke touches on the surprise of strangers to find that he has children at all, more so than even a bucket of doorknobs.

Blue does share one major performative strategy in common with Martinez, which is that he reframes “normalcy” within the context of disability. He challenges his audience to see disability from his perspective, wherein cerebral palsy is all he has ever known, and therefore, the rest of the able-bodied world becomes disadvantaged and outside of normalcy in Blue’s life. Blue jokes, “You know, I’ve overcome so much as a disabled person. I can do things that able-bodied individuals cannot. So when I look at my able-bodied children, I think to myself, ‘How will they ever make it like that? I should break their leg to give them half a chance’” (Blue Live). Blue spoke to me about the disconnect he observed between able-bodied individuals and those from the disabled community, particularly due to the notion that the disabled community was “a minority that someone could join at any time.” Blue’s body and comedy break apart a binaried able-bodied vs. disabled body cultural narrative, as Blue’s abilities, notwithstanding his ability to perform stand-up comedy, toy with perceptions of what constitutes impairment.

Martinez’s and Blue’s acts of performative activism, however, reify Rembis’s assertions that “[w]hile there are common patterns in people’s descriptions of their experiences with disability, particularly their focus on the body, a cross-cutting category and experience called “disabled” evidently does not exist; it is a fluid category embodying and marking profound discursive, embodied and material differences” (178). I would add that Blue’s examination of how his experience as “disabled” is mitigated and complicated by his birth nationality and the existence of his children presents a fluidity of race that creates additional space for Blue to

develop his unique performative strategy of contrasting notions of “normalcy” within multiple intersections of his identity.

To understand how a performer reframes “normalcy” within the context of his gender identity, I look to the comedy of Ian Harvie.

Ian Harvie

On Dec. 29th, 2016, Ian Harvie, a white, able-bodied, transgender man based in Los Angeles, became the first transgender person anywhere to release a stand-up comedy special: *May the Best Cock Win* (Polito). His special initially aired on the now-defunct Seeso network, but has subsequently been released by Comedy Dynamics on iTunes, Spotify, Apple Music, and Google Play. Harvie has continued to gain notoriety as both a comic and an actor, appearing on the television shows *Transparent*, *Mistresses*, and others. Harvie is also a socially progressive activist, and sees his presence onstage as a continuation of that work, as he related in our interview:

It’s interesting, I had in the early 90s started marching with Act Up and Queen Nation which were kind of radical, highly visible resistance groups back then that were doing demonstrations about HIV and AIDS, and how no one was paying attention and that people were dying, we used to go to high schools and do presentations, we got ourselves on the news jumping on the roof of a church building, taking on the Catholic church for their abstinence policies, because they didn’t fucking work. And just – being loud and in people’s faces and being the resistance. I remember connecting my comedy to those years, and thinking about how, I could actually *do* something in comedy – I could be in front of people, right in front of their faces, and not wag my finger at them, but I could

actually change something making them laugh. And it probably was the most subversive art form in a way....

Beyond simply infusing his comedy with trans activism, Harvie engages public discussions through speaking events, asserting his belief that we all can understand discomfort with the gendered expectations our culture places onto our bodies. When we spoke, he described his Ted Talk, “Everyone is Trans,” as exploring the idea that “everybody can identify with being uncomfortable in their body in relationship to their gender.” Harvie doesn’t just increase visibility for the transgender community, he challenges audiences to relate to his own body in ways they might not have thought possible. Harvie’s primary performative strategy in his comedy is that he lays bare (metaphorically) his explicit body for audiences, and then invites them to find commonality with his narrative in their own lives. Harvie told me in our interview that for him, his performative strategy in his comic work has specifically shifted from “I’m going to share my journey and change people,” to one of finding commonality with his audiences. This was prompted by his realization that:

...Our differences are an illusion. Everything we’ve been told about each other to keep us separate is actually a fucking joke and a farce...we’ve been sold this bill that we’re all so different, from color and race and bodies and comfortable vs. uncomfortable...there are places where cis men intersect [with me]. After my TED Talk, this guy came up to me and said, ‘I’m a little embarrassed to say this, but when I was in junior high, my nipples were raised and I was tortured by people because of it. Just a few years ago, I had surgery to correct them.’ I realized that me, who had extra-large nipples that came with breasts, and this guy...where we cross is in healing, and the physicalities of our discomfort might be different, but the root of them and the feeling about them are the same.

Through his comedy, Harvie also answers questions he believes audience members might have on their mind regarding transgender experiences, while relating his own experiences and ideas structured as jokes. He discusses his transition to living as a trans man, and what happens when he takes on the socialized signifiers of manhood and masculinity, having initially been socialized as a woman.

One of Harvie's bits from *May the Best Cock Win* is as follows, which demonstrates his strategy of connecting with his audience:

Taking testosterone, or actually producing it yourself, it doesn't matter, it's true it does make you think about sex all the time – [audience begins clapping] yes, it's true.

[Referring to audience members] See? The dudes are like, 'Yes, it is true, I told ya!' It's true. But we can evolve. I was socialized a girl, so I have that girl voice in me – thank God. Thank God for that voice because it taught me how to act fucking right. It did. But I now have that testosterone voice, and I have these two voices inside me. Not competing, but informing me...and I'll be walking down the street, I'll see somebody hot, and the testosterone voice is like 'C'mon, just look at her ass' – not out loud, but 'C'mon, just look at her ass!' And the girl in me is like, 'Stop objectifying her, gawwwd!' And then I'm like, 'Where did she get those shoes?' (Polito).

Here, Harvie draws on his personal experiences to illustrate the fluidity of gender as socially constructed. When Harvie states, "Taking testosterone, or producing it yourself, it doesn't matter," he is calling attention to the fact that for the body, the original source of the hormone bears no significance on his masculinity. Harvie is still compelled to perform gendered behavior as a man, such as checking out a woman's buttocks, regardless of the gender he was assigned at birth. Therefore, in Harvie's comedy, positioned from whiteness, he illustrates the performativity

of gender and guides the audience into understanding this on a deeper level. He embodies Judith Butler's argument: "...whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex...When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice" (9).

In line with Harvie's performative strategy of sharing commonality with his audience though, Harvie also makes it a point in his comedy to forefront his privileges within the trans community. That, as a white trans man, with an accepting family to boot, his experience of transitioning has been different than from what many others in the trans world have experienced.²⁵ Intersectionality is key to Harvie's, and all trans experiences. Laverne Cox, actress and a trans activist, recently wrote: "There's no universal experience of gender...to suggest that is essentialist and again, not intersectional. Class, race, sexuality, ability, immigration status, education all influence the ways we experience privilege so though I was assigned male at birth, I would contend that I did not experience male privilege prior to my transition" (Kiefer). Because Harvie races himself as a white trans man and acknowledges his privileges, he guides the audience into thinking through intersectionality within the trans community.

²⁵ The National LGBTQ Task Force, along with the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC) and the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) released a study in 2011 titled *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. This dataset found that "[f]rom education to employment and housing discrimination, from police brutality to health care disparities, Black transgender people are suffering at extremely high rates due to bigotry and transphobia" (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis).

Using this performative strategy once again to reach commonality with his audiences, Harvie states:

If you feel 100% okay about your body...wherever you are on the spectrum... then YOU'RE the fucking weirdo, okay? Because everybody else is struggling. Then I move to LA, and it's the plastic surgery capital of the world, and there's all these people modifying their bodies who are not trans-identified, but they are modifying their bodies to feel more masculine or more feminine. Whether you choose to do something about it or not, we all share the same feelings, we all share the same space...when you think about the Kardashian family and all of the procedures they've had? Caitlin was the eighth in the family to be trans (Polito).

While Harvie makes his body explicit through performance, discussing his transition, Adrienne Truscott is a comic who is unafraid to unfold her body in performance through a very different performative strategy.

Adrienne Truscott

In 2013, Adrienne Truscott, a New York City-based, white, able-bodied, cisgender performance artist, developed an hour-long stand-up comic set titled, *Asking for It: A One Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else* (Czajkowski). In this stand-up set, Truscott discusses rape and rape culture exclusively throughout the entirety of her performance with the intent to take power away from rape culture, stating to the audience, "I'm going to do a comedy about rape whether you like it or not." The show has been quite successful: it garnered the Foster's Edinburgh Comedy Award at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, as well as the 2013 Malcolm Hardee Award, and a nomination for the 2013 Total Theatre Award. Truscott has

performed the show primarily in the UK and Australia, but also continues to perform it here in the U.S. One of her performative strategies for this show, is that Truscott wears no pants and allows her vagina to remain visible throughout significant stretches of her performance. The performative strategy is an explicit one, allowing audiences to read the histories of sexual violence and gender onto her body, including times when, quite literally, these messages are made legible as Truscott positions herself behind images projected onto her body as canvas (Truscott "Asking").

When Truscott appeared on MSNBC's *The Docket*, it became evident that interviewer Seema Iyer was uncomfortable with the word choice of "vagina," and instead, Iyer substituted an alternative term on each occasion, stating, "Is there another way...besides showing [pause] – your 'hooaha' – to hundreds of people, to get the same message across?" (Iyer). Iyer's visible discomfort around discussing the vagina is part of what Truscott addresses in her show: the ways in which the vagina and womanhood are discounted and dismissed, contributing to the violence and proliferation of sexual assault. Truscott acknowledges that sexual assault is raced differently for Black and Brown women, both in her show and in interviews. In my interview with Truscott, she spoke insightfully about intersectional feminism:

When it is performing at its best, feminism is crucially aware that all of these identities intersect and there's rarely a place where something oppressive is functioning on just one level. Finding out that white women had largely voted for Donald Trump was devastating...on the other hand, people going, 'We need to have empathy for the white working-class male,' I'm like, 'Really?' The term working class [has become] coded as disenfranchised, where it's just white dudes who don't like the fucking feelings that they're having. I'm sorry, I've never associated working class with rural white males. I

studied labor politics [in college]...I'm well aware that there are disenfranchised white workers who are male in America, but I don't know that they are suffering any more than Black women!...I'm glad when [people who discuss intersectionality] know you can't just talk about feminism without talking about intersectional feminism. But I think that there are places where that conversation has still forgotten some things.

Truscott's comments about "the conversation" reveal her frustrations in the burden of having to educate white audiences about their invisible privilege. She specifically notes the white fragility of white males and white feminists who refuse to confront their exclusionary practices of ignoring the plights of black men and women. *Asking for It* was already in development when Daniel Tosh, another stand-up comedian, gave a performance in July of 2012 at the Laugh Factory (Los Angeles), in which he made fun of a female audience member for saying during his set that rape jokes weren't funny. Tosh responded, stating "Wouldn't it be funny if that girl got raped by like, five guys right now? Like right now" (Bassist). Though Truscott was already partway into her writing process, the Tosh rape-joke incident and the national conversation that ensued spurred Truscott to complete her set and to begin performing as soon as she was able to do so.²⁶

In developing her show, Truscott stated that she hopes to lessen the power of figures such as politicians who make unscientifically-based assertions regarding a woman's body. These include claims such as the assertion that a woman's body has the capability to prevent pregnancy in the event of a "legitimate" rape, as was stated by former U.S. Representative Todd Akin (R-

²⁶ For more on the discourse surrounding Tosh and his joke, see Holpuch.

MO) (Sullivan). Truscott has been clear in interviews that the content of her set solely depends upon disempowering the structures that support rape culture around the world through her use of fumerist humor; her punchlines never rest on the act of rape or the victims themselves. Consider Truscott's joke: "If you don't want to get raped, just don't do any of those things, right? So, no makeup, no miniskirts, no booze, no sexy dancing, and you should be pretty much just fine, like in India and Iran" ("Asking"). Truscott's fumerist joke satirizes an element of rape culture in which victim-blaming often rests on a series of activities, all of which Truscott intentionally commits throughout the show: exposing her body, drinking, wearing makeup, etc., while she also references the marginalization of South Asian and Middle Eastern women, demonstrating that this is a transnational issue. Furthermore, this reference connects "benign" policing of women's bodies to ones that, because of racism, are deemed to be authoritarian and oppressive elsewhere in the world while reminding us that, ultimately, rapes are committed regardless of the behavior of women. In our interview, Truscott stated of her performance, "...once I had it in my head to do it, it was really clear to me that it would be an insurgent trick to talk about gender and violence against women in a way that would trick people into listening, because people who would never listen to a lecture, or speak out about it might go to a comedy club...."

Truscott's use of partial nudity is like that of Notaro's, in that neither performer is looking to arouse or titillate sexually with the reveal of areas of the body traditionally associated with sexualized performance, such as in Burlesque or striptease. However, Truscott brings her own performativity to bear on the activism of nudity in her comedy. Unlike Notaro, who intentionally downplays the reveal of her body and makes no other reference once revealed, Truscott incorporates her vaginal reveal for almost the full length of her hour-long set. Her costume otherwise consists of a denim jacket, bra, alcohol which she drinks throughout her

performance, and a blonde wig. In donning this costume, Truscott frames herself as every cliché of rape culture's justifications for rape: she's drinking alcohol, behaving flirty and approachably for the audience, and her vagina is framed specifically as open and available. Truscott races herself as a white victim, in which the blonde wig assists. She creates a cliché of the rape victim as she is often portrayed in the frequent uneven media coverage of an accosted white woman, vs. black rape victims. The image of a young white woman, often a college student, is manipulated by the media to create a stereotype of white fragility that is conflated with a particular phenotype of whiteness and femininity. Her use of a blond wig exemplifies this point and creates more distance between her audience and Truscott as herself. Coupled with jokes referencing women in India and Iran as rape victims, she reminds us that the rape victim we imagine in U.S. culture is just that, a construct of a victim that media pays attention to most; her work also takes advantage of – and works to debunk – the construct of the rapist as “not white.”²⁷ Truscott highlights these constructs by removing the wig, the multiple bras, and other clothes she wears throughout the performance. Current statistics show in fact that one out of every ten rape victims are male-identified; transgender persons are at a higher risk for sexual assault and rape, and Native Americans are twice as likely to experience a rape/assault as compared to other ethnicities (Berkowitz).

Truscott related to me that allowing her vagina to be seen in the show is anything but erotic, and that it is rather silly and unsexy. Similar to Notaro, she highlights the absurdity of the

²⁷ To paraphrase scholar Matthew Vadnais, historically speaking, specific acts - from lynchings to Trump's border wall – have been a direct response to the racist caricature of men of color as hyper-sexualized. Truscott forces us to equate U.S. tendencies with the Islamophobic perceptions that Islamic societies police their women; it is potent because it is not just rape culture that prevents Americans from making the connection there, but racism (Vadnais).

emphasis on areas of the body which may or may not link to someone's gender identity. In addition, it is perhaps the clearest and most direct way of proving that an accessible and unclothed vagina is not a justification for rape. Truscott states: "If the rules are that a flirty lady having a good time in provocative clothing and having a couple of drinks is a girl asking for it, then that would be me – and yet every night I am able to walk out of my show unraped" (Spring). Here, Truscott's reveal constructs her explicit body as subject to a history of sexual violence while locating that same body as one that, through performance, resists that violence.

The criticism of Truscott differs starkly from that of Notaro, in which reviewers and interviewers appear to respect the fact that Notaro's shirtlessness is not the framing device around her comedy: neither is it so for Truscott, but nonetheless, both sets of reviewers consider the move as performative activism. Both comedians use their bodies as points of vulnerability and in doing so, make objectification hyperreal and grotesque to signify the oppression of women. Truscott's reviewers and interviewers frequently ask, how does her activist message make it through to audiences when her vagina is on display? In Truscott's appearance on *The Docket*, Iyer voices this criticism: "This is my point," says Iyer, "is that if someone's 'hooaha' is onstage, then the viewers – the audience – could be distracted from the message by what they're looking at – no? (Iyer). Truscott has addressed this criticism multiple times, stating:

If that was something that was going to bother me [men leering at her vagina during her performance] or have been uncomfortable for me, I would have made different choices. And, I also think nudity is hilarious sometimes – I think I look hilarious in the show. And I think that it's okay for a body to simultaneously hold and express comedy and desire and sexuality and politics, all in the same body. I've been brought up by some feminists, who say, 'Well she's mad if she thinks anyone is going to listen to anything she says if

she's not wearing pants.' And I grant everybody – men and women – a lot more credit than that. That if they are in a room, for an hour, and there's a vagina and an hour of material, I reckon most brains are going to open up and hear a bit of the material, you know? ("Festival TV")

I argue that this is precisely Truscott's performative intention: to situate the body in a history of gendered, racialized, and sexualized cultural baggage, in a performance of feminist activism. In Truscott's words, "I'm perfectly comfortable as a performer to make other people uncomfortable, but I like to think that lack of comfort is something progressive and interesting and not just to be offensive for offence's sake" (Czajkowski).

Beyond the show itself, the discourse around rape culture has lent depth to Truscott's conviction of just how necessary the show is to advancing anti-rape feminist activism. Her performance contextualizes rape culture discourse and takes up an issue (rape culture) significant to fourth wave feminism, as reflected in the recent #TimesUp and #MeToo movements.²⁸ Truscott said in our interview that, "I've been told by newspapers they won't put in the title of the show...they go, 'we can't print the word rape.'...a newspaper saying they can't print the word 'rape'? You have to report on this horrible, actual act in the actual world, which is far more serious than a comedy show...so really?"

The final comedian in this section who uses her body and dress as a performative strategy toward activism within her stand-up comedy is comic Bridget Christie.

²⁸ #MeToo, founded by Black activist Tarana Burke, and #TimesUp, founded by a collective of women in Hollywood including Black writer Shonda Rimes and white actor Natalie Portman, are movements that focus on creating a world and a workplace, respectively, free from sexual harassment and assault (Langone).

Bridget Christie

Bridget Christie is a London-based, white, cisgender, abled-bodied, British female stand-up comic who, throughout her career, has experimented with costume as a specific performative strategy. She has entered the stage costumed as an ant as well as other animals and material objects. Her performance objective is to move past the audience's perception of her as a female comic and everything that may imply. Christie is responding to a history of audible disappointment after a woman's introduction to the comedy stage. In Leslie Jones' special *Problem Child* for example, she is introduced by the emcee as "one of the baddest females working in comedy today," and the centering of Jones' gender in her introduction is in direct contrast to the way male comics are brought onstage, which typically does not make note of their gender (Binkow). Were the emcee in Jones' special to also make note of her Blackness, the inherent racism in such a move would be apparent as well. Here, the subtext of 'one of the baddest females' suggests that, of a marginal group working within comedy, Jones has reached the top, which is still positioned beneath the dominant culture of stand-ups (white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual men). States Christie of her experiments in costume:

...The disappointment caused by the arrival of my point of view and X chromosomes onstage was palpable. How I got around that was by presenting myself as non-human matter. Some of my earlier stand-up characters were weeds, viruses and types of wood, all achieved with tawdry homemade costumes. Any preconceived notions of what a female stand-up talks about are soon eliminated by the arrival onstage of a person-shaped clump of Japanese knotweed...I was the Trojan Horse of female stand-up (*A Book* 68-69).

In performance from 2010 to 2011, she created and performed an isolated set known as *An Ant*, which served as a metaphor for the history and reception of female stand-up performance (*A Book* 70). In *An Ant*, Christie sought to address and contradict the notion that women weren't funny. In Rebecca Schneider's use of 'explicit body,' she states that the performer's manifestation of explicit body onstage is the use of the body to "reenact social dramas and traumas which have arbitrated cultural differentiations between...natural and unnatural, essential and constructed" (7). Here, Christie substituted the ant for the social drama which has taken place for women and other marginalized communities in the comedy world when placing themselves onto stand-up comedy stages. In doing so, she reminds the audience of the social scripts that have been constructed around the appearance of marginalized bodies onstage, and challenges us to think about those scripts as applied to an ant (an insect most do not typically think of as gendered, raced, sexualized, classed, or able-bodied). In doing so, Christie calls into question what is "natural or unnatural, essential or constructed." Eventually, Christie left behind full costumes but has continued to experiment with dress as a performative strategy of isolating the ways in which audience members understand categories of difference such as gender, race, sexuality, ability etc., as measured in degrees of power away from white male heteronormativity. Using animals, costumes, organisms, etc., Christie is able to deconstruct the utility of the category, as well as unpack the stereotypes that are projected onto her body that limit her creativity. In Christie's own words: "So the ant was the start of me talking about 'the annoying things women have to put up with'. Then, in 2012, a man farted in the Women's Studies section

of a bookshop...and I dropped the ant façade. And became myself. Not An Ant. But A Woman” (*A Book 75*).²⁹

In line with a near-uniform streak of comics addressing the Brexit/Trump shift in late 2016 in London, Christie developed her show, *Because You Demanded It. Because...* ran at the Leicester Square Theatre where, for a time, it could be seen performing on the same night as Stewart Lee’s stand-up show, *Content Provider*, discussed in Ch. 4. *Because...* was a timely and intersectional response to the racist aspects of the Brexit and Trump votes, as the core of this show’s exploration was a plea to journalists’ accountability for not discussing these intersections. This show also became the next artistic leap forward in use of costume within Christie’s career. I saw the show myself on Nov. 22, 2016, the same evening that Ben Williams of *The Guardian* saw it and recounted in his article, “How Bridget Christie Found the Funny Side of Brexit.” Christie stranded several threads of ideas together that became the basis of her show: the connection between anti-immigrant sentiment and racism behind the Trump/Brexit votes, the failure of white women’s feminism to address race, and the failure of journalists to hold politicians and citizens accountable for these things. *Because...* forefronted the intersectional identity of others, particularly those who would immigrate to Britain.

Christie stood onstage in denim jeans and a red top, covered by a beige “business” style blazer. There was no real set design to speak of, and the lighting was subtle. It became clear by the end of her performance however, that this was meant to draw attention to ultimately what

²⁹ The show that developed out of this shift, *A Bic For Her*, performed at London’s 2013 Calm Down Dear Festival, which also hosted Adrienne Truscott’s *Asking For It* that same year. This year, Calm Down Dear 2018 had a panel among its offerings called “Feminism at the Intersections,” set to discuss “how much impact is intersectional thought having, and what work is still to be done?” which is rather like, well, this entire dissertation (Logan).

became the most important aesthetic aspect of her show – her clothes. This was a reveal at the end of show which highlighted the thematic strands in a singular visual image, capitalizing on charged humor via the image of her body. To Williams in *The Guardian*, Christie said of her show, “I love gardening so much, and particularly my fuchsia [plant]. I thought, ‘I don’t know if I really want to keep thinking and talking about feminism, politics, and death. I might just do a nice show about gardening.’” While this may sound misleading, what Christie performed in *Because...* was that she discussed fuchsia gardening in depth, which became a greater metaphor for immigration. The gardening metaphor addressed the arguments of “Leave” voters in the EU Brexit decision who wanted Britain to break from hosting immigrants from elsewhere in the EU, thereby necessitating a leave from the EU. The fuchsia, meanwhile, is a plant that was first discovered in the Caribbean, and is native to mostly Central and South America. For Christie to grow and tend to her fuchsia plant in London, the plant had to have immigrated. Christie stated in performance of *Because...*, “While some falsely believe that the fuchsia takes up resources within the soil it shares with native English flowers, the fuchsia actually contributes more to the soil than it uses...a soil that cultivates many different flowers contributes more overall to the natural economy.” Her joke mimics the arguments of those who oppose immigration who say that immigrants take up resources (jobs, health care, etc.) that would otherwise go to “native” British residents.

Christie came down hardest on journalists who weren’t holding themselves professionally accountable for openly discussing the racism that permeated the Brexit decision and the motivations to discourage newcomers from immigrating. Early in her set, Christie described a detailed account of a BBC interview she saw on television in which a journalist, interviewing a “Leave” voter, ignored the large swastika tattoos he had across his arms and chest. Because the

journalist failed to bring up the glaring significations on his interviewees body which related to his political beliefs and voting motivations, Christie decried this journalists' non-address of glaringly obvious political motivation in his interviewee as emblematic of the culture's failure at large to address these issues.

Christie's sentiment has not only been expressed in her show, but by other British comics as well, such as Gina Yashere (discussed in Chapter 4) when discussing the 2017 engagement between Britain's Prince Harry and American Megan Markle, whose biracial heritage was the subject of discourse in both countries. Britain's Channel 4 News hosted a panel of all Black women in November 2017 consisting of Yashere, and writers Afua Hirsch and Charlie Brinkhurst Cuff to discuss the royal engagement, and Britain's willful avoidance of race. Hirsch noted, "It's representative of a very British problem, which is we don't talk directly about race...we sweep race and identity under the carpet." Yashere added, "It's the undercurrent of subtle racism in the UK where they use these terms that they don't deem 'racist' but they are; it's just another way of saying 'She's Black! She's not one of us. She's 'dusky.' She's 'exotic'" (Newman). Christie's show addressed this tendency to "sweep race and identity under the carpet" in relation to Brexit. Christie cited the statistic of white women who voted to leave the EU also, 53%, (similar to the white female voting outcomes in the United States for President Trump) and called on white feminism particularly to embrace conversations of race, firmly lodging this production in fourth wave feminist discourse, yet making the omission of race in the movement abundantly and painfully clear.

The costume reveal in Christie's show came in the final moments when she removed her jacket, finishing her show on a plea to end racism. Underneath her jacket, the red top revealed itself to be the middle of a Union Jack flag tank top: one of the most recognizable symbols of the

United Kingdom. Across her arms and chest were large swastikas painted on her body. The juxtaposition of all these elements carried a theatrical surprise, as well as a larger statement and performative strategy. The swastikas were a callback to the BBC interview she had cited earlier in the performance. Regarding the Union Jack flag however, is that the flag for anyone that was colonized by the UK – which is nine out of every ten countries, or close to ninety percent of all countries on earth – is a symbol of colonial rule and oppression (Copping). The swastikas in their most well-known connotation are a symbol of the Nazi Party of Germany, representing forces of hatred and segregation for race, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, and class. The act of Christie removing her jacket to reveal the swastikas on her arms and chest may be thought of simply as a callback to her earlier material regarding the BBC interview. But Christie paired this visual with a Union Jack flag shirt, making her body explicit and representative of England's colonial past, present, and – depending upon the actions of Britain's populace, including her audience – the future, as well.

Her body serves as a warning of what has passed and what may yet be, when racism goes unacknowledged, coded in political strategy (like Brexit), coded in language (like “exotic,” and “dusky”), and coded in foreign policy (like colonization). Rebecca Schneider notes that “[t]he danger inherent in binary explosion – the fear unleashed in close interrogation of our distinctions – is manipulated with political purpose in contemporary feminist performative interrogations of social symbolic constructs made explicit across literal bodies” (24). It was alarming to see the sudden reveal of swastika symbols across Christie's body, an act that embodied a ‘performative interrogation of symbolic constructs’. Here, the construction made symbolic is the result of uniting racist ideology with political and national policy: gone unrecognized by Britain's journalists, but framed front and center, explicitly demonstrated by Christie's body. Rebecca

Krefting contends that charged humor can question the national and cultural notions of citizenship, or as she states, “who belongs, and what does belonging mean in practice?” (16).

Christie’s final image in her stand-up show uses charged humor to question the audience on what kind of Britain they want to have: one where citizenship and belonging is open to all, or only to some?

Conclusion

This chapter’s comics all utilize performative strategies to challenge notions of identity, and all do so largely through some sort of bodily reveal, either literally or figuratively. This includes revealing the body to expose an oft-hidden center of rape culture discourse (Truscott), revealing what is not there (Notaro), revealing what lies beneath (Christie), or by simply revealing their lived truths (Blue and Harvie). While all of these comics are legible as white subjects, we can see that racial identity as part of intersectional identity was a moving target of focus across all these comics’ material, with some of these comics consistently discussing themselves as raced, and some less consistently so. To really perform a centering of intersectionality in their stand-up comedy however, racing themselves as white becomes a key performative strategy, because it negates an invisibility of whiteness and a defaulting of whiteness as somehow unraced. Black and Brown comics do not get this privilege; when they stand on stage, they are expected to make jokes about the melanin that others them. When comics such as Blue, Truscott and Christie acknowledge and race themselves as white however, they disabuse their white privilege of not having to acknowledge their race in their comedy, and they center themselves as raced subjects in a truly intersectional performance. To problematize however, it may be that at some point within the work of these comics, their moves to construct

whiteness within their comedy may inadvertently reinforce it, as well. It can certainly be argued, as scholar Matthew Vadnais does, that some jokes and strategies within the same sets of material certainly vary in terms of their engagement with whiteness, and it is problematic to paint these performative strategies with a broad brush (Vadnais).

This study's final chapter considers the performance of race by contemporary comics who hail from both within and outside of the U.S. The transnational lens through which many of the next chapter's comics understand race is a deeply engaged story about the social construction and translation of race and racisms across national borders. The two comics discussed in this upcoming chapter who were raised in the U.S., Tehran Von Ghasri and Aziz Ansari, are men who were raised by parents from outside of the U.S., which enables their own unique transnational perspectives from within U.S. culture. All, however, forefront intersections of race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and more at the center of their comedy.

Chapter 4 – Comedy in the Contact Zone: Critical Race Humor from a Transnational Perspective

“I always am on the outside looking in, and at the same time, I’m on the inside looking out...” –

Tehran Von Ghasri

This chapter answers the research question, what performative strategies do intersectional comics use to invite audiences to see them in their fullness as not only raced subjects, but specifically as subjects whose race is constructed differently dependent upon the country in which they are performing? How do these performative strategies assist these comics in translating their comedy across national borders with the inevitable fluctuating demarcations and delineations of racial construction? What does this mean for their comedy when they have to address themselves as part of the Black diaspora (or in the sole case of white-positioned Lee, who refuses to let his audience remain ignorant of Black and Brown diasporic populations)? I am applying Rossing’s concept of critical race humor here because the comedians in this chapter: Tehran Von Ghasri, Aziz Ansari, Trevor Noah, Gina Yashere, Stewart Lee, and Aamer Rahman, are all comics whose work constitutes critical race humor as a “form of public pedagogy...[providing] people with the skills and habits of thought necessary to think critically about and transform racial knowledge and reality” (16). Critical race humor, or the defiance of “dominant practices and ideologies that promote the erasure of material realities of race,” coupled with a transnational awareness, is the through-line underneath the work discussed here in this chapter (17).

The transnational element for these comics is not just constructed within their own identities, but is also a matter of where they perform and how they adapt their comedy in response onstage, place – to borrow from Mary Louise Pratt – I would call a comedy contact zone. Pratt defines a contact zone is one in which the colonizers and the colonized meet; where the “conquered subject [uses] the conqueror’s language to construct a parodic, oppositional representation of the conquerors own speech” (35). What becomes clear from analysis of the following comics is that they all use their voice often – literally and figuratively – to construct a parody of whiteness for a variety of national audiences. All of these comics perform not only in the U.S., but in a host of other countries, including Kuwait, Israel, the U.K., Dubai, Palestine, Germany, Australia, Mexico, etc. The only two comics in this chapter who are from the U.S. originally (Von Ghasri and Ansari) are Persian-African American and South Asian, respectively, who are first generation Americans in families who immigrated from elsewhere. There is a global awareness in all of these comics’ work of the ways in which color, ethnicity, class, and nationality intersect to create a different reading of their bodies dependent upon where, and to whom they are performing – and their strategies in performance reflect this. To begin, I look at the comedy of Tehran Von Ghasri.

Tehran Von Ghasri

Tehran Von Ghasri is a biracial African American and Persian American, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied comic who immediately forefronts his intersectional identity in his comedy, and builds his sets around his international perspective. He also performs around the world, frequently in Farsi, bringing his unique perspective abroad in interesting ways. He opened a recent set at the Laugh Factory in Los Angeles, CA with the following:

I see you looking. It's Persian night – it's a mix. But the reason I'm up is because I'm half Persian. Oh yeah – you're shocked – '[Gasp] He's one of them!' I can see what he's thinking [pointing out an audience member] 'Oh my god. That's the most dangerous combination in America, bro.' That's right, I'm America's worst nightmare. Half Persian, half Black? Half n***a, half terrorist? *Shahs of Sunset/Atlanta Housewives* put together? Car jack, hijack, I'm capable of anything! (Black and Persian).

What places Von Ghasri into this study is not merely that he forefronts his identity at an intersection of Persian and Blackness in interesting ways, such as highlighting the racial stereotypes of both groups in the racial imaginations of white Americans; like many of these comics, Von Ghasri's work also places him at intersections of public intellectual output and activism. Von Ghasri holds degrees in international politics and communication, a master's degree in economics, and a law degree from Georgetown University. Rather than pursuing the law however, Von Ghasri chose comedy, as he stated in our interview, "because comedy is the field in which I, as an individual, can speak to the most amount of people...I'm not preaching, I'm reaching out to people." One of the ways that Von Ghasri's social consciousness plays into performative strategy is that he actively tries to dismantle the typical white male aesthetic of the line-up in shows that he curates himself. He does so all around the world, becoming a transnational comic who has performed in such places as Kuwait, Dubai, Israel, Palestine, Australia, and Mexico. In doing so, he makes it a consistent practice to create inclusive and diverse arrangements of performer line-ups, similar to Kerry Coddett.

Von Ghasri is not only concerned with presenting a more inclusive line-up onstage, but he takes a vested interest with progressing the careers of those performers. He is very familiar with what he refers to as "mic time," or the amount of time one spends performing behind the

microphone, and how this contributes to the progression of a comic's career. Von Ghasri understands that when a Black or Brown woman is positioned among a line-up in which she is not the only token woman of color, her voice goes from being an othered worldview, to becoming a perspective that is grounded in an increasingly familiar set of voices, experiences, and collective narrative. Von Ghasri stated in our interview on his curating of line-ups that to disrupt the usual aesthetic of one Black male, one white female, and eight or nine white males, it does the following:

Well, I personally pick my line ups with the understanding that I will have people of color, women, and especially women of color on my show. We are not just a minority in the census, but we are overall given a minority of stage time. Comedy, as in society, stereotypes and boxes people in. Black comedians do "Black Night." Women comedians do "Women shows." That limiting of stage time also limits what we can do, and how we can grow. Comedy is a game of practice makes perfect. The more stage time you get, more mics you hit, the better you will get. Period. Limit those things and you cap how good one can get. Let the audience determine who is funny; not [who is funny as] a pre-judgement of the audience. All my shows are like this. I have many examples of shows that are not: just look at basic line-ups. I think there are even twitter accounts dedicated to it. You see so many all-male all white line-ups, it's crazy.³⁰

³⁰ The most readily quantifiable assessment I've made from several years of research in this study, is that comedy clubs – even the most famous of them in LA and NYC – typically have a line-up on any given night that tokenizes persons of color. My only instance in seeing a female performer of color over the course of sixteen club visits (NYC, LA, and London 2016-18) was a Korean comic, Kat On, who opened at The Laugh Factory in LA. Typically, there is just one Black male performer, one white female performer, and no women of color among a line-up of

Von Ghasri frequently plays with the notion of identity and others' perceptions of himself in his comedy. In a bit titled "Racist Baggage," he describes how a white woman behind him in line at an airport gate check-in is accidentally bumped into by a man who happens to be Black, causing her to utter "Fucking Black guys. They're all disrespectful. Look at them, they're all the same." Von Ghasri: "I was hurt, because this bitch didn't think I was Black," which points to the ways in which Von Ghasri's intersection as a Black and Persian man disrupts a Black/white binary that may blur the lines for people to construct him racially on sight. In our interview, Von Ghasri stated, "I cannot separate my cultural identity, my race, my heritage, my mix – from the words that come out of my mouth and that form my comedy. While I can understand the world from many different perspectives, I give the world my perspective. Which, because of my mix, because of my race, because of my cultural identity, my heritage, my religious belief system, is an extremely easy place to come from. So I always am on the outside looking in, and at the same time, I'm on the inside looking out..." Here, Von Ghasri self-defines as an intersectional subject offering a near-text book definition of the term according to Crenshaw and Collins' Black feminist standpoints.

twelve or more white male comics. This was true of my time in LA at The Comedy Store (one white woman and two Black men), The Laugh Factory (just Kat On), and The Comedy Union (an all-Black comedy club which had no women perform that night). This was again true in New York City throughout my visits in 2017, including The Stand (one Black male and one white woman), Eastville Comedy Club (one Black male and one white woman), Comedy Cellar (one white woman and no persons of color), Gotham Comedy Club (no persons of color), Caroline's (no persons of color), and Dangerfield's (one Black male). An exception to this is Kerry Coddett's monthly *Brooklyn, Stand Up!!* show, discussed in Ch. 2. It is worth noting that this was not the case in London, among Monkey Business Comedy Club, Top Secret Comedy Club, Leicester Square Theatre, and the Palace Theatre. In a U.S.-based comedy club culture where persons of color and white women are tokenized in line-ups, it is radical, political and activist to disrupt the typical line-up of comics set to perform in a given evening.

The flip side of Von Ghasri's outward perspective is the way in which bodies from outside the U.S. are raced upon entering the U.S., a subject which crops up in his stand-up as well. An interesting example of this is when this subject came from an audience member during one of his sets. A woman in Von Ghasri's audience spoke up during his bit on the *Black Panther* film at the Laugh Factory. The following is their exchange:

Von Ghasri: So, here's what I think is interesting about *Black Panther*, and I propose this to you sir in the interracial couple –

Woman: We're not interracial, I'm Australian.

Von Ghasri: Oh – you do know you're white though? I'm going to explain to you: if we were in a car, and a cop pulled us over, and said, 'Get on the floor n***er,' you'd look at me like, 'you better get on the floor n***er!'

What's interesting here is how this audience member conflated race with nationality; as an Australian, she did not consider herself to be white. Von Ghasri uses humor to point out that as an example situation (the U.S.-based context of police brutality and racial profiling – a historical and ongoing feature of racism), there would only be one assessment of her by all involved, and that is that she is white.³¹ Not only is she white, but key here is that if her own well-being was at stake, she would automatically utilize her white privilege and distinguish herself from Von Ghasri, who has a reasonable expectation of the potential for violence at the hands of law enforcement. Von Ghasri's performative strategy is to educate this woman in an act of critical race humor, but also to contextualize the following: that whiteness in the U.S. means not only

³¹ Though, sadly, this issue of police brutality and racial profiling is not limited to merely the U.S.

evading the violence and oppression that comes with being a person of color, but often being complicit in the perpetuation of systemic racism, too.

I asked Von Ghasri about transposing his comedy from one country to another, and what performative strategies he uses to address the complexities of moving his body across national borders. His response touches on a theme that reveals itself in different ways throughout this chapter, which is that of the voice, both physically and figuratively:

Well one thing you learn quickly when you're mixed is how to have different selves for your voice. It's a different sound that comes out of your mouth, and it's a different voice that you have internally. My comedy works well because I'm able to relate to people in different places easily and authentically. So, when I'm in Kuwait, even though for the most part I'm pretty much saying a lot of the same stuff, I do so in a way that relates to Kuwaitis. And I'm not saying I have an accent; no. I'm saying I understand the verbiage and the way to contextualize that exact same content.

Vocal coding becomes a major performative strategy for comics who transpose their comedy across nation-states. This is something that comic Trevor Noah is also masterful at doing, and it is worth taking a closer look at how he navigates race across borders, utilizing his facility with voice as well.

Trevor Noah

Long before he was tapped to become Jon Stewart's replacement on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah, a biracial, white and Black-South African ancestry, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual performer had made a name for himself as a stand-up comic in his home

of South Africa. Noah was born to a white Swiss father and a Xhosa mother (Bantu ethnic group of South Africa), and a lot of his humor stemmed from the way his body was considered illegal as the product of one Black parent and one white parent during Apartheid South Africa (Lichtenstein). An oft-cited joke of his depicted the way that both his mother and father would have to physically distance themselves from Noah if they encountered the police while walking down the street. Noah states that he was too “light” to be seen with his mother, and she would drop his hand from hers as though he were “a bag of weed;” and he was too “dark” to be seen with his father, who would have to cross to the other side of the street and slyly wave to him “like a creepy pedophile” (“Apollo”).

Noah has enjoyed immense success in South Africa, headlining huge theatres and even a stint as a talk-show host (Itzkoff). Noah began performing regularly in the UK and Australia, and eventually came to the U.S. His more recent sets and stand up specials, including *Trevor Noah: African American* (2013) which he filmed for the Showtime network, highlight his increasing acquaintance with American racial discourse, and how it is similar or dissimilar to that of racial construction in South Africa. Speaking to *Newsweek* in 2012, Noah explained, “I very immediately understand a lot of things happening out here [in the U.S.]. It’s very similar to back home – there’s still the Black club, the white club, the Latino club, the Black restaurant” (Lichtenstein).

Noah is touted by reviewers time and again as a man having “so much positive energy,” and a comic whose “positivity is distinctive” (Hardy “Trevor”). These descriptions are often used to support the notion that although his comedy trades in “weighty” or serious matter, it is made more palatable to audiences, which appears to be a U.S.-specific concern. Joey Kok, a media expert who studied media in the U.S. before returning to Johannesburg, has characterized the

U.S. as more “politically correct,” and more inclined to shy away from discussing race in the media than South Africa (Neille). Noah, however, comes armed to win audiences over whatever his subject: he is charming, intellectually curious, polished, and worldly. One reviewer stated, “His calling cards are intelligence, charm, quickness and an ability to get across a sharp point of view in an ingratiating manner” (Zinoman "For 'Daily").

One of Noah’s early performance strategies was to make shrewd observations about U.S. racial discourse couched in the feigned ignorance of an outsider who is assimilating. He has obvious edification and polish while transitioning between the voices of a vast array of characters from many different cultural backgrounds, and he uses this to gain credibility with his audience to counter his outsider status. A joke which exemplifies the comic power of Noah’s feigned ignorance, coupled with an informed deconstruction of American racial discourse, is his KKK bit:

When I was in Tennessee, I stumbled across an organization called the Klu Klux Klan. Have you heard of them? Worst magic show ever. Guy gave me a pamphlet, ‘Come and see the Grand Wizard!’ The guy didn’t do one trick! Not one! I mean, I guess they made a few Black people disappear, but that’s not magic. That’s just Reaganomics, I wasn’t impressed by that....in fact, the whole name is wrong. They got that, as you know, from Ancient Greece, it was Klu Klux Adelphon, meaning a ‘circle of brothers.’ Which is wrong for two reasons: one, if your sole purpose as an organization is to hate Black people, don’t you find it strange that you’ve now named yourself the circle of brothers. And secondly, did they realize that in Ancient Greece, circles of brothers were doing very different things? ("African").

The joke highlights Noah's performative strategy: equal parts innocent and studied. It enables him to make a unique critique, highlighting the ways in which even the etymology of the KKK is contrary to the organization's core racist agenda.

In the opening sequence of Noah's comedy special *African American*, we see documentary-style footage of men and women depicted in a generic African tribal village, speaking to the stereotypical imagery conjured up by the African continent. Emerging out of this imagery, walking onto the stage, is Noah: African stand-up comic. He wears a simple blue t-shirt, Black leather jacket, jeans and sneakers, and he immediately gives the all-American gesture that all is well: the thumbs-up. Here is a man who, already by stepping onto the stage begins to break down the stereotypes held for him in his audience's mind. Stereotype dismantlement figures heavily into Noah's comedy, and he commences by describing how hot it had been in Atlanta, GA, claiming that even for him, it was hot. He fears the prospect of jogging, for the dread of fainting in the street and having the local news media report that "[i]t's so hot out here, even the Africans are fainting" ("African").

Noah also toys with stereotypes by exploring the stereotypes that Africans hold for the U.S. Later in his set, Noah describes coming late into watching a UNICEF ad asking donations from its viewers for an undisclosed African location, and his reaction to seeing the images of Blackness and poverty is to wonder, "Where is that? Cleveland?" ("African"). Noah expanded on this concept for his very first appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, wherein he played a game with viewers titled, "Spot the Africa." Audience members were shown photographs of areas in extremely poor economic condition which were revealed to be U.S. locations as well as photographs depicting state-of-the-art classrooms and economic prosperity which were revealed to be located in Kenya and other African countries. The dismantling of stereotypes in Noah's

comedy is a complex and layered trajectory, however. It's not simply that Noah destroys the stereotypes many American may have about South Africa, but that through Noah's better acquaintance with America, the stereotypes he previously held are destroyed also, including those of American Blackness. He relays his dream of becoming "American Black," and he mines a lot of comedy from demonstrating the ways in which he still has trouble fitting into one racial categorization over another in the U.S. In his dream to become "American Black – the coolest Black in the world," he relates how he steps off the plane into New York and is immediately approached by a Latino man who begins speaking Spanish to him in a thick accent. Noah's punchline is, "Eighteen hours of flying and I still wasn't Black. I was Puerto Rican" ("African"). In these jokes, Noah is parsing out the different ways in which race is constructed not of color alone, but comprises an intersectional social construction imbued with ethnicity, nationhood, and class.

One of the techniques that Noah uses to demonstrate such rich cultural fluency in embodying other characters is his sonic prowess for other languages and character vocalizations. Noah speaks at least six languages (Itzkoff), and as a professional goal, builds his comic routine into other languages in order to perform in other countries using their native tongue: Germany was his next destination as of 2012 (Williams "Trevor"). To help understand Noah's vocalizations as a performative strategy, I want to briefly discuss Faedra Chatard Carpenter's terminology of aural racial signifiers, such as "aural whiteness" and "aural Blackness." These terms signpost:

...technical elements in speech that may indicate racial associations...these differences are based on learned behavior. Factors such as word choice and dialect are often the clues that guide a listener to draw conclusions about the speaker's race, but rather than being

racially determined, these choices and patterns are evidence of one's acculturation, experience, and environment." (198).

In other words, there is no biological factor that influences the ways in which a person speaks with regards to race; "aural whiteness" or "aural Blackness" are not a set of choices made by the speaker, but are instead indicative of the conclusions drawn by someone listening to the speaker. Certain speech patterns may project images of who we are environmentally conditioned to associate with particular vocal patterns, but those are culturally determined, not biologically so. Therefore, Noah's fluency between Standard American English (SAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and his vocal stasis of self, all demonstrate the ways in which race is sonically constructed without regard to ethnicity or biology. In Noah's *Afraid of the Dark* (2017) special, he discusses the way voice changes perceptions: "I like accents because I'm always impressed by how much power they have over us, over our minds. When someone speaks a certain way, it changes how we feel about that person. For good and for bad" (Meyer).³²

When Noah makes a conscious choice to project whiteness through aural signification, he is using "linguistic whiteface," which is a conscious choice on behalf of the speaker (Carpenter 24). "Linguistic whiteface" is an act termed by Carpenter that is "intentionally deployed by performers...for the sake of deliberately portraying a persona of whiteness. It is the self-conscious and often exaggerated manipulation of one's vocal qualities (including variables such as word choice, grammar and timbre) for the sake of suggesting that the speaker is white or

³² Noah performs incredible vocal gymnastics in this special, including an eleven-minute segment where he creates a conversation between Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama, where Mandela teaches Obama how to speak more like he does.

“white-identified” (198). A key to Noah’s comedy is that he skillfully employs linguistic whiteface often for characters who are not specified by names, but rather by their roles and occupations in American culture. Pointedly, these characters are often in positions of power, and intentionally become white-identified in Noah’s use of linguistic whiteface. They are media reporters, political pundits, supervisors in places of employment, etc. Noah’s performative strategy doesn’t just call attention to SAE and the ways in which it is raced, but he is critically commenting on the ways in which our culture places white individuals in positions of power as a matter of hegemony. In Noah’s jokes, there is frequently no joke-related structural reason to give these peripheral characters linguistic whiteface; they are only there to serve a perfunctory function – but in doing so, he calls out his audience for the ways in which we automatically inscribe whiteness onto any generic character in power. For example, when Noah tells the aforementioned joke about fainting due to the heat in Atlanta, he portrays the unnamed reporter on the scene with linguistic whiteface. He anticipates the reactions of his U.S. audience, and their assumptions that anyone in a position of power is likely white. In turn, Noah subverts our cultural norms with the stealth of a practiced comic, but also keeps our eyes and ears trained on what he’s doing at all times: dissecting power and privilege through jokes.

What happens when you are a Black female comic who moves between the UK and the U.S., and you must negotiate this intersectionality as it is read on your body by these two different audiences? I look to the comedy of Gina Yashere to examine her performative strategies used to negotiate the translation of nationality and the way that it is complicated by specific expressions of blackness and gender in light of such circumstances.

Gina Yashere

Gina Yashere, a first-generation Black, queer, able-bodied, British comic born to Nigerian parents in London, was very vocal about wanting to live and perform comedy in the U.S. in the early part of her career. In an interview with *Diva Magazine*, Yashere stated that it had been a longtime dream of hers to live in the U.S.: "...since I was around six, when I used to chew Bazooka bubble gum, and the insides of the wrappers always had offers for American toys you couldn't get in England. I always berated my mum for coming to England and not Miami!" (Czyzselska). Her career in comedy, like that of Noah's, includes a lot of sharp observations of American culture, told from the view of a woman negotiating her Blackness, her gender, her sexuality, and her diasporic understanding of Blackness from outside of the U.S.

Yashere tackles race in unique ways through her comedy. One performative strategy she shares with Noah is using her transnationally removed "otherness" to satirize U.S. politics via a mode of contrived ignorance. For example, in her special *Laughing to America* (2014), Yashere discusses the "birthers," a group of white, conservative Americans who demanded that former President Obama provide his birth certificate as proof he was born in the U.S. (most vocal among them was current president Donald Trump). The birthers' acts and rhetoric were hyper-racialized and centered around conflating Obama's Blackness as "foreign" and "other."³³ Yashere states, "Maybe I'm from England, I don't know...I don't know anything...but I thought to be the President, there were some pretty stringent checks" (Paul Green).

Later in this set, Yashere takes this form of critique further, calling our attention to the Black diasporic community that lives within the U.S. and using her feigned ignorance to disrupt

³³ The birthers used other means to denigrate the legitimacy of Obama's presidency, including racist cartoons and other racist rhetoric (Lopez).

the ways we perceive and stereotype aural Blackness (24). In one particular bit, she discusses her encounters with Black men and women in the U.S. who speak in ways she had not anticipated. On the subway in New York City, she encounters a group of men from the Dominican Republic, and relays her confusion when they begin to speak Spanish: “What? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Black people have their own language here!” (Paul Green). When Paul Gilroy discusses an Afrocentric diasporic community, he notes that “[t]he distinctive historical experiences of this diaspora’s populations have created a unique body of reflections on modernity and its discontents which is an enduring presence in the cultural and political struggles of their descendants today” (45). In effect, Gilroy’s description of the Black Atlantic is intrinsic to Yashere’s comedy. She is part of the Black Atlantic herself, with roots in Nigeria and the UK, sitting on a New York City subway and observing American Blackness. The humor in her joke points to the fact that not all Blackness is homogenic, or necessarily tied to the same nation-state. The racial categorization of anyone is subject to the cultural awareness and assumptions of the observer attempting to do the categorizing, let alone nationhood, ethnicity, sonic significations, class, sexuality, gender, ability, and more. These intersections create different sets of rules for what constitutes racialized “Blackness;” assumptions can depend upon the physical location of the embodied Black subject as well. In this instance, Yashere’s joke is based on her feigned ignorance of the Black diaspora, and assumptions around Blackness due to being on a subway car in New York.

Yashere also unsettles our notions of race in other ways, such as by decoding the cultural practices that are normatively white; reflecting whiteness back to white people so that the absurdity of racial categorization is apparent. Carpenter contends, “theoretical concepts of white visibility and invisibility [offers white spectators] the opportunity to experience this paradoxical

construction of whiteness for themselves,” which is now the experience that Yashere gives to her audiences, another of her performative strategies (81).

I can read certain news stories, and I can tell by looking at it...*the hue*...of the people involved. So it was a beautiful summer’s day in England, one of the three we get, and a couple decides to go for a walk along their local riverbank. That’s the first clue. And they’re pushing their baby in a stroller, and their pet dog – that’s the second clue – is running alongside them. The dog ran off, and fell into the river. And the couple – as in, BOTH OF THEM – jumped INTO the river after the dog, leaving their BABY on the riverbank. Both of them drowned. True story, go google it. I read that story, and I was like, ‘Aww. This is an awfully sad story...but I don’t need to look at the pictures. I know that’s white people. Now white people, this isn’t racist, I’m not being racist, we’re all similar, but we’re different. And white people, you love your animals! You love your animals (Paul Green).

Another of Yashere’s performative strategies is to address race by way of framing it around the discussion of other, more trivial subjects. Whereas I would posit that other comics such as Trevor Noah and Aamer Rahman use the frames of other subject material (such as language, the metric system, comic books, and cereal) to address race, Yashere often reverses this structure by using race as a lens through which she addresses the humor in other, more trivial topics. A clear example of this is one of Yashere’s bits in *Laughing to America*, in which she discusses the riots

that took place after the shooting of Mark Duggan in the Tottenham, London area.³⁴ Yashere moves through a variety of topics with the riots as her framing structure; for example, how her mother would seize on the economic opportunity created by the looting as a shop owner in the Tottenham area: “‘Let them come. I sell bags, maybe they’ll need bags.’ My mother’s a business woman.” Additionally, she imagines how teenagers arrested for looting a Kentucky Fried Chicken establishment might be perceived by fellow inmates in prison. In this bit, Yashere is calling our attention to race in a way that signifies its embodiment in all aspects of life; even through a subject seemingly disconnected (landing in jail for looting a KFC), the white hegemony and systematic devaluing of bodies of color always shapes the ways in which those events unfold (Paul Green).

When analyzing the comedy of Yashere, it becomes equally critical to discuss the ways in which Yashere is simultaneously racialized and gendered offstage by her critics in the U.K. Yashere’s white male reviewers in the U.K. have their own performative strategy on the page so to speak, but in this instance, it is used to denigrate Yashere’s intersectional identity as a queer Black woman. In performance, Yashere is often noted for her “brash charm,” something which Yashere herself has embraced as a part of her comic persona (Casey). Once again, I want to draw specific attention to a comic’s voice: Yashere employs vocal techniques that reflect very specific choices about emphasis in her word choices, emphasis on syllables, repetition of words and phrases, and a rhythm of phrasing for prime comic effect. She is not altogether vocally dissimilar

³⁴ These riots erupted in response to the shooting death by police of Mark Duggan, a man of color from a West Indian and British family. These riots, which took place in 2011 in London, also addressed and protested structural factors of racism, classicism, police brutality, and economic disadvantage that many felt were culpable in Duggan’s death (Moore).

from that of Lewis Black for example, an American, white, cisgender, able-bodied male comedian who has built his career on constructing the angry persona of a man who is perpetually frustrated with the politics of American culture. It would be reductive to call Yashere an angry comic however; at most, these vocal patterns may reflect a kind of comic indignation with her subject material at times, but they are a comic effect all her own in which she controls her vocal quality and timing to enhance and punctuate her jokes. Simply put, she is no louder in volume than the majority of white, cisgender male comics. But Yashere, unlike comic Lewis Black, experiences a two-fold negative critique: the critique of her “in your face style” which is supposedly “more appropriate for American audiences,” and, notably the critique of her as masculinized, both of which are used in reviews as methods of reducing her work (Hardy "Review"). When describing her 2012 London show at the Underbelly Festive in *The Times*, Clive Davis writes: “Noisy, laddish, and the comic equivalent of six pints of lager and lime, she obsessively pursued the lowest common denominator.”

The terms “laddish” and “ladette,” both of which were used by reviewers to describe Yashere, are located in contemporary British slang (Davis; Hardy "Review"). According to Oxford Dictionary, ladette refers to “a young woman who behaves in a boisterously assertive or crude manner and engages in heavy drinking” (Proffitt). Urban Dictionary expands on this definition by adding that the ladette typically “enjoys sport or other activities that are traditionally enjoyed by men” (Ecort). “Ladette” and “laddish” derive from “lad culture,” a subculture featuring men who were generally “middle class figures espousing attitudes conventionally attributed to the working classes” (Ecort). Therefore, in calling Yashere “ladette,” the term denotes gendered and classed histories written onto Yashere’s body.

The “masculinization” of Yashere by her critics is a response to the intersections of her queerness and Blackness; other white female comics in the UK, such as Bridget Christie, Josie Long, and Francesca Martinez use similar vocal patterns and gender presentation without being referred to as laddish. More to the point, this characterization as masculine is in line with queer and Black histories, wherein Black women and gay women are derogatorily painted as masculine to the benefit of white supremacist patriarchal hegemony (Judith Butler; Covington). In a review for *The Times*, writer Alex Hardy took it a step further, suggesting that Yashere’s style might be appropriate for the U.S., but “I’m not sure that it excels here [England],” denoting a transnational layer of further denigration (Hardy "Review").³⁵

The notion of Yashere’s critics that her comic style is “masculinized,” and therefore devalued in their estimation, speaks to the intersectional challenges that Yashere faces as a Black, queer, female comic. Her critics’ language is a crude reminder that no matter the content of her comedy, white male critics especially have measured her as a comic in relationship with her Blackness, her gender, her sexuality, her class, and finally, as a transnational subject, with what they perceive as intrinsically British or American. In grappling with Yashere and her criticism, it is equally important to consider the ways in which bodies of comics are read according to the very same hegemonic ideology to which Yashere is drawing our attention. As a Black woman of African descent, Yashere must combat European beauty norms that haunt her

³⁵ To unpack this statement further would certainly lend itself to an entire chapter’s (if not dissertation’s) worth of study comparing the U.S. and U.K.’s perceptions of each other’s humor, and epistemological investigations into what constitutes “lowbrow” vs. “highbrow” humor, and positing of, “Who gets to decide what is lowbrow versus what is highbrow comic content?” Stereotypes still abound today correlating one’s education level with personal taste in comedy, television, music, and other forms of entertainment. As recently as 2010 for example, an article was published in *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* that did just that. See Claesenns and Dhoest.

performance on both sides of the Atlantic. Seeking aesthetic freedom to self-present in the United States, Yashere notes that the same trappings for Black women of light skin, light eyes and straight hair which are used to establish power hierarchies both within Blackness and outside of it, persist in both nations. Yashere has spoken often in interviews about the ways in which her intersections of race, gender, and sexuality have marginalized her both professionally and personally. Notably, these examples include what prompted her to move from Los Angeles to New York City. By way of partial explanation, Yashere stated, “Another reason [to move from LA] was I hated going to auditions – there are basically two looks in Hollywood for Black women: Beyoncé, or Precious” (Fleckney).³⁶ However, one comic – Aziz Ansari, created space for a queer Black woman’s story to come forward, who is neither Beyoncé nor Precious. In doing so, Ansari presents us with another performative strategy for centering intersectional identity.

Aziz Ansari

Aziz Ansari is a Brown, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied comic based in the U.S. Ansari’s comedy was not initially known for its social consciousness, but as Ansari developed his comedy, grew older and matured, so did his material. Always part of his narrative however, was Ansari’s family. Ansari is a first-generation South Asian comic, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from India. Central to Ansari’s comedy has been the theme of immigrants’ experience in the U.S. and the racism they experience; particularly so for non-white immigrants. While this

³⁶ Even the comparison of Beyoncé to the character “Precious” imposes Euro-centric beauty standards onto the bodies of two Black women. Beyoncé is considered curvy, while the character “Precious” from the novel *Push* by Sapphire is characterized as obese. Both bodies are still hyper-sexualized by the public, as happens with all Black women’s bodies. See Collins.

theme has been touched on in all of Ansari's stand-up comedy specials, the way that Ansari explored this theme became ever more nuanced in his most recent special, *Aziz Ansari: Live from Madison Square Garden* (2015).

Live from Madison Square Garden begins with Ansari making his way to the stage, and the music overlaying this entrance sounds as though it hails from an American Western film. Given that the first material explored in this special centers on immigration, it could be suggestive that Ansari himself is a pioneer. Or, it could be a reminder that all U.S. settlers – with the exception of course of Native Americans – immigrated. Once on stage, in front of a setting sun graphic, Ansari greets the audience: “Thank you to all 12,000 of you...predominantly white people who showed up here tonight. No, there's minorities in the mix, I'm kidding.” He continues:

I'm a minority. And I'm the first generation in my family that was born in America. Anyone else first generation? Pretty amazing thing our parents did, right? They came to this country, didn't know anyone, maybe didn't speak the language, and they figured it out. Very brave, courageous thing. And I feel like we never sit down and thank them for it. And we should, because that's such an amazing thing! For someone in your family to at some point just be like, ‘You know what? Fuck China, let's get out of here, let's go.’ And you know they had friends that were dicks, like [imitating friend], ‘What? You can't move to America. You don't know anyone there, you don't speak the language. What are you going to do for work?’ ‘I don't know man, worst case scenario, we'll cook food and we'll sell it to white people, okay?’ ‘You got a master's degree in chemistry, you don't know how to cook.’ ‘They don't know what Chinese food tastes like! I'll just put some chicken in a box with some orange sauce and serve it to ‘em.’ ‘Ooh, what are you going

to call that dish? ‘Orange chicken?’ ‘Yeah, maybe I will call it ‘orange chicken!’ Maybe I’ll call it #36, we’ll see!’ ...My life is super easy ‘cause [his parents] did all the struggling. What am I going to tell my kid? ‘One day I was flying from New York to LA and my iPad died.

Ansari’s discussion of immigration and its conflation with non-whiteness, and/or Muslim identity, creates a rich and funny conversation around ideas of bravery and working hard for a better life, reframing the anti-immigrant rhetoric that fed such moves as Brexit and Trump’s Muslim Ban (Lydia Green). Additionally, Ansari is asking his audiences to consider the transnational move, particularly for bodies of color, across borders. He reconstructs those moves in our imaginations and what they could entail for a family. Ansari’s major performative strategy is to center the stories of others within his stand-up comedy.

At the time of Ansari’s performance in *Live From Madison Square Garden*, Ansari began to incorporate discussions of feminism into his material as well. Feminist subject matter comprised eight minutes of his *Madison Garden* special, but Ansari began voicing his thoughts on feminism in numerous public appearances. In several late-night talk show interviews and in print, Ansari joked his way around statements of solidarity with the feminist movement, such as “You’re a feminist if you go to a Jay-Z and Beyoncé concert, and you’re not like, ‘Mmm. I feel like Beyoncé should get twenty-three percent less money than Jay-Z’” (Murray). In addition, Ansari began discussing dating practices outside of heteronormative structures, expressing his

desire to support equal marriage along a continuum of sexuality. In a nutshell, Ansari's comedy began to find a new level of social consciousness, and its intersectional feminist footing.³⁷

Soon, Ansari's material developed into more specific intersectional awareness in his comedy television series for Netflix titled *Master of None*. While this dissertation is written with the intention to explore the performative techniques of stand-up comedians, I would be remiss not to include Ansari's work in *Master of None*, and particularly the eighth episode of the second season titled "Thanksgiving." "Thanksgiving" was co-written by Ansari and one of his co-stars in the show, Lena Waithe, who plays "Denise." In "Thanksgiving," Ansari steps to the side, and he and Waithe center the story of Denise's journey to self-present her Black queer womanhood, following her as she comes to understand the intersections of her gender, her sexuality, and her Blackness. Over time, the show establishes that Denise and Dev have been close friends since they were children. Through a measured time passing sequence in the episode, we watch Denise come to love and accept herself, as well as receive the gradual acceptance of her family.

The episode follows a series of Thanksgiving day celebrations in Denise's home, to which Ansari's character "Dev," is always invited. They begin when Dev and Denise are children, and at a young age, Denise's gender expression is already becoming a point of contention with her mother. Her mother would like her to wear a dress, and Denise understands she's more comfortable in loose, baggy pants and shirt. As we see from year to year, Denise

³⁷ In early 2018, Ansari was accused in print of sexual misconduct by a single accuser. However, it is the purpose of this study to examine performative strategies that hail intersectional identity into performative being, and the subject of male comics utilizing feminist discourse in their work who are later accused of sexual misconduct (like Ansari and Louis C.K.) would constitute its own dissertation. Therefore, I choose not to fall down a rabbit hole that will remove me from the core purposes of my analysis. See Stefansky.

begins to understand and accept her sexuality as a lesbian, eventually coming out to Dev, and also expressing her fears in coming out to her family: “Being gay isn’t something Black people like to talk about.”

Early in “Thanksgiving,” there is a conversation between a young Denise, Dev, and Denise’s mother Catherine, in which Catherine (played by Angela Bassett) asks Dev if they celebrate Thanksgiving in the Indian community, to which Denise responds that she thought Dev was Black. While humorous, the conversation displays the fluidity among identities and the absurd illogic of racial construction. Later in the episode when an older Denise comes out to her mother, Catherine begins to cry. When asked why, Catherine responds, “I don’t want this life to be hard for you. It’s hard enough being a Black woman in this world, and now you want to add something else to that.” Catherine’s response points to the intersection of oppression that Blackness and womanhood already engender; Denise’s queerness further marginalizes her. Catherine’s emotion translates the fear and protective instincts a mother has for a daughter who doesn’t embody white heteronormativity, and it movingly conveys the complexities of intersectionality.

Throughout this episode, we frequently see Denise respond to her budding self-actualization in performing what she is not, or disidentifying: for example, she is not straight, so her posters of teen idols papering her bedroom consist entirely of women. Comically, she has still adopted the teenage practice of teen idol posters in the bedroom, but the women we see in them shows us the ways in which Denise is “neither assimilating nor strictly opposing dominant culture” (Muñoz 11). Denise isn’t comfortable in the conventional gendered expressions of femininity that manage expectations of women, so she performs a differently coded gendered expression through her fashion. Here again, she embodies Muñoz’s disidentification: she

disidentifies with what she sees as normative expression for straight white women, instead discovering her truth as she comes to terms with her intersections of Blackness and homosexuality. We see Denise move through a host of emotions, including anger, grief, surprise, and joy as she and her family gradually accept herself and her truth, even inviting girlfriends to join in at later Thanksgiving meals. I surmise that in writing this episode, Waithe certainly drew on her own personal experiences as an out, Black, queer woman. As Jose Esteban Muñoz argued, “Comedy does not exist independently of rage. It is my contention that rage is sustained and it is pitched as a call to activism, a bid to take space in the social that has been colonized by the logics of white normativity and heteronormativity” (xi).

Ansari’s performative strategy is to center the stories of others. His stand-up frequently centered the stories of immigrants to the U.S., and in “Thanksgiving,” he stepped aside, and he and Waithe centered the story of Denise. Waithe and Ansari won an Emmy award for the writing of “Thanksgiving,” and Waithe made history by becoming the first Black woman – and, importantly, openly queer Black woman – to win an Emmy for comedy series writing (Bethonie Butler).

Another comic who centers the narratives of others is Stewart Lee; he has his own performative strategies for doing so, which I shall now explore.

Stewart Lee

London-based Stewart Lee is the sole white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied male stand-up comic that I include in this dissertation, and it is for his consistent, intersectional and transnational approach to discussing racism and anti-immigration sentiment onstage. As one of many examples, Lee focused entirely on the topic of anti-immigration rhetoric for episode 2 of

Series 3 in his stand-up comedy show *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* (Lee "Ukips and Immigration"). In this episode, Lee addressed comments made by Paul Nuttall, then-leader of the "Ukip," (UK Independent political party) who had stated that Bulgarians, with their great skills, should stay in Bulgaria, making it economically prosperous there instead of coming over to the U.K. (Lee "Ukips and Immigration"). Lee responds to this statement using one of his performative strategies of the callback of joke structure, in which both the sentence structures of the joke set-up (premise) and punch (the punchline) are repeated.³⁸ Here is an excerpt from his set, in response to Nuttall:

...But the Ukips seem to object to the Bulgarians on the grounds that they *are skilled*, which is a whole new angle for the anti-immigration debate... [imitating Nuttall] 'Here they are, coming over here, with their skills...' The way people are talking about the Bulgarians, we've seen it all before, haven't we? Ten years ago, with the Poles [Polish], people going, 'Ah, bloody Poles, here they are, coming over here with their skills...mending everything. Coming over here, fixing all the stuff we've broken that we're too illiterate to read the instructions for, doing it better than us in a second language, bloody Poles...' When I was a kid – forty, forty-five years ago, it was the Indians, wasn't it? 'Bloody Indians and Pakistanis, coming over here, besting us in our national cuisine...' Before that, in the 16th

³⁸ A "callback" in stand-up comedy is when a comic establishes a joke early on in a set around a particular subject, and then later calls to mind for his audience the same subject later in the set but used in a different context, thereby creating what is essentially an "inside joke" for that audience within the set (Rosenfield).

century, bloody Huguenots, ‘coming over here from Medieval France, bloody French...doubting transubstantiation, questioning the Eucharistic symbolism....

Lee’s joke continues its structure to imitate what the anti-immigration sentiment would have been in England at various points in time, continuing to move backward chronologically from the Huguenots to the 5th century, when they didn’t want the Anglo-Saxons immigrating “with their ship burial traditions and their miserable epic poetry, learn to speak the fucking language! They need to stay *there*, instead of laying down the entire basis of our future language and culture!” Lee moves backward in time again to 2000 BCE with Beaker Folk, followed by Neolithic people, and finally the first fish who began evolving and crawled up onto the land – “*Our* land! You get back into the sea!” Lee ultimately regresses to nothingness, before life as we know it. “There was no crime back then, make of that what you will. You could leave your house unlocked, because it didn’t exist.”

The transnational element of this is that Lee blurs the hard boundaries we use to structure nationality and ethnicity: when moving back in time, we can see through a historical context that national borders and the cultural groups who may have held primacy in a given region change over time, and even the constructs used to make these national or cultural distinctions change with the times as well. Therefore, arguments about who is allowed to immigrate lose strength in the face of seemingly arbitrary markers of what land belongs to whom. It is Lee’s performative strategy of repetition of structure that drives this home. The last line, “You could leave your house unlocked...because it didn’t exist,” is an absurdly funny reference to politicians that often cite increased crime rates as a reason to ban immigrants. This reasoning has been used here in the U.S. by President Trump on multiple occasions, including in support of his presidential race

campaign, when he stated: “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists” in reference to Mexicans attempting to immigrate into the U.S. (Zurcher).

Lee used this performative strategy to great effect in his 2016 stand-up show, *Content Provider*. *Content Provider* embodied an intersectional approach to the dual political shifts of President Obama to one of President Trump, and from EU membership to Brexit. Lee’s approach acknowledged the links between anti-immigration sentiment and racism, and their fueling of these political events.³⁹ In the first half of *Content Provider*, Lee launched into a series of jokes relating to Brexit. One such joke went like this: “It wasn’t just racists that voted to leave Europe...it was also cunts.” After intermission, Lee returned and made a callback of structure: “It wasn’t all racists who voted for Trump...cunts did too.” Lee made these kinds of structural callbacks with a small but significant portion of his material that mirrored the material around Brexit in the first half of his show. Underscoring Lee’s callback using Trump’s election in place of Brexit is a pointed message about the xenophobia tied to both political moves, a position widely documented by U.S. and British press (Khaleeli).

What is transnational about the way that Lee discusses race in *Content Provider* is that he forges connections between ways that the both the U.S. and the U.K. were utilizing racism to support xenophobic political strategy. In part, he used the painting “Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog,” by German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1817) to tie his show together thematically, using the painting’s appearance at the beginning of the show, and reappearance at

³⁹ Lee’s is not the sole comic voice to forge these connections, and political analysts from the U.S. and the U.K. had been writing on the links between the two major political events for some time. See Cillizza.

the end (which I shall explore further shortly). Ultimately, Lee's *Content Provider* demonstrates that race is already intersectional, tethered to class, nation/state, ethnicity, religion, and more, not simply color.⁴⁰ Lee's show acknowledges that while the U.S. and the U.K. have their specific xenophobia, there is an overlap where they meet on common ground as well: the era of post-facts. The following paragraphs describe Lee's performative strategies as he navigated comedy around this transnational, ideological shared space.

Partway through his set, Lee suggested that, in tandem with xenophobia and "some people who just want to be able to wear their KKK robes to the supermarket," was a fragmented informational culture tied to a digital free market that had aided in these specific political outcomes for both countries. The inherent bias of certain news outlets in the U.S. has long now been common public knowledge, such as the conservative bent of Fox News.⁴¹ More than just the news outlets however, Lee commented on the tendency of social media to serve a similar function of reflecting our own voices and views back to us, simply because we can tailor our feeds to only show those voices with whom we agree. Lee also expressed loathing for selfie photos, which was an act of us "taking pictures of interesting things, and then inserting your face in between yourself and the interesting thing."

⁴⁰ Religion is part and parcel of xenophobia, as evidenced by Trump's Muslim Ban (Diamond).

⁴¹ The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan, nonadvocacy think tank in Washington D.C. conducted research into the political slants of various media and news outlets, and published a graph showing a spectrum of political bias leaning toward the left and the right, and where those organizations fell along the continuum (which included news organizations in the UK as well, such as BBC News). It is worth noting for Lee's assertion that on a scale of -10 to +10, no media organization sits on the very center at zero, indicating no slant at all (Blake).

Later in Lee's show, he referred to the set design around him of media content (piles and piles of DVDs and CDs), noting it was the "tide mark of late capitalism, increasingly obsolete physical media," and drew a connection to the piles of second-hand DVDs and comics becoming their own content providers. He noted how culture, through digital media, had commodified nearly everything from dating (dating apps), to health and education; even popular website "Trip Advisor" is a "commodification of experiences." In the final minutes of the show, Lee began to climb the media, using the piles as stairs to stand higher on the set. In doing so, he had leaned over and pulled a coat with tails onto him, and suddenly he held a walking stick. In a matter of seconds, the piles of media had become rocks, and Lee stood with his back to us in front of the projector screen, onto which was projected the painting "Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog." The media piles became the rocks, the lighting dipped low in brightness and grew cool in color to indicate the sea, fog began to pour in among the rocks the way it is depicted in the painting, and Lee himself became the man in the painting replete with coattails and walking stick. Earlier when Lee had mentioned increasingly obsolete physical media as the "tide mark" of late capitalism, it wasn't just metaphor; it was foreshadowing as well.



Figure 5: "Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog," (1817) by Caspar David Friedrich. Photograph: (Friedrich).

In these final moments of the show, Lee says "They say that you should never place dolphins in concrete tanks, for they use sonar loops to communicate with one another, and these sounds bounce off the walls and they forever hear their own voices communicated back to them, driving them mad. Like those concrete tanks, we live in a digital hall of reflecting mirrors of Instagram, Facebook, etc., forever hearing our own voices reflected back to us in an endless

documentation of our own lives.” He continues: “Instead of looking out onto the world, past our borders, we have the endless back and forth of our own sonar sound. You are the dolphins of today; and when I look at this painting, I see a man looking out into the world, and (turning around to face his audience once more) not using it as a backdrop for his own narcissism,” as Lee flipped the walking stick to become a selfie stick which he used to take a selfie of his face inserted between the interesting thing and the camera.

The main thematic ribbons of the show were the U.S. and U.K.’s increasing inability to look beyond our borders to learn about others, and how this inability might further insulate and assist in the xenophobia and racism which ran underneath the Brexit vote and Trump’s election. In my interview with Stewart, I asked him about his writing process for *Content Provider*.

Stewart said:

...I didn’t really structure it, right? The world structured it. Okay – there’s this Hitchcock quote. Someone said to him, ‘How long can you show a couple kissing on a bed?’ He said, ‘As long as you like, as long as there’s a bomb underneath it.’ The bomb underneath this show is Brexit and Trump now...no one knows what’s going on, people haven’t taken news in context, and they’re allowed to go down these tunnels of their own information.

In Lee’s show, the inability to “see past our borders” prevents us from understanding others, and they therefore become the Other. Outsiders and foreigners become conflated with notions of race, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., and we lose our shared humanity the more we insulate ourselves according to these socially constructed categorizations.

The final comic in this chapter who is ultimately the most direct – both onstage and off – about the ways in which race is shaped by class, ethnicity, religion, and nationality, is Aamer

Rahman.

Aamer Rahman

Of all the comedians discussed in this chapter, Aamer Rahman may be the most overtly political onstage, and certainly the most vocal on or offstage about race as a richly complex narrative read onto one's body. Rahman, an able-bodied, Brown, cisgender, heterosexual, Muslim comic was born to Bangladeshi parents and raised in Australia; like Yashere and Ansari, he has the perspective of a first-generation offspring whose skin color marks him as other within the national culture of where he has been raised. Rahman is expressive both onstage and in interviews about his comedic intentions to validate those who are oppressed by racism, and his tactics as a performer are shrewd, sharp, vicious, and unapologetic. Rahman is a comic whose performative strategy is to explore race as it is a social construction built upon history, ethnicity, color, class, and politics. Rahman met his longtime comedy partner Nazeem Hussain at an Islamic awards event in Australia where they both hold law degrees and had been working in social justice work on behalf of refugee and Aborigine populations (Lakshmi). Together they formed *Fear of a Brown Planet*, the heading for shows under which they both performed separately, one following the other.⁴² Their show was very popular at the 2011 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and they released a filmed comedy special (Logan "A History"). Rahman performed throughout Australia and the UK, but eventually decided to discontinue performing, feeling his

⁴² *Fear of a Brown Planet* is a direct riff on *Fear of a Black Planet*, the third studio album of hip hop/rap group Public Enemy. This album, and certainly Public Enemy themselves, became known for their politically charged lyrics, which frequently tackled racism and adjacent subjects such as police brutality, and capitalism (Perry).

shows were too “niche,” and *Fear of Brown Planet* disbanded (Lakshmi). Then, in 2013, Rahman released a clip online that he had performed on a whim toward the end of one of his shows, a joke about “reverse racism,” and his stand-up career was rejuvenated (Nawaz; Rahman). The momentum granted Rahman his first tour of the U.S. and Canada in 2015, in a show titled, *The Truth Hurts* (Kettle).

Rahman’s “Reverse Racism” bit captures a lot of what is at the heart of Rahman’s comedy and performative strategies, which methodologically at their core employ critical race humor: it is “racial truth-telling and criticism artistically angled through humor...defy[ing] dominant practices and ideologies that promote the erasure of material realities of race” (Rossing 17). The first of these is that Rahman originates the roots of modern-day racism in the colonization and imperialist histories of the U.S. and the U.K., and traces a clear line forward to today’s global white hegemonic structures. At several junctures in Rahman’s comedy, he uses a time machine to do so. In Rahman’s “Reverse Racism” bit, he explores use of the time machine as the only authentic way to create true reversed racism, in which a white population is systematically oppressed in a reverse mirror image of our world today. This structure embodies Rossing’s defining of critical race humor as directing attention to “the construction of race and the material consequences of those constructions;” here, Rahman goes to a time before Europe’s colonization of Africa, Asia, etc., and convinces the leaders of these places to instead colonize Europe (Rahman; Rossing 17). He moves through the history and importantly, the material consequences of this shift, where white people are forced into a Trans-Asian slave trade and exported to work on rice plantations, etc. “And in that time, I’d make sure to set up systems that privilege Black and Brown people at every conceivable social, political, and economic opportunity...and just for kicks, subject white people to [Afro-centric] people’s standards of

beauty so they end up hating the color of their own skin, eyes, and hair...and if, after hundreds and hundreds of years of that, I got up on a stage and said, ‘What’s the deal with white people? Why can’t they dance?’ That would be reverse racism.”

In his *Fear of a Brown Planet* special, one of many examples of this kind of performative strategy – tracing a line from history forward in time – also involves a time machine. In this bit, he riffs on the premise of a hip hop song by artist Pataphysics, also constructing a scenario in which he could go back in time and give to “indigenous peoples, machine guns and AK-47s” (Karalus). In Rahman’s version however, he travels to the future first, to pick up an even more technologically advanced weapon; he then travels back in time to give it to U.S.-based Native American populations for when Christopher Columbus arrives. It is representative of Rahman’s material in the sense that it toys with the horrific knowledge of the systematic oppression of bodies of color that is to come as a consequence of colonialism. Also, Rahman’s work on the whole is exclusively devoted to the deconstruction of the social, political, and economic mechanisms behind racism and its effects on society. Offstage, Rahman frequently discusses this publicly with less jokes, but no less potently: “The biggest mistake people make when they talk about racism is to talk about it without talking about class. So racism always has some sort of economic imperative...it is about poor working people, it is about asylum seekers, it is about foreign policy, which are all economically driven” (Myriam).

In Rahman’s delivery, his stand-up frequently include statements that, taken out of context, could potentially provoke a reaction from white audiences: sentences such as, “Sometimes, terrorism can be a force for good” (Karalus). Rahman’s delivery however exceeds even Noah’s positivism; he is relaxed and non-confrontational, which comically serves in great contrast to his content and syntax. That said, it would misalign Rahman’s skills as a comedian to

reduce his efforts onstage to mere political propaganda or ideological preaching, as Rahman's comedy is not written with white audiences in mind. In reference to his "Reverse Racism" bit, Rahman stated, "A lot of people assume that bit is designed to speak to racists, to educate them – but it's not, it's meant to entertain people who already understand" (Rickett). Also: "It is designed to validate victims of racism and what they think" (Myriam).

This element of his performative strategy: pairing subversive, highly political content with a contrasting light-hearted delivery, is expanded upon repeatedly throughout Rahman's sets in interesting ways. In performance, he frequently trades on the idea that his audience is in for something dangerous, building his audience's tension, but then releases that tension through laughter when Rahman concedes that there is nothing harmful about to befall them after all. To illustrate, Rahman has a bit in *Fear of a Brown Planet* in which he builds the notion that he is going to become violent by participating in a race riot, but the audience is released at the last possible moment when he qualifies that he will do so by email, and from a remote Australian city. In another, more expansive bit, he discusses his similarities to the character Jason Bourne, from the *Bourne Identity* films. Bourne is a man unwittingly chosen by the CIA, trained to become an assassin; Bourne eventually learns the truth and kills a lot of other characters in retaliation. Rahman compares himself similarly, stating that private schooling tried to make him "white" but that he "came back and slew everyone in retaliation" – again, by email (Karalus).

Similar to the work of Noah and Yashere, Rahman utilizes familiar performative tactics in constructing race for his audiences, such as the unsettling of racial stereotypes. However, in Rahman's work, there is a significant focus on disrupting Islamophobia and the ways in which the religion has become raced onto the bodies of Brown men and women, intersectionally so. For example, he discusses the white colorization of the figure of Jesus, a man who presumably was

born in the Middle East. This is a familiar comic trope explored by other critical race comics, such as previously-discussed Hari Kondabolu; in tandem with some of Kondabolu's material, he capitalizes on the bigoted denial of some that Jesus could have been anything other than white (Hari Kondabolu "Waiting"). But where Rahman departs from Kondabolu is that he takes racism to its own logical conclusions by further suggesting that not only would Jesus be a Brown man, but if he were alive today, he'd be racially profiled. "Jesus is coming back, but he's going to be late – you know why? Because white people are going to stop him at customs" (Karalus).

Another performative strategy of the way Rahman constructs race for his audiences is to color whiteness in ways that echo the way Blackness is colored onto bodies in contemporary U.S. culture. In effect, he invites audiences to hear the familiar catchphrases of presumed aural whiteness ("speech that is assumed to emanate from white bodies") in defense of racist clichés, but then turns these on their head with jokes such as: "I can't be racist...some of my best friends are white. Sometimes I take them to parties to show them off to my other friends," and "White people are awesome. I'm going to adopt one of their babies to feel better about myself" (Carpenter 24; Karalus).

In another iteration of this performative strategy, Rahman takes another comic construct – that of linguistic whiteface – and once again, flips this device on its head to startling comic effect. Linguistic whiteface is using the voice to "indicate a speaker is white-identified – can include word choice, grammar, vocal timbre" (Carpenter 24). Performers such as Eddie Murphy, Dave Chappelle, Trevor Noah, and Gina Yashere have all utilized linguistic whiteface to some extent when adopting white-identified characters in their sets, but to listen to Rahman's voice carefully throughout *Fear of a Brown Planet*, Rahman doesn't appear to make any vocal adjustments to timbre, pitch, or other markers, even when playing white-identified characters. As

entire portions of his set pass and we hear a variety of characters, it initially appears as though Rahman has not adopted linguistic whiteface as a performative technique at all for white characters. However, well into his set, Rahman begins a bit specifically addressing linguistic whiteface as a practice in daily life: “White women are conditioned to be so terrified of young Black and Brown men that did you know we have to completely change our behavior? Like if I’m in a job interview, or any kind of professional setting, the bank – I’m dealing with a white woman...I have to appear less threatening...I have to make my voice higher. *This* is not even my real voice, *this is my white voice*” (Karalus). All through this section of his set, he intentionally never alters himself vocally whatsoever, including the words, “*this is my white voice.*” The great comic reveal, just shy of twenty minutes into his set, is that he’s been using Faedra Chatard Carpenter’s “linguistic whiteface” for his audience for the full duration of his set up to this point. In order for his audience to feel at ease, and that their comic entertainer appears “less threatening,” as he described just moments before, Rahman reveals he’s been performing linguistic whiteface from the moment he stepped onstage. Rahman keeps a straight face; his audience is not meant to have a release from the tension in the form of a punchline here.

To distinguish between what Noah does when he becomes a white character vocally onstage, and what Rahman is doing here: Rahman intentionally does not make his linguistic whiteface – i.e., portraying a white character – obvious for the audience, in the way that Noah does. Instead, Rahman has shocked his audience into the realization that what we believed to be his neutral persona when not in character, was performatively linguistic whiteface after all; meaning we’ve not yet heard Rahman’s authentic voice the entire time he’s been performing. Rahman’s performative strategy that I reference earlier – pairing politically heightened material with a relaxed delivery – is the stuff of his ultimate, long-form joke on his audience. He was

using linguistic whiteness all the while, so that his white audiences would be more receptive to his material.

Conclusion

To conclude: Rahman embodies what all of the comics in this chapter embody, which is a transnational voice. He uses adaptive behavior that allows him to perform transnationally, while inviting those audiences to read and understand his otherness as not just outside of white, Euro-centric culture, but outside of the nation-state in a way that further complicates his already-othered body. All of these comics live with a kind of cultural double consciousness (or in Lee's case stemming from white positionality, consistently points to this double consciousness). I am gesturing to the W.E.B. DuBois term, which was an expressed understanding of the relationship and tensions between Black and white, self and other. These performers know that racial construction moves beyond the borders of a localized nation-state, and they embody this critical cultural consciousness and intersectionality as they perform. Speaking truth to power and racial truth-telling is a powerful act wherever it may occur, but these comics' use of critical race humor enables us to contemplate and laugh about the complexities of intersectionality in new ways, wherever we are in the world.

Each comic has their own performative strategies that hail into consciousness intersectional identity. Tehran Von Ghasri disrupts the white male-focused line-ups of shows, deconstructing race across national borders and using his voice in different ways. Trevor Noah also uses his voice, making use of linguistic whiteface while dismantling stereotypes. Gina Yashere uses feigned ignorance to disrupt the ways we perceive and stereotype aural Blackness (and in this manner, uses her own voice as well, complete with British accent), and toys with

theoretical concepts of whiteness' visibility and invisibility, challenging the white members of her audiences to recognize whiteness as raced. Aziz Ansari centers the stories of others, including immigrants and Black women, and created space for Lena Waithe to center her own story. Stewart Lee's strategies include the callback of joke structures, as well as theatricalizing elements of his performance, such as projection, set design, lighting design, and costume, to create an image of looking out across one's (national) borders. Aamer Rahman's strategies include tracing lines through history backwards and forwards in time, building an audience's tension and then releasing that tension in the last moments, and, very effectively, letting an audience in on his use of linguistic whiteface as a neutral persona. Ultimately, all of these performers utilize critical race humor, providing audiences "with the skills and habits of thought necessary to think critically about and transform racial knowledge and reality" (Rossing 30). Their voices reside in a comedic contact zone, asking their audiences to witness them in the fullness of theirs and others' complexity through our laughter.

Conclusion

Not long ago, I found myself in a New York City subway station, and I saw five poster advertisements in a row for Black and Black-themed productions: television shows *Blackish*, *Black Lightning*, and *The Chi*, the film *Black Panther*, and an HBO comedy special *2 Dope Queens*. It was encouraging to see this kind of representation, particularly *2 Dope*



Figure 6: Subway ads at 68th St./Hunter College station. Feb. 1, 2018. Photograph: (Blackburn "Subway Advertisements: 2 Dope Queens, the Chi, Et Al.")

Queens which features Jessica Williams and Phoebe Robinson: two Black female comics who originally began *2 Dope Queens* as a podcast. In HBO's introduction for their special, Robinson states:

There's something really cool about Black women talking onstage. With comedy, the landscape is changing, it's more diverse now I think. Jess and I really feel that role...we own our stories. I think it's pretty cool that this is the first comedy podcast to go to TV. I think twenty years ago, a show like this led by two women of color having fun and just being our authentic selves wasn't there. There's been *Living Single*, *Insecure*, and now us, that's been it. Cheers to fucking progress!

Interesting to note once again about *2 Dope Queens*, is that their comedy special is directed by Tig Notaro. While Notaro has yet to address race directly in her stand-up comedy or television work, it seems perhaps she is there behind the scenes, helping to support the voices of women of color who are telling their own stories.

To be clear: intersectional identity and socially activist comics have always been among us. It is not new to find a voice for progress or social critique in comedy. However, what makes the last fifteen or so years in stand-up comedy of academic interest to me, is the ways in which intersectional identity is becoming more acknowledged and performed by both stand-up comics and social justice movements; and the ways in which past distinctions between social activist movements, public intellectual work, and comedy are continually collapsing in on one another. An unprecedented level of interdependency appears to be developing among comedy, social justice, and public discourse. I believe this is an exciting and fascinating time to find oneself in a comedy club. As Nicole Hodges Persley argues, the intersectional comics of the twenty-first century are “living in their wholeness, not just presenting as Black, or queer, or disabled, etc.” (Hodges Persley). These comics are asking their audiences to understand and accept a more complex and nuanced construction of identity than ever before. While previous conceptions of identity and performance blur and give way to new ones, we pay witness to these transitions as the public discourse about humanity continues to grow, working toward greater understanding, I hope. You can witness these social transitions in the blurred lines between news and comedy (Ch. 1), in the ways that Black women comics own their stories and define themselves (Ch. 2), in the ways that comics are unsettling cultural narratives around gender, sexuality and disability (Ch. 3), and in the ways that comics are guiding their dialogue with audiences about race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality on a global scale (Ch. 4).

During the time in which I had been working on this dissertation, a stand-up comic named Hannah Gadsby suddenly gained notoriety in the U.S., in the eleventh hour of my writing on this study. Gadsby is a white, queer, gender non-conforming comic from Australia, who shares some of the same performative strategies with the comics discussed in this dissertation. In

addition to those strategies, she also adds a couple of others: she explicitly queers the structure of stand-up comedy by telling stories instead of consistently joking in the traditional set-up/punch format, and she doesn't always release the tension through laughter. I would suggest that this is, at least in part, where intersectional identity in comedy may be headed next. She insists on storytelling as her format, and it is not linear, thereby disrupting the way stand-up comedy in the U.S. was structured in its infancy by white, straight, cisgender, able-bodied men. And while comedians like Amer Rahman speak truths to the point of discomfort for his audiences but then releases that tension through a joke at the last possible moment, Gadsby simply lets her audience sit in the discomfort:

Remember that story I told you about the man who almost beat me up? It was very funny, I made a lot of people laugh about his ignorance...but I didn't tell the rest, where he came back: 'Oh, I get it. You're a lady fa***t. I'm allowed to beat the shit out of you,' and he did. No one stopped him...and that is what happens when you soak one child in shame, and give permission to another to hate. And this tension, it is yours. I am not helping you anymore. This tension is what 'not-normals' carry inside of them because it is dangerous to be different. I believe we could paint a better world if we learn to see it from other perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference, you learn *nothing*. Hindsight is a gift – can you stop wasting my time? (Parry).

While I believe Gadsby is referring to all intersections of identity when she cites the dangerousness of difference and that diversity is strength, I wish to note that Gadsby is white and does not explicitly race herself as white within *Nannette*. There are some comedy enthusiasts who will argue that white comedians write from a place of what they know and of their

experiences, and that not every comic must “fight everyone’s fight.” To be clear, I am not proposing in this dissertation that all comedy must hinge on social justice and progress as its motivation (I am just as susceptible to a good fart joke as the next comedy fan).⁴³ Additionally, for every comedian I’ve discussed here in this study, I have witnessed at least five or more comics perform who upheld or in some cases, even intentionally reinforced cultural directives that privilege white, male cisgender, able-bodied, and heterosexual identities. But for those comics who *are* concerned with social critique, rendering visible what has been made invisible – be it whiteness or able-bodiedness or other social privileges – is a major performative strategy that cannot be ignored for those who wish to use their comedy toward social progress. If we who are white comics or scholars or activists don’t fight for others, including those who do not look like us, we place the fullness of the emotional, psychological, and physical labor of the fight for equality squarely on those who must fight for themselves. On the contrary, the ability to see beyond ourselves and to imaginatively inhabit the shoes of others is precisely what is necessary for social progress, and it is what makes the narratives of the comics discussed here so integral to understanding how identity is constructed here in the 21st century. When Ava Vidal quoted Martin L. King Jr. in her piece on Trayvon Martin, she borrowed from the idea that inequality negatively impacts the whole of society, including even those who socially benefit from the social hierarchy as it has been constructed. The quote Vidal selected comes from Martin L. King Jr.’s “Letter From a Birmingham Jail,” and in context, it reads as follows:

⁴³ For an exceptionally brilliant fart joke sequence, see Maria Bamford’s comedy special *Old Baby*.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outsider agitator’ idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds (77).

Wherever it may lead, I am excited to see the comics discussed here and more lead us down new pathways of understanding identity. The intersection of stand-up comedy and social activism is an ever-shifting landscape, but my, what a time to witness these performers innovate within this art form and beyond.

At the end of one of Williams’ and Robinson’s *2 Dope Queens* television specials, they dance offstage to the song “BBYGRL” by mc Nitty Scott. The song is something of an intersectional feminist anthem, and it references No Doubt’s 1990s hit “I’m Just a Girl,” as well as lines from poet Rupi Kaur’s *Milk and Honey* collection. Scott stated that the song is ultimately “an ode to our many moods and layers. I’ve got my own identities – a Black and Latina zen bruja, bisexual with both masculine and feminine energy – but it’s really about creating a world where we can just be the multidimensional beings that we are” (Nazim). Indeed, it is.

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