TAKING COMEDY SERIOUSLY

Stand–Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture

JENNALEE DONIAN

Taking Comedy Seriously

Politics and Comedy: Critical Encounters

Series Editor: Julie A. Webber, Illinois State University

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Taking Comedy Seriously

Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture

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Writing a book is much like telling a joke—it requires engagement and support from others to render it laughable, and thus enjoyable. To this end, there are a few individuals to whom I owe a great thanks.

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Introduction

Comedy Is No Laughing Matter!

Despite all appearances to the contrary, humor is no joke! Rather, it has become a site of critical cultural importance in our postmodern, neoliberal, and highly mediated culture, operating as a central point of interface between day-to-day life, media culture, and the community at large. In an economic sense, the production, distribution, and consumption of comedy in its various forms (film, television, video games, internet content, publishing, and so on) are significant sources of profit for the cultural and media industries (Holm 2012, 5). For instance, in its filmic format, comedy is consistently one of the most profitable of all cinematic genres. In the United Kingdom (UK) in 2016, for example, comedic films accounted for 16.4 percent of all releases and 14.4 percent of box office takings (BFI Research and Statistics 2017). Similarly, looking at the most popular film genres in North America by total box office revenue, comedy comes in first, with total earnings of $41.49 billion from 1995 to 2016 (Prikhodko 2016). As impressive as these figures might be, it is important to remember that the gross profit of a film is far greater than box office statistics alone, which constitutes only a fraction of the overall revenue of a film; therefore, these figures provide only a slight indication of comedic films' economic success. Furthermore, these figures do not account for those cinematic products not confined by conventional (genre-specific) boundaries and which include strong elements of humor, such as top-grossing action movies like *Iron Man*, *Ant-Man*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (volumes 1 and 2). The Deadpool franchise, in particular, renders explicit the genre overlap between action films and comedy.

In the televisual context, there is no clear way to measure the economic impact of comedy shows across their entire run, as shows that are in

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syndication for years or even decades generate a consistent and sustained income (Holm 2012, 6). In addition to the financial returns of syndication, such shows also have "massive earning powers" in terms of ratings and their influence on secondary markets (Holm 2012, 6). For instance, six of the ten highest-rated season finales in American television history are situation comedies—*Family Ties* (1989), *All in the Family* (1979), *The Cosby Show* (1992), *Friends* (2004), *Seinfeld* (1998), and *Cheers* (1993) (Carter 2015). The economic impact of such shows can also be derived from merchandise, as Nicholas Holm points out with reference to *The Simpsons*, which generated $750 million in merchandise sales in 2007, increasing the franchise's revenue over its entire run to an estimate of $12.33 billion (2012, 6). Not forgetting, the above-mentioned sources of comedy (in their cinematic and televisual manifestations) 'live on' and continue to establish the economic power of humor by way of the home entertainment market (DVD sales and rentals). For instance, Holm notes that sitcoms consistently constituted almost a third of rental charts and dominated sales through the early 2000s, and comedies featured in the top ten best-selling DVD titles as reported in 2004 (2012, 7). It is also worth remembering that some of television's best (and most lucrative) dramas have also been some of the funniest—*The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Wire*—to name just a few. Clearly, the production and consumption of humor is a profitable business.

The second site at which one might ascertain the importance of humor in our current moment is in the social sphere, in terms of the way we define ourselves in relation to one another, and our larger contexts, as well as humor's psycho-physico-social effect. As sociologist Michael Billig argues, "we belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humor is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human" (2005, 13). Undeniably, so profoundly is humor intertwined into the very fabric of our society that possessing a 'sense of humor' has become a universally desirable personal characteristic (Holm 2012, 8). Indeed, Billig adds that "people will no more declare themselves to be humorless than claim to be selfish, insensitive or criminally insane" (2005, 12). One might comment here on the obligatory nature of having a sense of humor, to the extent that it has become such an imperative, which immediately raises my suspicion because it indicates ideological status and lack of spontaneity.

One may deviate here for a moment and refer to Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) and his essay on 'immaterial labor,' wherein he offers insight into this quasi-ideological development in today's society by unmasking this type of work (which would include comedy-work) as part of capitalist strategy. For Lazzarato, 'immaterial labor' is composed of two different aspects of work—the 'information content' of the commodity, and the 'cultural content' of the commodity (of which only the cultural content serves a purpose here) (1996, 133). With regard to the latter, the

'intellectual workers' (cultural producers, if you will) produce a series of activities (as opposed to 'work' in the traditional sense) that contribute to the development of cultural/artistic standards, consumer norms, and public opinion, which are channeled and structured within capitalist business practice, and are thus exploited. As such, their work forms part of what Lazzarato sees as the 'intellectualization' of work, which requires subjectivities that support (by way of creative production) the informational and knowledge economies. This has become the norm in contemporary capitalist society, but—and this is an important 'but'—without dislodging the hierarchical relationships that persist between workers and the managerial class. The important point I am trying to make here, however, is that there is an ideological reason why humor has become *de rigueur* today: it promotes the interests of capital.

In addition to serving as a way of defining ourselves, humor also assumes a positive role in society, ofttimes appearing to function as a physical and mental panacea by improving social, mental, and physical health and well-being by way of (but not reduced to) relieving stress and anxiety, increasing self-worth, promoting social cohesion, and aiding in physical recovery and healing, as an educational tool and teaching method, promoting peaceful protests, and enhancing workplace wellness (Holm 2012, 8–10).

The third site at which the contemporary importance of humor can be located is in the realm of aesthetics, where humor functions as an almost undisputable aesthetic category, increasingly operating as a marker of cultural value (in terms of quality, desirability, etc.), such that for a text to be deemed 'humorous' and 'funny' is to entirely justify its presence and continued distribution within society (Holm 2012, 10). In this instance then, humor operates in a manner once reserved for categories such as 'beauty' or 'truth.' Depending on whether or not one equates humor with comedy in ancient Greece and Rome (think of Aristophanes's comedies in Athens—and probably in ancient China, India, and Japan as well), one might argue that this is not the first time that it has attained this aesthetic position.

Similar to the evaluation of art then (whether or not a text is to be considered art), Holm argues that humor (whether or not a text is humorous) has the ability to "legitimat[e] a text deemed otherwise irredeemably obscene, ugly or otherwise unworthy" (2012, 11). Subsequently, artworks are increasingly produced, interpreted (and ofttimes reinterpreted in terms of art schools and movements), and exhibited in terms of humor, such as the 2007 exhibition *All About Laughter: Humor in Contemporary Art* at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, the 2005–2007 exhibition *Situation Comedy: Humor in Recent Art,* displayed throughout the United States and Canada, and 2010's *Rude Britannia: British Comic Art* at the Tate Britain. Likewise, older examples of humor such as newspaper cartoons and caricatures are reinterpreted in terms of art, such as 2015's third *What's So Funny?* installation series at the Art Gallery of Ontario, which features six works (caricatures) by humorist and

illustrator Walter Trier, all of which date from the late 1700s to the early 1800s. At the same time, humor is declared as central to the cultural politics of several art movements of the twentieth century—such as Dada, Surrealism, and Fluxus (Higgie 2007, 12), setting the stage for art theorist Sheri Klein, in her book *Art and Laughter* (2007), to call for a reinterpretation of the historically 'serious' avant-garde in terms of humor, using the works of Sarah Lucas, Bruce Nauman, and Jeff Koons as examples. This is not to say that humor's aesthetic role is confined to the art world alone; on the contrary, humor has come to play an increasingly central role in the production, distribution, legitimation, and consumption of various forms of popular culture (as pointed out), leading Holm to declare its significance in "the organization and interpretation of contemporary culture, in terms of both elite and popular aesthetics" (2012, 12).

One might be inclined to turn here to Italian semiotician, philosopher, novelist, and universal scholar Umberto Eco who thematized the 'defense' of humor against dogmatic religion in his first novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980/2014). Here, Adso of Melk, a Benedictine novice priest travels with a Franciscan friar, Brother William of Baskerville, to a Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy to investigate a theological dispute, but instead becomes engaged in solving a series of murders in the community. A narrative thread of the novel—a conversation between the monk Benno of Uppsala and William regarding the elderly blind monk, Jorge of Burgos—sets the scene for the exploration of the supposedly opposing relationship between "incontrovertible truth" (*the* truth) and what Jorge calls the "enemy of truth" (laughter, ridiculous images, witticisms, and plays on words):

> Jorge was saying that it is not licit to use ridiculous images to decorate books that contain the truth. And Venantius observed that Aristotle himself had spoken of witticisms and plays on words as instruments better to reveal the truth, and hence laughter could not be such a bad thing if it could become a vehicle of the truth. Jorge said that, as far as he could recall, Aristotle had spoken of these things in his Poetics, when discussing metaphor. And these were in themselves two disturbing circumstances, first because the book of the Poetics, unknown to the Christian world for such a long time, which was perhaps by divine decree, had come to us through the infidel Moors. . . . But Jorge added that the second cause for uneasiness is that in the book the Stagirite was speaking of poetry, which is infima doctrina and which exists on figments. And Venantius said that the psalms, too, are works of poetry and use metaphors; and Jorge became enraged because he said the psalms are works of divine inspiration and use metaphors to convey the truth, while the works of the pagan poets use metaphors to convey falsehood and for purposes of mere pleasure, a remark that greatly offended me. (Eco 2014, 119)

Here, Jorge uncompromisingly condemns laughing (showing a sense of humor) at the TRUTH (dogmatically held beliefs), insisting that such is a "sin" and

"evil." The novel ends with William, discovering that Jorge was the murderer, standing in front of the burning abbey that Jorge set alight, advising Adso:

> Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them . . . Jorge feared the second book of Aristotle because it perhaps really did teach how to distort the face of every truth, so that we would not become slaves to our ghosts. Perhaps the mission of those who love mankind is to make people laugh at the truth, TO MAKE TRUTH LAUGH, because the only truth lies in learning to free ourselves from insane passion for the truth. (Eco 2014, 526)

South African philosopher Bert Olivier argues that Eco's book, in relation to the truth and laughter, may be considered applicable to the ostensible motivations behind many 'recent' events with "uncanny accuracy," and names the fire bombings of Charlie Hebdo's office in November 2011 in France, linked to its decision to satirize the Prophet Muhammed, as an example (2015). The above highlights that extreme instances—which William describes as "excessive love of [and for] the truth"—which are only ever partial knowledge, can lead to absolute belief or faith in a non-existent absolute truth, with dire consequences. It is highly relevant here that in Eco's novel, Jorge's fanatical defense of an absolute truth was prompted by what he saw as the danger of 'frivolous' comedy, in that it might distract people from the seriousness of 'TRUTH.' Might this not partially explain the widespread turn to comedy, including stand-up comedy acts? After all, these offer not merely a kind of escape from the anxieties (to be addressed later) that are provoked by the pervasive awareness, in a thoroughly information-saturated and mediatized world, of the fact that society is inundated by the ubiquitous potential of 'terror-attacks,' but their popularity also represents a kind of collective, unconscious affirmation of the need (articulated so well by Eco's character, Brother William) for humor, or comedy, to challenge the fanaticism of unquestioned belief in absolute truth as that which motivates such acts of 'terror.'

In addition to serving as an 'escape' or 'distraction' from the harshness of every-day reality, comedy could also be said to incite conversations about those very ('serious') issues. This seems to be especially true with regard to contemporary television series, the most popular of which seem to be straddling the line between light-hearted comedy, on the one hand, and incisive (sociopolitical) commentary on the other. Such is the case with *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, for example, streaming on Netflix since 2015, which tells the story of a kidnapping survivor who adjusts to life in New York City with an optimistic sense of humor. There is also *Black-ish*, a broadcast comedy/drama on ABC (2014–) which focuses on race in America, and then there is *Transparent*, a web television series that revolves around a family in Los Angeles and their lives following the discovery that their father is a transgendered woman. These three shows, and there are many others, all deal with very current and crucial issues in our

society—rape, race relations and racism, and gender identity. Commenting on comedy's popularity and success in the television industry, in particular for the 2015–2016 season, Sonia Saraiya states: "[T]he brilliance in comedy has led to joke-telling becoming one of the most politically charged platforms in pop culture. This past season, the shows with the best takes on transgender civil rights, diversity in media, police brutality, the vagaries of capitalism, and the 2016 election have been comedies, not dramas; punch lines have become more profound than grit" (2016).

Humor's pervasive presence in public culture is further evident in the increasing acceptance of the field of comedy (in the broadest sense) into the academic space—a site once reserved for more 'serious' forms of discourse. To be clear, when I refer to the so-called 'field of comedy,' I mean any discourse or text intended to be humorous and elicit laughter, which might include the study of humor, laughter, jokes, and so on. in various manifestations (i.e., cinematic, televisual, photographic, literary). Indeed, until recently, the 'general' attitude among scholars toward the study of comedy is succinctly expressed by E. B. White: "The world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurel, and its wags with Brussels sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious" (1977, 244). Certainly, the revered halls of academia have questioned how one is able to formulate critical, serious responses when the discourse in question, through its own admission, is not to be taken seriously. However, Peter Berger argues that studying the comic dimension of social reality is "not meant to denigrate the serious study of society but simply to suggest that such study itself will profit greatly from those insights that one can obtain only while laughing" (1963, 165). Notably, though, there has been an ever-slight shift in the public perception of studying comedy in the higher education industry over the last five to eight years. For instance, in 2013, Dr. Sharon Lockyer set up the Centre for Comedy Studies Research at Brunel University in London and even an academic journal, *Comedy Studies*, published in print for the first time in 2014 (Jeffries 2014). Indeed, scholars finally seem to be taking comedy seriously (certainly I am; hence the title and focus of this book). Clearly, thinking about comedy is becoming a big academic industry.

Comedy also seems to be finding a boost in research from (arguably) unlikely sources, like cable and satellite television (albeit Comedy Central) and custom-research firms (TRU Insights and Sachs Insights), which are commissioning research projects (albeit not academic as such) with a focus on comedy, humor, and youth (Carter 2012). Furthermore, as the digital world/space grows and comedians are finding a larger fan base, more people are writing (good and informative, if not altogether academic) articles about the genre, subsequently promoting comedy to new heights. The comic regis-

ter even appears to be shaping the contemporary experience in terms of education, politics, journalism, *and* the all-serious medical profession:

> Teachers are increasingly urged by educationalists to enliven their delivery with jocularity. Social protestors train newcomers in the use of humor for non-violent resistance. Teams of doctors dressed as clowns deliver an optimal dose of laughter in children's wards. Psychologists advise organizations on how to use humor to enhance workplace wellness, while negotiating the thorny issue of 'political correctness.' When work pursuits are over, laughter clubs offer a means of relieving stress, and personal column editors supply acronyms to assist in the search for a mate with a G(ood) S(ense) O(f) H(umor). (Hynes and Sharpe 2010, 44)

This is not to say that humor has not always been a central aspect in the cultural production and consumption of our society (e.g., see ancient Greece above), but rather, that the degree to which it has relatively recently permeated and pervaded all zones of modern life (in one way or another, and to varying degrees), is a new phenomenon, and therefore deserves reinterpretation and reevaluation. *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture,* explores the possibility of a contemporary sociopolitically efficacious comedy through one of humor's least theorized and least analyzed media forms—stand-up comedy. The reason for this choice in comic style lies with humor scholar Lawrence E. Mintz who, in his article "Stand-up comedy as social and cultural mediation," argues that stand-up comedy is the most "deeply significant form of humorous expression," adding that "the student of a culture and society cannot find a more revealing index to its values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns . . . [than] the relatively undervalued genre of stand-up comedy" (1985, 71). It is in this spirit that I take up the task of charting (or sketching) contemporary stand-up comedy's 'deep significance' in our society. However, working on the (arguably sound) assumption that a phenomenon cannot be adequately understood in isolation from its context, I examine the relationship between stand-up comedy's popularity and the social, economic, and political landscape within which it exists, and question the possibility of a sociopolitically efficacious contemporary comedy within a mass-cultural context problematized by co-option and commodification.

The first chapter of this book presents a systematic (and rather encyclopedic) overview of the field of stand-up comedy by situating it within a broader historical context, focusing on the genre's defining features, as well as the stand-up comic's various traditional antecedents. Here I encourage a broader conceptualization and understanding of what enactments qualify as 'stand-up comedy,' in which case one could comfortably locate sketch comedy (in all its [tele]visual manifestations), daytime talk show hosts, late-night talk show hosts, and even material converted from traditional stand-up acts to

literary texts, within the realm of stand-up comedy. Moreover, drawing from the work of Mintz, this chapter explores humor's critical functions in society, paying particular attention to the modern-day stand-up comic's ambiguous position in society, between that of negative exemplification and comic activism, which grants them the ability and power to either publicly affirm, or subvert, normative cultural values.

Moving on, chapters 2 and 3 work in tandem to provide an overarching theoretical lens through which to explore the possibility of a contemporary aesthetics of humor, situating stand-up comedy within the broader socio-cultural, political, and economic context of what post-Marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call the age of "Empire." In particular, chapter 2 adopts a psychoanalytic perspective to the study of contemporary humor/comedy, attempting to account for the resurgence of stand-up comedy in present-day society, firstly by drawing a feasible connection between the current socioeconomic dispensation and worldwide human hardship and suffering (in its economic, physical, and psychical manifestations) and, secondly (and thereafter), by understanding comedy in terms of Sigmund Freud's theory of humor (in relation to the unconscious), as a form of 'escape' and relief from such travail and the anxieties they induce.

Extending this theoretical framework into the discourse of political philosophy, chapter 3 draws on the work of Lacanian political philosopher Slavoj Žižek to demonstrate that the ideological situation of global capitalism poses an obvious predicament for the possibility of a sociopolitically efficacious stand-up comedy in that ironic and skeptical distance is already characteristic of postmodern cynicism, incorporated into the very social fabric itself, thus rendering the comedic technique of satire (synonymous with so-called 'political comedy') altogether appropriated, or at least compromised, and subsequently impotent. That is to say, satirical and carnivalesque modes of critique in comic performances operate ideologically and, in spite of appearance and intentions, may be bound up in the official ideology. In this case, such practices of (comic) activism (critique) can arguably never lead to any progressive agency or advance beyond the limits of 'mere comedy' *sans* political effect. Following this inference, the possibility of a radical democratic comedy (here I follow the theoretical framework of 'radical democracy' that relates the mode of politics to a 'disagreement' elaborated by a variety of theorists, but most notably Jacques Rancière) must circumvent the logics of satire and carnival by breaking with (and from) the prevailing neoliberal and post-political consensual ideology (i.e., symbolic order).

To this end, chapter 4 turns to the aesthetic theory of French philosopher Jacques Rancière who offers a contemporary reinterpretation of political aesthetics based on the notion of the "distribution of the sensible," which alludes to the manner in which the 'sensible' realm of the perceptible world (inseparable from the social, cultural, and political spheres) is 'partitioned' (or ar-

ranged) along hierarchical and cratological lines of inclusion and exclusion. To this end, in Rancière's account, aesthetics gives rise to the very possibility of politics in that the 'distribution of the sensible,' which both generates the conditions for circulation and for the production of meaning (i.e., signs and images), traces the boundaries between what and who can and cannot be seen, heard, and understood (2004, 12–13). In Rancière's political aesthetics then, aesthetics are considered to do political work when they disrupt (create a 'gap' in) the existing (hierarchical) sensible parameters regulating social life, which effects a redistribution or rearrangement of the social world at the level of the perceptible, audible, intelligible, and linguistically articulable. Operating on this principle, I argue that in comic practice, this 'disruption' in the symbolic order takes the form of the 'gap' at the heart of joke-making (between set-up and punch-line; between 'common sense'/categorical reason and 'nonsense'/folly), which suggests that to a degree, stand-up comedy is immanently 'political' in its form, and as such can serve as a site for the possibility of democratic politics.

Informed by the concept of 'dissensus,' chapter 5 analyzes a range of contemporary televisual, digital, and literary examples from the comedic routines of American comedian and talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres, South African satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys, and South African–born (and now American comedic talk-show host sensation) Trevor Noah to identify instances whereby these comedians could be said to introduce 'dissensuality' into the emerging/reigning neoliberal and post-political public domain, thereby contributing to a reordering of the 'distribution of the sensible' and concomitantly existing power relations. Additionally, this chapter explores the extent to which DeGeneres's and Uys's sex-gender hybridity, and Noah's racial hybridity, serve a further destabilizing function. By navigating between standard and 'traditional' gendered and racial responses within the comedic realm (i.e., between fixed identifications), without an assumed or imposed hierarchy, I argue that these comedians expose the constructed nature of essentializing social categories such as race and gender. Furthermore, I argue that their fluidity or 'neutral' positionality—resulting from their layered outsider status (DeGeneres, as a lesbian; Uys, as a homosexual male dressed in drag; and Noah, as a biracial man)—further grants them a certain taboo-breaking moratorium that makes it possible to ease 'unsayable' and 'unthinkable' issues into the terrain of the 'sayable' and 'thinkable,' and enables them to create an alternate 'safe' comedic space where their comedy is 'passively' received as a set of (ostensibly) harmless and impersonal jokes (which may, however, hide a serious and potentially critical subtext).

In light of the five preceding chapters, in the concluding chapter I classify contemporary humor as an aesthetic of ambivalence and ambiguity, or what amounts to Linda Hutcheon's notion of "complicitous critique," whereby postmodern cultural forms of representation (which are ideologically

grounded in late capitalist discourses) are understood to be both 'complici-tous' *and* 'critical.' To understand humor in these terms is neither to con-demn it as a cultural form bereft of political potential, nor to celebrate it as a liberatory force that fosters radical political change; but rather to highlight it as a space of endless political possibility that can be taken up in the service of consensus or dissent, capitalism or socialism, and any combination of the above. In Holm's words, "[humor can] stand for, against, or most often somewhere confusingly in-between, the political demands of our contempo-rary society" (2012, 286).

While the study of humor within a contemporary context, and its social and/or political efficacy within this space, is by no means a new area of research, most studies frame contemporary humor/comedy in terms of previ-ous 'traditional' (humor) theories (that may be in need of revision, consider-ing the ever-changing landscape of contemporary culture), which inevitably further replicates the ideas of previous scholars. Consequently, they re-create the very arguments they seek to disprove or extend. Furthermore, few schol-ars employ contemporary theories, such as postmodernist theory or contem-porary research methods, and interpretive reading strategies inspired by poststructuralism, all of which may provide new insight and perspectives on stand-up comedy in particular, and by extension, humor as a whole. This book, which I therefore consider to be timely, rectifies this imbalance as it critically examines stand-up comedy as a relevant sociological phenomenon from a contemporary perspective, as both a symptom of neoliberal capitalism *and* the *locus specificus* of sociopolitical critique in the era of 'Empire.' In this way, *Taking Comedy Seriously* brings the genre into contemporary con-versation within social and political philosophy, media studies, cultural stud-ies, political criticism, humor theory, sociology, literary studies, and psycho-analytic theory to incorporate scholarship on popular culture and cultural politics unavoidably seen against the backdrop of their environing social, economic, and political context.

By contextualizing contemporary stand-up comedy within the wider sociopolitical terrain, this book redefines, within certain parameters, the no-tion of 'political comedy' in the current moment, providing a theoretical model informed by the work of Hardt and Negri, and Freud and Rancière, among others, to suggest further ways of evaluating contemporary stand-up comedy (and, for that matter, the more general field of comedy) in terms of its ability to offer potentially effective social and political critique. To this end, *Taking Comedy Seriously* ultimately reveals contemporary stand-up comedy's peculiar activist potential for thinking a radical emancipatory poli-tics based on polemics and paradox.

Chapter One

Sketching the Terrain of Stand-Up Comedy

Stand-up comedy as an art form faces the challenge of being a rather slippery genre, with no clear workable definition tracing what it is, and what it is not, which might often limit the analyses of performances that might indeed be considered stand-up comedy. Indeed, most dictionaries and even scholarly papers that focus on stand-up comedy do not offer an all-encompassing definition of the art form. For instance, the *Cambridge Dictionary* only contains a cursory description: "[comedy] performed by a single person telling jokes" (2017), and *Oxford Dictionaries* does not even contain an entry for stand-up comedy, offering only a description of a stand-up comic: "a comedian whose act consists of standing before an audience and telling a succession of jokes" (2017). Furthermore, those definitions that do exist and are in circulation belong to one of three categories: generalized, strict, or contradictory. In his critical account of the history of American television comedy—*Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*—David Marc argues that the lack of a workable definition of stand-up comedy poses a serious problem that undermines what little criticism of the art form has been written, and also denies the art form its traditional history and heritage, *and* its significance in contemporary culture (1989, 15). Almost three decades since the release of Marc's book, and still, little progress has been made in producing a workable definition of stand-up comedy.

As a rather flexible, vague, and generalized definition of stand-up comedy, Nathan Andrew Wilson in his doctoral thesis—"Was that supposed to be funny? A rhetorical analysis of politics, problems, and contradictions in contemporary stand-up comedy"—offers the following: "Most stand-up centers on the figure of the comic, and whenever a comic is facing an audience and trying to act or being perceived as acting humorously (whether by design or

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happenstance), stand-up may be said to occur" (2008, 4). Such a flexible definition of stand-up comedy poses a problem in that it allows other performance arts to infiltrate into the category reserved for stand-up comedy. For instance, the above could apply to musical comedy (where humorous dialogue is combined with music, singing, and dancing), physical comedy (the manipulation of physical movements and gestures for humorous effect), prop comedy (that relies on humorous stage props or objects used in humorous ways), or situation comedy or the 'sitcom' (which centers around a group of characters involved in humorous situations, often with humorous dialogue).

At the other end of the spectrum, Lawrence E. Mintz proposes a rather precise and restrictive definition of stand-up comedy (which most scholars use as a reference point), describing it as "an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting or dramatic vehicle" (1985, 71). Such a rigid definition of stand-up comedy arguably disallows for the possibility of growth beyond stage performances, although, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, talk shows, sketch comedy skits, and literary texts, for instance, may be classified within the genre of stand-up comedy. While there are other definitions that could be included in the above categories (flexible and rigid), it is not my intention here to explore the totality of definitions of stand-up comedy, but rather, to engage in the defining of stand-up comedy as problematic, complex, and challenging, indicated by the sheer volume of contradictory definitions and the utter lack of any sort of consensus among scholars.

As a case in point, Swedish comedian Adde Malmberg, in his essay "Världens näst äldsta yrke: stand-up comedian," which serves as an introduction for the book *Stå upp! Boken om stand-up comedy* (1992), readily offers several basic defining characteristics of stand-up comedy, yet almost simultaneously realizes the inadequacies of his own assertions. For instance, he argues that in stand-up comedy one has to be funny, and one has to be alone, two features undoubtedly supported by most humor scholars (Malmberg 1992, 5). Yet Oliver Double asserts that stand-up comedy does not necessarily always involve laughter (the by-product of interpreting something as being funny or humorous), noting that if a comedian 'dies' on stage, that is, fails to make the audience laugh, this does not mean that the act fails to qualify as stand-up comedy (1991, 3). Furthermore, Double, along with Wilson and sociologist Robert Stebbins, maintain that stand-up comedy is not necessarily a solo form, citing that many duos and trios could easily be said to qualify as stand-up comedians (Double 1991, 3; Wilson 2008, 5; Stebbins 1990, 3).

Malmberg goes on to state that a further defining characteristic of stand-up comedy is the *literal* interpretation of the genre—that one must 'stand up'—yet Malmberg himself is quick to mention Irish comedian Dave Allen, who performs his routines sitting down, and nevertheless qualifies as a stand-

up comedian (in particular in Malmberg's point of view) (1992, 5–6). One might also be inclined to include Trevor Noah in this conversation, as in his current position on *The Daily Show,* he is mostly sitting down.

Regarding what is perhaps one of the most written-about aspects of stand-up comedy—direct communication and interaction with the audience—Malmberg affirms that as a stand-up comic, one has to talk directly to the audience (1992, 5–6). 'Talking' here would suggest that stand-up comedy is an exclusively spoken form, yet Double argues that it actually evolved out of comic song, with many stand-ups still including songs in their acts (1991, 3). Double adds that stand-up does not necessarily involve direct communication with the audience, as is the case with stand-up double acts where the performers often talk to each other as well as to the audience (1991, 3). To be clear, by 'direct communication' I mean what Double means by it: "an intense relationship, with energy flowing back and forth between stage and auditorium . . . like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter and sometimes less pleasant responses" (2005, 19). Most scholars, however (Double included, even if it may appear to contradict what was said above regarding his claim about 'direct communication'), like Malmberg maintain "the *absolute* 'directness of artist/audience communication' as the definitive feature of [stand-up comedy]" (Marc 1989, 16). To this, Double adds that if one "take[s] the audience away from stand-up comedy . . . it starts to look weird . . . stand-up comedy without an audience is only half there" (2005, 106).

Continuing to list the central features of stand-up comedy, Malmberg argues that these breed of comics should not make use of props, and furthermore, that in their comedic routines, should be themselves, neither wearing costumes nor interpreting a character; yet Malmberg himself realizes the ineptness of such characteristics for a number of reasons (1992, 5–6). Firstly, he, together with Wilson, Double, and Mirali Almaula, are cognizant that some comedians might rely on gestures and visual jokes involving (limited) stage props for certain routines, although this might be thought of as less pure a version of traditional stand-up comedy (Malmberg 1992, 5–6; Wilson 2008, 5; Double 1991, 3; Almaula 2015, 9–10). In addition, Malmberg mentions that some comedians might make use of characterizations, and Double further argues that personality is one of the genre's key features, noting that stand-up comedy "puts a person on display in front of an audience, whether that person is an exaggerated comic character or a version of the performer's own self" (Malmberg 1992, 5–6; Double 2005, 19).

A further characteristic Malmberg attributes to the performance of stand-up comedy is that these comics should not be dependent upon context (1992, 5–6), yet many scholars strongly argue otherwise (Wilson, 2008; Limon, 2000; Zajdman, 1991; Attardo, 2001). Wilson, for instance, argues that context is essential to stand-up comedy as rhetorical criticism and the rhetorical

effectivity of discourse can only be understood in terms of "the delineation and deployment of symbolic space" (2008, 5). In addition, Salvatore Attardo categorically distinguishes between narrative/canned jokes (rehearsed jokes that can be reused) which are generally detached from context, and conversational jokes ('original' jokes expressed with an ease of collocation) which are strongly context-dependent (2001, 62). However, Anat Zajdman notes that if one takes into consideration the concept of 'recycling,' canned jokes are often adapted, to a great extent, to the context in which they are told (1991).

Perhaps the one and only inarguable feature of stand-up comedy then, devoid of contradiction, is that stand-up comedians usually write their own material, often to fit in with their personalities or, less commonly, their stage personas which they then present on stage without the actual script (Malmberg 1992, 5–6; Stebbins 1990, 3; Wilson 2008, 5). According to Stebbins, such comedic material typically includes "anecdotes, narrative jokes, one-liners, and short descriptive monologues, which may or may not be related" (1990, 3), and Wilson adds that the act may also include slapstick, impressions, and satire (2008, 5).

While the above definitions offer vague, restrictive, and often contradictory descriptions of stand-up comedy, they are not sufficient in offering an insightful understanding of an art form that, according to Mintz, is "arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression," with its roots "entwined with rites, rituals, and dramatic experiences that are richer, more complex than [a simplistic definition] can embrace" (1985, 71). Indeed, the persona of the contemporary stand-up comic has various antecedents in the form of the shaman, the mythological trickster from world literature and oral traditions, and the fool and traditional fool variants such as the court jester.

As one of the initial progenitors of today's stand-ups (from the earliest ancient civilizations), the shaman was the original entertainer, performative storyteller, social therapist, and cipher (inciting fundamental existential and spiritual questions). Serving as an interface between the monotony of everyday life and the entertaining and mysterious, the shaman leads the community in acts of shared celebration (expanding a sense of community) and spiritual transcendence (encouraging the audience to view the world in new and extraordinary ways)—not entirely unlike the unifying and cathartic (and restorative) practice (and power) of laughter, induced by the professional comic (Mintz 1985, 74; Bergson 2013, 4; Koziski-Olson 1988, 109; Tafoya 2009, 39). Perhaps the comedian who most explicitly embodies this approach (of spiritual consciousness) was Bill Hicks who, in one of his letters in the book *Love All the People*, even declared himself a shaman, which he likens to a prophet: "I am a shaman come in the guise of a comic, in order to heal perception by using stories and 'jokes,' and always, always, *always* the Voice of Reason" (2004, 223).

The cultural icon of the comedian also resonates with and is shaped by the archetypal figure of the mythological trickster, omnipresent in the oral literary canons of a number of linguistically distinct indigenous cultures since some point from 50,000 to 30,000 years BCE (Tafoya 2009, 86). From China to North and South America, Tierra del Fuego to the Ukraine and Africa, and from Bulgaria to Russia, ancient myths portray these divine mischief-makers as the embodiment of ambiguity and paradox (opposing the traits of the humorous and foolish buffoon, for example, with the intelligent and wise cultural hero, or the scandalous deceiver with the sacred truth-teller) (Tafoya 2009, 86; Hyde 1998, 7). To this end, they are characterized as the quintessential border crosser, challenging boundaries physically (often changing shape, exhibiting gender variability, or crossing between worlds), psychologically (mediating between basic animal instincts and human moral ideals of civilized decency and propriety), and socially (openly challenging the civilizing forces of society and staid belief systems, criticizing the dominant paradigm, common truths, and habitual interpretations [i.e., reality], destroying social and cultural convention and complacency, and promoting chaos and unrest) (Tafoya 2009, 86; Weaver and Mora, 2016; Bassil-Morozow, 2017; Hyde, 1998).

Perhaps the most recognizable of these characters is Hermes and Prometheus from ancient Greek mythology, the Monkey King from Chinese legends, the Coyote from the Native American canon, Loki from Norse mythology, and Br'er rabbit from the storytelling traditions in African culture. Elements of the trickster exemplar still feature prominently in contemporary popular culture: in movies (Captain Jack Sparrow from the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise, *The Mask* with Jim Carrey, Ferris Bueller—the hero from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*—and *Deadpool*); television and animation (Bart Simpson from the animated TV series, *The Simpsons*, Bugs Bunny, and Woody Woodpecker); novels (Kickaha from Phillip Jose Farmer's *World of Tiers*); video games (Snake aka Big Boss from the *Metal Gear Solid* series, Agent 47 from *Hitman,* Corvo from *Dishonored,* and Adam Jensen from the *Deus Ex* series); and comics (the Joker from the Batman franchise, which also features in films and animated TV, the supervillain James Jesse from DC Comics, Loki from the Marvel Comics series and from the new Marvel movies *Thor*, *The Avengers*, and *Thor: The Dark World*). However, in its modern manifestation, the trickster 'discourse' is arguably most authentically personified in the spirit of the stand-up comic who crosses and violates social and cultural boundaries in ways that uphold the trickster idea of change. Indeed, whether the joking is practical (as with the trickster) or verbal (in the case of the comedian), both personages manipulate an audience's immediate social and cognitive environment in an attempt to re-create the social world (i.e., shift their perceptions of reality).

While the above comic figures undoubtedly contributed (in some way or another) to the persona of the modern-day stand-up comic, it is primarily the guise of the European court jester (the 'wise fool' who exposes the 'truth' about society to a cynical, humorous light)—in his iconographical insignia 'cap and bells,'[1] and institutionalized and popularized by Shakespeare: the fool in *King Lear*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, and the aptly named Touchstone in *As You Like It*—upon which the structure and foundation of the contemporary stand-up comic is built. Yet, the court jester is not a traditionally European phenomenon traced back to the medieval period; rather, it is something much older, appearing in ancient times in Rome and Greece (as comic mime actors), in Egypt (in the form of dancing dwarfs), in Thailand (as dwarfs performing acrobatic wizardry), in the classical Sanskrit plays of India (as stock characters), and at the courts of China (as actors), as well as in northern Kurdistan (Iran, Iraq, and Eastern and Southern Turkey) and Maghred (western North Africa) (Otto 2001). Despite their cultural diversity around the world, however, their similarities arguably far outweigh their cultural differences and surroundings, as demonstrated below.

In her extensive research into court jesters, Beatrice Otto claims that throughout history and across continents, early jesters entertained with their sharp tongues and quick wit, ofttimes augmenting such verbal dexterity with a variety of physical skills like juggling, dancing, performing conjuring tricks, and acrobatics (2001). The typical jester (like the shaman and trickster) was an outsider shunned by society for one reason or another—most often due to a mental or physical abnormality of some sort (i.e., having a hunchback or being a dwarf)—whose marginal position placed him outside of the social framework, which only sharpened his insight into human nature (Otto 2001, 23; 135; Romanska and Ackerman 2016, 31). More than simply providing pure amusement, jesters around the world also served as the ruler's/king's confidant, ally, advisor, and counsel, a role which granted them the freedom to mock (without persecution) typical human vices of petulance and vanity, for example, as well as religion and the hypocrisy of its authority figures, court officials, and indolent or incompetent rulers (Otto 2001; Romanska and Ackerman 2016, 31).

While the stand-up comedian has evidently assumed a similar role in society (although arguably less distinctly than the court jester), Otto argues that the modern jester tradition differs greatly from its ancient historical predecessors in terms of the inability of those in power "to openly acknowledge a comic person who might mock and advise them" (2001, 257). Nevertheless, F. D. Roosevelt (who had informal jesters) commented on the comedian Will Rogers who had ready access to the man he called 'Pres,' that: "while I had discussed European matters with many others . . . Will Rogers' analysis of affairs abroad was not only more interesting, but proved to be more accurate than any other I had heard" (Otto 2001, 257).

In addition to being part of Native American tribal rites, mythology and oral traditions, world literature (Shakespeare), and court entertainment, stand-up comedy as an art form also has its roots in ancient pagan rites, anarchic religious festivals, and carnival acts throughout the world—past and present. For instance, many classical parallels to modern-day stand-up can be found in the traditions of the informal vintage-festivals of the Greek villagers when all was jovial gaiety and jesting license in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine, intoxication, pleasure, revelry, and fertility. The largest and most prolific of these annual celebrations was the 'Great Dionysia' festival—held every spring (March) in Athens for five to six days—the central events of which were characterized by an inchoate medley of (improvised) ribald and satirical song (augmented with masquerades), phallic dances, an indulgence in vulgar and abusive banter and repartee (with onlookers), and theatrical productions (in the form of comedy and tragedy, the most famous playwright of the former genre being Aristophanes) (Shafto 2009, 3; Cavendish 2010, 88–90).

The ancient Romans then continued the tradition in the form of 'Bacchanalia,' a festival named for Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and pleasure, which was celebrated for three days in Attica and Rome during early Spring to mark the beginning of a new planting season (Shafto 2009, 3; Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010, 116). Originally confined to women (but later also included men), the festivities were marked by dancing, singing, masks, and an overindulgence in food and drink (Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010, 116; Shafto 2009, 3). The Romans also celebrated the festival of 'Saturnalia' every year in honor of the god of agriculture—Saturn (Shafto 2009, 3). The festivities began on 17 December, continuing for a full month, and were presided over by a mock king—or Lord of Misrule—with much drinking, eating, mischief, and game playing (including public gambling which was otherwise normally forbidden), and also included the exchange of gifts and a triumphal procession through the city streets (Shafto 2009, 3–4; Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010, 116). More importantly, the festival was marked by various rituals of (hierarchical) inversion, such as slaves being waited on by their masters and peasants presiding over the city (Shafto 2009, 4; Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010, 116).

Many of the traditions from these ancient festivals—during which social restrictions were released, appetites were indulged, social orders were inverted, and a state of collective disorder was encouraged—were incorporated over time into late medieval and early modern festivals of a broadly similar kind. During the early Middle Ages in Europe, for instance, the Christian Church adopted some of the celebratory spirit, practices, and customs of the old pagan religion into its own liturgical festivals. For example, the 'Feast of Fools'—a popular festival celebrated in cathedrals and churches during Christmas and the New Year—was characterized by rituals of misrule and

inversion: excessive eating and drinking, transgressive behavior (i.e., parodying the sacred rites and customs of the church), masquerades, exuberant folly, and a reversal of church hierarchy (with a Lord of Misrule or mock king presiding over the celebrations) (Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010, 116; Yaneva 2013, 36).

Aspects of the 'Feast of Fools' have also been transferred to carnival, a Christian tradition originating in Europe in the ninth century as a celebration before the Christian season of Lent—the forty-day period leading up to Easter Sunday (the day Christians believe Jesus Christ rose from the dead after having been crucified on Good Friday)—whereby Catholics, some Protestants, and Orthodox Christians are expected to practice self-restraint and penance, and abstain from meat, sweets, and other pleasures of the flesh (Shafto 2009, 7; Flanagan, Cillier-Morales, and Labbo 2003, 5, 9).[2] Carnival was thus considered to be a 'feast before the fast' whereby people celebrated life by overindulging in alcohol, consuming lavish foods, and engaging in disorderly conduct and lascivious behavior (Shafto 2009, 9). In addition, such festivities also included music, jubilant dancing, parades, balls, and masquerades (Shafto 2009, 9).

As Christianity spread to many other countries throughout the world, so too did the celebration of carnival—it spread to the Caribbean, the Americas, and even Africa, just to name a few (Shafto 2009, 8). Today's most popular carnival cities include Rio de Janeiro, Venice, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the carnival at Rijeka in Croatia (Smith 2012, 94). Despite their national variances and rich blend of diverse cultural elements, P.D Smith argues that "Carnival has remained an intoxicating mix of pagan disorder and religious piety, growing into a global urban phenomenon [. . . which] is bigger than any one city or religion" (2012, 94). In addition to carnival and those ceremonies and practices mentioned above, more recent cultural experiences of stand-up comedy include the comic lecture (most readily associated with the nineteenth-century humorous lectures of Mark Twain), minstrel theater (which emerged as populist entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century in America), and vaudeville (which eclipsed minstrelsy to become America's primary form of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century). What can be understood from this detour through the origins of stand-up comedy, even from this cursory glance, is that the evocations of these rites, rituals, traditions, and customs all inhabit the spirit of comic identity in contemporary stand-up (in one way or another and to varying degrees), which is why Mintz arguably appeals for the broadening of the scope of stand-up comedy to include:

> seated storytellers, comic characterizations that employ costume and prop, team acts (particularly the staple two-person comedy teams), manifestations of stand-up comedy routines and motifs within dramatic vehicles such as skits,

improvisational situations, and films (for example, Bob Hope in his 'Road' pictures, the Marx Brothers movies), and television sitcoms (Jack Benny's television show, Robin Williams in *Mork and Mindy*). (1985, 71)

What has become apparent from writing this section of this book is that the lack of clearly-set parameters surrounding what the art form is, and what it is not, is the reason for the incongruity between scholarly definitions (and understandings) of stand-up comedy. This has led me to draw on the work of Stebbins, who I believe offers the most workable definition of stand-up by noting that the art form is less precisely defined in daily life and in the entertainment industry, and therefore requires some terminological distinctions to bridge the gap between traditional stand-up comedy (what he terms 'pure stand-up comedy') on the one hand, and entertainment on the other hand. Undoubtedly, the emergence of the digital landscape and the mass media also necessitates a reconsideration of what 'enactments' can be classified as stand-up comedy. In this way I, like Stebbins, attempt to find stand-up elements in various modern cultural forms.

Firstly, Stebbins offers a rather strict and limiting scientific definition of stand-up comedy which he refers to as *pure stand-up comedy,* or what most scholars simply refer to as stand-up comedy (as with the previous definitions) (1990, 4). According to him, this category is defined by its humorous, primarily verbal dialogue—the particulars of which have already been discussed—which is memorized and presented before an audience "in a spontaneous conversational manner as if the performer were speaking to friends" (Stebbins 1990, 3). He adds that such performances might be supplemented with costumes, props, vocalizations, and bodily and facial gestures (Stebbins 1990, 3).

Most closely resembling 'pure stand-up' is *quasi-stand-up comedy*, which is also primarily verbal, but differs in content and structure: rather than the descriptive monologue being shorter, with more disconnected jokes, anecdotes, and one-liners as with pure stand-up, this variety of comedy consists of a lengthy narrative with a clear subject matter that delivers a message of some sort (Stebbins 1990, 4). Examples of this form of comedic performance include the ethical monologue, satire (a monologue with the aim of ridiculing through irony and sarcasm), and impersonations (including parodies, satire, and caricatures).

Farther removed from 'pure stand-up' (by way of heavy reliance on props and costumes) is what Stebbins terms *mixed stand-up comedy*, that is, comedy which combines verbal *and* physical humor (1990, 5). Prop comedy would serve as a fitting example of this form of stand-up, whereby the performer includes accessories in his or her performance, such as juggling, music, ventriloquism, and entertainment magic. The performer may also make use of singing and sound effects (produced in various ways through the

microphone or special noise-making instruments) (Stebbins 1990, 5). Unlike 'prop comedy' which is predominantly verbal in content, pantomime and clowning serve as further examples of this form of stand-up, relying, as they do, on bodily movements and facial expressions (Stebbins 1990, 5).

Farthest removed from pure stand-up comedy is what Stebbins calls *team comedy,* which includes sketch and improvisational groups (1990, 5). Sketch comedy distinguishes itself from 'pure stand-up' in terms of minimal script deviation, nominal and impersonal audience interaction, identifiable (albeit simple) plots, and its dependence on theatrical embellishments (props, costumes, etc.). At the opposite end of the gamut, improvisation groups are fully devoid of any scripted material, and as such the performers on stage are required to work and interact collectively to spontaneously create some sort of storyline (Stebbins 1990, 5). Here deliberate audience interaction and conversation (like with pure stand-up) is impossible (Stebbins 1990, 5). In this comedic format, audience participation (in varying levels) is at its highest, with the audience taking on an active role in the creation of instant hilarity and enjoyment by way of the performers utilizing their (the audience's) suggestions to initiate scene work, and ofttimes members of the crowd even joining the cast on stage (at the performers' invitation), as is the case with the popular show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*—both the British and American version.

While the above definitions of stand-up comedy frame it as an art or entertainment performed entirely to live audiences (as was traditionally the case), it later became available over radio, and still later television and long-play (LP) records and video-tapes. Stand-up's mode of production has ever since further mutated into a form also disseminated by the mass media—with comics selling their humorous performances via books, talk shows, regular TV spots, voice-over work (advertising and film animation), DVD, and other peripherals—and now, in particular, via an online industry pioneered by YouTube and social media (Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). The ever-changing media landscape in the digital age and its effects on the diversification of comedy production and distribution (and consumption, but this aspect shall be dealt with later when analyzing the resurgence of stand-up comedy) necessitates a new understanding and (re)defining of the term 'stand-up comedy'—one that takes into consideration technology's rapidly progressive nature, and with it, the advent of new paradigms of communication, and adjusts itself accordingly.

I am not arguing that talk shows or literary texts, for instance, be considered stand-up comedy in the traditional or 'pure' sense (although one could indeed make a case for it), but rather, given the increase in talk shows and books written and hosted by comedians labelled as stand-ups, that these are cultural texts and mediatized televisual and literary *counterparts* of stand-up comedy that deserve (if not necessitate) intellectual inquiry (in terms of their

social and political function in society). One need only think of Ellen DeGeneres who has written three best-selling books and has her own daytime talk show which has won numerous awards. In addition, stand-ups like Chelsea Handler, Trevor Noah (and previously Jon Stewart), Jimmy Fallon, Jay Leno, and Stephen Colbert (to mention but a few) host (or have hosted) wildly successful talk shows which include a number of elements closely associated with the genre of stand-up comedy. A number of popular stand-up comedians have also written highly popular books, such as Steve Martin and Jerry Seinfeld.[3] The popularity of such cultural texts points to the need to analyze these comedic enactments in terms of their social and political function in society.

THE POLITICS OF COMEDY: THE 'SERIOUS' FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR

In whichever way the above-mentioned fool variants manifest themselves, Mintz argues that they perform "essentially the same social and cultural roles [and functions] in practically every known society, past and present" (as is briefly evidenced in the former section)—that of negative exemplar (the object of an audience's laughter) and comic spokesman (observer of life and social commentator) (1985, 71, 74).[4] The negative exemplar is the representative of socially unacceptable traits we ridicule or laugh *at* such as drunkenness, cowardice, vanity, crassness, and just plain silliness or stupidity, to name but a few (Mintz 1985, 75). In this first (and oldest and most basic) role, the fool or comedian portrays behavior that we symbolically 'punish' (through verbal scorn), or at least publicly pretend to reject (Mintz 1985, 75). Modern stand-up comedians reflect the universal range of this phenomenon, from the drunkenness of Dean Martin, the goofball persona of Steve Martin, and the weak, cowardly, and neurotic Woody Allen, to the egotism of Bob Hope, and the sexual ineptitude of Joan Rivers, as well as a host of other follies mirrored by these comedians (Mintz 1985, 75). By judging the comic to be 'inappropriate' (paradoxically by breaking with social conventions— laughing at and ridiculing someone for their ineptness, constructed or otherwise, followed by comic punishment), Faye Ran argues that the audience are, *ipso facto,* affirming standards of propriety and effectively censuring subversive behavior (2007, 27). In this way, stand-up comedians may be said to provide a unique forum that shapes our collective consciousness, (publicly) affirming accepted ideological and cultural values. While this is ostensibly the case—and perhaps is, at a first level—what emerges in my later chapters is that the comics' 'deviant behavior' or aberration also functions as potential criticism of 'normal' behavior and beliefs.

Scholars trace the stand-up comic's role as negative exemplar to the traditional fool's 'defectiveness' or 'deformation' in some way (as previously explored in relation to the origins of the stand-up comic), manifesting itself in the fool's anatomical, anti-natural, or idiosyncratic appearance, often in combination with his (or her) mental aberration (Mintz 1985, 74; Ran 2007, 27). Due to the fool's natural physical and mental weakness (or deviation), the audience 'pity' him, and more importantly, exempt him from normal behavior commensurate with social and cultural expectations and custom, even going so far as forgiving or blessing his 'mistakes'—thus marginalizing him from society (Mintz 1985, 74–75; Ran 2007, 27). Thus, in his (or her) role as negative exemplar, the stand-up comic is granted the fool's traditional *license* for deviant behavior and expression, which is key to understanding the development of the stand-up comedy tradition (Mintz 1985, 74).

Many scholars have drawn a link between this licensure and marginality, going so far as to assert that it is, in fact, crucial to the profession of the stand-up comic. As Anton C. Zijderveld notes in his discussion of the decline of professional 'wise fools' in the eighteenth century, "the court jester was institutionalized and professionalized to such an extent that he lost his marginality—which is an essential ingredient to folly—and grew into just another courtier" (1982, 123). This is because marginal individuals (by which I mean individuals suspended between two different, and often antagonistic social and cultural realities), like the fool, or what American sociologist Everett Stonequist refers to as "cultural hybrids," are afforded a unique perspective in society: a combination of "the knowledge and insight of the insider with the critical attitude of the outsider" (1937, 154–155).[5] Indeed, operating in the liminal space of society, or what anthropologist Sherry Ortner calls "borderlands" (originating of course in ethnographic studies and describes "the construction of complex, hybridized identities for those who must live within, yet are excluded from, the dominant cultural order"), the fool is able to navigate the 'borderlands' separating competing vantage points or spaces, in this way disrupting normative logics and offering alternative ways of understanding the world of human experience (1996, 181). It is important to note that Stonequist refers to marginality as an exclusively sociological condition; that is, marginality imposed by oppressive structures according to some irrefutable physical actuality such as race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on, as was the case with the traditional fool and fool variants, whose marginality (while not always attributed to the above-mentioned characteristics) was enforced due to their differing physical appearance and mental and cognitive behavior in relation to the rest of society.

However, the stand-up comedy tradition in the modern sense has become a rhetorically constructed category rather than a sociological one. If anything, stand-up comedians (as solely rhetorically marginalized individuals) have

become 'normalized' over the years (both through appearance and behavior), "passing"[6]—to use Joanne Gilbert's term—as members of the dominant culture. Thus, as opposed to sociological marginality in which the marginalized "cannot help but perform their marginality—they do not voice it, but rather it—nonverbally—voices them," the rhetorically marginalized, such as the stand-up comic, may choose when, and when not, to enact and 'perform'[7] their marginality. In other words, they are able to change their self-presentation at will. For instance, DeGeneres positions herself apart from the dominant culture (i.e., male), and therefore foregrounds her marginality—that is, her femaleness; and at times she performs her sexual marginality as well, by performing her homosexuality, another factor that separates her from the dominant culture (which is heterosexual), but which is not physically apparent. However, she 'rhetoricalizes' her sociological marginality by performing her femaleness.

If we turn to Uys, within the context of apartheid, it is not surprising that he would perform his sketches as a white Afrikaner socialite and self-proclaimed political activist—Evita Bezuidenhout. As his alter-ego, Uys positions himself apart from the dominant culture (i.e., conservative white male Afrikaans—which would not have been the case had he performed his comedic routines as himself, devoid of his female alter-ego), performing his/her/Evita Bezuidenhout's marginality—her femaleness. Another one of Uys's characters, yet not a staple like the above, was Nowell Fine—a *kugel* (social climbing Jewish woman)—who once said: "The two things I hate most about South Africa are apartheid and the blacks" (Trillin 2004, 70). Such a character firstly allowed Uys to separate himself from the dominant culture and perform marginality through femaleness, and secondly, it allowed him to perform ethnic marginality by performing the kugel's Jewishness. As neither an Afrikaner nor a male (i.e, one belonging to the dominant culture), or an African (black), the kugel has the license to critique both races with impunity.

Turning to Noah, his racial hybridity—his father is white and his mother is black—affords him a rather interesting perspective with regard to his marginality. For instance, as a 'colored'[8] South African male, he can choose to perform his ethnic marginality (he is neither black nor white) in a number of ways. For example, he may position himself apart from the dominant culture (i.e., black, masculine) by foregrounding his 'whiteness' when it best suits his comedic routine, or, he may choose to highlight his 'blackness' when it best suits his comic performance, for example, when critiquing the dominant culture's political views or a particular political party such as the African National Congress (ANC). In this way, marginalization may operate as a site of critical resistance and possibility to social, political, and economic inequities. As George Yudice maintains:

> In a sense, the postmodernist has taken the old 'myths of marginality' [with their negative connotations] and turned them on their heads, endowing them with a 'positive,' 'subversive' sense. The 'laziness,' 'shiftlessness,' and 'cynicism' attributed to the 'marginal' by liberal sociologists and anthropologists of the fifties and sixties are transformed here into 'radical' and 'subversive' tactics of resistance and advantage. (1988, 216)

It is therefore important to note that margins shift as the center (power relations) shifts, and as such, it is central to locate margins within a particular context, as different contexts produce different frames of reference. With Noah, for example, two decades ago his race (as a 'non-white') would have been cause for social marginalization, but now his race positions him within the dominant culture, requiring a double marginalization, as it were—rhetorical as well as, paradoxically, the marginalization of his former socially marginal position.

While stand-up comedians often provide a butt of the joke for humor, more importantly, they act as our comic spokesperson or mediator, with Mintz going so far as declaring them "articulator[s] of our culture" and "contemporary anthropologists" (1985, 75). The role of the stand-up comedian as 'social commentator' is not a new one, as I have previously shown, but is most readily linked to Shakespeare's wise fool who speaks the 'truth' about society, a practice/performance Gilbert describes as "holding up a mirror to the culture, showing us our (and their) frailties and foibles, eliciting the laughter of recognition" (2004, xiii). As a constructed comedic persona (and within the orchestrated and carefully structured ritual of comic performance), Mintz argues that "[the stand-up comic] is permitted to say the things about our society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done so without the mediation of humor" (1977, 1–3). Mintz adds that, while as negative exemplar the audience laughs *at* the comedian to the extent that they (the audience) identify with his or her (the comedian's) representation or behavior, secretly recognize it as valid and true, or publicly affirming it under the guise of 'mere comedy' or 'just kidding,' the comedian becomes our comic spokesperson (1985, 74). By extension, within the public ritual of stand-up comedy, Mintz likens the comedian's ability to lead the audience in "a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogenous understanding and expectation," and encourages them to view the world in new and extraordinary ways, to that of the shaman (a connection made earlier) (1985, 74). Eddie Tafoya shares this sentiment, comparing the stand-up comedian who connects "the realms of the painfully ordinary and the mysteriously entertaining" with the shaman who similarly acts as the go-between that unites "the mundane world with the realm of the sacred and mysterious" (2009, 39).

The comedian's role as both negative exemplar and comic spokesperson may be illuminated by anthropologist Mary Douglas's work on the public ritual of joking, whereby she distinguishes between the joking activity as *rite*—public affirmation of shared cultural beliefs articulated in the act of shared laughter, and *anti-rite*—a reinterpretation of these cultural beliefs through joking (the structure of jokes are themselves subversive) (1978, 102). On the one hand, she maintains, *rite* imposes order, hierarchy, and fosters a sense of community (in this case, shared laughter as a result of the comic's performance as negative exemplar), which affirms common beliefs and behaviors (Douglas 1978, 102). On the other hand, however, Douglas asserts that *anti-rite* (i.e., jokes, through their structure) has the opposite effect—denigrating and devaluing dominant values (1978, 102), or, according to Mintz in relation to Douglas's assertion, jokes tend to "tear down, distort, misrepresent, and reorder usual patterns of expression and perception" (1985, 73). To be clear, Mintz reminds us that the separation of these two roles is not absolute, as they are often blurred and overlap, and uses Joan Rivers as an example. He notes that Rivers's comic persona is fundamentally negative in that she characterizes herself as a failure at the female role: ludicrously unattractive, sexually unappealing, and domestically inept (i.e., in skills such as cooking and housekeeping) (Mintz 1985, 75). However, he points out that over the years, Rivers's sexual and domestic defects or 'failings' have become a site of resistance against the image of the 'ideal' woman (by society's standards) as harlot/housewife, with Rivers going so far as aggressively attacking the 'perfectification' of cultural idols such as Elizabeth Taylor (Mintz 1985, 75). Thus, the stand-up comic is able to alternate between two groups in society, which grants them the power and ability to either (publicly) affirm (through the role of negative exemplar) or subvert (through the role of comic spokesperson) normative cultural values. Indeed, Ran notes that "folly and non-folly and order and disorder are always simultaneously implied in the person and behavior of the fool" (2007, 27). This oscillation between negative exemplification and comic activism, if you will, enables the comedian to negotiate the difficult and dangerous straits between the Scylla of social alienation (negativity) and the Charybdis of social and political irrelevance (laughter signifying lack of seriousness) through the ambivalent combination of (implied) criticism and (irreverent) laughter.

NOTES

1. The European court jester's regalia comprised of a fantastical multicolored hat with three floppy, cone-shaped protrusions representing a donkey's ear, nose, and tail, and embellished with small twinkling bells at its ends.

2. The word, carnival, originates from the Latin words *carne* and *vale*, which literally means 'to remove meat' (Yaneva 2013, 42; Shafto 2009, 7).

3. While quite a few stand-ups have written books, many are theoretical workings of stand-up comedy—stories *of* (not by) stand-up comedians (Cynthia True—*American Scream: The Bill Hicks Story*; Bill Zehme—*Lost in the Funhouse: The Life and Mind of Andy Kaufman*), and stand-up-comedians' personal lives (Patton Oswalt—*Silver Screen Fiend: Learning About Life from an Addiction to Film*; Mike Birbiglia—*Sleepwalk With Me and Other Painfully True Stories*; Marc Maron—*Attempting Normal*), rather than a literary enactment and extension of their live comedic routines and stand-up personas, as is the case with DeGeneres, Martin, and Seinfeld.

4. In his discussion of fools in his book *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character*, Orrin Klapp observes the functions of stand-up comedy to include, in addition to those mentioned above, sublimation of aggression and relief from routine and discipline which shall be discussed further when referring to the resurgence of stand-up comedy and the relief theory of humor studies in relation to Sigmund Freud.

5. While Stonequist's concept of marginality was an exclusively sociological condition (i.e., regarding race and ethnicity), his concept might easily extend and adapt to any study on marginalized individuals, such as the fool or the stand-up comic.

6. Gilbert uses the term "pass" to express the ability of rhetorically marginalized individuals (i.e., those with no apparent physical feature that marginalizes them sociologically) to "pass" as members of the dominant culture.

7. I use the term "perform" here from a poststructuralist perspective that acknowledges the performative nature of discourses, most notably theorized by Judith Butler in her seminal contribution to deconstructing gender in theorizing "gender performativity." In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993, 2).

8. 'Colored' is an ethnic category (arising from the apartheid regime) made up of the mixed descendants of the Dutch, British, Malay, Indonesian, and native Africans.

Chapter Two

The Resurgence of Stand-Up Comedy

"There has never been a better time to be a comedian," exclaims Jesse David Fox in an article for *Vulture* (2015a). Whereas prior to 2009 (arguably the year many readily associate with the beginning of stand-up's revival), only three comedians had ever sold out Madison Square Garden. In the subsequent three years, three comedians did so, and each numerous times (Fox 2015a). Furthermore, the live comedy industry generates $300 million annually, more comedians than ever are playing the 1000-plus seat theaters, and Matt Beringer—a talent buyer for the Pabst theater group—argues that booking comedy talent has become more sustainable than other live entertainment markets, such as music (Kelley 2015). Undeniably, we are living in a golden age of comedy:

> More people watched [*Saturday Night Live*] *SNL 40* than the Golden Globes. Comedy Central's original programming nearly doubled [between the years 2012 and 2015], in competition with other networks that have beefed up their own comedy offerings. The hiring of a new *Daily Show* host—congratulations, Trevor Noah—was treated with as much anticipation and passionate critique as when LeBron James decided to go play for the Miami Heat. About as many people follow Sarah Silverman on Twitter than follow Hillary and Bill Clinton combined. Critics revere Louis C.K. and Amy Schumer as geniuses. Practically every comedian has a podcast or web series, or both. (Fox 2015a)

Clearly, the genre's popularity is nothing to laugh about, and several trendy culture websites, such as *Slate* and *Vulture*, are deeming *this*—our time—as the 'SECOND COMEDY BOOM,' last seen with the genre's rise in 1979 which lasted until 1995. And it is not only in America; Britain's comedy scene has "hit the stratosphere" according to comedy critic Brian Logan (2010). For the purpose of this section of the study, I will focus on the

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American and South African, and to a certain degree, on the British comedy scene (excluding European countries) to provide an overview of comedy's current popularity.

In his article for *The Guardian*—"Stand-up comics hit the boom time"—Logan reflects on the second comedy boom taking place in Britain, noting that "yesterday's club comics now tour theaters, and yesterday's touring comics are now fixtures at the giant O2 in London" and that there are even new summer festivals dedicated specifically to comedy, such as the Laughs in the Park festival in Hertfordshire (2010). Furthermore, there is an explosion of comedy clubs throughout the country, such as The Comedy Store*,* for instance—with premises in London, Manchester, and even Mumbai—which was rumored to have taken over £2.5 million at the end of 2009 (Logan 2010; Salter 2009). Comedians are touring and playing to hundreds of thousands of people: whereas in 2004 fewer than 100,000 tickets were sold for arena stand-up gigs, in 2009 this figure topped 1 million (Logan 2010). Fast-forward to October 2010, and Lee Evans broke box office records when he sold 227,424 tickets (nearly £7 million of ticket sales) for his 2011 "Roadrunner" tour in just one day (Logan 2010; Chortle 2010). David Campbell of AEG, which runs the O2 arena, reflects on the change that has taken place with regard to comedy in Britain: "When we opened in 2007, we didn't have anything comedy-wise. It wasn't a genre we were looking at" and now "the O2 is becoming, as it is in the music industry, a 'must-play' building"—with live comedy accounting for 10% of the venue's sales (Logan 2010).

Even countries not previously or particularly associated with stand-up are playing their part in contributing to comedy's rise. For instance, in 2011, South Africa saw the launch of the Comedy Central TV channel on its own shores, in 2012 tickets sales at Parker's Comedy and Jive at Montecasino in Johannesburg increased by 35% in one year, and the country now has its own satirical TV show—*Late Night News*—that attracts around 1 million viewers a week (Smith 2013). Joe Parker, who opened Parker's Comedy and Jive in 2009, attests to the comedy explosion in South Africa, noting that "It's still in the early stages but there is a bit of a boom" (Smith 2013). Loyiso Gola, who reads the script for *Late Night News*, concurs with Parker, noting that he has watched comedy in South Africa go mainstream since he did his first stand-up gig in 2001: "In 11 years I've seen the changes. In Durban I did 10 people, I went back and did 80, then went back and did 1000. I don't think it's a passing fad" (Smith 2013). But more than any other attributable comedic factor in the country, comedian Trevor Noah spearheaded a new generation of wildly popular stand-ups (hence Noah's inclusion in this study). Indeed, Noah's tour—"That's Racist"—sold out in nine cities in South Africa, including a run with minimal pre-publicity at the 1,100-seat Lyric Theatre in Johannesburg (Smith 2013). Moreover, Noah took his comic ability to international shores, playing at the Edinburgh Festival and appearing on *The*

Tonight Show with Jay Leno, and on *The Late Show* with David Letterman (Smith 2013). In addition, Noah toured in the Middle East, was the subject of a 2011 documentary film by David Paul Meyer titled *You Laugh But It's True,* and appeared on one of America's most celebrated comedy shows— *The Daily Show*—the overly successful satirical news show which he now, of course (as of 2015), hosts (Smith 2013; Gambino 2015).

Who or what has revitalized a market for stand-up comedy? The most notable (and instrumental) factors at play in this new comedy world, which are gradually transforming the culture and economics of the genre, are arguably the democratization of the global information highway, and subsequently, a new generation of comedy aficionados. Indeed, with countless websites devoted to comedy (such as the American-based Laugh.com) and live streaming sites and video and clip-sharing sites such as YouTube, comedians now have an innovative platform to (instantaneously) showcase, distribute, and promote their comedy. Furthermore, the rise of social networking sites (for example, Facebook and Twitter) have allowed modern comedians to access (and directly engage with) a wider and more diverse audience than ever before, attracting the likes of the older generations as well as the youth. For instance, American stand-up comedian Dane Cook began his online audience cultivation in 2003 by building a following on the social media site MySpace, and by 2007, he had gone from being "a fairly obscure comic" to "the kind of act that could fill Madison Square Garden twice in the same night" (Double 2013,51). As of 17 June 2018, Cook boasts 1,830,405 'connections' on MySpace,[1] 4,034,782 'friends' on Facebook,[2] and 3.42 million 'followers' on Twitter.[3] Today, perhaps the comedian with the largest celebrity social media followings is Kevin Hart, who boasts an impressive 35.3 million Twitter 'followers,'[4] 23,658,724 Facebook fans,[5] and 2,330,553 YouTube subscribers.[6] While the internet (in the broad sense) is (and has been) important in advancing stand-up comedy around the world and giving it an online presence, the rise of social media and user-generated content has undoubtedly made stand-up comedy infinitely more accessible, as the above figures demonstrate.

Perhaps the single most viable path for comedians these days to parlay their acts into broader success and develop an enviable fan base is via the relatively new digital media format, the podcast—which allows audiences to stream and download digital audio or video files onto their computers and mobile devices. According to Adam Sachs, the CEO of Midroll—the company sells advertisements for popular podcasts such as *WTF with Marc Maron* and Scott Aukerman's *Comedy Bang! Bang!*—"many comedians could survive today with the revenue from their podcasts alone" (Fox 2015a). Indeed, Sachs states that "a podcast with 40,000 downloads per episode can gross well over $75,000 a year, and shows in the 100,000-downloadrange can gross somewhere between $250,000 and $400,000" (Fox 2015a). He adds

that by his estimation, comedians with three to four Midroll podcasts stand to make over \$1 million a year (Fox 2015a). Many comedians have also heralded a new trend—the podcast-turned-TV series—parlaying successful podcasts into larger earning (cable) TV shows, such as Marc Maron's *Maron* (IFC, 2013–2016), Scott Aukerman's *Comedy Bang! Bang*! (IFC, 2012–2016), and more recently, HBO's adaptation of *2 Dope Queens* (2018) featuring Jessica Williams and Phoebe Robinson.

Furthermore, the creation of podcasts, websites devoted to comedy, and the instantaneous streaming services across television, web, and mobile platforms has enabled comedians to progress past the physical venue and television limitations associated with the first (original) comedy boom. Indeed, reflecting on the differences between the current and past (1980s and 1990s) comedy industry factors, comedian Marc Maron notes that the first comedy boom was driven by a nationwide circuit of hundreds of comedy clubs where comedians had to follow certain patterns and procedures in order to headline at these venues (Fox 2015b). Additionally, the comedy was specifically mainstream, and only a few bona fide stars surfaced out of this period (Fox 2015b). On the other hand, Maron remarks, comedy's second 'renaissance' is fueled by technology, and is more diverse and artistically daring, owing much of its creative freedom (and success) to such non-traditional venues as mentioned above (Fox 2015b). Furthermore, the multitude of ways through which to produce and access stand-up comedy has also led to comedy becoming a channel of comedic talent rather than comedian popularity (as was the case with the first boom), with amateur and up-and-coming comedians easily able to gain recognition and possibly become breakout stars. As Fox states, "Today, you can make it by starting with a YouTube video series, creating a weekly podcast, or heavily engaging on social media" (Fox 2015a).

The plethora of new platforms for comedy has undoubtedly also given rise to an outpouring of fresh, creative, original, and edgy comedy from an extensive and diverse group of comics, as touched upon by Maron. As comedian and writer Elahe Izadi exclaims in an article for *The Washington Post,* which highlights the impact of technology on comedy: "Never before has so much original material been this easy to access and been consumed by this many people. Never before has the talent pool of comedians been this deep, and in format, voice and material, this diverse" (2017). Indeed, rather than starring in regular mainstream TV network sitcom roles (which requires comedians to tone down their voices, as was the case in the 1980s), online stream services like IFC, Fusion, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and TruTV have created a stage for a cacophony of young, alternative, and cutting-edge comedians who, through small, idiosyncratic shows on cable or streaming sites, are able to maintain their authorial voice (i.e., put their own personality and ideas into what audiences see on screen) (Fox 2015a). For example, in *The*

Last Man on Earth, Inside Amy Schumer, and *Nathan for You,* the comedians/creators (Will Forte, Amy Schumer, and Nathan Fielder, respectively) retain full auteurist control over every aspect of their shows. The import of such a diversification of media outlets is subsequently an amassing of a more sundry group of fans, and also a more loyal group of 'superfans,' or what Maron dubs "comedy nerds"—that is, "people who are into different facets of the history of comedy [and] the different types of comedy" (Fox 2015b).

Indeed, Comedy Central's head of research, Chanon Cook, says that 'millennials' (the first generation to come of age in the new millennium) are far more connected to comedy than past generations, a development he readily associates with television (Fox 2015a). According to him, at the end of the first comedy boom (i.e., the 'bust'), the biggest stars from that period either landed their own sitcoms or appeared on popular TV shows like *Saturday Night Live,* many of which became fan favorites for millennials, thus paving the way for the second comedy boom (Fox 2015a). Fox adds that given the endless reruns of sitcom classics (he mentions *Seinfeld* specifically) and stand-up specials on Comedy Central, this generation became inherently mindful of comedy's conventions, and subsequently "the comedy nerd was born" (2015a). What does this say about contemporary stand-up comedy fans?

Leading up to the 2012 American presidential elections, Comedy Central, together with TRU Insights and Insight Research, conducted a study to define and understand the role of humor in millennials' political beliefs, behaviors, and capturing their vote, and found that comedy is the most effective way for politicians to reach Generation Y (PR Newswire 2012). One of the key findings to emerge from this study was that millennials (50% of the participants) frequently rely on political satire and comedy shows (like *The Daily Show, The Colbert Report,* and *Weekend Update*) (PR Newswire 2012). Clearly, there exists a subsidiary relationship between funny and informative. Take the President Obama sketch from *Key & Peele* on YouTube, for instance, which Comedy Central posted before the show's premiere. The sketch became the fastest-growing clip in the channel's history, with over 1 million views in just two days (Carter 2012).

The same study also reveals that the millennial generation favors humor as a means of engaging in/with politics/politicians, as the following figures demonstrate: 62% like it when politicians use their sense of humor; 54% say politicians need to loosen up; 55% want politicians to show their sense of humor more often; and 54% agree that a politician who is funny (in the comedic/humorous sense), is more likeable (PR Newswire 2012). In addition, when asked the following question: "If I could only know one thing about a candidate, it would be" the majority (40%) of the respondents answered "their favorite comedian," followed by "their favorite band" (33%) and "their favorite sports team" (27%) (PR Newswire 2012).

A previous research study commissioned by Comedy Central, focusing on how young men view humor, substantiates the above data, pointing to the value of comedy to the millennial generation, noting that 88% of the respondents site comedy as essential to their self-definition, even more so than music, sports, or 'personal style' (Carter 2012). Indeed, Tanya Giles, executive president for research at MTV Networks, asserts that "Comedy is so central to who [millennials] are, the way they connect with other people, the way they get ahead in the world. One big takeaway is that unlike previous generations, humor, and not music, is their No. 1 form of self-expression" (Carter 2012). In a similar vein, Cook adds that "Comedy is to this generation what music was to previous generations . . . They use it to define themselves. They use it to connect with people" (Fox 2015a). Drawing from Cook's reference to music, it seems fitting to include a quote from comedian Pete Holmes, who (unconventionally) comments on millennial's active engagement with comedy: "The comedy audience of 2015 is like the guitar to the musician. They're not just sitting there to get fucked up and smoke a cigarette inside, which is what it was in the '80s; they're there to actually participate in something" (Fox 2015c).

Now, with the second comedy boom and its 'comedy nerds,' stand-ups are everywhere: on TV roadshows, on entertainment fashion shows, on panel shows, and on bestseller lists. They are on DVDs, making and starring in blockbuster movies and hosting their own talkshows, both daytime and late-night. They are writing newspaper columns, are all over Twitter and YouTube, and are podcasting to a larger audience than ever before. Moreover, comedy is being translated into a variety of different forms, crossing over into different genres, and in doing so, is producing a new kind of cultural artifact. Regardless of the medium they employ, contemporary comedians are pushing and challenging the boundaries of dominant ideologies—concerning gender, race, identity, and politics—in more ways than ever before, indebted mainly to the rise of diversified technology. Their continuing popularity, as well as their growing influence over the current generation, points to the need to find a critical lens through which to examine this dynamic genre and its progenies.

In addition to the rise of digital media and social media platforms, as well as a new generation of comedy fans, the upsurge of comedy and comedy-viewing over the last number of years might also be attributed (in part) to the major shift, since the 1970s, in contemporary capitalist production and global power relations—neoliberal capitalism. The purpose of the next section of this chapter is to situate the resurgence and rise of stand-up comedy within the sociopolitical terrain of this regime. That is to say, while the internet and a new generation of 'superfans' have no doubt contributed to the burgeoning of the art form over the past number of years, the evolution of the digital media landscape (a form of escapism itself) has resulted in an outpouring of

popularity among *many* entertainment formats, not only stand-up comedy, as well as social media, which are arguably also an escapist space, among other things. Therefore, one needs to explore other possible reasons for this upsurge of a previously rather underrated genre. Here I attempt to draw a feasible connection between stand-up's revival and neoliberal capitalism, whereby comedy understood in terms of Freud's theory of humor in relation to the unconscious might offer a form of 'escapism' from the things that are 'serious' in the world. Before turning to Freud, however, it is necessary to demonstrate the correlation between the functioning of neoliberal capitalism and worldwide human suffering (in its economic, physical, and psychical manifestations), contrary to what supporters of the regime would have us believe. Although it may come as a surprise to many comedy-aficionados, I do believe that a connection can be established between the rise in popularity of comedy—specifically stand-up comedy—and the abundance of evidence concerning economic and psychic hardship under the current dispensation.

CAPITALIZING ON CHAOS: SITES OF SUFFERING IN THE AGE OF 'EMPIRE'

The purpose of this section of the book, as previously stated, is to situate the unprecedented rise of stand-up comedy within the sociopolitical terrain of 'Empire,' or what Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells refers to as the 'Network Society,'[7] which has seen political power and economic power increasingly brought together into "a properly capitalist [dis]order" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 8–9). While it might seem counterintuitive to associate free-trade capitalism with suffering, given that capitalism's *telos* advocates individual freedom and enjoyment through the ostentatious consumption of commodities (to be discussed at great length shortly), scholars have begun to trace an undeniable connection between the emergence of this new global sovereign world order operating at a political, juridical, social, economic, and technological level, and increased human suffering and hardship in its economic, physical, and psychical manifestations.

For evidence of this, I turn to Canadian investigative reporter Naomi Klein, who in *The Shock Doctrine—The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, exposes neoliberal capitalism's current ideological imperative to privatize (and advance) economies while communities or nations are in a state of 'shock' in the wake of collective natural or political catastrophic events—what she calls "disaster capitalism" (2007, 6). Among the instances of 'disaster capitalism' that Klein elaborates on are 'disaster zones' such as New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Sri Lanka after the horrifying tsunami in 2004, and Iraq after the US military invasion in 2003. In the wake of these collective past tragedies, the signs of human hardship and suffering have been clearly

evident. For instance, in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, Klein notes that the education system in New Orleans was reformed from a state-run public school system to a (for-profit) private charter school system with "military speed and precision" within only nineteen months—in stark contrast to the "glacial pace" it took to get the electricity grid brought back online (2007, 5). Subsequently, public-school students (mostly African-American, and many with special needs) were excluded from experiencing 'same standard education,' and many older and experienced teachers lost their jobs to younger teachers who were employed at relatively low salaries with fewer benefits (Klein 2007, 5–6).

Referring to another incident of 'disaster capitalism,' Klein turns to the traumatic 2004 Asian tsunami on the coast of Sri Lanka, where rather than rebuilding the villages of the local fishing communities along the shoreline, the government used the storm as an excuse to hand over land tenure to large luxury resorts (2007, 8). In Klein's book, such instances of collective trauma have been described by those in power (be it government, investors, politicians, etc.) as "exciting opportunities" and the method of choice in "advancing corporate goals" in an attempt to engage in "radical social and economic engineering" (2007, 8). For example, in the wake of the tsunami devastation, the Sri Lankan government released the following statement: "In a cruel twist of fate, nature has presented Sri Lanka with a unique opportunity, and out of this great tragedy will come a world class tourism destination" (Klein 2007, 8). As if further evidence of extreme instances of suffering under 'disaster capitalism' is needed, Klein also refers to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, where American companies (like Burger King and Pizza Hut—who were contracted to run franchises for the US Army, and private security firms and engineering corporations) made a financial killing in the wake of the military raid, while the local population were exposed to economic and political hardships (2007, 9–13). It might also be useful at this point to include South Africa in this discussion, where the transition to democracy in 1994, on neoliberal terms, led to a massive enrichment of a small minority (white and black), to the economic detriment of the poor (Klein 2007, 194–217).

Klein elaborates on all of these 'extreme' instances of 'disaster capitalism' with devastating consequences for the nations and communities concerned. While these consequences undoubtedly include individual and collective suffering in terms of economics, such as loss of livelihood (fishing communities on the coast of Sri Lanka) and loss of employment, housing, and the erosion of public facilities (New Orleans),[8] Klein further elaborates on psychological suffering as a consequence of economic suffering by referring to the rise in the phenomenon of suicide—arguably a symptom of unbearable suffering. She reflects on the introduction of "economic shock therapy" in Russia in 1992, which subsequently saw a noticeable rise in suicides

(almost double in 1994 to what it was in 1986), as well as an increase in violent crime (most notably killings, by more than fourfold in 1994), the latter statistics leading Moscow academic Vladimir Gusev (in 2006) to declare that the last 15 years of "criminal capitalism" had killed off 10 percent of the Russian population (Klein 2007, 238). It was even worse in Southeast Asia at the time of the market crash—cynically labelled the "Asian flu"—around 1997 (Klein 2007, 264). In 1998, the incidence of suicide increased by at least 50 percent in South Korea, with the concentration of these cases being among older parents (over 60) seemingly attempting to alleviate the financial burden of debt on their children (Klein 2007, 265). While some might argue that economic disasters such as these cannot be prevented or managed, Klein provides 'shocking' evidence that the IMF, US Treasury, and Wall Street deliberately adopted a "do-nothing" approach to helping these countries so as to further capitalist interests (2007, 266), leading Klein to declare the current free-trade capitalism "a system of gross wealth inequalities, often opened up with the aid of grotesque criminality" (2007, 446).

Clearly from the instances outlined above, there is a demonstrable connection between neoliberal capitalism and 'extreme' economic and psychological human suffering. It could, however, be argued that these cases serve as 'extreme' examples of suffering, and therefore such economic (and psychological) affliction would not prevail in 'everyday' circumstances and conditions. However, one could also elaborate on the suffering that intolerable debt imposes on capitalist society, as Hardt and Negri do in *Declaration,* where they argue that the present global crisis under the conditions of 'Empire' have fabricated new figures of subjectivity within the social terrain, one of which they call "the indebted."[9] Elaborating on the aforementioned subjectivity, Hardt and Negri state that 'the indebted' is a figure produced by the privatization of the economy and constructed on the foundation or basis of debt (2012, chap. 1). According to them, the system of "welfare" has turned into one of "debtfare," to the extent that most of the population today rely on (or rather, suffer under) debt at all levels and sites (house mortgages, students loans, car installments, doctors' bills, etc.) to sustain their basic material needs (Hardt and Negri 2012, chap. 1). In light of this, debt may be said to become comprehensible in Foucaultian terms:[10] it "controls" everything, from your consumption to your very survival. Hardt and Negri argue that debt even determines your work choices, such as those that confront you when you finish at a university with a repayable loan and have to accept the first paying job in order to honor your debt or working incessantly with no vacation or study leave in order to pay off your mortgage on an apartment (2012, chap. 1). They add that debt is a kind of self-enslavement, beginning as an external force but later "worm[ing] its way inside" one's subjectivity in the form of responsibility (the promise to honor debt) and ineradicable guilt (of a financial kind—over having entered into debt), for which the latter

becomes "a form of life" (Hardt and Negri 2012, chap. 1). In this light, 'the indebted' is the contemporary, non-dialectical counterpart of Hegel's slave (and capital the master); that is, debt is a negation that *cannot* enrich you or liberate you, but rather only "debases you, isolating you in guilt and misery" (Hardt and Negri 2012, chap. 1).

In addition to Klein's instances of 'extreme' economic and psychological suffering and the above discussion of suffering under perpetual debt, Hardt and Negri—in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004)—assert that war has become an interminable and pervasive condition in the postmodern era of globalization under the regime of neoliberal capitalism, and it has increasingly assumed the guise of global civil war. That is, in 'Empire,' the modern-age form of war—characterized as a *necessary* military activity of defense or resistance against territorial and political threats to a state (nation state against nation state) in order to achieve peace and order—no longer exists (Hardt and Negri 2000, 12–13; 2004, 3). Instead, war today takes the form of military armed conflict between different groups within the 'same' (previously sovereign national) common space (i.e., the global terrain) (Hardt and Negri 2004, 3–4). Indeed, with the new 'face' of war, the distinction between police function (i.e., domestic) and military activity/action (i.e., international), for instance, is indistinguishable, such that one increasingly witnesses military personnel intervening in 'police' missions aimed at preserving the peace in global political spaces (Hardt and Negri 2004, 14–15). This goes for many instances where international peace-keeping forces like the United Nations intervene in national conflicts, such as the wars of the 1990s, not least in Bosnia and Rwanda. In some cases, military forces are also sent by specific nations to intercede in domestic battles, such as the French interventions in the Ivory Coast in 2011 and in Mali in 2013.

To be able to grasp what is at stake in this new era of constant, brutal global war, Hardt and Negri employ the concept of a "*state of exception*"—the temporary suspension of the state's constitution, giving special powers to the state for the good of the public (2004, 6–7). They argue that, in the early modern period, a "state of exception" derived from the attempt to terminate civil wars by relegating wars to something occurring *only* under 'exceptional' conditions (to deal with political exigencies) and along the margins of society (between one sovereign state and another—i.e., external threats) (Hardt and Negri 2004, 4–6). War under these 'modern' conditions "was a limited state of exception," a strategy they argue is no longer viable today given the proliferation of "innumerable global civil wars," the upsurge of which goes hand in hand with the declining sovereignty of nation-states (Hardt and Negri 2004, 7). Although one could argue that the recent rise of international 'terrorism' in European and other countries, together with the subsequent tendency to strengthen national borders, has halted or even

reversed this 'decline' of the nation-state, the overall tendency is arguably still in the direction of a supranational global structure.

Instead of this decline of national political authority making way for Kant's eighteenth-century dream of "perpetual peace," Hardt and Negri argue that we are suspended in a nightmare of a "perpetual and indeterminate state of war . . . with no clear distinction between the maintenance of peace and acts of war" (2004, 7). Events in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria during the last few years have given credence to their claims, and the recent growing tensions between the United States and North Korea create the possibility of another such ambiguous event. Hence, although 'Empire' professes to be unfailingly devoted to universal peace, it is, on the contrary, "continually bathed in blood" (Hardt and Negri 2000, xv). To phrase Hardt and Negri's above argument differently, the "state of exception" has become a permanent practice or paradigm of governments across the global terrain, becoming the "rule" rather than the "exception" to it (Hardt and Negri 2004, 7–8). One need only think of the many instances of unlawful US drone strikes on foreign soil (e.g., Pakistan, Yemen, and Afghanistan), a practice which is in violation of international law.

But there is a second, more important meaning of the "state of exception" at work here, one which better enables us to understand our new global state of war (particularly in terms of the previous claim regarding drone warfare)—what Hardt and Negri refer to as American "exceptionalism" (2004, 8). According to them, "U.S. exceptionalism" carries a dual meaning: first, in the ethical sense of America claiming to be the global "exception" by being the world leader in advocating democracy and human rights, and so on, and secondly, on a legal level, claiming "exception" from (international) law (Hardt and Negri 2004, 8). As they show, the United States increasingly exempts itself from international treaties and protocols (pertaining to the environment, criminal courts, human rights [ironically], etc.), and its military from the "rules" others have to follow (such as tactical strikes and weapons control) (Hardt and Negri 2004, 8). In this sense, America—as "the only remaining superpower"—reinforces the notion that "the one who commands need not obey" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 9). In light of the evidence that Hardt and Negri present to support their argument—that war has changed in the postmodern context—it is clear that society is witness to a state of perpetual war.

If one considers that the state of 'perpetual war' is inseparable from the emerging global order of what Hardt and Negri call 'Empire'—the new form of sovereign power which consists, broadly, of the capitalist states, and operates at various levels, including the political and military—it should become clear that the suffering under capitalism elaborated on by Klein cannot be separated from the condition of 'perpetual war.' As I shall attempt to demonstrate later, this state of affairs is not unrelated to the phenomenal rise in the

popularity of stand-up comedy; in fact, it should be seen as a kind of explana-
tory backdrop to its revival.

It could undoubtedly be argued that suffering under capitalism only takes
place in 'extreme' instances like those outlined above, and not in ordinary
daily life. In what follows, I will show that this is not the case. When tracing
some kind of connection between capitalism and suffering under 'normal'
'everyday' conditions, it is useful to turn to Ian Parker, a practicing Lacanian
psychoanalyst who, in *Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Revolutions in Subjectivity,*
associates suffering under the conditions of capitalist society with the clinical
structure of "obsessional neurosis," as is evident where he writes:

> Those who suffer in obsessional mode under capitalism are subjects who buy
> into the separation of intellectual and manual labor, the separation of thinking
> from being, and live out the predicament of a puzzle about the nature of being
> as if false consciousness really did operate only at the level of the individual.
> Lacan argues that the question that haunts the obsessional neurotic concerns
> being, existence, their right to exist and whether they are alive or dead . . . The
> 'obsessions' are repetitive ideas manifested in a series of actions from which
> the subject seems unable to escape. Even though this eventually may result in
> suffering that is too much to bear, enough to bring someone to ask for help, it
> is still stubbornly tied to personal administrative strategies that contain an
> unbearable surplus of satisfaction—'jouissance' is our name for this excess—
> within the domain of the 'pleasure principle' . . . (2011, 42).

Here Parker argues that human behavior under the social and economic con-
ditions characteristic of capitalism are reminiscent of the behavior of the
obsessional neurotic, recognizable in repetitive actions, uncertainty, anxiety,
indecisiveness, antipathy, self-doubt, and ineffaceable guilt (2011, 88); and
Freud would add compulsive impulses, irrational and irrelevant prohibitions,
and obsessive fear.[11] In other words, the "series of symptoms" associated
with the category of obsessional neurosis, clinically speaking, can be ob-
served in capitalist society as an overall pattern of (anxious) behavior (Parker
2011, 42). This could be understood in terms of Freud's metaphor of a
'shattered crystal,' representative, as it were, of the relationship between (so-
called) normality and pathology. In "New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-
Analysis," Freud compares the human psyche to a crystal formation (signify-
ing psychical normality) which, when shattered, breaks into "fragments"
(representing psychically 'damaged' subjects) (1933/2010, 4667). The analo-
gy of the crystal makes it possible to comprehend that certain behavioral
traits associated with specific pathological conditions (the 'fragments' that
are studied in isolation) are actively displayed (or manifested) in 'normal'
life (or in 'normal' people), even if they are excessive and exaggerated in
individuals—'fragments'—who suffer with some kind of pathological
condition. What this implies then, in the present context, is that the character-

istics concentrated in individuals with obsessional neurosis, clinically speaking, are now reflected at large in contemporary society in a nonclinical sense, indicative of the far-reaching and damaging effects of capitalism on the psyche. Slovene philosopher and sociologist Renata Salecl supports Parker's claim, in the context of what she calls "love anxiety" in contemporary society, observing that the "protective mechanisms" typical of certain clinical conditions seem to occur in the population at large, which is also the case with increasing cases of non-triggered psychosis—individuals displaying no apparent delirium, but nonetheless having a psychotic structure (2011, 68–86).

In particular, Parker points to capitalist "production and consumption" as the two main sites where one might expect to encounter signs of psychic suffering in the age of 'Empire,' and explicitly connects these with the structure of obsessional neurosis:

> Within the very texture of capitalism as an ostensibly rational system of production and consumption and as terrain on which each individual is free to enter into different kinds of commercial and interpersonal contract with others, there are moments of unbearably excessive irrationality when relations between subjects break apart. This aspect of alienation which haunts everyday reality breaks the trust which glues market trading and the civil community together, and this alienation is 'real' as that impossible point at which the subject is torn, divided between commodity exchange and the labor process. Here the subject as such is vaunted in ideology as the psychological individual—perceiving, cognizing and electing between alternative courses of action—but, in its pathological condition of obsessional neurosis, it is the subject as product of capitalism. (2011, 88)

In this excerpt, Parker refers to the suffering that occurs when the subject is "torn" or at the interface between production (the labor process) and consumption (commodity exchange)—capital's main vehicles—asserting that the act of choosing between various series of actions, on the part of the subject, is reminiscent of traits associated with obsessional neurosis such as uncertainty, anxiety, guilt, and so on, as previously stated (2011, 88). This is not to say that everyone is a clinically identifiable obsessional neurotic, but rather that society at large displays behavioral patterns which echo the attributes of this clinical condition, such as anxiety and uncertainty.

Somewhat surprisingly, these psycho-pathological symptoms are encountered in precisely those areas of society most commonly associated with the freedom of the individual (in the economic and social sense), such as the liberty to choose one's identity, religion, sexual orientation, whether or not to have children, where to live, what products to buy, with whom to "hook up," and even one's gender (Salecl 2006, 85). In her article "Choice and the Ultimate Incurable"—a preview to her insightful book *Choice* (2011)—Sa-

lecl scrutinizes what she calls the "tyranny of choice," noting that everywhere we turn in modern capitalist society, which embraces (or rather relies on) variety, we are constantly bombarded with the necessity to 'customize' and 'perfect' our lives by choosing from a plethora of things, products, services, career paths, and so on (2006, 85). She argues elsewhere that the (psychological) cost of living in these times of unlimited options (excess) is overwhelming anxiety, depression, personal dissatisfaction, stress, uncertainty, self-doubt, and guilt in the face of having to constantly choose from a multitude of options on offer, lest one makes the 'wrong' choice and has to suffer the scorn of fellow consumers, or worse, the possibility that your decision could have disastrous consequences and impede your journey to self-fulfillment (2011).

Salecl makes it clear that the notion of limitless choice and the injunction to develop and cultivate our individuality is in fact a "powerful ideological tool of consumer society" which serves to reinforce the capitalist imperative to make more money/profit (2011, 5). Indeed, while 'choice,' as described above, is arguably thought of as a benefit *of* capitalism, Salecl shows that in the present era, choice is in fact a benefit *for* the self-righteous actions of neoliberal agencies. This is because, as well-known continental philosopher Slavoj Žižek outlines in his essay "The deadlock of repressive desublimation," under capitalism the normative role that Freud attributed to the superego, namely the prohibition of enjoyment, has been replaced by the exhortation to do just that, namely, to "Enjoy yourself!"—largely through commodities, the celebrity lifestyle, ostentatious consumption, and wealth accumulation (2005). It is therefore not surprising that contemporary consumer culture relies on the general principle of excess, that bigger is better and more is best: extreme makeovers (both beauty and home); super-sized meals (McDonald's and KFC) and larger portions (it is no wonder we are also living in a culture of obesity); bigger phones and glasses (which were once admired for their miniature frame); more sex (and so pharmaceutical companies make a killing with Viagra); losing weight and more quickly (so herbal and pharmaceutical companies make a profit by catering to these needs); and the magical 'diet pill,' bogus diets, the diversification of workout DVDs and classes, and so on. The list is endless—wardrobes, which once occupied a minimal space in a room, have now become rooms of their own, in which to store the excess (resulting in the consumption of organizing services, organizing containers, etc.). Consequent upon adaptation to this "ideology of choice"— and its push to *jouissance*—however, is an increase in self-harm, especially visible in the many forms of toxic mania, as Salecl observes below:

> the society in which he or she is living starts speeding up. The subject not only starts working longer hours and consuming more and more, but there also comes a time when the subject starts consuming him or herself. Workaholism, addiction, anorexia, bulimia, and self-cutting thus become symptoms the sub-

> ject starts suffering from in the developed world. Slowly these symptoms push
> the subject onto various paths of self-destruction. The paradox, however, is
> that the subject seems to be oblivious to what is happening to him or her and
> continues believing in the ideology of endless possibilities. (2012:2275–2276)

What is perceived from the above excerpt, is that *having* (things) has become synonymous with *being*, to the extent that consuming (things) is enacted out in everyday life, with the subject consuming him or herself. Belgian professor of clinical psychology and psychoanalysis, Paul Verhaeghe, supports Salecl's observation, asserting that "people [under the current neoliberal regime are] fall[ing] ill from an excess of 'enjoyment,' from an addiction to everything" (2012, 58).

Furthermore, correlative to the pervasive intrusion of superego, enjoyment has been the dissolution of "the big Other"—that is, the collapse of the axiological anchoring point that all societal and cultural values ultimately refer to, and from which they draw their own value, from one historical phase to the next (Žižek 2008). In the face of this lack of symbolically anchored (relatively stable) points of identification (structured in terms of nature, gender, tradition, the 'people,' God, social status, labor, and so on)—which also undoubtedly gives rise to a fundamental feeling of uncertainty (and hence, anxiety) in our relation to the world—the emphasis on individual freedom finds material support in capital's provision of consumer goods manufactured and produced for specific demographics, ranging from accessories and clothing fashion, radio stations and television programs, to medical aid and health insurance, and even cellphone contracts, just to mention a few. In this way then, the 'ideology of choice' becomes a site of profitability and thus a force that maintains the systematic reproduction of capitalism. It is clear that in neoliberal society, consumer satisfaction is equated with human freedom, when in reality this imaginary freedom is simply a disguise for excessive social control, with devastating effects on one's mental health, as Salecl shows further along.

Elaborating on how the 'discourse of choice' functions virtually indiscernibly (as ideology always does) to instill a collective mentality that furthers capitalism's interests, Salecl turns to the concept of the "self-made" person (touched on above). She notes that while in postindustrial society the idea of the 'self-made' person (inextricably tied up with that of the American dream) involved social mobility (progression up the social ladder) through hard work and determination, today this career concept has developed into a collective life philosophy of 'rational' (and one might add, obsessional) self-mastery via choice (of the consumerist kind), where "[e]verything in life has become a matter of decisions that need to be made in order to come close to the ideal of happiness and self-fulfillment that society promotes" (Salecl 2011, 20–22). And this belief in and adherence (i.e., adaptation) to a social

reality that amounts to attempts at 'rational' mastery of one's choices in life—the idea that if we make the 'right' (consumer) choices we will be happy, wealthy, attractive, and healthy, and we will have passionate romantic relationships, be wonderful parents, and so on—is accompanied by greater anxiety over our ability to make the 'right' choice that will bring us closer to the 'ideal' life that capitalism promotes. This explains why one of the consequences of this 'culture of choice' has been the emergence of the self-help industry whereby people are deferring to horoscopes, market agents, magazine, books, websites (and their so-called 'advice experts') as well as life-coaches and feng-shui to alleviate the burden of having to make choices for themselves, which nevertheless requires another version of choice—the inescapable necessity to choose one (Salecl 2011, 2–35). Furthermore, rather than assuaging concern, Salecl argues that these practices create even *more* anxiety as they highlight multifarious aspects of the self where people need to invest their time (2011, 3–4).

Salecl goes on to chart the negative effect(s) that this consumerist approach to our lives—the 'ideology of *rational* choice'—has had on relationships. What she discusses under the rubric of "love choices," which really amounts to "hooking up," epitomizes what is most noticeable about dating today—the principle of steering clear of any real intimacy in favor of "light attachment," or what she terms "the mechanics of contact" (Salecl 2011, 73–75). She elaborates on the dynamics of freedom of choice in sexual-romantic relationships in today's society, arguing that "Enjoyment is no longer about searching for a spouse or a friend, coming close to the chosen object or trying to comprehend or penetrate his or her often unsettling otherness. It is about taking gratification from the process of hooking—enticing, seducing, trapping, and then discarding—unhooking, and searching for a new object. This lack of commitment is the new vogue in relationships" (Salecl 2011, 75). Further on, she continues: "We have so many options in every aspect of life that the choice of emotional attachment is not only an added burden but also an impediment to the total freedom we are meant to value. Someone who gets attached too quickly has supposedly not fully profited from that freedom" (Salecl 2011, 76).[12] In light of this excerpt, it would appear as though (traditional) relationships and freedom are mutually exclusive in capitalist society, if not in direct opposition.

Furthermore, the practice of 'hooking up' as perceived by Salecl above, is supposed to empower people—especially women, for whom (historically speaking) sexual freedom has been (socially) denied—by providing them with seemingly more control over their bodies and sexual lives, for example, such as 'spending the night' with a random someone while avoiding any investment of feelings or emotional consequences. However, Salecl insists that such casual, no-commitment-intended (sexual) relations, grounded in a sense of "choice and control" and supposedly aimed at liberating individuals

from the burden of attachment, paradoxically increases feelings of "insecurity, anxiety and guilt" (2011, 77). This explains why 'hooking up' is so often accompanied by the use of alcohol, serving as it does as a means to forgo responsibility (over one's actions) (Salecl 2011, 77). In light of this, and what has been laid out above, it is not surprising that Salecl says that "Hooking up allows for anonymity, non-commitment and non-responsibility" (2011, 77). Moreover, regardless of one's best efforts and intentions not to form emotional attachments with casual contacts, this is sometimes unavoidable, and within the given norms governing 'hooking up,' such emotional investments (admitted to oneself or, forbid, the person for whom one has developed such feelings) are unacceptable (Salecl 2011, 76–77). In such cases, one's inability to conform to the principles of the 'hook-up culture' is accompanied by feelings of inadequacy, shame, and guilt.

To further understand how and why limitless choice makes us anxious, Salecl delves into the psychological mechanisms accompanying the experience of choosing from a bewildering amount of options. As an example, she recounts her own visit to a posh Manhattan grocery store to buy some cheese for a dinner party: The process of 'choosing' a cheese begins with overwhelming confusion in the face of the daunting array of possibilities (mature, soft, flavored, classic, spreadable, and so on), and progresses to anger at oneself for one's indecisiveness, through to suspicion and resentment toward the supposed 'help' offered by authorities (Salecl 2011, 14–16). Consistently, the person in such a situation reverts either to a random choice, because of decision paralysis when confronted with too many alternatives, or settles for the most advertised product (Salecl 2011, 15). According to Salecl, such an experience illustrates "some of the reasons why overwhelming choice can increase our anxiety and feelings of inadequacy" (2011, 15).

To this one could add the well-known Lacanian insight, that one's desire is really the desire of the Other which, in the present context, manifests itself in the fear that one's choice (of product) might not be accepted or considered adequate by others (for instance, dinner guests) (Lacan 1966/2007, 525). Indeed, in her article "Society of Choice," Salecl insists that choice is "a very social matter," contending that "one's choice is rarely a purely individual one but is always linked to others at various levels [which] can be anxiety provoking for many people" (2009, 165). To illustrate this point, that our choices (and the anxiety that goes along with it) are influenced by others' ideals in so far as we seek their approval in this regard, I revert back to Salecl's book, where she writes about her friend (a well-known law professor) and the agony he experiences over choosing a bottle of wine at a restaurant while out with friends: "[Because he] is afraid that others will laugh at his choice . . . he usually orders very expensive wine and, at the end of dinner, insists on paying for it" (Salecl 2011, 17). Here, the professor is not making a choice (in wine) according to his individual desire (his preference,

or the best [bargain] buy), but rather he is gauging how the other dinner guests will view his choice. For instance, if he buys a bottle of wine that is exorbitantly expensive, will they think he is showing off, or if he chooses a cheap option, will they label him a cheapskate? These are undoubtedly some of the thoughts he would be confronted with when making his decision. Arguably then, the more choices we are presented with, the greater the opportunity to humiliate ourselves by choosing the 'wrong' option (according to others' standards and opinion), and thus the greater our levels of anxiety.

There are other (more significant) factors to consider here too. According to Salecl, the current omnipresent ideology, which relies heavily on feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, guilt, and self-doubt, actually functions to "pacify" society by "turning criticism to ourselves instead of organizing ourselves and making a critique of the society we live in" (2011, 28). In other words, our engagement in constant self-improvement (and self-critique)—to the point of self-destruction—turns our attention away from the possibility of choice as a mechanism for social change (Salecl 2012, 2275). The central paradox of the 'culture of choice' then, as formulated by Salecl, is perhaps this:

> Choice about the organization of society is offered and denied at the same time. Liberal democratic capitalism glorifies the idea of choice, but with the proviso that what is on offer is primarily a consumerist model of choosing. The choice of a new form of social organization, of different ways in which society might develop in the future and especially the possibility of rejecting capitalist society as we know it all appear not to be available as choices. (2011, 149)

The above observations, as laid out by Salecl, lead her to conclude (as Parker similarly does) that today's society, with its insistence on 'rational' choice (and the control that accompanies it) over all spheres of life, is privileging an obsessional attitude toward life (2006, 97). Paradoxically though, rather than obtaining greater control over one's life and subsequently being happy, fulfilled, successful, and so on, one's obsessional attempts at self-determination are resulting in overwhelming feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and guilt (Salecl 2006, 97). As will be seen below, it gets worse than this in psychological terms.

In light of Salecl, what is evident concerning the current dispensation is that the 'market' has become the newly valorized symbolic order, espousing, in particular, its values of technical rationality and individualism, consequently denigrating a sense of community kinship—things that become clear in Paul Verhaeghe's work in terms of suffering (elaborated on shortly), which might partly account for the popularity of comedy: comedy fosters a sense of community, however fleeting, that is an analgesic on the wound left by neoliberalism.

In *What about me? The struggle for identity in a market-based society* (2014), Verhaeghe (a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst) provides in-

controvertible, documented evidence on the psychic costs of living in a market-based economy (2014). While up until now I have focused mainly on instances of suffering, such as anxiety, uncertainty, and guilt in a largely non-pathological sense, Verhaeghe argues persuasively that there is a direct connection between neoliberal transformations in working conditions and the global rise in psychic pathologies and personality disorders—'mental illness.' As he states at the outset of his book: "The neoliberal organization of our society is determining how we relate to our bodies, our partners, our colleagues, and our children—in short, to our identities. And you can't get much more disordered than that" (Verhaeghe 2014, location 59).

Deeply resistant to the reinforced assumption that mental disorders are neurobiological or genetic, Verhaeghe instead argues that 'mental disorders' should more appropriately be viewed as psychological manifestations (in individuals) indicative of broader social problems. The premise of this argument is summed up in one of his articles (prior to the publishing of his book)—"Capitalism and Psychology: Identity and Angst: On Civilization's New Discontent"—where he makes the following conclusion: "One must assume that different social structures will lead to different processes of identity-creation and to different mental disorders" (Verhaeghe 2012, 55). At present, according to him:

> we see an avalanche of depression and anxiety disorders among adults . . . most marked in the rise in medication. According to official figures, in 2009 one in every ten Belgians was taking antidepressants . . . [and in] 2011, the use of antidepressants in the Netherlands had gone up by 230 per cent over a period of 15 years . . . Social phobia among adults is currently such a serious problem in the West—despite it being one of the securest regions in the world—that in 2000 the *Harvard review of psychiatry* referred to it as the third most frequent psychiatric disorder after depression and alcoholism. Is it too far-fetched to assume that this general fear of others is connected to the exponential increase in evaluations, audits, performance interviews, and CCTV cameras, combined with the disappearance of authority and trust?" (Verhaeghe 2014, location 2339)

The World Health Organization's statistics reflect the same rise in mental illness as does Verhaeghe's research, noting that, globally, an estimated 350 million people of all ages suffer from depression, making it the leading cause of disability worldwide and a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease (2016). Furthermore, social phobia or social anxiety among adults is currently a serious problem worldwide, although more so in the West, to such an extent that the Social Anxiety Association refers to it as the third largest mental health problem in the world today, preceded only by depression and then alcoholism (2013). Not insignificant, the above figures paint a

rather bleak picture of society, but a rather lucrative one for the profit-driven pharmaceutical industry.

Given Verhaeghe's theoretical assumption that psychological identity is constructed by mirroring (in the Lacanian sense of the imaginary) our cultural environment and internalizing its ethics—social norms and values—it is not surprising to find that social phobia and performance anxiety commonly occur among working people today. This is because, according to Verhaeghe, correlative to the current societal model, which he calls the "Enron society," there is a theoretical shift in the discourses or narratives operative in society through which we construct our identity—namely, the interplay between the political, religious or ideological, cultural, and economic—to the overt dominance of the economic discourse, which comes to substitute for the entire symbolic order (2012, 57). Everything (and everyone) becomes commodified and objectified—with profoundly devastating changes in our individual identities and personalities, and at the same time, weakening society. Verhaeghe further points out that the disintegration of the grand, overarching religious and ideological narratives of the past which provided a coordinating "communal ethical system," exacerbated by "a high-tech, lightning fast, globalized, pseudo-free market," has resulted in a shift in the classic Freudian idea of the area of tension between the individual and society (whereby the subject functions as part of a community—as a citizen) to one of the individual in "direct opposition" to society (the individual as consumer), which is "fatal for society as a community" (2012, 57–58). In other words, in contemporary society, the economic discourse comes to operate almost independently, along with its own comprehensive value system against which we construct our identities, the essentials of which are individualism and competitiveness (Verhaeghe 2012, 55–58).

Indeed, founded on the ideology of meritocracy (or as Salecl notes, the 'self-made' person) that success (and therefore also the lack of it, i.e., failure) is dependent on individual effort and talent, neoliberal capitalism promotes the idea of social mobility, that "everybody has an equal chance" at making it in today's world despite their divergent backgrounds and socioeconomic circumstances, when in actual fact this system serves only itself, functioning to enhance production, and therefore profit (Verhaeghe 2012, 57–58). The result has been an increasingly generalized 'management culture' in which success is 'measured,' literally, in terms of production, growth, and profit (i.e., efficiency) by way of subjection to a constantly growing Kafkaesque infrastructure of assessments, monitoring, surveillance, audits, and increasingly detailed contracts, the purpose of which is to reward the 'winners' and punish the 'losers' (who subsequently experience feelings of guilt, shame, and humiliation for not making it). In a work environment where those around you are classified as either your competitors (i.e., success can only be achieved in direct competition with colleagues, even best friends) or evalua-

tors (tasked with assessing your performance), and you are classified as either a 'winner' or a 'loser'—the only roles available in society under neoliberal capitalism—it is not surprising that there has been a spectacular rise in social phobia and performance anxiety. Verhaeghe argues that, in the present context, these are often expressed in the form of infantile behavior—evident in childish outbursts of anger, jealousy, deceitfulness, teasing, and bullying, just to name a few, leading him to declare social angst, "the hallmark of the new identity" (2012, 59–61). He graphically depicts the consequences of the "Enron society" on both individual and collective identity (at length) as follows:

> A meritocratic system very rapidly starts to privilege certain characteristics, and punish others as a way of maintaining itself. Since a competitive character is a must, individualism soon takes over. Flexibility is also highly desirable, but the price is a superficial and unstable identity. Solidarity becomes an expensive luxury and its place is taken by temporary coalitions whose main purpose is to gain more from them than one loses. Strong social bonds with colleagues are virtually excluded, emotional commitment to one's work hardly exists, and there is certainly no loyalty to the company or organization. In this connection, the typical defense mechanism is cynicism, reflecting the failure or refusal to commit oneself. Individualism, profiteering and the 'me-culture' are becoming quasi-endemic and are the clear consequences of the Enron model and not of the welfare state in the past. (Verhaeghe 2014, location 60)

Clearly, from the above excerpt, one can observe a shift from Emile Durkheim's "moral individualism"—the promotion of the welfare of others—to 'utilitarian individualism'—the glorification of social progress through individual self-interest, moving contemporary society closer to social Darwinism's 'survival of the fittest' (Sunderlin 2003, 26). Furthermore, this emphasis on the individual (and the subsequent declining sense of community) has also resulted in the destruction of 'the community' to the point that German sociologist and social scientist Ulrich Beck speaks of "zombie categories" and "zombie institutions" which are "dead and still alive" to describe family, class, and neighborhood in the present era (2000).

What the capitalist work-discipline essentially does, then, is reduce society to a commodity, devoid of autonomy and creativity (and the feelings of power and self-control that these promote)—in short, a sense of loss of identity, transforming individuals into working machines in the name of increased production, and therefore greater profit. Along these lines, one of the most respected American psychologists (from the autonomist Marxist tradition), Silvia Federici, contends that the current regime "increasingly exploits the entire range of our productive capacities, our bodies and our minds, our capacities for communication, our intelligence and creativity, our affective relations with each other, and more. Life itself has been put to

work" (2013, 3). Taking into consideration that this stress-inducing environment, as described by Verhaeghe, is further intensified and accelerated by the ongoing computerization and automation of work, requiring what Federici describes as "highly mechanical, dehumanizing, militaristic types of behavior, in which the person is reduced to just a component of a broader mechanical system," her summary of the concomitant suffering serves as a mirror for the contemporary subject and resonates with Verhaeghe's findings, discussed earlier:

> Indeed, the abstraction and regimentation of labor has reached today its completion and so has our sense of alienation and de-socialization. What levels of stress this situation is producing in our lives can be measured by the massification of mental diseases—panic, anxiety, fear, attention deficit, the escalating consumption of drugs from Prozac to Viagra . . . Fear and anxiety are only one aspect of the terror that today is employed to suffocate the growing revolt against the global work machine. Equally important has been the militarization of everyday life, now an international trend, preceding September 11. (Federici 2013, 7)

The above findings on both Verhaeghe and Federici's part demonstrate that (as Parker has pointed out) capitalist work displays an obsessional neurotic structure—even on the part of those that are not clinically ill, as Bert Olivier outlines below:

> [Capitalism demands of workers] a painfully repetitive and stressful, conscientious commitment to productive work, on the tacit assumption or belief that 'something terrible' would happen to them if they should fail to do so. And anxiety or fear and depression are always waiting in the wings, lest one should feel, as one inevitably does, sooner or later, that one is not meeting expectations (which have by then been internalized). (2014)

The proliferation of so-called mental disorders today has to be seen in this light. Out of this self-perpetuating meritocracy of the system—the practice of salary differentiation linked to performance—emerges a clear polarization between 'winners' and 'losers,' with Verhaeghe pointing out that financial meritocracy rapidly leads to a system of *winner takes all* in which "the middle group becomes steadily smaller and the gap between the top and the bottom grows even wider" (2012, 61). For the above reasons, it is not surprising that Olivier contends that "health has been deteriorating steadily under the neoliberal regime" (2014), and Mark Fisher declares that we are facing a "mental health plague" (2009, 19).

Alongside increasing competition in the workplace and the growing automation and computerization of work, as outlined by Verhaeghe and Federici above, the restructuring and reorganization of labor at all levels in neoliberal capitalist society at the hands of privatization, deregulation, union decline,

and the downscaling of social assistance, has given rise to what Federici calls "the precarization and flexibilization of work," which has resulted in our relationship to waged work becoming increasingly discontinuous, and the work experience becoming increasingly fragmented (2006, 7). It is important to remember that the neoliberal capitalist imperative to maximize profit finds support by shifting the balance of money (and therefore power) out of the hands of the working class and into the hands of the rich and their corporations. This is strategically achieved by undermining the working conditions of working people by way of an increase in automation, subcontracting, downscaling, and 'clawbacks' of workplace benefits (most notably through tax increases); in other words, by way of an increasingly insecure workforce.

In their article "Neoliberalism, precarious work and remaking the geography of global capitalism," which serves as a dictum on the International Labor Organization's 2015 *World Employment and Social Outlook: The Changing Nature of Jobs* report, scholars Andrew Herod and Rob Lambert elaborate on the restructuring of capital/labor relations in the age of 'Empire.' Here they detail a shift away from "the standard employment model, in which workers earn wages and salaries in a dependent employment relationship vis-á-vis their employers, have stable jobs and work full time" in favor of "informal employment" such as short-term contracts and irregular work hours (Herod and Lambert 2016, 1). This transformation in capitalist labor is especially visible among well-paid and high-status workers who were previously engaged in stable and long-term employment and are now increasingly engaged in irregular labor—once relegated to mostly lower-paid and lower-skilled workers (Gill and Pratt 2008, 3). Indeed, 'work' in neoliberal capitalist society has increasingly come to be characterized in transitory terms, as 'insecure,' 'flexible,' 'irregular,' 'casual,' 'intermittent,' and 'informal.' The growing flexibility of capital can be seen to reach its height in the development of so-called "zero-hour contracts" in which workers are "not guaranteed any work but ha[ve] to be available as and when the employer needs them" (Herod and Lambert 2016, 22). In this way, workers are forced into a liminal 'twilight zone,' on 'permanent' (excuse the pun) standby, employed, but (paradoxically) unemployed, with little control over their time or income, as British professor Guy Standing points out in the following:

> Most of the workers must be constantly on standby, preventing them from being 'on their bike' searching for jobs, retraining or even having the 'work experience' that politicians claim is so uplifting. It is induced inertia, an impediment to social mobility and in most cases it is degrading. The employer is under no pressure to train workers or make good use of them, and as with any free commodity, need not fret about inefficiency. (2013)

Given that work is intimately related to other social, economic, and political issues, it is not surprising that negative changes in the workplace have re-

sulted in destructive changes in other spheres of life as well. This "brave new world of work," to quote Beck (2000), as described by Verhaeghe and Federici, has resulted in the corrosion of both individual and collective identity. For instance, under neoliberal capitalism, Federici observes the emergence of "a worker that is depersonalized, adaptable, ready at any moment to change occupation," noted by Verhaeghe as well (2013, 7). Furthermore, the impact of these now 'standard' working conditions has poured over into family and public life, with scholars observing a direct correlation between work demands, extended and unpredictable working hours, job overload and stress, and social fragmentation—greater violence, criminality, and family conflict (Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin, 2009; Verhaeghe 2012). This claim is supported by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, in his article titled "The essence of neoliberalism," identifies the hegemonic economic system of the present as a ruthless "utopia of endless exploitation" that gives rise to increased individualism, which goes hand-in-hand with the disintegration of the community and contributes to an increase in social problems like suicide, depression, and alcohol abuse; in other words, to a proliferation of mental pathologies, as graphically depicted by Verhaeghe and Salecl (1998). Bourdieu further argues that the 'institutionalization' of precarious employment and the competitive, cut-throat work environment, both of which serve to impose over-involvement in work and high-stress conditions in the workplace, converge to "weaken or abolish collective standards or solidarities" (1998). These methods of rational control, as he notes, serve to establish an "absolute reign of flexibility"—"the struggle of all against all at all levels of the hierarchy . . . through everyone clinging to their job and organization under conditions of insecurity, suffering, and stress" (Bourdieu 1998). The ultimate basis of this economic order then, which is placed under the banner of individual freedom, is the "*structural violence*" of unemployment, the insecurity of employment, and the perpetual threat of unemployment (Bourdieu, 1998).

This already precarious situation is further exacerbated by what Rachel Peltz describes as the absence of a containing function of the contemporary government—that is, those institutions that provide basic social provisions that reinforce a sense of social security—in turn promoting what she calls "the manic society," a society that gives rise to the proliferation of manic defenses such as compulsive consumption to disguise the suffering associated with the loss of a social 'safety net' (2006). This so-called 'safety net' could be likened to British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's (1960) concept of the "holding environment," the main function of which is to provide safety, reliability, predictability, continuity, security, and protection from strong affects (which will 'facilitate' and enable individual growth development) and therefore 'contain' and reduce our existential and inherent anxieties. Expanding this concept, in the present context, beyond caregiver-infant

and clinician-client, the erosion of this macro 'holding environment' (and the threat of it collapsing) under the current socioeconomic conditions leaves the subject experiencing destabilizing chronic anxiety.

In light of the above conclusions drawn by Parker, Salecl, Verhaeghe, and Federici, it would not be far-fetched to perceive in these global circumstances, as reconstructed by Hardt and Negri in terms of a state of 'perpetual war,' a kind of military correlate to the market-based, capitalist sources of anxiety and uncertainty on the part of consumers, uncovered by Parker, Salecl, and Verhaeghe. It would be naïve to suppose that these conditions (identified by Hardt and Negri), widely reported in the media, would not exacerbate an already fraught situation for citizen-consumers worldwide. What then can be done to circumvent this 'age of anxiety' that is increasingly becoming the defining experience of life and labor in the contemporary era? It is probably safe to say that the present is a time when society is witness to a pervasive condition of constant violence and global conflict, where violence, death, and destruction are played out in and through the media on a regular basis, infiltrating the homes of individuals and families, and furthermore, their psyche(s), contributing no doubt to increased levels of fear, anxiety, and stress. Add to this the rise in economic, physical, and psychic suffering as consequence of the stress-inducing demands of neoliberal capitalism, and it should be apparent that society, more than ever, needs productive, socially acceptable ways of releasing this tension. This is where Freud's theory of humor in relation to the unconscious might be useful in explaining comedy's resurgence in the age of 'Empire.'

HUMOR AS AN ANTIDOTE FOR ANXIETY

The attempt to explain the function, experience, and structure of humor in philosophy (as well as across several academic disciplines such as psychology, media studies, communication, and literature) has resulted in the development of three dominant theories of humor. Briefly summarized: superiority theory—first suggested by Plato in *Philebus* (1975) and further developed by Aristotle in *Poetics* (1961) as laughter (aggressively) directed at the folly and misfortune of others who we perceive to be inferior to ourselves; incongruity theory—the most popular contemporary theory of humor, which is most associated with the work of Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgment* (1951) and Arthur Schopenhauer's 1818 book, *The World as Will and Representation*, which sees humor (and the associated laughter) as a response to a linguistic or conceptual ambiguity, logical impossibility, or contradiction (i.e., humor from this theoretical standpoint that substitutes an expected event or remark with an unexpected one); and relief theory—most notably associated with the psychoanalytic work of Sigmund Freud, offered in *Jokes*

and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905/2010) and revised in the essay "Humor" (1927/2010), whereby humor (through laughter) is thought to provide either psychological or physiological relief from emotional tension. In the present context, while Freud is by no means the only figure in this theoretical tradition, owing to space constraints, it is only Freud's psychoanalytic theory of humor that interests me and appears to be of significance in tracing the rise in comedy and comedy-viewing in the age of 'Empire.'

One of Freud's central arguments about civilization, and the price we pay for successful adaptation to civilized society—as explained in his essay "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death"—is that we (as humans) are required to live beyond our psychic means (1915/2010, 3076). That is to say, (civilized) society exacts good conduct and compliance of human beings, forcing us to renounce or suppress the dictates of our own (instinctual) natures from conscious awareness which, for Freud, is founded on the *life instinct* (or Eros, which includes the drive to live and basic instinctual impulses such as thirst and hunger but which is most readily associated with sexual interests) and the *death instinct* (or Thanatos, which is the source of destructive urges, most notably agression) (2010, 3076). In other words, we live beyond our psychological means, or dare one say 'at our wits' ends,' when we repress our visceral dispositions in favor of acting continually in accordance with the precepts of society (Freud 2010, 3076). Consequently, Freud argues in his work *Civilization and Its Discontents* that we (individually and collectively) come to display a rectitude diametrically opposed to our innate desires, which in turn increases feelings of anxiety, which is nothing more than a manifestation of a "sense of guilt"—the tension between the supposedly 'sinful' ego or pleasure seeker and the harsh superego or punisher through guilt—our (moral) conscience, if you will—a psychic agency employed by civilization to abate, defuse, and guard the desire for aggression "like a garrison in a conquered city" (1930/2010, 4513). This 'sense of guilt' (as exhibited through a structural variety of anxiety) either "makes itself noisily heard in consciousness," as is most often the case with obsessional neurosis, or may conceal itself unconsciously, as "a tormenting uneasiness, a kind of [unconscious] anxiety" (Freud 2010, 4523). In the former case, the resulting tension or anxiety triggers the ego defense (coping) mechanism of "reaction"—that is, to avoid inciting displeasing (sexual) feelings which are anxiety-provoking or perceived to be unacceptable in civilized society, we erect barriers against sexuality through disgust, morality, and shame, as is the case with the reactive phenomenon of neurotic disorders (Freud 2010, 1500; 3076). In the latter case, the resulting tension "betrays itself" in the phenomenon of compensation—that is, we seek out socially acceptable outlets or anodynes (religious fervor, fantasy, and escape into art) to 'substitute' for our unfulfilled instinctual satisfaction/pleasure (Freud 2010, 3076).[13] While in this instance "the pressure of civilization brings in its train no pathological

results," it presents itself "in the perpetual readiness of the inhibited instincts to break through to satisfaction at any suitable opportunity" (Freud 2010, 3076). The latter leads Freud to conceive that "the sense of guilt produced by civilization is not perceived as such . . . [but] remains to a large extent unconscious, or appears as a sort of *malaise,* a dissatisfaction [or unease], for which people seek other motivations" (2010, 4523).

Humor, for Freud then, comes to serve a very significant (if not vital) function in society, and civilized society in particular, as compensation for the release of this 'unease' (or tension) and the pleasure/satisfaction attained through the acceptable means of laughter. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud (1905/2010) points out that erecting or maintaining prohibitions against sex and aggression imposed by civilization requires what he terms "psychical expenditure" (and what Herbert Spencer, one of the forefathers of the relief theory of humor, called "nervous energy"), and laughter counteracts this imposition of excessively high moral standards by offering us an "economical" (not to mention more appropriate) way of "saving" in the expenditure of psychological resources that we do not, in fact, yet possess. We are, according to Freud, borrowing against the future in this regard, as it were, on credit. The very prevalence of neurotic disorders as described by Parker indicates that this borrowing against the future (and the anxiety it provokes) is widespread.

Freud makes explicit the connection between humor and the saving of psychological expenditure in the concluding paragraph of the last chapter of his book where he distinguishes between three laughter situations—"jokes," "the comic," and "humor"—all of which allow us to save a certain amount of psychical energy; that is, energy that had been summoned for a psychological purpose that, having been abandoned, becomes superfluous (it is 'saved') and is then discharged in laughter (2010, 1735). More specifically he shows that with jokes we save psychic energy used normally to repress forbidden desires; in reacting to the comic we save an expenditure of energy in 'ideation'/thought; and with humor we save energy otherwise invested in (painful) emotions. In other words, one could think of laughter (in a broad sense) as reducing or circumventing those mechanisms that exhaust our psychic energy: sexual and hostile inhibitions, logical and rational thinking, and painful emotions. Because the saving of psychic energy operates differently in these three kinds of laughter situations, I shall consider them one at a time. However, most of Freud's attention is devoted to jokes, and therefore, mine shall be too. Here Freud's distinction between "innocent" (playing with words and thoughts) and "tendentious" (lustful or hostile) jokes is important. In the case of the former, the joke has no definite purpose and renders only "a slight smile," whereas the latter serves as a means of lifting psychical repressions, usually of an obscene or hostile nature, and thus results in a "sudden burst of laughter" (2010, 1693). Freud further distinguishes between two kinds

of tendentious (or purposeful) jokes: "a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggression, satire, or defense) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of [sexual] exposure)," both of which free us to experience pleasure that is impermissible (2010, 1693).

Freud thus presents jokes as serving a similar function to dreams—providing pleasure (albeit temporarily) by releasing us from the restraints of our inhibitions and allowing expression of instinctual urges and forbidden desires of a sexual and hostile nature that would otherwise remain repressed. These urges, according to him, are ordinarily censored by external and internal forces: people's exalted authoritative positions (and therefore the possible dangers of offending them) and an inner aversion to the overt aggressiveness or lustfulness of these urges, respectively (Freud 2010, 1699). Here jokes come to serve two functions: If the force is external, jokes offer people a kind of safety valve[14] or temporary leverage from these restraints, allowing these urges to be expressed by means of levity—disguised as a joke, which can therefore never be taken too seriously altogether (Freud 2010, 1697). In addition, by expressing these urges by means of 'just kidding,' we avoid having to expend psychic energy that would otherwise be necessary to inhibit and restrain these urges. Alternatively, if the obstacle is internal, jokes use the "joke-work" (an analogue to Freud's "dream-work") to evade the censor and give playful and acceptable expression to otherwise repressed or inhibited urges in a manner that avoids a direct assault on the moral fabric of civilized society (as in the case of dreams) (Freud 2010, 1697).

Freud focuses much of his analysis where the book's title suggests he should—on the connection between jokes and dreams (and their relation to the unconscious). Here he identifies two mechanisms through which jokes perform their joke-work (release instinctual energy), which are the same mechanisms that govern the structure of dreams and allow the "latent dream-thoughts" to be safely (and intelligibly) expressed in the dream's "manifest content:" condensation and displacement (or, in other words, metaphor and metonymy) (Freud 2010, 1745). In dream analysis, the process of condensation subjects several dream-thoughts (images, words, sounds, ideas, experiences, etc.) to an "extraordinary compression," fusing them, as it were, into a single element of the manifest dream (Freud 2010, 1748). In this way, the dream-element comes to symbolically represent several other underlying thoughts. In the same way, Freud argues that jokes make use of the "linguistic process of condensation," that is, two (often different) words or two parts of words are compressed or "considerably abbreviat[ed]" to form a composite word—neologism—with comic effect (should the audience be aware of the context in which the joke is told; otherwise the joke would be rendered incomprehensible) (2010, 1624–1642). In addition, linguistic condensation also refers to the way in which one word comes to implicitly convey and allude to multiple thoughts and ideas, such as with double entendres (play

upon words and double meanings), leading Freud to declare jokes as an "economy of means"—a 'saving' in expression (2010, 1638–1649). This technique is exemplified succinctly by one of his favorite examples of a fabricated word pronounced by a character in one of poet Heinrich Heine's novels in which a poor lottery agent, Hirsch-Hyacinth, boasts of the wealthy Baron Rothschild treating him "famillionairely"—that is, both "familiarly" and "so far as a millionaire can" (Freud 2010, 1618;1622).

The second process of the dream-work is displacement or "the diversion of the train of thought" from its anticipated trajectory, that is, transference of a latent (psychically significant) and disagreeable element with another well-concealed allusion to it (one that is more agreeable and often superficially absurd), which is the chief means at the disposal of the unconscious for disguising a dream's true content and therefore allowing it to bypass the internal censor (pre-conscious and conscious thinking) (Freud 2010, 914–964; 1655). In the same way, Freud argues that through purposeful jokes, hostile or sexual aggressiveness is displaced by "a new technique of [verbal] invective" where we can "make our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic [and] achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of over-coming him—to which the third person [listener], who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter" (2010, 1697). In other words, jokes give vent to libidinal impulses of violent aggression through spiteful but funny events that befall people other than the ones we feel the hostility toward, and the third person (listener) becomes our ally in this matter. The joke, as it were, "bribe[s] the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us," a notion expressed with perfect aptitude in the common phrase "*die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen*"—to bring the laughers over to our side (Freud 2010, 1698).

The premise of Freud's connection between dreams and jokes then is per-haps this: both dream-work and joke-work employ the techniques of condensa-tion (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy) which make use of nonsensical-ity and incongruity to momentarily break from censure, ethics, and reason (by-pass conscious awareness), and thereby produce a "yield of pleasure" (Freud 2010, 1686). In jokes, this pleasure is derived from a 'saving' of psychical expenditure on inhibitions (a rechanneling of previously repressed psychic ener-gy), which is then discharged in laughter, described by Freud in the opening section of his book as the "relaxation of tension," and having begun to explore his theory of humor, one understands why (2010, 1735). Thus, the joke becomes a liberating process of the inhibited and forbidden in a permissible, tolerable form. The latter qualification is important insofar as it explains why some jokes 'go too far' or 'are too close to home.' For instance, some of Sacha Baron Cohen's films, such as *Bruno,* overstep this boundary and confront people with their repressed anxieties in too 'undisguised' a manner, which makes it intoler-able. In other words, in the present context, the point is that stand-up comedy has

to provide relief *without* confronting viewers too directly with neoliberalism in its naked, ideological guise (or any of the many things metonymically connected with it, such as the never-ending wars of the present, as Hardt and Negri show in *Multitude*). Although an ideology always disguises itself so that it seems 'natural,' some of the things happening under neoliberalism are too unpalatable to digest, even in comedic form—like dreams that allow the dreamer to wake up, instead of continuing in their function of "guardians of sleep" (Freud 2010, 712).

Freud's second category of laughter-related phenomena is 'the comic'— illustrated by (people's) movements and actions, such as the antics of a clown or pantomime which are at once overstated and imprudent, and mental and intellectual traits of character (2010, 1767–1769). In the former case, Freud argues that we (as observers of the clown) mobilize a certain amount of psychical energy (greater expenditure for the idea of something large, and less for the idea of something small) in trying to comprehend such movements, what he calls "ideational mimetics"—the imitation of movement through the medium of thought (2010, 1767–1771). He grounds his concept of ideational mimetics, in the present context, on quantitative contrast, comparing the psychical energy required in the mental representation of the clown's movements (which, owing to its overstated efforts, demands far greater 'thinking energy') with the psychical energy required in the mental representation of what our own movements would be in the same situation (Freud 2010, 1770–1771). The process of ideational mimicry, according to Freud, is accompanied by "somatic innervation"—the physiological parallel to the mental process—in this case, the ideation of movement is simultaneously supported by empathetic "innervations [that] run out to the muscles," which "displaces far smaller cathectic energies" than the actual cathexis (activation) of physiological energies typically required to perform the movement that is being observed (2010, 1771–1772). As such, surplus 'saved' energy arises from this *Differenz*[15] in expenditure of innervation and is discharged in the physiological and psychical act of laughter.

Of the species of the comic, Freud states that the "comic of movement" is characteristically the most important, and his explanation of this second subclass of the comic—the intellectual and mental (as opposed to the physical) functions of other people—is brief, so mine shall be too (2010, 1775). Here Freud argues that a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, "[he] has spared himself expenditure which [we] regard as indispensable (for nonsense and stupidity are inefficiencies of function)" (2010, 1774). Thus, the "uniform explanation" put forth by Freud as to the "comic effect" of a person relies on a comparison between ourselves and the other person who "makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones" (2010, 1774). On the other hand, if this balance is reversed, "we are filled with astonishment and admiration" (Freud 2010, 1774). While Freud's explanation of 'the comic' marks somewhat of a theoretical depar-

ture from his psychoanalytic perspective on laughter that we find with jokes, and shortly, with humor, in favor of a more physiological approach to laughter (as is the case with Spencer's theory), he nevertheless offers us clues as to the greater significance of the comic in civilized society.

Freud argues that society educates (literally) its members to adopt and endorse rational and logical thinking and forego ways of thinking that are absurd or nonsensical (Freud 2010, 1716–1717). It is no wonder that he declares elsewhere in his book on jokes that "Pleasure in nonsense . . . is concealed in serious life to a vanishing point" (2010, 1716). However, he argues that jokes, in particular, and I do not think it would be too far-fetched to include the comic in this discussion, allow us to recover our capacity as small children to participate in the "pure pleasure" of imaginative play—to engage in the incongruous, the absurd, the illogical, and the nonsensical and thereby "to withdraw from the pressure of critical reason" (Freud 2010, 1799; 1717). Thus 'jokes' and 'the comic,' in Freud's summation (and my own), represent a revolt against the cogency of reason, rationality, and actuality in search of pleasure in "liberated nonsense [which] only seldom dares to show itself directly [in adults]" (2010, 1717). In this light, the comic (and jokes) can be understood as the path to "the regained lost laughter of childhood" (Freud 2010, 1800). Bearing in mind the over-competitive, over-worked, detrimentally rational worker of neoliberal capitalism as presented by Verhaeghe and Federici, it would make 'sense' that engaging in such playful and childish behavior would offer a kind of escape from the excessive, profit-serving, and rational and logical thinking demanded by the standard working conditions of today.

Freud next discusses 'humor,' which stands slightly apart from jokes and the comic, as being "one of the highest psychical achievements" in that it offers "a means of obtaining pleasure *in spite* of the distressing affects that interfere with it" (2010, 1803). For Freud, humor achieves this by way of deflection, by "act[ing] as a substitute for the generation of these affects [and] put[ting] itself in their place" (2010, 1803). In other words, "unpleasurable" emotions such as anger, pain, and so on are "economized in favor of the humor" (Freud 2010, 1806). This assertion is in need of much elaboration and expansion, which can be found in Freud's lesser known paper, simply titled "Humor."

Here he contends that the humorous process or approach can take place in two ways: It can be directed toward a single person—the humorist—who "adopts the humorous attitude," or toward other people—the spectator(s)—who "derives enjoyment from it [the humorist's humorous attitude]" (Freud 2010, 4541–4542). In the former case, Freud considers this type of humor to be "the highest of the defensive processes" in that it (the humorous attitude) "spares [the humorist] the [negative] affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emo-

tion with a jest" (2010, 1807; 4542). For this reason, he asserts that humor "has something of grandeur and elevation" which is lacking in the other two laughter-producing situations, namely "the triumph of narcissism" and the victory of "the pleasure principle" (Freud 2010, 4542). That is, the ego asserts its invulnerability, refusing to be concerned or troubled by the vexations of reality, instead avowing that such "traumas of the external world" are but opportunities for it to attain pleasure (Freud 2010, 4542–4543). Humor (in the narrow sense) so conceived displays a "magnificent superiority over the real [unkind] situation," leading Freud to declare humor as recalcitrant and "reactionary,"[16] as the parental superego that comforts the intimidated ego (2010, 4542–4545).

In the second instance of the humorous situation, the spectator (or bystander) does not produce the humor themselves, but rather from a distance, "shares in the enjoyment of the humor" (Freud 2010, 4541). Freud describes this humorous process as follows: Identifying himself with the humorist, who (in turn) finds himself faced with an unpleasant situation, the spectator anticipates the humorist to "produce the signs of an affect"—anger, pain, fear, despair, and so on—and is thus prepared to "follow his lead" and assume the same corresponding "emotional impulses in himself;" however, the humorist "expresses no affect" but rather "makes a jest" (2010, 4541). As such, the psychical energy summoned for the ready-mobilized painful emotion, by copying or echoing the humorist, becomes redundant and is released in laughter (Freud 2010, 4541–4542). Furthermore, "The small contributions of humor," writes Freud, "that we produce ourselves are as a rule made at the cost of anger—instead of getting angry" (2010, 1805). In light of the proliferation of mental disorders under neoliberal capitalism, together with Freud's conception of humor, one might be encouraged to add the following: the humor we produce ourselves are as a rule made at the cost of psychosis—instead of going insane. In light of the above, it is not surprising that Freud declares a sense of humor "a rare and precious gift" (2010, 4545).

In addition to describing three kinds of anxieties that are relieved by laughter: tension from inhibitions (jokes), difficulty in rational thinking (the comic), and painful emotions (humor), Freud also (very briefly) directs our attention to another of laughter's roles in society—that of creating a sense of social community. As he intimates when speaking of jokes: "Every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity" (Freud 2010, 1738). This assertion is supported by many scholars, most notably John Morreall in his book *Taking Laughter Seriously* where he summarizes the following social function of humor as such:

> Laughter is not only contagious, but in spreading from person to person, it has a cohesive effect. Laughing together unites people . . . To laugh with another

person for whatever reason, even if only at a piece of absurdity, is to get closer
to that person . . . sharing humor is in this respect like sharing an enjoyable
meal. (1983, 115)

In a world of limited psychic resources, as sketched out in the previous
section on neoliberal capitalism and suffering where rationality from the
domain of economics has become the cornerstone of human existence (and
civilization) and where a sense of community has dissipated under the cur-
rent capitalist regime, Freud's theory of humor represents methods of regain-
ing "the euphoria . . . [of] the mood of a period of life in which we were
accustomed to deal with our psychical work in general with a small expendi-
ture of energy—the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the
comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humor
to make us feel happy in our life" (2010, 1809). Laughter, so conceived by
Freud, thus does not merely offer escapist relief (which is itself valuable in a
time of increasing stress about things like mounting debt as so vividly de-
picted by Hardt and Negri in *Declaration*) but also provides viewers with
something—jokes—on which the audience can project their fears and anxie-
ties, and it brings the unconscious 'truth' about 'prohibited' beliefs and as-
sumptions into the open. In brief: seeing and hearing 'prohibited' and 're-
pressed' topics treated with sometimes irreverent humor absolves people of
the guilt and the anxiety they would ordinarily experience when these topics
are addressed. The humor then functions as a kind of soothing, anodyne
elixir, and arguably also provides the opportunity for catharsis, that is, a kind
of purging of the psyche as far as anxiety, stress, and fear are concerned.

Importantly, the perceivable, growing interest in stand-up comedy may
therefore be understood in the terms provided by Freud as something that is
symptomatic of what might hypothetically be called an underlying aware-
ness—or more accurately a repressed anxiety—concerning the multifarious
manifestations of life under neoliberalism, or what Hardt and Negri have
famously termed the emergence of 'Empire' at various levels. Succinctly put,
it is plausible, if not highly probable (from a Freudian perspective), that
comedy, as a kind of lightning conductor, offers audiences opportunities to
transmute their 'anxious energy' into humor. Differently put, stand-up come-
dy affords them the space to elaborate on their largely unconscious, anxiety-
generating awareness of a global state of affairs that does not leave anyone
untouched, particularly as far as phenomena like securitization and indebted-
ness (themselves inseparable from the current neoliberal regime) are con-
cerned. It makes sense that under these conditions stand-up comedy would
flourish, particularly because the interconnectedness of global society brings
stand-up into easy reach of viewers, both those who (can) attend such shows
personally and those who cannot.

It is important to remember, finally, that even where stand-up comedic routines do not directly address the prevailing world order of neoliberalism or 'Empire'—focusing instead on issues of gender, race or politics—the preceding discussion of Freud's work on humor implies that the absence of such direct reference does *not* mean that it is not implicated. Because of the function of repression regarding the actual sources of anxiety and stress, people are mostly unconscious of these, and the humor attached to stand-up therefore still serves the important psychic function ascribed to it by Freud— perhaps more than ever, given the global reach of 'Empire' or neoliberal hegemony. The evidence adduced to demonstrate the extent of 'suffering' in the current economic and political dispensation is overwhelming, and given Freud's convincing elaboration on the function of humor, it stands to reason that the increased (and increasing) popularity of stand-up comedy is at least partly (even to a large degree) explicable against this backdrop.

NOTES

1. Dane Cook's MySpace page. Accessed June 17, 2018. https://myspace.com/danecook
2. Dane Cook's Facebook page. Accessed June 17, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/DaneCook/
3. Dane Cook's Twitter page. Accessed June 17, 2018. https://twitter.com/DaneCook
4. Kevin Hart's Twitter page. Accessed June 17, 2018. https://twitter.com/KevinHart4real?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor
5. Kevin Hart's Facebook page. Accessed June 17, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/hartkevin/
6. Kevin Hart's Laugh Out Loud Network (YouTube channel). Accessed June 17, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLRmIdRJgLfmdpJufmBhBuA
7. Castells, Manuel. 2010. *The Rise of the Network Society*. 2nd ed. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
8. While loss of employment and housing and so on is applicable to all neoliberal societies, I refrain from extending these instances beyond the examples I have mentioned.
9. In addition to "the indebted," Hardt and Negri also name "the mediatized," created by control over information and communication networks; "the securitized," constructed by the security regime and the state of exception by inducing fear and the longing for protection; and "the represented," a depoliticized figure forged by the corruption of democracy (2012, 8).
10. For Foucault, there are different forms of power (and therefore different forms of relationships to power), remembering that power is a system (a network of relations) encountered in the whole of society, not just regarding individuals, and only one of which is power imposed by one subject onto another, which produces a relationship of control of the powerful over the powerless. However, Foucault reminds us that individuals are not just objects of power, but also the locus where resistances to power are exerted. See Foucault, Michel. 1982. "The Subject and Power." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4: 777–795.
11. See Freud, Sigmund. 2008. *Three Case Histories*. New York: Simon and Schuster (originally published in 1963).
12. It may also be useful to point out that Salecl observes a connection between 'limitless freedom' (on which capitalist ideology is predicated) and a greater turn toward androgyny and bisexuality, attributing this phenomenon to one's freedom to choose one's own sexuality (2006, 94). Of course this, like everything else, serves the capitalist imperative to 'make more money,' achieved through *free* online pornographic sites, sex toys shops, and so on. Capitalism offers the 'freedom' of sexuality only to cater to its every (consuming) need.

13. In the case of the neurotic, the attempted compensation is exaggerated and internalized.

14. Freud uses this term in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe the way in which dreams make "all kinds of harmful things . . . harmless" to the mind (1900/2010, 1018).

15. German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1977) uses the term to denote that two things, while remaining different, are not necessarily indifferent to each other—that is, their difference entails a mutually significant relation of either comparison or contrast.

16. Here "reactionary"—being conservative—unlike "rebellious" and "regressive" relates specifically to the superego's comforting role.

Chapter Three

The Ideological Situation of Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy

To locate the sociopolitical efficacy of contemporary stand-up comedy in the current neoliberal capitalist situation requires a detour through the unfashionable concept of ideology, in particular, the ideology of mass culture or 'pop culture,' subsumed under the rubric of 'postmodernity.' As a specific ideological formation of neoliberalism and global capitalism, postmodernity raises an 'aporetic bind' for the possibility of a contemporary sociopolitically efficacious stand-up comedy. This is because the functioning of ideology under conditions of late capitalism—characterized variously as the dissolution of symbolically-constituted universal truth and reality and its claim to a 'post-ideological,' autarchic self—produces an apathetic, depoliticized, and cynical subject which internalizes the official ideological ritual precisely at points where its authority is seemingly transgressed, namely through ironic self-distance and excessive enjoyment (the latter of which has been discussed in detail in chapter 2) (Žižek 2005).

Bringing the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan to bear on political theory, Žižek likens today's attitude toward the authority and prohibitive force of the Symbolic Law (the ethical law embedded in language, and 'anchored' by a master signifier that may change from time to time, such as the Name of the Father, the King, or the market) to the fetishist's attitude toward his fetish, which takes the form of a peculiar disavowel; an ideological formation summarized in the formula—"I know very well, but still" (1989/2008, 12). This fetishist logic, under the current dispensation, would arguably take the form of '*I know very well* . . . that the forces of capitalism are contradictory and sustained by exploitation, corruption, and inequality . . . *but still* . . . I make no attempts to change my behavior toward the master-signifier of the market.' The original notion of fetishism comes from Karl Marx's *Capital*

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(1867), where he writes about humans who do not understand abstract labor and thus unknowingly accept a wage for less than the value of their efforts. Here, ideology is represented as 'false consciousness,' espoused by the phrase "*They do not know it, but they are doing it*" (Žižek 2008, 24–26). Contrary to this so-called misrecognition of social reality, which inevitably separates a subject from effective causes, Žižek argues that ideology today functions as cynicism (2008, 24–26). That is, the current ideology offers the rewards of knowing better without excluding associated behavior, or what Peter Sloterdijk in *Critique of Cynical Reason* calls "enlightened false consciousness," articulated by the phrase "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it," which is one of the crucial ways in which ideology is able to function today with such ruthless efficiency (Žižek 2008, 25). The fundamental paradox of postmodernism can therefore be summed up as follows: an awareness of the artificial construction of ideology, and the simultaneous submission in servitude to its authority evinced in daily practice (Žižek 2008, 25–26).

Žižek gives the example of "commodity fetishism" to illustrate this point. In the classic analysis, money is simply an embodiment of social relations, yet, for individuals using money, the social relation "appears as an immediate, natural property of a thing called 'money,' as if money is already in itself, in its immediate material reality, the embodiment of wealth" (Žižek 2008, 27–28). On the other hand, Žižek notes that today:

> When individuals use money, they know very well that there is nothing magical about it—that money, in its materiality, is simply an expression of social relations . . . The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing,* they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory. (2008, 28)

This fetishistic attitude toward ideology demonstrates the extent to which cynical distance is already incorporated into the ideological framework, therefore to stand outside ideology and subject the ideological text to a "symptomatic reading" is not enough (Žižek 2008, 26–27). This difficulty poses an obvious predicament for a sociopolitically efficacious stand-up comedy in that postmodern cynicism, with its skeptical distance, seems to be significantly connected to the comedic technique of satire, which relies on some palpable distance or detachment between the satirist (comedian) and his/her subject matter (normally located within the dominant, official culture) in order to poke fun at figures of power, institutions, cultural practices, and ideologies by revealing the absurdities and follies behind our social conditions (Berger 1993, 49; Hutcheon 1985, 43–44). The technique of satire, then, is already characteristic of the postmodern condition, incorporated into the social fabric itself, effectively rendering satirical distance impotent. To

quote Žižek, "cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously" (2008, 24).

The extent to which laughter and joking is integrated into everyday real-life experiences can be demonstrated by the following incident. On 10 September 2002, Rena Salmon, a 43-year-old woman from Berkshire, England, shot her husband's (Paul) lover, Lorna Stewart, dead at Stewart's hairdressing salon in West London (BBC News, 2003). Paul Salmon claims that he was sitting in a business meeting when he received the following message from Rena: "I have just shot Lorna. This is not a joke" (BBC News, 2003). How are we to read Rena Salmon's bizarre addendum—'This is not a joke'? On the one hand, this is a commonplace—an expression that stresses the seriousness of the previous statement ('I have just shot Lorna'). On the other hand, the postscript could be regarded as an ironic self-conscious stance which "precludes sincerity, sentiment, [and] emoting of any kind," thus ruling out the existence of authentic and genuine truth (Williams 2003). In her article for *The Guardian*—"The final irony"—Zoe Williams maintains that in today's society we are "more alert to irony than we are to its opposite, sincerity" (2003). Why would Salmon have felt the need to qualify her statement? Why should anyone have thought that Salmon was joking at all? The use of the phrase 'This is not a joke' suggests the degree to which nearly all communication today is, in a way, infused with a sense of joking. If even the gravest, most serious pronouncements must be suffixed (as in this example), then comedy in performance arguably has no critical purchase.

A further example to demonstrate this point took place in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in July 2010, when a conversation between friends—Karen van der Merwe and Charné Brown, in which van der Merwe said she needed money—led to a joke about robbing the Walmer Country Club where van der Merwe worked (Kimberley 2016). Brown recalls how she thought van der Merwe was joking and so responded as follows: "I'll bring the people and rob them and then I will give you your money" (Kimberley 2016). What followed were numerous incidences where van der Merwe expressed her intention to rob the country club, and Brown supposedly 'laughed it off' as a joke—not requiring 'serious' attention. The result was that on 22 November 2010, an employee at the Walmer Country Club—Gerrie Hoekstra—was shot dead while transporting club money to the bank, and Brown and van der Merwe were subsequently charged with murder (Kimberley 2016). One needs to question why Brown would assume that van der Merwe was kidding, especially considering that this serious topic (robbery) was spoken about on a number of occasions. As previously mentioned, the age of 'Empire' is saturated with irony, in which, to quote German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, "everything [. . .is] all jest and all seriousness, everything guilelessly open and deeply hidden" (1797/2009, 87). Consequently one can no longer immediately distinguish between seriousness (or sincerity) and jest

(playfulness), which of course plays into capitalism's ideology, which is an endlessly circulating advertising slogan to be taken ironically (not seriously).

But how has the ideology of late capitalism delimited the contours of comedy today? Simply put, no critique (in the form of ridicule) of the ideological text (in the form of a comic performance) can amount to liberation from it (neither for the comic nor the audience), as there is no longer an 'outside' position from which to 'laugh *at'* ideology; rather, ideology is already 'laughing *with.'* Therefore, humor and laughter in the postmodern cynical mode of ideology might be read as a thriving mechanism of disavowal; as a kind of sublimation, in the Lacanian sense (papering over the cracks, as it were), and a redirection or outlet for some traumatic 'Real' (Žižek 2008, 24–27). In this case, the traumatic 'Real' would be the inconsistencies of the official ideology—capitalism's sentimental and 'merciful' aspirations of liberalism and human rights, on the one hand, and obscene exploitation and inequality, on the other hand. It is therefore not surprising that today's culture praises social and political authoritarians for 'being able to take a joke' and 'laughing it off,' phrases which have become clichés in the current era. As Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher argue in *Žižek and Politics: A Critical Introduction,* "few people can happily accept the idea that they are dupes or fools [of a set of ideological beliefs]" (2010, 43); however, Žižek suggests that comic practices are indeed one way in which people can and do accept this stance (2008). In fact, Slovenian-Lacanian philosopher Mladen Dolar asserts that laughter and ironic distance function as a necessary (intrinsic) condition of all true ideology:

> Laughter is a condition of ideology. It provides us with the distance, the very space in which ideology can take its full swing. It is only with laughter that we become ideological subjects, withdrawn from the immediate pressure of ideological claims to a free enclave. It is only when we laugh and breathe freely that ideology truly has a hold on us—it is only here that it starts functioning fully as ideology, with the specifically ideological means, which are supposed to assure our free consent and the appearance of spontaneity, eliminating the need for the non-ideological means of outside constraint. (Adorno 1986, 307)

Like Dolar, Alenka Zupančič in *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (which presents an insightful reading of the genre of comedy through the framework of Lacanian theory) questions the totalitarian force of laughter in the contemporary ideological climate, because cheerfulness, positive thinking, freedom, humor, happiness, and "a distance toward all ideologies" have become the principal modes for growing and fortifying the hegemonic ideology (2008, 7). This situation leads Zupančič to question whether the rise of comedy in Hollywood, "neatly packaged to suit different audiences: romantic comedies, black comedies, teen comedies, family comedies, blue-collar comedies, white-collar comedies," and which I have hitherto conceptualized in the

Freudian sense (as a form of relief or escape from the banalities of the neoliberal state), might in fact serve to promote and solidify the official ideology (2008, 7). To paraphrase Žižek, ideology today often assumes the guise of its exact opposite, in which case, would the imperatives of humor and laughter (as Zupančič has also suggested) not serve as the ideal disguise for the tenets of the neoliberal regime, or even worse, as an accomplice for exploitation or injustice? (2009, 39). Cynthia Willett seems to think so, arguing that comedy provides "terribly effective tools, strategies, and tactics for reinforcing social patterns of domination and exclusion," offering the example of oppressive communities who generate internal unity by mocking social outcasts (2008, 116). The following example offered by Žižek serves as an ideal instance of power employing the tools of satire to further its own ends:

> [I]n December 2001 in Buenos Aires . . . Argentinians took to the streets to protest against the current government, and especially Domingo Cavallo, the Minister of Economy. When the crowd gathered around Cavallo's building, threatening to storm it, he escaped wearing a mask of himself (sold in disguise shops so that people could mock him by wearing his mask). (2007:219)

Another example of figures of state power employing comedy to their advantage, and to the advantage of capital itself, which, at every turn, bombards the subject with injunctions 'to enjoy!' is former Governor of Alaska and 2008 vice-presidential nominee, Sarah Palin. Having been the butt of many jokes by satirists who have characterized her as a stupid, crazed Republican (and with good reason),[1] culminating in Tina Fey's iconic impersonation of the politician on *Saturday Night Live* which aired on 13 September 2008, Palin's subsequent cameo on the show, for which she was lauded for "being a good sport," turned the tables in her own favor (Bradshaw 2008). That is, it might be argued that Palin's appearance on the night-time comedy show could be read as an exercise of power (the political subject's disavowel through the comic practice) in that it afforded her the opportunity to present herself in a more acceptable and likeable manner in the midst of a hard-edged campaign. Recalling chapter 2, a number of studies indicated that the millennial generation rely on humor when making decisions about voting, for example, often equating a sense of humor with likeability, and subsequently, 'vote-ability.' As the old saying goes, 'there is no such thing as bad publicity.'

Commenting on the influence of late-night comedy on politics and politicians, S. Robert Lichter, Jody C. Baumgartner, and Jonathan S. Morris in *Politics is a Joke: How TV Comedians are Remaking Political Life* argue that appearances on such shows offer candidates an opportunity to highlight their personalities in a relaxed atmosphere, allowing them to connect with voters in "a nonpartisan, policy-free manner," often winning over swing voters

(who tend to base their voting decisions on candidates' character traits rather than on policy or piety) in the process (2014, 202). This tendency is in line with studies (discussed in chapter 2) which reveal that comedy plays a significant role in millennials' political beliefs, behavior, and voting decisions, all of which are largely influenced by satirical comedy shows. Furthermore, this generation (or at least half of it, as indicated in the above-mentioned study) looks to comedy as the very source of their self-definition, which gives rise to a number of questions regarding comedy as a propeller for postmodern ideology's all-pervasiveness, despite intentions to the contrary. In addition, as Peter Bradshaw comments in his article for *The Guardian*—"Tina Fey should have gone for Sarah Palin's jugular"—the SNL skit had the effect of "massively inflating the brand-price for Palin's own post-election political or media career" (2008). By accepting such satirical impersonations of herself with a 'smile on her face' and actively participating in its promotion, is Palin not guilty (consciously or unconsciously) of encouraging the official ideology's slogan, to not take itself seriously? To take it one step further, according to Ed Pilkington in his article "The Feylin phenomenon," Palin told Fox News that years before the now iconic comedy sketch, she had impersonated Fey for Halloween (2008).

Referring to Palin, as well as to George W. Bush, George Monbiot of *The Guardian* notes a definite "dumbing down" of US electorates, and more significantly, the celebration of stupidity within US politics, pointing to how politicians, such as the aforementioned, flaunt their stupidity and ignorance, which nevertheless do not seem to hinder their political standing (as in the case of Donald Trump); in fact, it seems to endorse it (2008). Questioning how such "gibbering numbskulls" get to where they are, Monbiot concludes that "[i]gnorant politicians are elected by ignorant people," citing numerous statistical examples to support this claim (2008). Referring in particular to Susan Jacoby's book *The Age of American Unreason* (2008)*,* Monbiot attributes this "stupification" of American culture to a suspicion of intelligence, which he goes on later to argue is a "grave political disadvantage" (2008). According to Jacoby, the degradation of US politics, and its citizens, has resulted due to a distrust of intelligence (Monbiot 2008). She attributes this suspicion of astuteness to fundamentalist religion which became indistinguishable to the public from *laissez-faire* economics, as well as the equating of intellect with subversion (Monbiot 2008). As an example of the latter, Jacoby writes that the brief flirtation of some thinkers with communism in the 1930s has created an impression, in the public mind, that all intellectuals are communists (Monbiot 2008). In addition, Jacoby also points to the failing US education system (assisted by the devolvement of control of education to local authorities and America's fetishization of self-education) as contributing to the dumbing-down of American society (Monbiot 2008).

In his essay "Berlusconi in Tehran," Žižek traces the figure of the "Teflon" politician (to whom criticism and blame could never 'stick') to Ronald Reagan (and Carlos Menem in Argentina), noting that Reagan's popularity would increase with every public appearance as journalists enumerated his mistakes (2009). Clearly, for Americans, Reagan's interaction with the press (as is the case with Palin) presented him as a down-to-earth, average citizen (who, like everyone else, makes mistakes), effectively forming a protective covering that resisted public displeasure and made him invulnerable to factual criticism, such as the inconsistencies in his electoral program (Žižek 2009). However, such instances of 'dumbification' and the convergence of comedy (as clownish bravado) and politics (as callous manipulative power) are not confined to America alone, but are playing themselves out on the global stage.

One example is the farcical comic persona of Italy's Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, well-known for his constant philandering, innate opportunism, repeated blunders, and shameless behavior, such as ignoring and neutralizing legal inquiries into his private business interests, and more significantly, "behaving in such a way as to undermine his dignity as head of state," parading such conduct for all to see, as if participating in a reality TV show (Žižek 2009). Žižek writes: "The wager behind Berlusconi's vulgarities is that the people will identify with him as embodying the mythic image of the average Italian: I am one of you, a little bit corrupt, in trouble with the law, in trouble with my wife because I'm attracted to other women" (2009).

What happens, in such cases, when the ironic distance the people are to take toward authority is incorporated into the public face of authority? Despite identifying Berlusconi (as well as Palin, Bush, and Trump) as 'clowns,' their authority is by no means less authoritative—quite the contrary. Berlusconi, for instance, controls the majority of the television monopoly in Italy (this is especially significant given that the country's newspaper readership is weak and its internet connections slow), revealing the extent of his power—he controls its very discourse with ruthless efficiency (The Economist 2010). To put it differently, Berlusconi's obscene amount of control over the Italian media and information system functions as an articulate propaganda machine, granting him immense and unchallenged power over public opinion (which *should* be formed in an objective and impartial way, and not distorted by a biased, irresponsible media), ensuring his survival in Italian politics. Politicians like Berlusconi, and Trump represent the new comic face of authoritarian capitalism, where jokes, improprieties, and a comic persona function as part of that efficiency. That is to say, by laughing at Berlusconi and Trump (and other political 'clowns'), we are, in fact, already playing their game.

In addition to acting as a justification for (and normalization of) exploitation and prejudice, comedy in the age of 'cynical reason' also provides an

effective space for possible ideological indoctrination. Recall Theodor W. Adorno's article "How to Look at Television," wherein he discusses an imagined "extremely light comedy of pranks"—a hypothetical television comedy in which a young schoolteacher, who is underpaid and "incessantly fined" by a "pompous and authoritarian school principal," subsequently has no money for her meals (1954, 223). The schoolteacher attempts to subvert her exploitation through a series of comic scenes in which she tries to hustle food from various acquaintances; regardless, her exploitation continues and she is "actually starving" (Adorno 1954, 223). Adorno suggests that the script, as a form of 'light comedy,' promotes a certain ideological propaganda as it endorses identification with the attitudinal patterns of the charming heroine:

> the script implies: 'If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. *You can cope* with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind.' In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comic and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment. (1954, 224)

The above example, while being a fictional academic exercise, nevertheless seems entirely plausible, and in today's society, perhaps probable. One need only think of the growing popularity of television comedies centering on humiliation, such as *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Two and a Half Men, Arrested Development, The Office,* and *The Life and Times of Tim*. The latter, a Home Box Office (HBO) animated comedy television series created by Steve Dildarian, which premiered in 2008, is set in New York City and centers on Timothy ('Tim'), a twenty-something average worker for 'Omnicorp'—a name that communicates its satirical nature clearly (namely all-encompassing and pervasive)—who endures unending humiliation at the hands of his employer, 'The Boss,' and the company. For example, in the episode titled "Mad Dog Tim/ Monday Night Confession" (Season 1, episode 4, 19/10/2008), 'The Boss' asks Tim to take the blame for his (the boss's) dog defecating on the rug near the elevators. 'The Boss' reminds Tim that the business world is founded on favors, and he ('the boss') would consider *this* a "personal favor," urging Tim that it would be a wise choice for his career to accept responsibility for the incident, to which Tim responds, in his characteristically monotone voice: "doesn't feel like it," but nevertheless agrees to go along with it. Here Tim's deadpan humor might be read as promoting adjustment to his conditions (comparable to Adorno's charming heroine), certainly not on behalf of the show's creator, Dildarian (or other comedy writers or show creators who employ such form and structure in their works), at a conscious level anyway, but rather, to the extent that the audience can

relate to Tim's (or Adorno's heroine's) dilemma, there is a simultaneous unconscious acceptance of the ideology that forms the backdrop of the text—that of naïve acceptance.

In light of the above, satire and forms of comedy involving a cynical or ironic distance (such as parody and irony) could be drawn together under what Žižek calls the "obscene supplement" or "obscene double" (2006). In several of his works, in particular *The Parallax View*, Žižek shows how the social field is split between the overt symbolic "public law" of the ego-ideal (the civilized mask regulating normal everyday experiences—the law that 'keeps up appearances') and its shadow accompaniment, the obscene (and brutal face) of the superego—the difference between the two being only the degree to which the hidden face remains hidden (2006). Importantly, both 'sides' of the Law are sustained by their divergence, which can only be understood as a function in the gap between conscious and unconscious injunction; between demand and desire (Žižek 2006). In *The Sublime Object of Ideology,* Žižek elaborates on the split between demand and desire in terms of speech act theory whereby he correlates the two above injunctions with the difference between locution and illocution (the force of a given utterance which, in itself, effects or constitutes the intended action) (2008, 123–124). For Žižek, the injunction "to obey" is located at the level of utterance, which would arguably take the form of "you demand something of me, but what do you really want, what are you aiming at through this demand?" (2008, 123–124). And it is exactly at this place of questioning, arising above the utterance, where we situate desire, embodied by the phrase "Why are you telling me this?" (Žižek 2008, 124). Put differently, Žižek distinguishes between the explicit and written rules of the 'official Law' (external prohibition and constraint) on the one hand, and the implicit and unwritten codes of the superego (i.e., internalized injunction to enjoy), on the other hand (2006, 89–90).

Following this distinction, he argues that the 'public Law' is actually reinforced by its 'obscene' underside insofar as the symbolic order (of which the injunction 'to obey' is neither natural nor spontaneous) is always-already mediated by the (repression of the) desire, on the part of the superego, to 'free itself' from such constraints by violating and transgressing it (Žižek 2006, 89–90). This is effectively what Žižek means by disavowel or 'the fetishistic split.' The relevance of this elaboration of Žižek's work for comedy or comedy-reception is to highlight the similarities between the functioning of today's capitalist ideology and the functioning of contemporary comedy. As Žižek's work suggests, the internal contradictions of the contemporary hegemonic ideological scene make themselves ludicrously obvious—and funny—effectively mirroring the workings of comedy, as that which is 'obviously' (in the perceptual sense of the word) ludicrous—and funny; in other words, both comedy and the capitalist ideology are impervious to 'ra-

tional' argumentative criticism. As such, modern-day stand-up comedy is arguably perceived (and received) as being an intrinsic element of the neoliberal state rather than functioning as a site of resistance against that system of ideas and ideals.

With regard to one of Žižek's examples, the 'obscene double' can be illustrated with reference to Rob Reiner's 1992 legal drama, *A Few Good Men,* starring Tom Cruise, Demi Moore, and Jack Nicholson, which revolves around the court-martial of two US Marines charged with murdering one of their fellow soldiers. The defense, however, wins an acquittal by demonstrating that the defendants were just following 'Code Red' orders (unofficial military orders that are surreptitious and unacknowledged), which authorize a covert violent extrajudicial beating of any fellow soldier who, in the opinion of his peers or a superior officer, breaks the US Marines' ethical code—in this case, the deceased (Private William Santiago) exposed an illegal fence-line shooting by a fellow marine. For Žižek, the dual function of 'Code Red' is very interesting:

> it condones an act of transgression—illegal punishment of a fellow soldier—yet, at the same time, it reaffirms the cohesion of the group, calling for an act of supreme group identification. Such a code must remain under cover of night, unacknowledged, unutterable; in public, everybody feigns ignorance, or even actively denies its existence. Code Red represents the community spirit in its purest form, exerting the strongest pressure on the individual to comply with its mandate of group identification; yet simultaneously, it violates the explicit rules of community life. The plight of the two accused soldiers is that they are unable to grasp this exclusion of Code Red from the 'big Other'—the public law; they desperately ask themselves what they did wrong, since they simply followed a superior officer's order. (2005:54)

Of particular significance is the film's climax, when Cruise's character (Lt. Daniel Kaffee) insists that Col. Nathan R. Jessep (Nicholson) "tell the truth," to which Nicholson's character's outburst serves as a rather fitting example of the way that the 'obscene double' functions to sustain and reinforce the official Law:

> You can't handle the truth! Son, we live in a world that has walls. And those walls have to be guarded by men with guns . . . I have a greater responsibility than you can possibly fathom. You weep for Santiago and you curse the Marines. You have that luxury. You have the luxury of not knowing what I know: that Santiago's death, while tragic, probably saved lives. And my existence, while grotesque and incomprehensible to you, saves lives . . . You don't want the truth. Because deep down, in places you don't talk about at parties, you want me on that wall. You need me on that wall. We use words like honor, code, loyalty . . . we use these words as the backbone to a life spent defending something. You use 'em as a punchline. I have neither the time nor the inclina-

tion to explain myself to a man who rises and sleeps under the blanket of the very freedom I provide, then questions the manner in which I provide it! (*A Few Good Men*, 1992)

Contrary to what might at first seem to be the case, Žižek argues that it is not so much identification with the 'public Law' that holds a community together, but rather, group cohesion or the "spirit of community" is located in the very act of transgressing that Law, as enjoyment in the violation and suspension of that law "exert[s] the strongest pressure on individuals to enact group identification" (2006, 369). This specific form of transgression of the Law, which often places the subject in a position at a distance from the dominant official ideology or institution of power (through disruptions, subversion, etc.), might equally be read as a 'fold' of power, in the Deleuzian sense, in that while appearing exterior to official culture, it is really a necessary part of it, ensuring its palliative functioning. The above transgression might therefore be interpreted as a pseudo-Bakhtin carnivalesque activity—reaffirming the power edifice rather than transforming it. Necessary then, in moving forward, is identifying precisely the relationship of the multitudinous practices of carnival to ideology, the state, and power in an attempt to better understand the possibilities of comedy in performance as subversive praxis.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque developed from his analysis of the sixteenth-century early French novelist François Rabelais. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin describes a dialectical picture of medieval society, organized into "official culture" (the church) on the one hand, and "folk culture" on the other, the latter term, *importantly*, used interchangeably with "culture of the marketplace" and "popular sphere of the marketplace" (1984, ix–9).[2] For Bakhtin, the medieval carnival constituted a temporary suspension of the monolithical "seriousness of official church ideology," creating a space of play that licensed disorder and certain taboo behavior (lust, gluttony, drunkenness, and other animalistic debauchery), in particular the inversion of the moral hierarchy of decorum (allowing those at the lower echelon of society to subject nobles and even kings to parodic mockery) (1984, 10). Following this description of the medieval carnival put forth by Bakhtin, the carnivalesque, in my analysis, makes a desirable claim as a resistant practice—that official discourse *can* be suspended through the performance of parody, satire, and mockery; in other words, *comedy*. This attractive proposition nonetheless requires scrutiny in terms of the present postmodern logic. Many scholars find in Bakhtin's writing a declaration of the emancipatory potential of transgression in comedy performance, such as Andrew Stott who, in his book *Comedy: New Critical Idiom,* argues that "the inversions and suspensions permitted and legitimized in carnival represent substantive challenges to authority, therefore offering the possibility that comedy,

invested with the spirit of festive and carnival traditions, may also be an expression of popular discontent" (2005, 34).

However, while by no means dismissing the positive aspects of carniva-lesque activist practices, it is important to note that traditionally speaking, carnival misrule constituted a distinct type of humorous mode that was sanc-tioned (and even elicited) by the official culture as a kind of "safety valve" for political frustrations and the repressed dark side of social *jouissance* (extreme enjoyment), which might otherwise be directed toward transforma-tive change (Bakhtin 1984, xviii). In other words, carnival expression func-tions as a means of keeping discontents in check, leading Stephen Greenblatt to assert that carnival's formalized mode "helps to contain the radical doubts it continually evokes" (Stott 2005, 35). Misrule and inversion of the law exists then within a matrix of what Žižek calls "inherent transgression"—that is, carnival functions as an expression of the obscene (disavowed) double of official culture, which is the very thing that sustains its ideological fantasy (2005, 55). In what way then might a carnival protest act that begins by opposing a form of dominance ultimately reproduce that same form? Put differently, how does carnival function to make one feel as though they are engaging in something subversive when really they are not?

We might see the above critique of carnival misrule brought forward by Greenblatt as a furtherance of Freud's 'economic' theory of laughter (dis-cussed in the previous chapter), which argues that laughter (at an uncon-scious level) is the pleasure that results from the release of a build-up of 'cathectic' energy (Freud 2010, 1736). In the age of postmodern cynical reason, where everything is effectively rendered open for parodic perfor-mance—and inferring from the personal unconscious to the social uncon-scious—the invitation to laugh at the obscene dimension of a figure of pow-er, exploitative relationship, or ideology thus relieves subjects (i.e., dissipates the 'cathectic' investment) of their potentially rebellious drive toward author-ity. In addition, Freud notes that a humorous attitude allows people to dis-place the psychical emphasis away from the fragile ego and transfer it to the superego which effectively diverts the ego's psychical investment away from reality and onto illusion or fantasy (2010, 4541–4545). Freud illustrates this mechanism with a literal example of a criminal being led out to the gallows to be hanged on a Monday, to which he (the criminal) remarks: "Well, the week's beginning nicely" (2010, 4541).

In light of this Freudian perspective, we might therefore conclude that sanctioning a subversive message in the pleasure of 'carnival laughter' *ne-gates* the resistant message altogether. And perhaps, even more significantly, humor as a defense mechanism precludes the audience-subject from what Žižek calls "traversing the fantasy" (of ideology, which silences social antag-onism)—that is, from identifying with the 'little kernel' of the Lacanian Real (their symptom), and in doing so, losing the fantasy which sustains their

repetition of institutional rituals and also their symbolic identity (Sharpe and Boucher 2010, 12).

A clear example of the sanctioned subversion I am describing here, in a contemporary context, is the 'conciliatory spectacle' of protests that dutifully accompany any gathering of world leaders, such as the G20 protests held in London in April 2009. Apart from the media uproar rightly surrounding the death of Ian Tomlinson, 47, who collapsed and died after being knocked down by a police officer, perhaps the most sinister practice was the police tactic of 'kettling'—the concept of sanctioned subversion made material and visible (Gammell 2009). The term 'kettling' describes a police action in which protesters are contained and confined (and therefore controlled) to a specific, pre-dedicated area—like animals being herded into a pen—by both police and physical barriers (Joyce 2010; Elliott 2011). Inside this ancillary zone, or 'kettle,' protesters are cut off from the social realm, and the rule of the law is 'suspended' on behalf of the law itself. Referring to an incident in December 2010 when she was 'kettled' for eight hours in London, Jane Elliott (a lecturer at the University of York) states that while the protesters operated as a community of sorts, they were "robbed of basic rights, stripped of public services, and denied any collective voice" (essentially manifesting neoliberalism's basic tenets), after which they were "allowed to be lawless simply because it didn't matter what [they] did" (2011).

As an instrument of policing and silencing political protest, 'kettling' is thus wickedly effective as it transforms a populace of protestors with a common interest into "docile individuals whose most pressing goals are food, water and access to a bathroom . . . us[ing] the body's own basic needs against protesters: hold people long enough and you can transmute the desire for social justice into the desire for a loo" (Elliott 2011). Devoid of any form of political collectivity then, the "disparate group of individuals [now . . .] encounter one another publicly only as competitors in an endless series of markets," rendering the original contents of such acts (now distorted) as absurd and their discursive undertone as less convincing—inevitably diluting their political potential (Elliott 2011). That is to say, police 'antics' like the ones mentioned above reduce political protests to what Sam Leith fittingly calls a "recreational activity," which he describes as an act to "show off to your mates, impress girls, [and] get a rush," concluding that associating (and putting on display) political action with absurdity "makes it easier for serious campaigners to be written off" (2009). It might be argued, therefore, that the above demonstrations illustrate the extent to which the institutions in power sanction, even elicit, political action insofar as their tactics render any real 'threat' harmless. Might the same not be said of the various forms in which humor functions in an ostensibly 'subversive' manner—that is, that such humorous practices are encouraged because of the way they are 'rendered harmless' at the outset through a policy of 'repressive tolerance'?

Returning therefore to the idea of satire, parody, and irony as supporting a carnivalesque logic (i.e., both subverting and affirming the *status quo*), one must remember that any transposition of carnivalesque ideals to the present day is far from symmetrical. That is, while carnival in medieval catholic society undoubtedly served as a means to 'manage' enjoyment and dispose of its transgressive and destabilizing energy (and thus served a largely dissident purpose), in light of the free-market ideology of global capitalism, carnivalesque opposition and difference are readily encouraged (if not demanded, as has been demonstrated), commodified, and indeed incorporated into its very fabric as an impetus "to keep its productive machinery in perpetual motion" (Žižek 2000, 156). Take for instance the masses of merchandise of communist icon Ché Guevara circulating the globe, or the advertisement for Apple including Cesar Chavez, the farmworker organizer who led the struggle against capitalist forces in California's Central Valley.

Commenting on the growing relationship between stand-up comedy and capitalism in America (although it rings true in other parts of the world as well), which she adequately terms "commodified comedy," or what I am more aptly calling 'comedi-fication,' former professional stand-up comic turned academic, Joanne Gilbert, argues that "it is not surprising that a comic's jokes are called 'material,' for within the commodification of cultural performance, jokes are exactly that—the material of capitalist currency" (2004, 17). She further comments on how contemporary stand-up comedians, while in no statistical way operating on the margins of society, invoke the capital of 'marginality' in their performances to attack the dominant culture (Gilbert 2004, 169). In other words, as has already been pointed out, comedy's resistance and opposition (which exist within the set boundaries of censorship and 'sell-ability' as conditioned by the mono-directional mass media) are 'sold' as just another 'liberal' product within the ever-expanding market of 'liberal' material, thus diminishing its subversive efficacy. This is not to say that stand-up comedy today offers no dissidence at all; in fact, the premise of my study is to prove otherwise. Rather, it means that the extent of such dissidence is compromised, insofar as resistance and opposition are offered up as something mildly quirky and non-threatening (recall the G20 protests).

Gilbert offers no way out of this ideological impasse, concluding (on a rather bleak, albeit humorous note) that the comedian can only be efficacious inasmuch as he/she operates within the system: "the 'master's tools' may never dismantle the 'master's house,' but the master's cover charge and two-drink minimum might help build another very nice house" (2004, 165). While I agree with Gilbert's argument that humor has become a valid currency—a process of mutually profitable exchange—I do not agree with her resignation to the idea that stand-up comedy's sociopolitical efficacy resides in its alliance with the capitalist social and economic system. If this were the

case, the potential for a politically efficacious stand-up comedy would amount to nothing more than an assertion of marginal identity within heavily capitalistic circumstances of performance—which I do not believe to be the case. But this idea, of moving beyond 'inherent transgression,' will be discussed shortly.

Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon arises here as a useful heuristic for further exploring the stand-up comic's ambiguous, contradictory, and duplicitous nature in the postmodern era. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Hutcheon draws attention to the way in which postmodernism "uses and abuses" the very conventions of late capitalist and liberal humanist discourse (i.e., their attendant social and cultural associations of totalization, homogenization, hierarchical structures and systems, authority, continuity, unproblematic presence, origin or originality, center, certainty, universalization, totalization, and closure) from within its implicated position in that very value system (1988, xi–57).[3] That is to say, as Hutcheon purports in another of her works, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, all cultural forms of representation (visual, literary, aural, etc.) are "ideologically grounded"—they cannot escape participation in the social and political associations, systems, organizations, and arrangements it takes to task (2003, 3). However, Hutcheon is adamant that such "ideological positioning" does not preclude postmodern art's ability to interrogate and reevaluate the foundations of unquestioned narratives that are problematic in their exclusionary logic, and to flout the suspicion of narrative mastery and master narratives as provisional, contingent, and unnatural; only that its position (of complicity) allows it to do so . . . ambiguously (1988, xi–179). That is to say, most scholars impose an exclusive logic of 'either/or' on postmodernism's drives, suppressing half of the contradiction and thus failing to acknowledge its full paradoxical complexity. Owing to this unavoidable compromised position, academics often conclude that postmodernist art is bereft of critical potential (as in the conceptions of postmodernist art put forth separately by Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson). Conversely, Hutcheon shares in the 'both/and' logic of poststructuralism, insofar as it refutes the idea that one could render social critique from a position of vaunted 'purity'—hence her notion of "complicitous critique" (1988, xiii). Put differently, Hutcheon views postmodernism as being politically "ambidextrous"—on the one hand, conservative (installing cultural continuity through a nostalgic return to the past, that is, furthering the domestication and recirculation of cultural hegemony), and on the other hand, revolutionary (enacting change through a critical revisiting of the past) (1988, xiii–205).

Concluding her argument on the possibility of resistance in postmodernism, Hutcheon argues that postmodernism's revolutionary drive moves beyond the limitations of dominant, liberal humanist culture to express a political impetus which is "complicitous yet critical" (1988, 73). She goes further

to state that while postmodernism does not purport to engender any "radical Utopian change" (Hutcheon 1988, xiii), it is her belief that postmodernism's theory and practice will exact aesthetic and political "consciousness-raising" which might possibly serve to "presage" this change (Hutcheon 1988, 73). While I agree with Hutcheon that a postmodern artifact can indeed be both subversive and complicit, I do question whether or not such critique distinguishes itself enough from the official ideology to be 'taken seriously' by the audience and rendered as anything other than a form of ideological maintenance and perpetuation. In other words, one might argue that in today's culture, 'complicitous critique' (which essentially follows the same carnivalesque logic discussed earlier) is taken for granted—the expected style of humorous devices—limiting its ability to 'raise' any sort of political 'consciousness,' thus becoming, as it were, a frozen aesthetic—an expressionless commodity decorating the background of our lifeworld.

Returning to the 'carnivalization' of comedy, while by no means dismissing carnival's emancipatory potential, I do argue that such freedom and equality are short-lived within the spatiotemporal parameters of carnival practices, inhibiting the possibility of moving beyond these confines into the 'real' social realm. Sam Leith captures the problem quite succinctly in his article "Political protest should be about more than having a nice day out and fighting some bankers" where he argues that "Misrule festivals are not revolutionary, that's the thing. Misrule festivals are what you have instead of a revolution. They invert the established order for a day, and thereby actually reinforce it. It's like the old Russian joke about International Women's Day: it cements the convention that the remaining 364 are reserved for men" (2009). Philosopher Simon Critchley, whose view on humor in my opinion is entirely too optimistic, would strongly argue against such a claim, insisting instead that carnival practices function to "show that other forms of life are possible" (2007, 128). However, the 'forms of life' represented here are defined by their inability to be sustained; moments of carnival offer release for sociopolitical discontents. Thus, although Bakhtin himself spoke of the power of carnival to create an alternative universe: "[o]ne might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state"[4] —its 'utopia' is itself already lived out in its fullness within the (contained) carnival festivities (1984, 88). Put differently, the (temporary) communal equality permitted and actualized in carnival practices facilitates the continuation and sustainment of (permanent) inequality in the official realm.

One therefore needs to question, as many scholars have, if carnivalesque practices of activism can ever lead to any progressive agency and revolutionary political action. In other words, although carnival presents an alternative way of organizing society, this functions as the 'exception' rather than the 'rule,' and this view (pre-packaged, as it is, with certain rules for its partici-

pants; rules based on social, moral, and psychological precepts, such as deco-
rum) is never meant to be 'taken seriously' and advance beyond the provi-
sional limits of the carnival festivities—that is, to function as any kind of
permanent or stable blueprint for social ordering. Put differently, by operat-
ing as a temporary inversion of the official culture, carnivalesque practices of
activism (perhaps inadvertently) act as a palliative for the smooth functioning
of the governing institutions, ultimately endorsing the existing hierarchy
through the repetition of the dynamics of the system at a deeper level. An
important point to ponder is, in the age of 'Empire' when the world is no
longer perceived according to a serious/humorous and official/unofficial du-
alism—the serious is infused with the comic (cynicism and ironic distance)
and *vice versa*—is there even the possibility for successful, or rather effec-
tive, inversion in that to turn society 'inside out' (as in carnivalesque prac-
tices), or vertically speaking, 'upside down,' would simply render the exact
same arrangement?[5]

To return to Žižek and the premise of this chapter, if ideology is not
meant to be taken seriously, or to put it another way, if ideology does not
take itself seriously, then how might the ideology of neoliberal capitalism be
said to delimit the contours of stand-up comedy today? (2008, 27). As I have
demonstrated, the current ideology ensures that we do not take capitalism as
an abstract system all too seriously, while, at the same time, precluding the
possibility of any alternatives to it. In this light, can carnivalesque transgres-
sion then ever 'act' as anything more than a 'safety valve' for outright rebel-
lion; as an active, sustained subversion rather than a temporary inversion?
Within the terms I have outlined above, the carnivalesque practices of acti-
vism can be considered a mere negation of the *status quo*, and not a subver-
sion of it; it cannot create a cultural fissure or fault line within the existing
order, but only draws attention to those already known which curtails and
quarantines any type of political efficacy, or at least, serves a lesser political
function. In short, it cannot *be* political action, but only, in Brazilian theater
director, writer, and politician Augusto Boal's opinion, a "rehearsal for the
revolution" (1979/2008, 122). In this view, carnival is preparatory to socio-
political life—we can learn through 'play' without fearing the repercussions
of failure, but also without any hope of success.

The above discussion of ideology may strike one as utterly pessimistic or
totalizing—if there is no position from which one is outside of ideology, then
how can one go about critiquing it? The possibility of a stand-up comedic
performance with radical, transformative sociopolitical potential must then
begin with a theoretical model of stand-up comedy that responds to the
ideology of global capitalism and the condition of the postmodern. Indeed,
the "parodies both oral and written" that Bakhtin attributes to folk humor are
themselves the necessary obverse of official culture and deeply implicated in
its efficient functioning (1984, 5). As such, the sociopolitical efficacy of

stand-up comedy (or rather, the possibility thereof) is not to be found in the object or content of the joke, which always includes some sort of 'inherent transgression' (as with carnivalesque practices and satire). Rather, stand-up comedy's political potential is predicated on the fundamental structure of the joke—the liminal space between meaning and non-meaning, between common sense and nonsense, which enables the possibility of a radical break with, or restructuring of, the symbolic order. In a Lacanian sense, such comedic performances would be authentic 'acts.' It is my belief that stand-up comedy's political dimension operates in these incommensurable 'gaps' between 'set-up' and 'punch-line,' which is correlative to the 'dissensus' or disagreement philosopher Jacques Rancière argues is the ground of politics.

NOTES

1. As an example, in an interview with Charlie Gibson on ABC News (11 September 2008), when questioned about her suitability to run for higher office given her limited experience in foreign policy, Palin cited Alaska's proximity to Russia as enhancing her international affairs credentials (ABC News 2008).

2. While in contemporary culture the term 'market' signifies the 'official culture' (of neoliberal capitalism), in medieval times the 'market' was a site of transgressive discourse (Robinson 2011). One might even be inclined, at this stage, to question whether there is any significance to this 'naming.' Andrew Robinson, in his article "In Theory Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," suggests that capitalists might have used references to the 'market' to hegemonize popular strata (2011).

3. Hutcheon reminds us that "[t]here is no outside" (as Žižek has also shown), and therefore, culture can only be challenged and contested from within (1988, xiii).

4. It is worth noting that in "From Notes Made in 1970–71," for example, one of his final pieces of published work, Bakhtin clearly delineates between the liberating joyful, open, festive, and unifying laughter of the carnivalesque, and the encumbering closed, divisive, threatening, and "purely negative" laughter of satire, which he concludes is "not a laughing laugh" (1986, 134–135). He argues that humor, irony, and sarcasm, which he calls "genres of reduced laughter," constitute the dominant forms of laughter in the twentieth century, marking a gradual erosion of laughter's utopian qualities (Bakhtin 1984, 120).

5. To note, this is *not* how things really are, but as they appear to be for society, and as we shall learn shortly from the work of Jacques Rancière, life, reality, and the world is constituted by the (cratologically distributed) 'image'—what we see and hear. And although it is not as simple as to say: 'that which we do not see and do not hear, does not, in our minds, exist' (which is an untenable variety of subjective idealism), for most people this seems to be the case.

Chapter Four

The Comedic Performance as Dissensus

In exploring the possibility of a sociopolitically charged aesthetics of humor, Rancière's radical and imaginative formulations offer a theoretical framework within which to 'think together' the political and the aesthetic, in tandem. His political project argues for a re-imagining of art and politics (traditionally conceived of as fundamentally opposed) whereby they are understood in terms of the functions of aesthetics and those of 'political activism' which, for him, reside in the "effects of equality that they stage" in the face of disempowering social orders of hierarchy and domination (Rancière 2010, 3).

To understand this will require setting aside the conventional conception of 'politics' (contrary to what seems intuitively to be the case) as the "practice of power" and "the enactment of collective ideas" as localized in the state (Rancière 2004a, 10), and the customary view of art as relegated to the aesthetic realm (in the modernist sense of the term),[1] and adopting, for the moment, the vocabulary of Rancière. While Rancière's works offer many philosophical insights that would prove valuable to this chapter, I only intend to appropriate and interpret selected concepts from his lexicon to construct a theoretical space in which to explore the question of the political efficacy of art (as comedy). Most important then, in his oeuvre, is his definition of politics and aesthetics and his exploration of their mutually constitutive affiliation through concepts such as the "distribution of the sensible," the "police," "consensus," and "dissensus."

As a key concept in both Rancière's aesthetic and political theory (it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate the 'two'), the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*) signifies both that which is available to the 'senses,' and thus perceptible, and what makes 'sense' within a hegemonic regime of (established) meaning (Rancière 2004b, 12; 85). Put differently,

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the 'distribution of the sensible' constitutes the perceptual conditions of exis-
tence that regulate life or that which goes by 'common sense.' The concept
refers at once to the conditions for sharing that establish the contours of a
collectivity and the delineations of its membership, as well as the potential
sources of disruption of that same order which introduce the possibility of
discomposing the inequalities that such structures produce (Rancière 2004b,
12–13). To this end, aesthetics, which pertains to the realm of sensible per-
ception (not merely art, but also nature) in Rancière's account, gives rise to
the very possibility of politics in that the 'distribution of the sensible'—
which both generates the conditions for circulation and the production of
meaning—traces the boundaries between what and who can and cannot be
seen, heard, and understood (Rancière 2004b, 12–13).

To be clear, politics, for Rancière, is constitutively an 'aesthetic' activity,
but not because it concerns the beautiful or the sublime in any conventional
sense of these terms, or because aesthetic objects 'represent' social or politi-
cal issues (2004b, 38–39). Rather, the social and political system is an aes-
thetic order in a broad sense of the term in that the signs and images in
constant circulation within the hierarchical order of a given social arrange-
ment—which determine the conditions of our 'fictions' (as that through
which reality is 'made')—also simultaneously offer the possibility of disrupt-
ing the political sensibilities and founding epistemologies of that very config-
uration, and rearranging the social world at the level of the perceptible,
audible, intelligible, and linguistically articulable (in short, the composition
of society) (Rancière 2004b, 39).

For Rancière, the ordering of the 'distribution of the sensible' along hier-
archical and cratological lines (of inclusion and exclusion) is the work of the
"police" (in a non-pejorative fashion, which does not refer to the institution
usually denoted by this term) (2004b, 3). It (the 'police') is the representative
of the amalgam of systems, institutions, discourses, practices, and procedures
that rationally administer the experiential world through the "clear categor-
ization" of "every individual" into groups, social positions, and functions
(Rancière 2004b, 3; 77; 1999, 29). This includes controlling "every 'visible'
social unit" in terms of what sensory data are, and what is and is not allowed
to enter into the social edifice, who may or may not speak about it, and
therefore, what speech is understood as legitimate discourse as opposed to
'noise' (Rancière 2004b, 3; 77; 1999, 29).

While the 'police' ostensibly represents most of what we consider to be
politics today (bureaucracies, courts, governments, etc.), Rancière argues
that this is not the case. Rather, the mode of government established and
evinced by the 'police' is one of 'consensus,' in which the practice of power
is reduced to only a "cluster" of (financially motivated) collective wills,
interests, ideas, practices, and social energies (Rancière 2010, 217). These
revolve decidedly around the post-political logic of interest-group pluralism

and the neoliberal market imperative of global capitalism and technocratic management—an instance of "reasonable agreement" in order to resolve social contradictions and dissimulate political antagonisms (Rancière 1999, 87–102; 2004b, 70; 2010, 217). Portuguese writer José Saramago paints a rather vivid picture of the predominance of economics in political thought today, whereby politics has been transformed into a tool for managing the economy:

> Western democracies are only the political facades of economic power. A facade with colors, banners, endless debates about sacrosanct democracy. We live in an era where we can discuss everything. With one exception: Democracy. She is there, an acquired dogma. Don't touch, like a museum display. Elections have become the representation of an absurd comedy, shameful, where the participation of the citizen is very weak, and in which the governments represent the political commissionaires of economic power. (2006, 144)

This very idea of politics-as-economics divides the polemical social sphere between "those who act" (and have a "part" in directing the community), and "those who are acted upon" (the "part with no part"—with its Aristotelian echo—who remain invisible and inaudible within the sensible coordinates of the community) (Rancière 2004b, 3). What is at stake then, when the 'police' scrupulously marginalize certain voices while activating others, and carve out relationships of command, is the legitimization, 'naturalization,' perpetuation, and demonstration of "untruth"—their unequal accounting of the community (Rancière 1999, 83)—as preconstituted, "objective and univocal" (2010, 5); thus promoting it as a kind of "normal state of things" (2010, 43)—'just the way it is.' Consequently, such inequality is rendered virtually imperceptible (much like the functioning of ideology recently discussed) in contemporary society, and more importantly, making moments of political speech as a reinterpretation of power relations (i.e., egalitarian distribution) impossible.

This is because, contrary to the conventional Habermasian understanding of consensus or agreement as the ultimate objective of political negotiations (among 'everyone in society'), more often than not, as Rancière demonstrates, consensus operates from the outset as a means of exclusion and pacification, and therefore functions as a fortification against (genuine) politics (1999, 102). Put differently, consensus logic dangerously effaces politics by binding individuals and groups in such a taut "fabric with no holes [and] no gap" that the partition between the included and the excluded is rendered invisible, unrepresentable, and "unsubjectifiable" (effectively rendering contestation impossible) (Rancière 1999, 115–117). Subsequently, the articulation of divergent, conflicting, and alternative trajectories of future possibilities and assemblages is thwarted (Rancière 1999, 115–117). In short, consensus democracy renders no alternatives to the current cultural, economic,

and political mainstream norms which, under neoliberal capitalism, is the commodification of practically everything. This subsequently institutes and fortifies a state-led, one-dimensional perception of the world where constitutive conflicts and disagreements have been expelled from "the community stage" (Rancière, 1999, 109).

Against such consensual "policing" (of social hierarchies and class divisions), Rancière argues in favor of genuine democracy, conceptualized as a divided and polemical community; one that carves out a site of dispute, tension, transgression, contestation, and conflict—calling for and necessitating equality as both a reference point and a practice (Rancière, 2004b:2). Drawing from this, I have come to frame Rancière's theory of equality (which also serves as a description of the political process) in the following way: equality as supposition; equality as staging a "wrong;" and equality as 'dissensus.'

To begin with, Rancière breaks with the progressivist logic generally associated with democracy, which posits equality at the end of the political process as a "goal" to be achieved through the reduction of inequality, declaring instead that "[equality is a] presupposition, an axiom, or it is nothing" (1983/2003, 223). Indeed, for Rancière equality does not correspond with the logic of arithmetic (or numeric) equality, which takes each person to be of equivalent value to, and interchangeable and exchangeable with, every other (1999, 6–15). Neither does his understanding of equality relate to geometric (or proportional) equality, whereby equality is proportioned according to certain criteria or qualitative distinctions within a community (i.e., wealth, virtue, expertise, capability, etc.), which forms the foundation of oligarchic rule (Rancière 1999, 6–15). This is where Rancière begins to sound very much like seventeenth-century French philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, recalling a 'natural' state of equality founded on an equal distribution of political rights that has been transformed and suppressed by civilization (1762/2010).[2] Indeed, one could argue that Rancière implicitly posits an egalitarian state of nature opposed to and underlying all social orders.

Building from his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* Rancière understands equality as fundamentally linked with human intelligence. That is to say, he locates his political theory of equality in the common act of language; the idea that all speech necessarily presupposes an always already mutual understanding between "each and every one" (Rancière 1999, 5–34). This is not to be confused with an equality of knowledge (i.e., SAT scores, high IQ ratings, etc.); rather, it means that everyone (not mentally hindered in some way) has the capacity to speak, think, and act, and therefore to reflectively construct a meaningful life. As Rancière points out in *Disagreement*: "There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it" (1999, 16). In other words, those

who obey are capable of understanding their orders and carrying them out, which negates any justifiable, 'natural,' or sociologically verifiable "right to order" or qualitative distinctions whereby some are granted positions of authority, and others are subjected to their command (Rancière 1999, 16–17). This logic reveals the "sheer contingency" of what passes as 'common sense'—the mechanisms of domination, legitimacy, and partitioning of any regime of 'policing' (Rancière 1999, 16–17).

Having posited the "equality-in-freedom of all men qua speaking beings," Rancière argues that the next step in the political process (toward democracy) is the verification and demonstration of that presumed equality by those 'with no part' (i.e., excluded), which effectively transforms the 'proper' distribution of people, places, and capacities as designated by the 'police' into instances of dispute and disagreement (Rancière 2004b, 69–70). As an example of the political 'subjectification' I am referring to here, Rancière recounts the renowned Rosa Parks incident in Alabama in 1955, when Parks (an African-American) acted on the assumption of equality and refused to give up her seat (in the 'colored section') to a white passenger on a segregated bus in Montgomery (2006, 61). This incident, first of all, was a 'private,' singular act of challenging the distribution of roles and places based on the category of race. However, based on Rancière's theoretical framework, it is clear that the act became a political one due to its 'aesthetic' effect. Using Rancière's terminology, one might say that Parks, as an individual symbolically and materially dispossessed by the 'police' order, asserted herself as an "active agent" and "legitimate partner" in the social imaginary (2010, 2–3). She did this by affirming her equality as a human being capable of *logos* (thinking, language) and an American citizen entitled to equal rights, performatively 'acting' outside of her 'proper' spatiotemporal locale and designated capacity to contest (visibly, audibly, and intelligibly) the "wrong" (her exclusion) subtending her social distinction.[3]

At an aesthetic level, Parks's intrusion into policed fictions and her barging into spaces and times deemed off-limits, blurred and displaced the boundaries separating the visible and invisible, the audible and inaudible, bodily capacities and incapacities, and speech and noise. This action allowed the partition between the included and excluded to be rendered (temporarily) visible, representable, subjectifiable—and therefore contestable; and it was—Parks's incident triggered public protests against the transportation company. Furthermore, rather than being limited to a singular and isolated event, Rancière argues that demonstrations of equality, such as the one referred to above, find expression through the universalization (and dissemination) of a particular socio-spatial condition which becomes the stand-in for a generalized democratic demand; a stand-in for the "Whole of Society" (2004b, 70). As a case in point, Parks's salient contestation of her designated

'place' (both physically and symbolically) not only affirmed her own equality, but also the equality of the black community in its entirety.

Building on Rancière's 'theatrical' notion of politics then, the question I want to gesture at here is one of *how* and *if* such staged demonstrations of equality (which disrupt the prevailing 'distribution of the sensible') can materialize into real, sustained social effect. While some accuse the above notion of equality as being an inconsequential account of democracy, in that it becomes nothing more than a mindset and approach with no substantive consequences,[4] Rancière argues that the staging of equality through demonstrations, speech situations, creative practices, works of arts, and literature *can* become political when they create scenes of "dissensus." An important part of Ranciere's political project, 'dissensus' refers to practices that break with (and from) the "given state of things" (i.e., symbolic order) to offer the possibility of an alternative "common world" with new ways of seeing, doing, and being together (2010, 143).

The specific formulation of 'dissensus' here is important, signifying as it does a 'gap' in the sensible order; a rupture in the consensual agreement (i.e., relation) between 'sense' (the perceptual givens of a situation) and 'sense' (its corresponding network of meanings), effectively reordering what can be perceived ('aesthetically'—recall that the word 'aesthetic' derives from the ancient Greek for 'perception') and thought, and thus addressed (politically) (Rancière 2010, 139). In this respect, politics is 'enabled' by aesthetics, in that aesthetics introduces a distance that severs the field of experience from its conventional reference points and reframes the world of common experience. 'Dissensus' could thus be said to mark the point of contact between art and politics, in that both deal, on a fundamental level, with the restructuring of the 'distribution of the sensible.' Put differently, creative demonstrations proper to politics are always both a disagreement/disruption/rupture *and* an opening up of the world (public sphere) where such disputes can be received, effecting a reconfiguration of the world of experience (Rancière 1999, 56; 2004b, 65).

Certainly, Rancière's account of politics is not the first to emphasize the need to disrupt the hierarchical structuring of an established social order (Whittaker 2011, 56). However, what makes Rancière's account of politics 'radical' and unique is his position that "not every disruption . . . is worthy of the name 'politics'" (Tanke 2011, 51). For Rancière, politics only emerges in a scene of conflict (or confrontation) between two incommensurable sensory worlds—two ways of "being-together"—and displays it on the same stage (1999, 101; 2010, 69; 139). These include the inegalitarian regime of the 'police' (i.e., the logic of inequality), which presents itself through identification and classification as incontrovertible reality, and the world created by political subjectivization (i.e., the logic of equality) which, through disidentification and declassification, breaks apart the illusory unity of the

given and exposes its contingency, thereby effecting a 'redistribution of the sensible' (Rancière 1999, 101; 2010, 69; 139).

Within these terms, politics (as the efficacy of 'dissensus') is only made possible through the process of disidentification, that is, the "removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space . . . where a connection is made between having a part and having no part," which Rancière regards as the *modus operandi* of both modern (non-police) politics *and* art (1999, 36). This process relies on the ability of demonstrations, speech situations, creative practices, and works of art and literature to distance themselves (explicitly) from the mono-dimensional fabric of the 'police' order by producing a sensory form of "strangeness" in relation to the everyday life experience in order to 'decondition' the lived social world and free socially conditioned phenomena from the stamp of familiarity to reveal them as something other than natural and self-evident (Rancière 2010, 143).

Recalling the Rosa Parks incident as an example yet again, Parks's demonstration of her equality rendered the valorized epistemic and contingent normativity of 'sensible' experience as regulated by the 'police' (i.e., the incongruities between appearance [the affirmation of equality] and reality [the administration of inequality between whites and blacks]), discernible. That is, this action allowed Parks to contest (and undo) the closure of meanings regarding who belongs, what capacities they possess, and which roles they occupy (i.e., classifications as administered by the 'police'). More than this, Parks's demonstration, which disrupted the implicit divisions in the realm of discourse—between speech and noise, and audibility and inaudibility—effected a dislocation of the sensible boundaries and aesthetic contours erected by 'police' strategies, and provided the possibility of envisioning new spatial imaginaries that are open, inclusive, and geared toward the creation of new political subjects and the reconfiguration of identities. For Rancière, such acts of subjectivization and disidentification "do politics" (1999, ix).

Two recent examples from Judith Butler's writing, focused on understanding 'public assemblies' and freedom of expression within the capitalist regime (bent on the privatization, violent enactment, and enforcement of the private sphere)—one theoretical and one journalistic—further illuminates this link between speech/noise, (in)audibility, (un)representability, and (un)intelligibility. The first of these examples is from Butler's dialogue with Gayatri Spivak on the nation state—in particular statelessness and illegal immigrants singing the US national anthem in Spanish—where she says:

> I want to suggest to you that neither Agamben nor Arendt can quite theorize
> this particular act of singing, and that we have yet to develop the language we
> need to do so. It would also involve rethinking certain ideas of sensate democ-
> racy, of aesthetic articulation within the political sphere, and the relationship

between song and what is called the 'public.' Surely, such singing takes place on the street, but the street is also exposed as a place where those who are not free to amass, freely do so. I want to suggest that this is precisely the kind of performative contradiction that leads not to impasse but to forms of insurgency. (Butler and Spivak 2007, 62–63)

Butler's second (and more recent) intellectual volley (in *The Guardian*) focuses on the 'public assembly' held at Berkeley's famous Sproul Plaza on 24 September 2009 to protest against the budgetary cuts at Californian universities:

The vocal and theatrical demands of the demonstrators were not, as governor Arnold Schwarzenegger quipped, just noise coming from another 'screaming' interest group. On the contrary, a rare solidarity among unions, students and faculty sought to 'save the university,' and their cry clearly struck a chord across a broad political spectrum . . . My wager is that the walls of the university will shake again—and again—until the message is received. (2009)

Returning to the idea of *if*, indeed, dissensual operations can materialize into real, sustained social effects, Rancière reminds us that "inequality is only possible through equality . . . politics doesn't always happen—it actually happens very little or rarely" (1999, 17). In other words, 'dissensus' is not an 'institutional ordering'—such a gesture of authority that seeks to limit (and thereby maintain) politics proper to conventional categories and regimes would simply perpetuate the very hierarchical ordering Rancière seeks to challenge. Rather, for Rancière, when political praxis does take place, it is inherently recalcitrant, whose purpose is never to "recaptur[e]" or "reappropriat[e]" an 'alternative' existence but to continuously 'deterritorialize' the partitions through which bodies are assigned identities corresponding to designated roles, occupations, and functions (1999, 137).

Indeed, building on the notion of the impossibility of *sustained* democratic politics, Rancière makes it very clear, on numerous occasions, that true democracy is provisional, precarious, fragile, and short-lived; characterized by an 'event' which is not supported by any ongoing post-evental mechanism of sustenance (2010, 39–43). That is, for Rancière democracy can only ever emerge as a fleeting subversion of the 'transcendental' order that sustains it, and can never be solidified into a stable regime, as any attempt to do so would mean democracy's dissolution (1995, 61; 1999, 84). Put differently, any attempt to institutionalize democratic practices, whereby they enter the realm of hierarchy and domination, inevitably brings about the collapse of their egalitarian integrity. In this light, Rancière's radical democracy is always an 'absent presence' which both enables the hierarchical ordering of the social strata and serves as the means by which its power relations are challenged—it is anticipated, but not realized; does not yet exist, but is in the making (1999:103;138).[5] To use a Derridean motif, one might say that, for

Rancière, equality is always 'to come.' Derrida's famous closing words in the *Politics of Friendship* apply well then to Rancière's understanding of democracy:

> For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept. (2005, 306)

Moving far beyond the limits then of an 'either/or' logic regarding 'being together' or 'being apart,' Rancière insists that true politics offers the possibility of a third mode of being-together that is neither a harmonious order of the 'police,' nor a contingent, disruptive reality of politics and equality, but a "being-between: between identities, between worlds" (1999, 137). That is to say, for Rancière, politics proper occurs along the ragged boundaries between *both* communal participation *and* separation (2009, 78)[6] where political subjects become "inter-being[s]" or "fluctuating performers" (1999, 89), always caught between "names, identities, cultures, and so on" (1992, 62); between "belonging to the world of properties and parts" (i.e., the 'police' order) *and* "belonging to the improper community" (i.e., those 'with no part') (1999, 137). In a similar vein to Hutcheon's thinking then, Rancière posits that genuine politics oscillates between two divergent practices (resistance and connivance), which both challenge the existing space of commonality while at the same time reinstating it.

However, I would argue that in light of the postmodern posture described by Hutcheon, that Rancière overestimates the interstitial distance between such positions. Rather, any act of resistance or challenge to the *status quo* necessitates, first and foremost, a perceptible momentary break with (and divergence from) the established arrangement in order to render itself anything other than completely complicit and appropriated. Indeed, the insurgent egalitarian performances that Rancière calls for require, if they are to be effective (i.e., political), 'transgressing the fantasy' of the sort of acting that sustains the post-political order and which calls upon 'resistance' and 'transgression' as a positive injunction.

Rancière does not offer any clear blueprint for creating or achieving scenes of 'dissensus'—in fact, he makes it very clear that political efficacy is always unpredictable and incalculable, and therefore "[t]here is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action" (2009, 75). Nevertheless, he does provide some direction moving forward, aligning art's power to disrupt the sensible with its ability to

present the disidentified, the unexpected, and the strange (as previously noted) (Rancière 2010, 142).

Within the terms of Rancière's aesthetic-political framework (described above), particularly his notion of 'dissensus' as a conflict between 'sense' and 'sense,' I would argue that comedy readily lends itself to dissensual (and therefore political) possibilities. This is because jokes (according to Freud's theoretical framework detailed in chapter 2) are discursively disposed to stage a momentary contradiction between two competing sensory modes— that is, between 'sense' (as meaning within the conventional [or 'police'] order) and 'nonsense' (as that which is 'meaningless' or incongruous within that order, and for that reason, could enact 'dissensus'). To be clear, 'sense' in the context of humor continues along Rancière's aesthetic-political trajectory, as relating to knowledge, ideological assumptions, and aesthetic and political visibilities within an established system; however, it takes on the additional resonance of seriousness, rational thinking, and reasonability. 'Nonsense,' on the contrary, refers to that which does not adhere to the 'common' conventional rules and logic within a given structure, corresponding, as it does, with the absurd, incongruous, illogical, unintelligible, and irrational.

While I fully realize that my interpretation of 'sense' in this context deviates somewhat (yet not altogether) from its original (intended) meaning, it does retain its theoretical and structural legitimacy which offers the opportunity to understand 'dissensus' within the context of stand-up comedy, as a conflict between 'common sense' (as an ideologically determined understanding of the world) and 'uncommon sense' (defamiliarization with the common world of meaning). My theoretical interest, at this point, thus branches off into (and broadly falls within) the category of humor theory identified by John Morreall as 'Incongruity Theory,' premised on the notion that "What makes [a] situation . . . humorous . . . is that there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy in some way" (Lockyer and Pickering 2005, 66). To this end, the joke (in particular its structure) takes center stage.

Structurally speaking, the joke, as speech act presupposes, is an incommensurable gap in meaning between the first part of a joke (or the 'set-up') and the end of the joke (or the 'punch-line'). According to Freud (as detailed in chapter 2), jokes *displace* "the psychical emphasis on to a topic other than the opening one," which then produces laughter through its discharge (2010, 1655). Simply put, the technique of displacement in joke-work operates by 'setting up' an expectation that is satisfied from an unexpected place. Freud offers the following joke as an example:

> An impoverished individual borrowed 25 florins from a prosperous acquaintance, with many asseverations of his necessitous circumstances. The very

same day his benefactor met him again in a restaurant with a plate of salmon mayonnaise in front of him. The benefactor reproached him: 'What? You borrow money from me and then order yourself salmon mayonnaise? Is *that* what you've used my money for?' 'I don't understand you,' replied the object of attack; 'if I haven't any money I *can't* eat salmon mayonnaise, and if I have some money I *mustn't* eat salmon mayonnaise. Well, then, when *am* I to eat salmon mayonnaise?' (2010, 1653)

Following this, Zupančič argues that jokes, premised on their structuring finality determined by the punch-line, operate through the mechanism of what Lacan calls *le point de capiton* (or 'quilting point')*;* that is "the point at which an intervention of a Master-Signifier . . . retroactively fixes the sense of the previous signifying elements [and] puts them in a new, unexpected, surprising perspective" (2008, 133). In Lacan's terms, the *point de capiton* is the site at which the slippage of the signified under the signifier (language's indeterminacy) is momentarily "knotted together" so as to secure meaning (Evans 2006, 151). Similarly, the punch-line of a joke brings together the syntagmatic incongruities of the narrative within a certain temporary resolution or synchrony (of comprehension and representation), which does not sit well with the established order of meaning. While Freud and Zupančič's understanding of the structure of jokes relates most readily to humor as comic relief—a momentary corporeal affect induced by the raising and extinguishing of tension—I would argue that humor, in light of Rancière's work, could also be said to serve as a form of ideological liberation; "a means of deconstructing our social realities, and, at the same time, creating, imagining, and proposing alternative ones" (Kingsmith 2016, 289). As Simon Critchley points out in his book *On Humor*:

> Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humor is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humor defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. (2011, 1)

Key to the above assertion, in relation to Rancière, is the ability of humor to 'change the situation,' for what is the purpose of 'dissensus' if not to effect a transient but significant shift in the way we view reality? The shape of the thought I am after is expressed by Eddie Waters, the philosopher-comedian from Trevor Griffiths's brilliant 1976 drama *Comedians*:

> A real comedian—that's a daring man. He *dares* to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they *want*. A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well. But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more

than release tension, it has to *liberate* the will and the desire, it has to *change the situation*. (Critchley 2011, 9–10)

The claim here is that any joke releases tension, but that a 'true joke' functions as a moment of (what may be called) 'dissensus,' "momentarily pulling us out of common sense," distancing us from the common world "through its miniature strategies of defamiliarization" (Critchley 2011, 18–19), which lets us see "the ordinary made extraordinary and the real rendered surreal" (10). This idea is also supported by sociologist Mary Douglas in her book *Implicit Meanings*, where she contrasts the structure of the joke with a standard rite, or ritual (briefly touched upon in chapter 1) (1975/2010, 155). For Douglas, while both (the joke and the rite) "connect widely differing concepts [or ideas]," the rite imposes order, hierarchy, and unification of experience, which serves to affirm and enrich formalized (symbolic) systems of thought, whereas the joke destabilizes, disorders, and denigrates these (dominant) formulations (2010, 155). Insofar as the joke 'plays' with the symbolic forms (i.e., accepted practices) of society, Douglas concludes that the best jokes are *anti*-rites (2010, 155). A 'true joke' (or anti-rite), in other words, shows us that our commitments to ordinary everyday social conventions (rites/rituals), which we take for granted and follow blindly, have "no necessity" (Douglas 2010, 150). Within these terms, Critchley attests to humor's *critical* function in society, arguing that by producing "a consciousness of contingency"—whereby we realize that "what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes, and just the sort of thing that should be mocked and ridiculed"—humor offers the possibility of "chang[ing] the situation" in which we find ourselves, a possible variation (at some level) on the old, somewhat naïve and clichéd belief that art can change the world (2011, 10–11). As Critchley puts it: "The comic world is . . . the world with its casual chains broken, its social practices turned inside out, and common sense rationality left in tatters" (2011, 1).

Following this, within the comedic performance (the discursive structure of linguistic engagement with audiences), the potential for 'dissensus' abounds, or to put it in Rancièrian terms, given the stand-up comic's employment of figural devices such as images and metaphors (which have sensory, and therefore sense-related implications), every time a joke is cracked or formulated in these terms, the 'distribution of the sensible' is affected or modified in aesthetic-cratological (that is, political) terms. That is to say, (stand-up) comedic performances have the potential to be simultaneously aesthetic *and* political (i.e., humor is not innocuous—it reconfigures the realm of the sensible along the lines of resistance to established power-relations, adumbrating the articulation of new ones). So, for example, when Pieter-Dirk Uys or Trevor Noah satirize or ridicule figures such as Jacob Zuma or Donald Trump (which they do from time to time), such humor could

be said to enact a form of aesthetic 'dissensus' insofar as it intervenes in the practice of the 'police' order in what appears to be an improper manner (i.e., humor is where it should not be). In this way, it subtly redraws the hierarchical lines of exclusion characteristics of that domain by rearticulating the relationship between 'sense' and 'nonsense;' that is, between the 'common sense' way of seeing the world and the 'nonsensical' way it is perceived, which contests the *status quo* of the 'police' order. This may be demonstrated through an analysis of several stand-up routines (next chapter).

Having explored Rancière's notional framework, it is clear that his theory embraces both plurality and diversity, which supports the concept that stand-up comedy is not only rooted in the sociocultural (as is the case with the logic of satire and the carnivalesque, which affirms the *status quo*), but has a two-way relationship with it insofar as it influences ideologies and practices (i.e., challenging dominant cultural assumptions). Indeed, Rancière's radical notion of politics offers us a means to think of stand-up comedy as neither a fortification of ideological and cultural assumptions, nor an always-already political and effective strategy, but as a terrain of potential politics (and political potential) which must be approached and assessed in and of itself in terms of its capacity for 'sensible dissensus.' As Rancière himself has pointed out, with reference to the fiction of Émile Zola and Virginia Woolf, some cultural works may challenge existing regimes of consensus more effectively (as with Woolf) than others (as with Zola) (2004b, 65). Thus, in true poststructuralist spirit, Rancière's critical formulation does not propose a simple equation of humor with political dissent, as he also points out that aesthetics have the ability to affirm the hierarchical *status quo*. Rather, what Rancière's conceptual framework allows us to grasp, in terms of humor's political efficacy, is that humor (as with politics) is a site of constant, indissoluble tension between, on the one hand, its paradisian promise to create a gap in the sensible order and, on the other, its ability to affirm the existing consensus of sense. In a way not dissimilar from Derrida and Hutcheon then, and following a broadly construed poststructuralist tradition, Rancière reminds us that the world in which we live (configured as that which can be seen and heard), and the way we live in it, is always ambiguous, undecidable, and 'playful.'

To recapitulate my argument, the ideological situation of global capitalism represents a limit for a critical and resistant comedy practice in that ironic and skeptical distance is incorporated into the ideology itself. A radical political comedy must thus circumvent the (superficial) logics of satire and the carnivalesque by making sensible the 'obscene double' of the official ideology. It is with this interpretation in mind that I seek to take up Rancière's theoretical framework as a means to assess the comedic routines of DeGeneres, Uys, and Noah as instances of a particular (contemporary) aesthetics of humor. The guiding question moving forward will thus be: In

what ways might DeGeneres, Uys, and Noah's comedic performances be said to help introduce 'dissensuality' into the emerging/prevailing neoliberal and post-political consensus, and thus facilitate political action in creating new forms of 'dissensual common sense'?

NOTES

1. By this I mean "a self-sufficient sphere of art, not having any representational bearing on the world of concrete things and events, least of all of a political nature" (Olivier 2016, 249).

2. See Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2010. *The Social Contract*. New York: Hafner Publishing Company.

3. Rancière allocates the term "wrong" to "the act of dismissing the majority of speaking beings into the vocal noise that is but the expression of pleasure and suffering" (2010, 91).

4. See Dean, Jodi. 2011. "Politics without politics." In *Reading Rancière,* edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, 73–95. New York, NY: Continuum; Hallward, Peter. 2006. "Staging Equality: On Rancière's Theatrocracy." *New Left Review*, 37: 109–129; Hewlett, Nick. 2007. *Badiou, Balibar, Rancière: Rethinking emancipation*. New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group.

5. Equality-as-democracy, in Rancière's oeuvre, thus manifests itself quasi-transcendentally—as the condition of the possibility of politics (as the assertion of a 'wrong' suffered by some excluded people), as well as of its impossibility—its perversion and "distortion" by the 'police' (1999, 63). This quasi-transcendental way of thinking about democratic politics serves as a more sophisticated and accurate approach to interpreting and understanding everyday life experience than attempts to reduce it to the anti-foundationalist side of supposedly contradictory opposites.

6. In fact, in *The Future of the Image,* Rancière claims that dissient events take place through an artistic "ambivalence," a concept that resonates with Hutcheon's understanding of the postmodern condition, previously referred to (2007, 106–107).

Chapter Five

Relocating the Political Dimension of Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy

ELLEN DEGENERES AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER

Born 26 January 1958, in Metairie, Louisiana (USA), Ellen Lee DeGeneres's stand-up comedy career began in the early 1980s, initiated by performing her stand-up routines at small clubs, coffee houses, and comedy clubs in her hometown of New Orleans (IMDb 2017a). Following this, DeGeneres began touring nationally before being named 'the funniest person in America' in 1982, after winning a competition sponsored by the cable network Showtime (IMDb 2017a). This led to a series of cable and late-night television appearances, including a shot on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* in 1986, where she became the first ever female comedian to be summoned by Carson (during her first visit) to sit on the famed "couch" for an onscreen chat following her performance (Tennant 2017). DeGeneres then began making regular appearances on the talk show circuit, including performances on *The Late Show with David Letterman*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and *Good Morning, America* (Biography.com 2017a).

Following this, DeGeneres began her acting career in television on a number of minor sitcoms before headlining her own 1994 sitcom on ABC titled *These Friends of Mine* (later renamed *Ellen* after its first season) (Biography.com 2017a). In April 1997, DeGeneres made groundbreaking television history by having her character on the *Ellen* show (and herself personally) reveal that she was a lesbian to a record 46 million viewers (Biography.com 2017a; IMDb.com 2017b). Despite receiving rounds of applause from gay-friendly activists, as well as the coveted Peabody Award and an Emmy Award for the coming-out episode ("Puppy Episode"), *Ellen* was cancelled in 1998 (Biography.com 2017a). DeGeneres followed her sitcom

journey with CBS's *The Ellen Show* which only ran from 2001 to 2002 due to poor ratings (IMDb.com 2017b).

DeGeneres has also been successful in her feature film work which has included the science-fiction comedy 'mockumentary' *Coneheads* (1993), the dark comedy *Mr. Wrong* (1996), *EdTV* (1999) co-starring Matthew McConaughey, and *The Love Letter* in that same year (Biography.com 2017a). Other television credits include executive producing and starring alongside Sharon Stone in the HBO Emmy-nominated *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000), in which the two shared a much-publicized love scene (Biography.com 2017a). DeGeneres also scored unprecedented popular response for her character Dory, the fish with extremely short-term memory, in the blockbuster animated feature film *Finding Nemo* (2003), followed by the sequel *Finding Dory* in 2016 (Biography.com 2017a).

In 2003, DeGeneres redeemed herself as a television artist, launching her syndicated daytime talk show, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (to date)*,* the (commercial) success of which has garnered a bevy of awards, including a total of 51 Daytime Emmy Awards for "Outstanding Talk Show" (Tennant 2017; HGTV 2017). Additionally, DeGeneres has won 14 People's Choice Awards and five Teen Choice Awards (HGTV 2017). While her film work slowed following the (continued) success of her talk show, DeGeneres has continued to work mostly behind the scenes as an executive producer of several television shows including *Bethenny* (2012–2014), *Repeat After Me* (2015), *One Big Happy* (2015), *Little Big Shots* (2015), and her HGTV reality competition show, *Ellen's Design Challenge* (Biography.com 2017a).

Underscoring her popularity, DeGeneres has hosted a number of award shows, in particular the highly rated 79th Annual Academy Awards in 2007 (and later again in 2014), which garnered her a Primetime Emmy Award nomination for "Outstanding Individual Performance in a Variety or Music Program" (IMDb 2017b). DeGeneres has also hosted the Primetime Emmy Awards three times, as well as an array of industry events, including the 38th and 39th Annual Grammy Awards, for which she earned an Emmy nomination (Biography.com 2017a; IMDb 2017b). Then, in 2009, DeGeneres was chosen to fill the coveted fourth slot (left by Paula Abdul) as a judge on *American Idol* alongside Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson, and Kara DioGuardi (Biography.com 2017a).

DeGeneres is also a best-selling author of several books, including *My Point . . . and I Do Have One* (1995), *Seriously . . . I'm Kidding* (2011), and *Home* (2015) (Biography.com 2017a). And in 2010, DeGeneres, in partnership with Telepictures, launched the *eleveneleven* record label, which concentrates on searching for lesser known artists (particularly via videos of performances on YouTube) and promoting them on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (Biography.com 2017a). In addition, DeGeneres has been included in *Forbes* magazine's 100 Most Powerful Women, *Entertainment Weekly's* 50

Most Powerful Entertainers, and *TIME* magazine's 100 Most Influential People (HGTV 2017). DeGeneres is also a sought-after spokesperson, having featured in campaigns such as *American Express* and *CoverGirl,* and most recently her first lifestyle and clothing brand, ED (HGTV 2017).

Despite being a wildly successful American talk show host—she is said to earn $75 million a year, and has more than 63 million Twitter followers, which is roughly the size of the United Kingdom's population (Anthony 2016)—what sets her apart from all the other famous comedic talk show hosts that clog up our TV screens, is that she played America's first prime-time TV character to come out as gay while simultaneously becoming America's first primetime TV star to openly disclose her homosexuality.

Turning away from DeGeneres's biography to a critical analysis of her work in terms of the preceding theoretical considerations, the first thing that strikes one about it is its unapologetic engagement with issues of gender—understood, within Mary Crawford's terms, as "socially constructed modes of being and behaving"—at a broadly 'political' level (1995, 9). That is, regardless of the medium she employs—be it film, television, or literature—DeGeneres (both implicitly and explicitly) challenges the normative gender roles and heterosexual sensibilities engendered by the tendency for society to be increasingly dominated by a consensual (and heteronormative) logic. One such instance (and there are many), which readily lends itself to an analysis in terms of the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, in that it makes the functioning of 'dissensus' conspicuous and interpretively accessible, is DeGeneres's entry into the male-dominated world of stand-up comedy in the 1980s, the culmination of which was her appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson,* in 1986.

Within Rancièrian terms, DeGeneres's entry into the field of stand-up comedy (manifested in her appearance on the above show) is symptomatic of an axiomatic equality; a presupposition which was put into practice (temporarily) when DeGeneres conducted herself, at a highly publicized and mediatized level, as the equal of anyone and everyone. Proceeding on the basis of this assumed equality, DeGeneres's demonstration of it could be interpreted as an affront to "the most basic social gender arrangement," in which men and women are arranged along hierarchical and cratological lines of inclusion (in the public arena) and exclusion (confined to the private sphere), respectively (Marlowe 1989, 150). Furthermore, DeGeneres's comedic performance (as joke-teller), which involves "controlling the mike [and] talking down to [the audience]" (Limon 2000, 113), signifies an exercise in authority, assertiveness, and domination which violates the norms of gender-based verbal socialization prescribed for females, namely passive and submissive presentation, timid speech, super-polite forms, avoidance of profanities, and eye-contact avoidance—all of which might be equated with self-effacement

(Crawford 1995, 16; McGhee 1979; Marlowe 1989, 150; Van Herk 2012, 98–106).

By intervening in the 'police' order at the level of the regime of the visible, in an improper and inappropriate manner, to present a 'scene' dissimilar from everyday life experiences, DeGeneres (consciously or unconsciously; intentionally or unintentionally) rendered perceptible (and therefore contestable) the implicit (and contingent) divisions inherent in the discourse of stand-up comedy (which inevitably reaches further into everyday life experience); between those voices deemed significant (and humorous)—men's, and those voices considered to be mere humorless noise—women's. Indeed, against the dictates of rigid gender norms, which claim that women cannot tell jokes and have no sense of humor (Sandford 1994, 178–179), and in which women are defined as "the unlaughing at which men laugh" (Hart and Phelan 1993, 316), DeGeneres's distinctive presence on the above show (signaling as it does her success in the field) has not only challenged such stereotypical typecasting (and the divisions they imply—between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and between what and who could be seen, heard, and what could be said about it), but has also advanced the transformation of normative structures of gender, creating the possibility for new social and relational conditions (i.e., alternative roles and functions for women in society). By (literally) 'going where no woman had gone before' (i.e., rejecting the assumptions made about her capacities and her allocated spatiotemporal locale)—displaying aggression and gaining dominance (if successful—which she was) through her words and actions—DeGeneres upended the traditional gendered sensibilities and expectations of women as passive, submissive, humorless, and condemned to the private (and not public) sphere. This is tantamount to self-definition and, by extension, redefinition in the sense that she simultaneously shatters the stereotype of the (female) stand-up comic *and* redefines the cultural definition (stereotype) of a 'lady' or 'woman.' By seizing a 'place' in what has traditionally been male territory, DeGeneres (symbolically) stakes a claim to the power that accompanies that domain.

With the above demonstration serving as a conjectural starting point, DeGeneres's performance on the ABC sitcom *Ellen,* in particular her 'coming-out' episode, can be interpreted (as I shall demonstrate within the theoretical arsenal established in chapter 4) as a form of socially desirable dissent from authoritarian and dominating structures of power. Initially titled *These Friends of Mine,* which aired for five seasons from 1994 to 1998, the series featured as its centerpiece thirty-something Ellen Morgan (DeGeneres), a Los Angeles bookshop owner who, along with her friends Paige (best friend), Audrey (annoying yet lovable), Joe (bookstore manager), Peter (openly gay), and her near-divorced parents, navigates the problems of daily life. The show was arguably a relatively formulaic situation comedy, no

doubt modelled after the highly successful *Seinfeld,* with typical plots revolving around "misunderstandings, outrageous predicaments, and relatively bizarre character quirks" (Shugart 2001, 99). However, albeit not always a central feature, the show consistently (and self-consciously) took on the topic of gender.

It might be worth mentioning that while stand-up comedy traditionally depended on "the shocking violation of normative taboos," the situation comedy, by its very nature, depended on "familiarity, identification, and redemption of popular beliefs" (Marc 1996, 20). In addition, the fact that such comedy shows continued to emerge within "the censorship of corporate patronage," yielded the genre "a conservative body of drama" which is "retarded by the precautions of mass marketing procedure" (as noted in chapter 2) (Marc 1996, 13). Thus, the values espoused by these situation comedies perpetuated the most excruciatingly conservative family structures and gender stereotyping, the most popular of these comedies being *The Cosby Show*. However, it deserves to be noted that this show was, at least to some extent, subversive and progressive in countering stereotypes of absent African American fathers and black male criminality as a constant refrain in media representations of African Americans. In *The Cosby Show* African-American families were depicted as 'nuclear,' stable, and prosperous. However, it may simultaneously be viewed as reinforcing gender stereotypes inherent in the traditional family values of the American dream, that is, the two-parent household, the educated children, and the white picket fence.

*The Cosby Show'*s cast featured the main character, Bill Cosby, as Dr Heathcliff "Cliff" Huxtable (husband and father), an obstetrician and gynecologist; Clair Huxtable (wife and mother) who was an attorney; and their five fully functional children who displayed what can only be viewed as an idealized childhood. The professions of the husband and wife team may suggest an equalizing of gender roles, but each character's portrayal in the sitcom suggests otherwise. For example, in one of *The Cosby Show'*s opening credit sequences, as Ellen Seiter has incisively shown, "performers playing wife and children (who are given roughly equal stature) celebrate Cosby as they dance around him, literalizing the show's phallocentrism" (Budd and Steinman 1992, 5). While it may be argued that this is simply a conventional ploy to reflect that the show is named after the main figure, one cannot easily dismiss the perhaps unintended sexist implications that Seiter has identified. Furthermore, though Mike Budd and Clay Steinman suggest that Cosby's patriarchal role in the show "can be seen as an attempt to remediate white stereotypes of absent African American fathers as well as an attempt to model dominant ideals for blacks," Cosby nevertheless reproduces patriarchal discourse (1992, 5). For example, while his career is emphasized throughout the show, in that he is often depicted in his office (the door with his title never far from view), his wife's professional life is noted by its

absence in the script, and Clair is always portrayed in the domestic sphere. For instance, she is always seen in the kitchen preparing dinner, and although Cliff (Cosby) attempts to help out in the kitchen, the results are comically inept, and it remains Clair's "job" to prepare the meals. Given the familiarity and popularity of the gesture toward an alternative in this sitcom's attempt to represent African-American life positively, it is perhaps inevitable that the next step would be an attempt at depicting the lives of lesbians and gay men more positively.

Returning to the sitcom at hand, in contrast to the standard feminine mystique that characterized most female leads in a television series at the time, Ellen Morgan's personality was presented as candid and socially inept (Shugart 2001, 100). Ellen also consistently performed outside of the imposition of 'femininity' through her lack of makeup and jewelry, her short and unstyled hair, and her clothing—which usually consisted of slacks or shorts with loose-fitting or bulky sweaters along with tennis shoes or loafers. It is useful to point out that Ellen's 'otherness' is highlighted (and contrasted) against the stereotypical feminine qualities of her friends Paige (who always wears make-up, has long hair, and dresses in tight-fitting and form revealing clothes) and Audrey (who has a high-pitched 'girly' voice and wears pink pinafore-style dresses accompanied by pigtails and ribbons in her hair). Ellen's androgynous stance toward fashion and her appearance arguably mimicked DeGeneres's own 'non-gender-specific' style which she adopted throughout her career and which she has since translated into a highly successful lifestyle brand—ED by Ellen DeGeneres—which includes a clothing and accessories line as well as pet products and home furnishings and décor.

Despite the character of Ellen Morgan being portrayed as heterosexual in the first three seasons, and most of season four—alleged primarily via her infrequent (and calamitous) dates with men—the show poignantly (and visibly) pointed to her inability to conform to the social milieu in which she existed, or what materialist feminist Monique Wittig (1992) calls the "heterosexual contract"; that is, the socially constructed and culturally enforced ideology of heteronormativity, which (unknowingly) commits the categories of 'woman' and 'man' to systematic gender roles. For instance, a running jab throughout the show is Ellen's non-existent love life, her awkwardness with romantic relations, and her incessant attempts to remove herself from these situations at all costs (Shugart 2001, 100). In this regard, there are far too many instances to offer as examples; however, some of the scenes and episodes analyzed below include the above-mentioned issues.

Throughout the show, many of the plots for each episode pointed to Ellen just not fitting in. An example of this can be found in the episode titled "Not So Great Expectations" (Season 4, Episode 8, which aired 13 November 1996, on ABC network), which features Ellen, at the insistence of her mother Lois (who accompanies her), making a video for a dating service. After a

'make-over,' Ellen ends up in exaggerated feminine regalia—big curly hair, make-up, jewelry, a long skirt with pantyhose, and a tight-fitting, low-cut sequined top (clothes she borrows from Paige) that exposes her ample cleavage—all of which seem very foreign to her. Noticeably, for instance, she pokes at her breasts, seemingly fascinated by their odd (voluptuous) appearance and lifted position, to the extent of trying, albeit unsuccessfully, to push them down. It is worth mentioning that DeGeneres used this image of herself in a promo of her show saying "This is what I meant by coming out" (Reed 2011, 15). With some coaching from Paige, Ellen works at heterosexual feminine sexuality, the effects of which are hilarious in that it is clearly a performance. This (gender as performance) is especially true from a poststructuralist perspective that acknowledges the performative nature of discourses, most notably theorized by Butler in her seminal contribution to deconstructing gender in theorizing "gender performativity." In *Bodies That Matter,* Butler defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993, 2). Put differently, gender is a set of signs we wear rather than a biological fixity or essence.

Returning to the above episode, what renders such feminizing elements (superimposed onto the character of Ellen) excessive and abnormal (and humorous) is its incongruity with Ellen's 'real,' normalized, androgynous, and asexual identity, which effectively underscores the fabricated and contrived nature of 'feminine' behavior and appearance. By the same token, later in that episode, Ellen shows up at a 'country western' dance club fitted in traditional and ultra-masculine cowboy wear—from the hat right down to the chaps—which gives validity to Butler's argument that gender is indeed a costume we wear, as if in drag. By transforming from a feminine gender presentation (femme) to a noticeably masculine one (i.e., a butch identity or role) within a matter of minutes, Ellen highlights gender as an unstable (and constructed and performative) entity rather than a fixed and innate category.

While the above-mentioned features of a main character in popular television fare may represent a significant departure from the gender norms of sitcoms at the time—especially Ellen's refusal to conform to the dictates of gender binaries: she is neither explicitly lesbian nor unequivocally straight)—and indeed, (certain moments) function overtly and successfully to challenge the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative, such resistance does not necessarily contribute to real, material change. That is, a straightforward rejection of opposite-sex desire through the use of parody has no critical (and therefore political) purchase in light of the logic of satire and the 'carnivalization' of contemporary culture (as demonstrated in the previous chapter), in that the norms and normativities it doubtlessly helps reproduce, would do little to contest the operations of power that animate them, because it merely turns the 'common sense' categories, which sustain the heterosexu-

al consensus, on their head. This could, at best, be understood as a precondition of political subversion. It is only in claiming a *marginal* identity (that stands not so much in direct opposition to the heteronormative consensus, but in an oblique relationship to it) that such resistance can be elevated to the level of 'dissensus.'

Up until the 22nd episode of the fourth season, Ellen was, at best, a nonpracticing heterosexual; however, on 30 April 1997, Ellen made television history by coming out as a lesbian, which simultaneously corresponded to DeGeneres's own personal (and public) announcement of her 'deviant' sexuality two weeks prior—on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (televised holding hands with then-girlfriend Anne Heche) and *TIME* magazine's cover which read "Yep, I'm Gay!" Not the first lesbian on television, the history-making was in the 'creation' of lesbian subjectivity (as the main character of a show) on and in (the confines of) prime-time mainstream network television—a time-slot allocated to sitcoms and television fare that promote 'wholesome' family values and caters to middle-America conservatism.[1] That is, up until then, situation comedy was a closed set domain. Homosexuality (as a form of freedom of expression and liberation) had up until this time indeed sometimes been presented on television (even Ellen's friend Peter is openly gay); however, by characters in supporting roles, which might be interpreted as a strategic guise for preventing and excluding the subversive potential of same-sex desire, subsequently affirming a heteronormative value system. To be clear, this epic saga was not confined to a single television series—it was an "intertextual media event" that unfolded as much in the public (newspapers, talk shows, magazines) and DeGeneres's own personal life (particularly her love life with Anne Heche and subsequent break-up) as it did in the actual series itself (Reed 2011, 10).

Within the context of the (then) recently passed Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) (in September 1996) by a large majority in the Senate, and signed into law by President Bill Clinton just weeks before his reelection which, for the purposes of federal law, defined marriage as the union between a man and a woman and banned same-sex marriage within the United States (Levy, 2002:93), DeGeneres's (and her TV persona's) very publicized sexuality thus played an important role in "the movement of gay and lesbian representation politics, performance, and identity" (Reed 2011, 10). Following this (albeit not immediately; in fact, at first the show ignited a storm of controversy which no doubt led to its cancellation shortly afterwards), Jennifer Reed notes that "Ellen DeGeneres [became] the most visible, the most famous, and the most loved lesbian in America" (2005, 23).

The ground-breaking "Puppy Episode"[2] (Season 4, Episode 22/23, which aired 30 April 1997 on the ABC Network) opens with Ellen, literally in a closet (seemingly at a department store), with her friends sitting around waiting for her as she gets ready to go out on a date with her old friend Richard (played by

Steven Eckholdt). Paige remarks: "Ellen, are you coming out or not?" and Joe incites her to "quit jerking [them] around and come out already." The closet is an obvious metaphor for Ellen's hidden, unacknowledged homosexuality, in a rather public manner (no doubt paying homage to the unfolding of her own personal disclosure). Interestingly, Ellen opens the closet door briefly, only to shut it again, before the scene cuts to her on a date with Richard, but feeling an unwavering connection to his openly gay news producer and co-worker (who interrupted the date and whom Ellen then invites to join them), Laura Dern's Susan, instead. In fact, Richard seems to disappear from all visibility (symbolically speaking) as Ellen and Susan engage in what seems like a 'real' date (laughter, banter, flow of conversation—quite the opposite of her date up until that point with Richard, which appeared forced and uncomfortable). The comfort and ease that characterized Ellen's interaction with Susan is later contrasted against her apprehension and uneasiness with Richard when, back at his hotel room, he tries to 'put the moves' on her. Even Susan (whom Ellen visits after leaving Richard's room) comments that Ellen seems more relaxed now (as they sit chatting) than when she was with Richard. Perplexed about her feelings toward Susan, Ellen talks with her therapist, played by none other than Oprah Winfrey,[3] lamenting that she has only ever truly "clicked" with one person. At this stage, the homosexual nature of the show is still quite implicit, until Ellen's therapist asks "And what was his name?" to which she (Ellen) replies, "Susan."

Later (in the episode), Ellen chases after Susan at the airport (as romantic-comedy leads still do, sprinting straight to the gate) intent to confess her true feelings for her (which also marks the first time that Ellen shows any interest at all in romantic involvement). For Dirk Schulz, the choice of an airport as the location where Ellen intends to disclose her sexuality takes on particular (symbolic) significance in that it is a place of departure and arrival, in other words, of transition (2005, 182). In Russian semiotician Jurij Lotman's terms, Ellen represents a "mobile person . . . who has the right to cross the border" (1977, 238). That is, in *The Structure of the Artistic Text,* Lotman suggests that there are only two "personae" (subject positions or functions) in myth—a "mobile being" (a role he readily associates with the 'hero'), who crosses boundaries and "penetrates" closed spaces, and an "immobile being" (rather obviously coded feminine, in the form of the 'heroine'), a character that moves 'within' the space assigned to them (i.e., behaving accordingly, in an obligatory manner to such confines) and who is therefore not permitted to cross the "forbidden border" (1977, 238). In this sense, not only has Ellen intruded into a 'forbidden' space, but she has done so in a manner characteristically reserved for men—for the 'hero'—thus becoming a 'hero-ine' in her own right.

Returning to the scene in question, turning to Susan, Ellen expresses her difficulty in articulating her feelings, no doubt a reference to the very real barriers that kept homosexuality hidden from the public sphere:

> This is so hard. But I think I've realized that I am . . . I can't even say the word. Why can't I say the word, I mean why can't I just say . . . I mean what is wrong, why do I have to be so ashamed, why can't I just see the truth, I mean, be who I am, I'm thirty-five years old . . . I'm so afraid to tell people. I mean, I'm just . . . Susan . . .

Putting one hand on the counter and accidently pushing the switch of the public address system, Ellen declares "I'm gay,"[4] broadcasting the words to the entire terminal. The fact that Ellen's declaration of her sexual orientation is uttered through the airport's PA microphone humorously underscores the poignancy of this moment. While throughout the sitcom (in its entirety) there has been a notable interconnection between Ellen DeGeneres and her eponymous character (from the way they dress to their lack of a [heterosexual] love life), "The Puppy Episode" marked explicitly the temporal and rhetorical blending of fiction and reality, making it part of a discourse that insisted on lesbian and gay identity as a human right (in the traditional register of citizenship), both on-screen (for the sitcom's story world) and off (the cultural climate in America).

Within the context of Rancièrian theory, DeGeneres's intrusion into public consciousness (mainstream middle-America) in both her personal and professional capacity, and her adoption of the label of the (shamed) identity of 'gay' or 'lesbian,' previously relegated (by the 'police' order) to the private sphere, made visible that which had no 'right' to be seen, namely lesbian subjectivity on network television (and, by extension, the exclusion of lesbians from free participation in society). Furthermore, her claiming of a voice not previously identifiable within the given field of experience subsequently disrupted the hierarchical domain of the 'police' and the way in which bodies (accordingly) fit their function in the social order. Put differently, Ellen (and DeGeneres) made visible (and by extension, 'normal') the 'unspeakable' and 'unacceptable' conditions of lesbians—their issues, culture, fears—to *others*, and brought them into everyday conversations with the whole audience/public/nation. One might say that her assertion (and claiming) of her 'otherness' presented a moment of alterity—in conflict with conventional, sanctioned ways of thinking—that rendered the established constructs of femininity and female (hetero)sexuality slightly less hegemonic, and opened up a critical space for alternative, competing conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, whereby such 'difference' could be increasingly recognized as a human right. Furthermore, in rejecting the 'natural' and 'normal' unfolding of daily life and evading and/or renegotiating the dominant heterosexual order, DeGeneres exercised her own forceful quotient of emancipation. This incident, first of all, was a singular act of challenging the distribution of roles and places based on the category of gender; however, drawing from Rancière, it is clear that the enactment of this socio-spatial condition—which

was publicly mediated in many forms—not only affirmed DeGeneres's (and her TV persona's) own equality, but became a stand-in for a generalized democratic demand among the whole of the lesbian community.

Given the enormity of the project of challenging heteronormative consciousness itself, particularly in the last (fifth) season, it is not surprising that the show was cancelled. The drastic decline in ratings (from 42 million viewers on the epic episode to only 12 million on the first episode of the new season)—apparently due to the show becoming 'too gay' and too politicized and thus allegedly excluding many heterosexual audiences (Schulz 2005, 183)—advertisers withdrawing commercials, and ABC's reluctance to embrace the fictional character (Bianco 2017), was a clear illustration of how gay women (and men) were treated on television and, by extension, in reality. Nevertheless, the two-fold coming out of Ellen DeGeneres and Ellen Morgan paved the way for what, today, is a TV landscape with more gay and lesbian characters (as well as bisexual and transsexual) than ever. This is apparent in the progression from *Will & Grace,* which debuted a year and a half later, to *Brothers and Sisters, True Blood, Glee, Modern Family, The New Normal, Brooklyn Nine-Nine, Broad City,* and Starz's *American Gods*—a fantasy drama which transcends past implicit homosexual content (such as in *Will and Grace)* to vivid representations of erotic (homo)sexuality, most notably.

A number of DeGeneres's routines/performances can also be interpreted along the lines established by my theoretical background in terms of the 'symptoms' of anxiety (and other signs of 'Empire') regarding the political and economic state of affairs in the world. In one of her earlier monologues on her daytime talk show—*The Ellen DeGeneres Show*—DeGeneres humorously reflects on how complicated life has become in terms of having to constantly make decisions, about everything, all of the time—"every single second" to be precise (Yellowbirdflyin 2007). This discourse of limitless choice, as Salecl has demonstrated (chapter 2), leads not to self-satisfaction or self-fulfillment, but rather contributes to the formation of incipient psycho-pathological symptoms such as feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Referring to an everyday humdrum thing like shampoo (and she also mentions clothes and TV programs), DeGeneres illustrates the abundance of choice in everyday banal decision-making when visiting one's local grocery store, contrasting this against the paltry selection of options available to cavemen:

> When the cavemen were, were around, you hunted or you gathered, or . . . or . . . your biggest decision was fleeing . . . do I run now or do I wait a second, you know, that's all you had to do. Now everything is a huge decision . . . There's so many different things out there, the world is cluttered and . . . a . . .

you know they say variety is the spice of life, but maybe we're getting too
spicy. (Yellowbirdflyin, 2007)

Referring specifically to shampoo, DeGeneres argues that whereas cave peo-
ple had only one shampoo—"that's all they had, for dry, brittle hair, that's all
they had"—today's range of shampoos caters for "thick hair, thin hair, fine
hair . . . for wavy hair, for blonde hair" (Yellowbirdflyin 2007). In addition to
the limitless choices in shampoo products, DeGeneres—poking fun at her
own 'simple' and 'unstyled' hair—draws attention to the other limitless hair-
care products needed (or endorsed) to supplement shampoo: "There's
mousse, there's volumizer, there's hairspray, there's extensions, there's
Afrosheen, there's so much . . . in my hair . . . to make it look like this"
(Yellowbirdflyin 2007). The fact that DeGeneres's hair(style) (visibly) does
not require most of these products (i.e., the contextual incongruity of the
scene), as well as her reference to cave people, points to the move (further)
away from basic necessities (for survival, such as food, water, and shelter, as
with cave people), toward the limitlessness and diversification of unneces-
sary (so-called) 'necessities,' which, as Salecl has demonstrated, is a power-
ful ideological tool which serves to inculcate a collective mindset oriented
according to capitalism's precepts.

   Not limited to this scene alone, DeGeneres again engages with the the-
matics of consumerism in another opening comic monologue on the set of
her talk show where she reflects on her late-night run to the drugstore where
she was faced with "way too many choices of every kind of product" (*The
Ellen DeGeneres Show* 2014). This time, to supplement her point (to the
audience *and* viewers), DeGeneres puts on full 'visible' display all the tooth-
pastes and deodorants (again, a commonplace product relating to the over-
whelming nature of excessive, arbitrary choice) available for purchasing just
at that one drugstore, which she declares as "ridiculous." The absurdity of the
bevy of toothpaste choices available is made explicit by DeGeneres reading
some of the labels, in which case, even the products' 'whitening effects'
produce yet another (unlimited) range within a large selection—there is
Aquafresh with whitening action, Aquafresh Advanced whitening x2, Crest
3D whitening, and Crest whitening with a citrus scent. DeGeneres seemingly
plays out the anxiety and uncertainty that plagues many (if not most or all)
consumers when attempting to choose a product:

> Aquafresh Extreme Clean with whitening action . . . so you have the whitening
> action, and . . . which is . . . who doesn't want that . . . I'm not going to pass
> that up . . . until you get to the next one and you see this one—Aquafresh
> Advanced 2X whitening [audience laughter] . . . now why wouldn't I choose
> that? So, so that, to me, if you don't have a flashlight your teeth can help you
> see in the dark . . . just smile and you see where you're going . . . Here's Crest
> and this one's 3D white, which means your teeth will be incredibly white but

only people with special glasses can see them . . . (*The Ellen DeGeneres Show* 2014)

The above scene draws an obvious connection to the illusion of choice that Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno saw as the heart of modern consumerism, between "mechanically differentiated products that are ultimately all the same," that is, "[s]harp distinctions [between toothpastes, in this case] . . . do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers" (2002, 96–97). In the same segment, although turning her attention now to the display of deodorants, DeGeneres declares that thanks to 'extreme couponing' (also the name of a highly successful American reality television series produced by TLC that focuses on shoppers making extensive and focused use of coupons in an attempt to save as much money as possible while accumulating obscene quantities of goods), she was able to purchase the dozens of deodorants on display (seemingly close to 60), for only $0.38. The ridiculousness and absurdity of the price, of course, alerts viewers (and the audience) to the incongruity between couponing as it really is, and as it is marketed to the public. That is, despite appearances to the contrary, rather than saving money, the illusive (deceptive) 'deals' are devised to 'encourage' (perhaps a more preferable word would be 'trick') the acquisition of dozens of every kind of grocery product, in that consumers effectively buy more than they originally intended on purchasing, in which case its yields do not cover the consumer's investment in space, print newspapers, gear, and time. Put differently, the activity of couponing, which 'rewards' buying in quantity, is just another way for businesses to tackle the accumulation of unsalable inventories (a result of overproduction under the capitalist regime) and, as is always the case under the current dispensation, facilitate the smooth flow of capital. To this end, it might also be worth mentioning that coupons, gleaned from newspaper inserts (and also online), doubles as an advertisement for subscribing promiscuously to print papers. In other words, couponing is consumerism disguised as thrift.

DeGeneres's campaign to "pay off your debt"—a segment on her talk show that often runs for an entire week at a time, and which also appears as a feature on her talk show's website—in which DeGeneres assists 'worthy' individuals in paying off their debt (be it for weddings, student loans, house mortgages, etc.), is also very important here, in the context of the age of 'Empire.' While DeGeneres does not explicitly engage with the debt-fare crisis in America (and elsewhere), the appearance of the subject of debt (and the desperate need to alleviate its pressures) on her show (and website) clearly alludes to the topicality of the issue. As Hardt and Negri have demonstrated with regard to the emergence of the subjectivity of 'the indebted' under 'Empire,' and as philosopher Gilles Deleuze observes in "Postscript on the societies of control," today it is the easiest

thing in the world to control people without the control mechanisms that Foucault lists in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*: you simply control them through economic means, like debt (1992). And as Verhaeghe has pointed out, debt (under the prevailing social and economic conditions) is directly linked to anxiety (disorders).

Switching to a psychoanalytical perspective, it is worth noting that the dissensual logic operative in the television series—*Ellen*—is intertwined with humor which, as previously argued with reference to Freud, is not innocuous with regard to what has been relegated to the realm of the unconscious because it cannot be tolerated in the glare of full consciousness. Humor, in other words, imparts to such repressed materials a transformed existence, one that is not merely tolerable, but is bathed in the light of what one might call an ontological innovation at popular level—in this case, the unheard-of claims to legitimate status of ambiguous lesbian subjectivity, which is thus afforded a place within the ranks of an enlarged humanity. 'The Point is . . . and I do Have One' (also the title of DeGeneres's first book) is that being clad in the 'disguise' of humor, something that would otherwise probably have been met with extreme resistance on the part of the public, is afforded safe passage past the censors at the gates of propriety. Along similar lines, DeGeneres's engagement with the topic of debt in America (although this is true at a global level as well), treated in a humorous fashion, functions as a coping mechanism through which to diffuse inner, emotional tension (in this case, the insurmountable anxiety over the accumulation of debt) in a constructive and acceptable manner, without confronting viewers/audiences too directly with neoliberal capitalism in its naked, ideological guise—which might be too unpalatable to digest.

PIETER-DIRK UYS AND THE POLITICS
OF RACE AND GENDER

South African satirist, actor, comedian, author, playwright, producer, director, and social activist—Pieter-Dirk Uys—was born (in 1945 into a Jewish Afrikaner family), bred and, as he describes himself, "invented" in Cape Town (Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016). As one of the most significant figures in South African theater, Uys has, in his 40 years in the industry, written and performed (as well as directed and produced and "do[ne] everything else, including the making of dresses and the wearing of them") over 20 plays and over 30 revues and one-man shows throughout South Africa and abroad (Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016; South African History Online 2017). He has even established himself as a notable author of several books (including two memoirs and two cookbooks).[5] His extraordinary body of work, which ranges across a variety of genres, has

been celebrated all over South Africa, in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States (University of the Witwatersrand n.d.).

Over the years, during his one-man sketches, Uys has transformed himself before the eyes of his audiences into many of South Africa's most respected and most despised characters (both male and female; both prominent political leaders and fictional characters), using the art of impersonation and satire to lampoon various members of parliament (first, those associated with apartheid rule, then, the leaders of the new democratic South Africa), and to challenge the ubiquity of racial (and gender) stereotypes in the country (University of Witwatersrand n.d.; Campbell 2011; Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2017). Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and the apartheid-era cabinet ministers like PW Botha and Pik Botha, as well as Piet Koornhof, are just some of the many individuals that have received Uys's scrupulous satirical attention (University of Witwatersrand n.d.).

Through his creative activism (for which he has garnered both national and global praise, and awards), Uys has engaged with many of the key social issues persistent in South African society, such as the nation's growing HIV/AIDS epidemic. As a consequence, Uys, through his humorous performances, has been involved in a number of HIV/AIDS awareness and sex education campaigns, most notably his one-man show *Foreign Aids,* and *For Facts Sake!* the latter having been taken to over 1.5 million schools (as well as prisons and reformatories) all over South Africa since 2000 (Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016). Uys has also gained legendary status (both locally and abroad) as a human rights campaigner, especially with regard to gay rights (being gay himself)—playing an important role in the evolution of attitudes toward gay communities (University of Witwatersrand n.d.).

In addition to his growing commitment to education and transformation, Pieter-Dirk Uys still plays a key role in South African theater and has converted Darling's (his hometown and where he currently resides) old railway station into his own cabaret venue called "Evita se Perron," consisting of two theaters, a restaurant/bar, an arts and crafts market, and a satirical garden called "Boerassic Park" (Evita se Perron 2017).

In recognition of Uys's contribution to South African theater and his humanitarian efforts, he has received a bevy of awards, most notably South Africa's prestigious Truth and Reconciliation Award in 2001 (Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016; The Arts and Culture Trust 2016). Internationally, he received the Obie at the 49th Annual Village Voice Obie Awards in New York in 2004 for *Foreign Aids* and a Lifetime Achievement Teddy Award at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2011 (University of Witwatersrand n.d.). And in 2012, he received both the FW de Klerk Goodwill Award and the German-Africa Award (Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016), the latter honoring "outstanding individuals for their long-standing endeavors to foster democra-

cy, peace, human rights, art, culture, the social market economy and social concerns" (Deutsche Welle n.d.).

It would be safe to say, as I shall demonstrate, that Uys's success—his performances (in all their formats/mediums) which have garnered critical appraise (and laughter), both on national shores and abroad—is indebted to the creation of his alter-ego Evita Bezuidenhout, a character born out of necessity as a means to evade apartheid censorship. Indeed, the apartheid era was one of extreme limitation and constraint, and the media were no exception. Following the 1976 student riots in Soweto, the National Party censored all media reportage of the violence and resistance that increasingly gripped the country (Sizemore-Barber 2016, 196). Uys describes this situation as follows: "The land was abuzz with rumors of embezzlements, thefts, even murder, but because of the ever-increasing paranoia about press control and censorship, it was not possible to write about these things" (Campbell 2011, 56). Indeed, any opposition against the state risked banning, censorship, or even incarceration (Lewis 2016, 100).

More than this, under the apartheid regime, homosexuality was illegal (and offenders could receive up to seven years in prison or be subjected to shock 'aversion' therapy), as was men wearing women's clothing, and any profane or sexual references were stringently censored and expurgated from all forms of public discourse on the basis of them being morally and socially damaging (Lewis 2016, 107–110; Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 66). In other words, the rights of marginalized groups were not yet entrenched in South Africa's Constitution, and thus cross-dressing, or drag, was still regarded as violating normative expectations of gender. Furthermore, in an attempt to retain political domination, the National Party enforced "wide-ranging restrictive controls over all forms of public communication" including literature and the theater (Hachten and Giffard 1984, ix).

Against this backdrop, most of Uys's plays, such as *Selle Ou Storie* (The Same Old Story, 1974)—a witty society comedy about the tensions between an established actress and her young lover when he invites his former boyfriend and the boyfriend's mistress to dinner—were consistently banned during the late 1970s and early 1980s by officials of South Africa's Censorship Board (which included Uys's father) due to blasphemy, obscenity, their damaging effects on the relations between the different races of the country, and their use of the current South African vernacular which "ma[de] the Afrikaner [appear] ridiculous" (Senelick 2000, 475). More than this, as Uys himself notes, the apartheid government lashed out at him because his plays (notably his characters) portrayed South Africans as living in a situation which was reputed to be normal, Christian, and civilized, but was not, thereby reflecting the hypocrisy of the current regime (Bernado 2014).

Against this milieu, toward the end of the 1970s, and writing a weekly column for the *Sunday Express* in Johannesburg, Uys used the format of a

society insider's gossip column to create Tannie ('Aunt' in Afrikaans) Evita—a white Afrikaner wife of a National Party member of parliament—from whose 'mouth' the political scandals and rumors about the apartheid administration would "drip like warm honey" (Evita se Perron 2017; Sizemore-Barber 2016, 196). Remaining in 'print format' for a couple of years (her popularity continuing to grow), Uys gave her a physical reality in his one-man show *Adapt or Dye* in 1981. With big eyelashes, a curly black coiffed wig with black and white highlights (the symbolism here, with regard to race in South Africa, is fairly obvious), bright red lipstick, high heels, and a handbag, Evita has since become "the most famous white woman in South Africa" (South African History Online 2017), with the *Johannesburg Times* even naming 'her' as one of the decade's most influential South Africans—on a list that included Nobel Prize winners Mandela, F.W. DeKlerk, and Bishop Desmond Tutu (Jenkins 1997).

Uys's (as a man) physical (and visible) performance of his alter-ego (a woman), in light of South Africa's virulently partitioned and oppressive society (which prohibits border crossings of any and all kinds—male/female, black/white, master/slave, private space/public space), occurs at a highly publicized and mediatized level. It is endowed with strong political resonance (in Rancière's terms), in that 'her' incursion (and interventions) into the public sphere has involved a physical, visual, and vocal disruption of the hegemonic, heteronormative South African mindset, at various levels. Indeed, according to Marjorie Garber in her book *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety,* cross-dressing is a form of "category crisis" which involves "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border-crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another," as in the case of Uys's impersonation of Evita, as well as the configuration between actor/character and real/fictitious (1992, 16). Garber sees the principal function of such a 'category crisis' as "disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonance" (1992, 16). It is this specific feature that gives impetus to the proposition that Uys's *oeuvre,* both in its textual and performance mode, but particularly in his creation and portrayal of Evita Bezuidenhout (in relation to social norms and regulations that surrounded sexuality and gender within South African society at that time), can be read as illustrative of instances of emancipatory impulses that reflect Rancière's concept of 'dissensus.' Indeed, Uys's performance as Evita cracks open the hegemonic discourse of white patriarchal masculinity, making hyper-visible the arbitrariness and superficiality of racial and gendered categories, breaking them down to the level of the body, and highlighting their fabricated nature.

Rancière's notion of 'dissensus,' as 'the presence of two worlds in one,' takes on an additional resonance in this context with regard to cross-dressing, which literally inscribes two genders (two ways of being and doing) onto one

body (identity). Take for instance the following excerpt from Uys's book *Funigalore—Evita's Real-life Adventures in Wonderland*:

> The middle-aged man in the shiny black dress with silver inlay sits tensely on the plush back seat of the imported stretch-limo. . . . He glances down at his hands. His hands look feminine. His legs are crossed and are shaved to just above the knee where no one will see the hairs. She doesn't wear minis. The legs look feminine, living up to their reputation as one of the best pairs of ladies' legs in the land.
>
> The man glances into the small mirror . . . The face of the most famous white woman in South Africa, Mrs. Evita Bezuidenhout, stares out at him. Her eyes are greener than his, her lips fuller, her face longer. . . . The man in the dress and the matching hat wets the lips of the woman he is made up to be. Through the heavy false eyelashes circling his eyes like verandahs, he sees the grand pillars of the Houses of Parliament slide by on his right . . .
>
> The man in the dress feels the long car glide to a halt. . . . He takes a deep breath and disappears safely into the darkness of the disguise this famous woman offers him. From all around people appear to witness this extraordinary event. It is not the issue of a man wearing a dress. It is the appearance of a superstar in their midst. She steps out of the long white car. . . . Her eyes look up at the forbidding exterior of this most famous building in her land. . . . The man inside the dress, behind the lipstick, under the hat, in control but never, ever seen, has to whisper to himself: 'Eat your black heart out, Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd.' (1995, 1)

In the above passage, Uys engages in what Johan Jacobs calls "gender-blending," which he describes as "a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned" (2002, 289). Consider the interplay of masculine and feminine elements from the extract quoted above when Uys juxtaposes the contrasting phrases "the man glances" versus "Mrs. Evita Bezuidenhout stares," or "he glances down at his hands" set against "his hands look feminine," as well as the penultimate sentence, in which case "the man in the dress . . . wets the lips of the woman." These examples, which illustrate the seemingly effortless shift from one gendered identity (Pieter-Dirk Uys) to another (Evita Bezuidenhout), highlights the temporal and situational nature of gender performance (and of identity more broadly), such that gender is construed as changing, unstable, inconsistent, ambiguous, and fluid.

It is not insignificant to note that Rancière refers to those individuals/or collectivities that "disorder every representation of places and roles" as "floating subjects" (2010, 84), reflecting, as the phrase does, Ernesto Laclau's concept of the "floating signifier" which, in semiotic and discourse analysis, refers to the signifier that "results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses" (Laclau, Butler, and Žižek 2000, 305). In his last book, *The Populist Reason*, Laclau elaborates on this concept, suggesting

that "floating signifiers" are open to continual contestation and articulation and, as such, their meaning is ambiguous and contradictory (2005, 150–151). In the case of Uys, his actualization of the plurality of gender (i.e., the employment of both masculine and feminine signifiers, simultaneously) interrupts the 'normal' semiotic process of meaning in which one signifier subordinates the rest and assumes representation of the rest via a hegemonic process. Rather, the non-fixity of the signifying frontier, which goes hand in hand with a constant displacement of this frontier, excludes these signifiers from uniting together in a chain of equivalence, thereby creating a "new people" and reconstituting a "new space" of representation (Laclau 2005, 150). To this end, it is not surprising that Garber classifies the transvestite persona as "both a signifier and that which signifies the undecidability of signification [as] it points toward itself—or toward the place where it is not" (1992, 37).

Similarly, in the revue *Farce About Uys* (1983), Sophie the maid comments on (former Dutch Reformed Church pastor turned transvestite and ballet dancer) De Kock Bezuidenhout's/Uys's convincing impersonation of his mother, Evita, and the three other members of his family, when a security policeman comes to investigate charges that Evita has been using her position as ambassador to Bapetikosweti (a mythical state) to sell guns, marijuana, and Krugerrands. Having previously mistaken De Kock as madam Evita herself, until De Kock begins to speak, Sophie then points to the actor's cross-dressing, commenting: "Jisis, De Kock, stop walking like a man in drag, man. Your mother is a woman of experience. You walk like you're holding something between your knees." De Kock responds by saying that "Ja well, they don't call me De Kock for nothing!" followed by what seems to be a sort of ontological crisis: "Wait, Sophie, I'm so confused. One moment I'm butch, then I'm old, then I'm pregnant and now I'm a legend! Who am I really?" The effect of staging (theatrically) the outward visible signs of 'gender-blending' (making it difficult to visually analyze in binary terms), is the subversion, or at least the calling into question, of the fixity and certainty of such rigid categorization, and points to the territory beyond its own limits. In Rancière's terms, Uys's performances construct a space imbued with emancipatory potential (the primacy of individual choice), whereby previously marginalized subjectivities are open to resignification, recontextualization, and constant renegotiation.

In another of his revues, *Adapt or Dye* (1982), Uys dramaturgically makes several meta-commentaries about himself as a performer to point out the constructedness of the gendered logics he satirizes. For example, as he removes his blonde wig—as the character of an old white liberal kugel, Nowell Fine—Uys reveals his own balding head and says: "Politics might be a pleasure, but most of the time it's a hell of a drag." In *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts,* Roger Baker argues that the

transvestite persona often employs "self-referential asides," such as the one mentioned above, which effectively promulgates conflicting images that compromise the nature of binaric gender identity (1994, 15; 18). Similarly, Jacobs notes that the process of male to female 'gender-blending' often includes deliberate "slippage[s]" that reveal the actor's masculine identity (2002, 297). By combining masculine and feminine elements in his performances in such a way that gender presentations are blended and intertwined (either by providing an overtly comical juxtaposition of gender or depicting gender fluidity), Uys challenges authoritarian structures because it signifies sociopolitical categories as constructed (and fabricated). But the implications of this move far beyond the discourse of gender alone, in that the idea of gender as "a dynamic, contextually guided, individually managed social construct" (Tewksbury 1994, 27), likewise infers that other social conventions (such as those relating to race, class, rank, culture, and political and/or economic power) too are socially fashioned, which threatens to dissolve the arbitrary boundaries upon which hierarchical power relations are based. In other words, Uys's physically and socially gendered performances (of Evita in particular) serve to remind society that no normative systems are natural and immutable, but should in fact be viewed and understood as dynamic and shifting constructions grounded in an anti-essentialist logic.

To be clear, Uys's utilization of 'gender-blending' does not equate to a simple slipping on of a dress and some make-up (in full view of the audience), but involves a complete metamorphosis into the elegantly costumed *imago*. In *Live from Boerassic Park* (1997), for instance, Uys waives his usual revue routine and introduces an interval in the course of which he 'changes' himself into the character and persona of Evita, even quipping to the audience: "I don't do Evita, she does herself."[6] Interestingly, Uys and Evita even have different eye colors—Uys has green-brown eyes, while Evita has blue eyes—because, according to Uys, "it's all part of 'her' personality" (Haffajee and Jurgens 1999, 5). Uys explains:

> I have made such a huge division between Evita and myself—and have started talking about her in the third person—because she needs that space. She's got nothing to do with me whatsoever now. I give her only two percent of my time. She's so divorced from me that in the press they refer to Evita Bezuidenhout and don't even mention that I'm doing her. And that's fine. That's the way it works. I find that when I do Evita, I have to do her totally for real. I've got to take every hair off my arm, because if anybody sees that fluff, I've lost it. I mean, she is not about balloons. She's not absurd. She's so real that women recognize the femininity in her, and men forget that there's a guy inside. (Lieberfeld and Uys 1997, 62)

This transposition—between the 'I' (self/actor) and the 'image' (mask/persona)—is so complete in its performance that it even spills over into the real

world where, for example, Evita in her official capacity as the former Ambassador to the fictitious Republic of Bapetikosweti was invited to address two pre-election rallies in 1994, and even interviewed president Nelson Mandela, who, upon meeting Evita, kissed her and declared: "Evita, ah, my dear, you look so beautiful!" (Uys 2005, 159). Indeed, Evita's convincing performance has been supported by several public ploys like, in addition to those mentioned above, holding official press conferences, starring alongside real political figures in her films, and even writing and publishing an autobiography—*A Part Hate A Part Love: The Biography of Evita Bezuidenhout* (1990) (Lewis 2016, 114).

Uys's contestation of gender norms, through the performance of his alternative masculinity (in drag)—as Evita—simultaneously intersects with the discourse of race, problematizing notions of white normative heterosexual masculinity (and its claim to purity, supremacy, and universality), upon which apartheid was ideologically founded. For Kobus Du Pisani, in his article titled "Puritanism transformed: Afrikaner masculinities in the apartheid and post-apartheid period," the notion of 'white masculinity' (and therefore, by implication, white supremacy and racial purity) during this spatiotemporal period was premised on two specific criteria—"heterosexuality and political conservatism" (2001, 159). With regard to the former, it seems quite obvious that Uys's drag performances would have troubled idealized configurations of heterosexuality; however, it was his (public) self-confessed homosexuality (both within and across the page and stage) that arguably marked a rupture with the apartheid order. This is because, referring to Rancière's theoretical framework, Uys's (highly publicized and mediated) presentation of a contrasting structuration of the common world (i.e., homosexuality), especially in light of the legislative mechanisms (i.e., Immorality Act) that policed non-normative sexualities (interracial sex and sex between men), disturbed the 'proper' ('police') ordering of white male heterosexual identity. It did so by establishing, inventing, and modulating (an)'other' sequence of relationality; that is, new modalities of love, friendship, and by extension, democratic citizenship, consequently offering alternative ways of seeing, hearing, and thinking about the world and one's place in it.

An instance of what I am referring to can be found in the memoir *Elections and Erections,* both in its literary (2002) and theatrical (2009) form, where Uys recounts how he felt inadequate when he did not live up to the standards of apartheid and white Afrikaner supremacy—because of being sexually attracted to colored men. In his second memoir—*Between the Devil and the Deep*—Uys goes on to recite, once again, his sexual desires for "young men of color," and his subsequent "extraordinary [sexual] experience" with a colored youth (2005, 46). What Uys's 'mode of acting' (making visible the invisible, and audible the inaudible) engenders, in Rancièrian terms, is a (sensory) break with the 'natural' heterosexual order that assigned

homosexuals and homosexuality to the private, invisible territory of the perceptual field.

Through his invention of 'new voices' and 'new figures' within the perceptual frames of this (heterosexual) social arrangement—the inscription of one (incompatible) perceptual world (homosexuality) within another 'distribution of the sensible' (along heterosexual lines)—Uys disrupts the idealized configurations (and intelligibility) of (heteronormative) whiteness, pointing to it, as a category (and its seemingly monolithic claim to purity and supremacy) and as a politically manufactured and contracted myth. In this way Uys opens up to the political demand for new (emancipatory) relational possibilities. In other words, Uys's public performance of his homosexuality (audibly, theatrically, and in its literary form) renders white hegemonic masculinity (and therefore Afrikaner nationalism) and its claim to racial and gendered bodily integrity, arbitrary and 'illegitimate.' Put differently, the insubstantiality of masculinity (and by extension, Afrikaner nationalism) is not reducible to the exposure of the lie lived by a 'world'—white supremacy and racial purity—nor does it equate to a contradiction over 'rights' (by which one is deemed a subject whose voice is heard as discourse and not noise). Rather, Uys's performance of Evita crucially, momentarily, put into play the more utopian possibility of inventing forms of social relationality— of rights and of institutions—quite different from those currently existing, which opens the way to reworking and revising the social organization of friendship, sexual contacts, and community. Uys's homosexuality (and his performance of it) thus named the trajectory by which the inclusion of those excluded did not restore the social fabric, but reopened the gaps whereby new affective and relational virtualities could be invented.

Returning now to Du Pisani's assertion that the notion of masculinity is dependent upon political conservatism, Uys's performance of Evita both highlights the fragility of masculinity (as discussed) and undermines its centrality by challenging the political system, through the 'mouth' of a female character. Contextually speaking, as Du Pisani points out, Afrikanerdom in the first half of the twentieth century was enshrined in patriarchal authority (which mirrored both the state and the family structure), with Afrikaner women, by implication, occupying the status of a subculture under the control of hegemonic masculinity (2001). Indeed, Afrikaner nationalism (so described), by implication, framed Afrikaner women as the epitome of purity and moral virtue (Radithlslo 2011, 115), and in light of these mentioned characteristics, in need of protection, as they were considered to be the nation's "biological reproducer[s]" that guard, against contamination (racial crossing/borders), "the entryway into the sacred nation-space" (Lewis 2016, 96).

For the most part, Uys's female characters (which formed the bulk of those in his plays) portrayed this archetype, in which their lives revolve around their appearance, their subordinate positions, their domestic interests

such as cooking and baking and, most significantly, their inability to function effectively on their own (without a man).[7] For example, in *Paradise is Closing Down*, Anna (a drunk Afrikaner divorcee), says of her ex-husband: "I had lunch with Helmut on Monday because I still adore him," and she says of her deceased brother: "He was a man—and I love him and I want to think about him" (Uys 1978, 143). Also, in *God's Forgotten,* one of Uys's later plays, Sarah (the daughter of Honorable J.J. Brand, a South African statesman) confirms women's role in South Africa when she describes herself and her sister Tosca as "two white princesses [who] will have to play at being handmaids to the big boss" (their father) (Uys 1981, 10). As yet a further example, Rosa (a white Afrikaans schoolteacher), in *Panorama,* questions her suppression when she asks: "Why am I always bowing and scraping, 'yes, sir' this, 'no, sir that;" however, she makes no attempt to change the *status quo* (Uys 1989, 137).

By contrast, Evita's "political incorrectness," by which I mean her plausible attitude and strong opinions regarding sociopolitical issues, marks a significant departure from this archetypal Afrikaans woman as put forth by the apartheid regime (Senelick 2000, 475). By implication, such a stance 'decenters' white heteronormative masculinity while pointing to the ineptitude of (white) men in politics (Senelick 2000, 475). That is, Evita's considerable social and political stature—albeit an imaginary one, beginning as the Ambassador to a Black Homeland Republic before rising to advisor to the leaders of the National Party Government and, more recently, to the African National Congress-led government—in light of a society of hidebound prejudices and patriarchal values, points to the ubiquity of the heterosexual white male upon which the apartheid ideology was founded.

Interestingly, Evita's husband, Dr J J de V Bezuidenhout (a Member of Parliament for Laagerfontein), is symbolically depicted as closely aligned with Dr Verwoerd, in which case the unfolding of his (Dr Bezuidenhout's) political failings might operate as constituently representing (or mirroring) that of the apartheid regime. As Uys states in *A Part Hate, A Part Love*, the young politician (Dr Bezuidenhout) could be found "solemnly walking the passages of Parliament, usually a few respectful steps behind Dr Verwoerd, but never too far from a friendly camera" (1994, 76). The suggestion here, implied by the phrase 'a few respectful steps,' is that Dr Bezuidenhout is a loyal devotee of the man who is the symbolic embodiment of the apartheid regime. The irony in this scene seems quite obvious, in that Dr Bezuidenhout's allegiance and dedication to the Nationalist Party and its vision seems to wane at the first sight of a 'friendly camera.' One could also argue that the reference to being (seemingly purposefully) close to a camera alludes to Evita's husband's desire to feature in the public eye.

In the same book, Evita also states that her husband "was once a man of integrity and drive," pointing to his failure in this regard which, in addition,

is ironic in light of his nickname 'Hasie,' which is the diminutive form of the word *haas* (the Afrikaans word for rabbit), which carries with it negative connotations, the most obvious being that of reticence and, if one were to turn to folktales, that of the 'dishonest' trickster rabbit (Uys 1994, 161). Furthermore, Dr Bezuidenhout's inability to complete chapter 6 of his "never-ending book, which would finally expose the hypocrisy of Nationalism," operates as a metaphor for his inability to succeed as a writer, and by implication, as a politician (Uys 1994, 342). It is therefore not surprising that 'Hasie' says: "I've always wanted to ask why he [Uys] makes me out to be so pathetic . . . when he does us in the theatre" (Uys 1994, 162).

Uys also challenged the certainty and 'naturalness' of whiteness that had been sutured to the apartheid government (and which undergirds a narrative that valued white bodies over 'other' bodies) in terms of the meta-narrative of a unitary white community (against which 'others' were defined). He did so through his portrayal of the many face(t)s of whiteness presented through his various theatrical personae (especially during the early and mid-1990s). As April Sizemore-Barber comments, "Uys's skits modelled diversity that had always been *within* whiteness" (2013, 27). For instance, she points out that Uys's 1992 performance at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town presented a gamut of archetypes of whiteness, including a *Bergie* (homeless person, usually white), two well-meaning *okes* (dudes) trying to mate their pigs, and an Afrikaans girl who, realizing she is too white to be Miss South Africa, decides to run for an international Miss Scarlett O'Hara contest instead (Sizemore-Barber 2013, 27). Although Uys throws in a Winnie Mandela and Mangosuthu Buthelezi impersonation, his representation of varied white figures arguably presented a fragmented white national identity which problematized its (white) claim to unification (and by extension, universality, purity, and supremacy).

To be clear, referring back to Evita, it is important to note that 'she' does not distinguish herself completely from the stereotypical Afrikaner wife 'mold'; in fact, as Uys depicts in *A Part Hate, A Part Love*, Evita's submissive role began shortly after her wedding day when her husband announced that she must "spend time preparing for her duties as a parliamentary wife" (1994, 62). However, despite taking on the same responsibilities as the above-mentioned female characters—namely caring for her appearance, cooking, and serving the needs of her husband—one could argue that Uys stereotypes Evita in this way only to draw attention to these 'ideas,' and then undermines them by speaking about things and acting in a way not in line with normative white womanhood. In that this activity (of seeing, being, making, and doing) might be considered (too) transgressive for the narrow, conservative, and closed-minded society under apartheid (i.e., counter to the social order at the time), Evita's 'balancing act'—between the typical housewife and the political socialite—makes her 'something acceptable' to her

audience, allowing her to play down her authoritative stance while simultaneously remaining center stage and delivering a social and political critique toward the apartheid government. As Senelick notes, Evita was free to demonstrate (and thereby critically comment upon) the prejudices and principles in which South Africa was grounded because she "capitalize[d] on charm, dignity and plausibility" (2000, 475).

The idea of the expression of sentiment relating to what is deadly serious in a disguised manner (both literally and figuratively, in this case) speaks to Freud's theory of humor, in which case Uys's performances (as described and demonstrated above) could be thought of as functioning as a release for repressed materials such as fears and anxieties regarding racial diversity. As Uys himself states in *Elections & Erections: A Memoir of Fear and Fun:* "Laughing at fear has become my secret cure: laugh at fear and put it into perspective. It's always going to be there, but once it has a name, it also has a place" (2002, 1). That is, Uys's performance of drag (and its success) in a time when gender non-normativity was aggressively policed through acts of social and physical violence in South Africa, and when the logic of the state was premised on the signifying power of white masculinity, speaks to comedy's ability to humanize (and 'humorize') 'difference' in a non-threatening, palatable, and acceptable manner.

While Uys makes no explicit (or implicit) references to neoliberal capitalism *per se*, he does however engage with tenets peculiar to the neoliberal landscape, such as economic subjugation (of black communities by the white population) and regulatory control (such as media censorship and the Immorality Act, among others). In fact, it could be argued (although this would require much analysis which is neither the intent nor the purpose of this book) that apartheid and neoliberal capitalism are two sides of the same coin, operating as hierarchically arranged institutions and ideologies that implement government and economic policies which are designed to increase the power of a group of elite individuals, that is, an oligarchy of sorts. These are, respectively, the reign of white supremacy (apartheid society) and oligarchic power through the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few (the so-called 1%). In contemporary global society, even China, a putatively 'communist' country, participates in this through its 'state capitalism.'

TREVOR NOAH AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

Born in 1984 in Soweto, Johannesburg, to a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss-German father during the apartheid system (when the couple's union was officially illegal), Noah has said (on Jay Leno and elsewhere) that "[he] was born a crime" (Lichtenstein 2012). It is therefore not surprising that most of his comedic work seems to engage with the racial dynamics of his native

country; but this will be discussed at length following this brief biographical introduction. Having begun his entertainment career by appearing in a local soap opera—*Isidingo*—on one of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) television channels in his late teens, Noah then joined radio station YFM with his "Noah's Ark" show in 2004 (Mambana 2017).

His gradual emergence on the South African entertainment scene saw him host SABC 1's celebrity gossip show, *The Real Goboza,* in 2007, as well as the sports show *Siyadlala* (Mambana 2017). In his twenties, Noah took to the comedy stage, beginning in amateur comedy clubs in South Africa before moving on to headline his first one-man show—"The Daywalker"—in 2009 (which sold out large theaters) (Biography.com 2017b; Lichtenstein 2012). The show also formed the subject of David Paul Meyer's award-winning documentary film *You Laugh but it's True* (filmed in 2008 and released in 2011)*,* which profiles Noah's early comedic rise in postapartheid South Africa (McCarthy 2017). Noah has since produced eight more comedy specials, such as "The Racist" (2012), "Trevor Noah: African American" (which premiered on Showtime in 2013), "Trevor Noah: Lost in Translation" (which debuted on Comedy Central in 2016), and, most recently, "Afraid of the Dark," which was shot before a packed house in New York City at the Beacon Theatre on 5 November 2016, and which later aired on Netflix (Trevor Noah 2017; Biography.com 2017b).

In addition to headlining his widely popular one-man comedy shows (both nationally and abroad), which have sold out in over five continents, Noah has also hosted numerous television shows including South Africa's music, television, and film awards and two seasons of his own late-night talk show—*Tonight with Trevor Noah*—which aired on M-Net and Mzansi Magic Channels from 2013 (Trevor Noah 2017; Biography.com 2017b). In 2012, Noah cemented his comedic success when he made his American television debut on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno,* becoming the first South African comedian to appear on the program (Biography.com 2017b). The following year, he also appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman,* again becoming the first South African stand-up comedian to do so (Biography.com 2017b).

Thereafter, in 2014, Noah joined the highly-rated *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as a contributor and correspondent (Lichtenstein 2012; Trevor Noah, 2017), and in March 2015, following Jon Stewart's departure from the show the previous month, it was announced that Noah would be his replacement (Biography.com 2017b). *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* then made its debut on September 28, 2015, with fellow comedian Kevin Hart as the first guest (Biography.com 2017b). And, according to US audience measurement system *The Nielsen Company,* in February 2017, *The Daily Show* (with Noah as host) managed to attract more than 1.5 million viewers, pushing the show's ratings up by 17% compared to the previous year (The Citizen

2017a). In fact, according to a statement issued by Comedy Central, "February was *The Daily Show's* most-watched and highest-rated month ever among total viewers" (The Citizen 2017a). In addition, Comedy Central stated that the show continues to dominate among the network's core, key millennial audience, "finishing February as the most watched and highest-rated daily late-night talk show among all millennials" (The Citizen 2017a). Then in May 2017, Noah beat Ellen DeGeneres, Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and RuPaul to win the "Best Host" award (for *The Daily Show*) at the 2017 MTV Movies & TV Awards held in Los Angeles (Buthelezi 2017).

In addition to hosting the widely (more) popular (than ever) late-night talk show, Noah has since released his first book, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* (November 2016), which was an instant New York Times bestseller (Trevor Noah 2017). The book is a collection of personal stories about the hardships experienced growing up in South Africa during the tumultuous apartheid era—albeit from a humorous perspective. Additionally, Noah performed an audiobook version of *Born a Crime* which was Audible Studios' highest rated audiobook of 2016 (Trevor Noah 2017). Moreover, the audiobook was nominated for two NAACP Image Awards—one for Outstanding Literary Work by a Debut Author, and another for Outstanding Literary Work in the Biography/Autobiography category (Trevor Noah 2017).

By the age of 34 (at the time he was writing his book), Noah had been a radio and television host and personality, an actor, and a comedian. He even covered *TIME* Magazine twice (within five months), the first case in which Noah shared the limelight with other late-night show hosts in a feature labelled "The partisan politics of late-night comedy" (September 2016). During the second time around, he graced the 13 March 2017 edition cover with a story titled "Next Generation Leaders . . . Trevor Noah and nine other stars ready to take over their fields," an article which looked at "10 pioneers who cross the boundaries, forge new paths, take their crafts to unexpected places and also improve the world" (The Citizen 2017b).

It is with this account in mind that I now turn to a critical analysis of Noah's comedic performances in terms of Rancière's political philosophy put forth in the previous chapter, in which case it would be safe to say that Noah's dissident potential is related to his engagement with the politics of race, whereby his 'mixed-blood' status takes center stage. As neither unequivocally black nor undeniably white (nor even colored,[8] according to Noah),[9] Noah himself seems to defy the categories of race as formulated within a consensual (hierarchical and binaric) (post)apartheid framework; and it is this ambivalence—of operating between two worlds and two ways of being and being seen—that resonates with Rancière's politics of 'dissensus.' This is because, as Rancière has shown, the process of subjectivization (at the heart of genuine politics) is never about asserting identity categories,

but rather is always about refuting the identity imposed by others or systems of power. Indeed, as has been demonstrated, Rancière proposes discordance, polemics, and the disruption and disorganization of set identity categories, and is highly critical of the way in which existing taxonomies, such as race, function to silence people's voices rather than resulting in truly political speech. This is not to say that *all* instances of racial 'mixedness' function as sites of resistance, or 'dissensus'; but in Noah's case, his dissensual framing of identity and alterity (and with it a rejection and interrogation of normative racial categories) is catapulted to mass mediated status, operating in the public sphere for all to see (and hear). Indeed, through his comedic routines, he is able to convene conversations and open dialogue about racial issues in South Africa (and more recently, racism in the US), that function to destabilize, broaden, and modify our perceptions of reality.

Noah's entry into the comedy scene took place against the 'new' South Africa (following the advent of democracy), at a time when 'political correctness' was (and still is) widely advocated under the rubric of the 'rainbow nation'; consequently, many citizens were (and still are) cautious to criticize each other, especially in terms of race, and especially with regard to national politicians and politics (Parker 2002, 10). To be clear, 'political correctness' is not equated with etiquette (being polite, inclusive, respectful, or sensitive); rather, it is about control—"the conscious, designed manipulation of language intended to change the way people speak, write, think, feel, and act, in furtherance of an agenda" (Suidlanders 2016). In other words, 'political correctness' can be understood as a form of propaganda, which seeks to pacify individuals and prevent them from thinking and acting for themselves, as such autonomy could inevitably incite their questioning of the nature of 'social reality' as presented by those in power with a supposedly 'higher' agenda; in this case, black rule and the notion that under black leadership all in South Africa are equal and free. Despite numerous incidences of racism which saturate the media—from the news to social media platforms like Facebook, where such instances are often recorded and 'posted' onto the site, inviting commentary (which only 'adds fuel to the flames')—implicit censorship regarding the issue of race remains the main pattern of behavior among most South African citizens. This is especially true for white South Africans whose 'voices' are seemingly readily interpreted and labelled as 'racist.'

Against this backdrop, Noah's strategic self-location of his racial hybridity (in this context, interchangeable with the term ambivalence), and with it his linguistic abilities (he is fluent in a mélange of South African languages) and their associated racial stereotypes, enable him to impersonate (and 'pass' seamlessly between) several of South Africa's overlapping ethnic and racial groupings. As Noah himself has said regarding his comedic performances: "My color didn't change, but I could change your perception of my color. If you spoke Zulu, I replied to you in Zulu. If you spoke to me in Tswana, I

replied to you in Tswana. Maybe I didn't look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you" (2017, 67). This concept of 'passing' between standard racial responses has overtones of performativity theory as related to Butler (1993), in which case 'passing' is not thought of as a literal move into an ambiguous race as performativity theory often suggests (although, in Noah's case, his body is an actual site of ambiguity), but as a claim that individuals can perform or 'pass' other parts of their identity, such as race.

For instance, in Noah's exclamation above, he calls attention to the articulation of racial identity through the lens of language. In this context, his 'passing' (both literally and performatively) grants him a free 'pass' to discuss racial matters in a perceivably non-racist manner, enabling him to insert a dissensus-wedge into the realm of the consensual world-order. Indeed, as Jesse Lichtenstein points out in "Soweto's Stand-Up Son," Noah is able to effortlessly alternate between parroting township dwellers and Afrikaans yuppies to 'inner city' (urban 'ghetto') African-American schoolchildren, granting him access to a range of audiences that few other comics can match (2012). Lichtenstein adds that Noah's role as a "cultural chameleon," as he calls him, accounts for his (Noah's) appeal, accessibility, and 'relateability' despite South Africa's fraught racial landscape (2012). David Paul Meyer (director of the 2011 documentary on Noah) also comments on Noah's cross-cultural reach: "If you go to a Trevor Noah show in South Africa, you'll see a white Afrikaans person sitting right next to a Xhosa person, laughing at the same material" (Keohane 2016, 93). Perhaps David Kibuuka (a young stand-up himself) expresses it best when he says: "The whole [South African] country was united in two things: Nelson Mandela and Trevor Noah," adding that "What [Noah] represented was a country of different races going, Ahhh, we can all agree on that person" (Keohane 2016, 94). To this conversation, fellow comedian Robby Collins states that Noah was "that guy who could speak for everyone," noting that "Being at once too white and too black, and not white enough and not black enough, provided [Noah] with a natural ability to get around people's defenses, to ingratiate and disarm, even if he was tackling a divisive issue" (Keohane 2016, 93–94). This is a contention supported by Lichtenstein who argues that Noah's racial ambiguity allows him to explore highly sensitive issues without being explicitly confrontational, while simultaneously taming indignation with laughter (2012).

In this light, Noah's comedy takes on an anti-hegemonic approach in that his multilayered outsider status (as neither black nor white) facilitates the breaking of silences around race relations in South Africa (and at large), wrapped up, as these are, in 'political correctness' and implicit forms of censorship which 'police' the boundaries of the 'sayable.' This makes it possible for him to ease 'unsayable' issues into the terrain of the 'sayable' and 'thinkable' and, by extension, articulate alternative readings that challenge the hegemonic 'common sense(s)' at the core of public life in the

country (and also the world).[10] Importantly, Noah is able to do so without inviting judgement or scorn, as is evidenced by the tour posters and DVD cover art for his 2012 comedy show "That's Racist."

The mentioned illustration parodies the controversial painting done by local South African artist Brett Murray (a white man), titled "The Spear," which depicts South African President (at the time) Jacob Zuma in a pose reminiscent of the famous poster of Russian Marxist revolutionary, Vladimir Lenin, but with his genitals exposed. As is common knowledge in South Africa, Zuma has often been the center of scandal and ridicule due to his polygamous lifestyle and a comment he made during his 2006 rape trial—that showering after sex would minimize the risk of contracting HIV. While Murray was handed a defamation lawsuit by Zuma's party, the African National Congress (ANC), and crowds gathered to protest—later resulting in his (Murray's) painting being vandalized (Sosibo 2016), Noah's comedy show garnered major success in the US and the UK, and also in his homeland. It is no wonder that Neal Brennan describes Noah as "a walking absolution" (Keohane 2016, 94).

It is also worth mentioning that South African cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro (famous as Zapiro), like Murray, has also faced animosity from the ANC for his so-called 'racist' cartoons of Jacob Zuma, having been threatened by the said political party and its legal representatives with an R5-million lawsuit for defamation and impairment of Zuma's personal dignity over the publication of his (Zapiro's) 'Lady Justice rape' cartoon in September 2008 (IOL 2012). The controversial cartoon (following Zuma's rape trial of 2006, where he was acquitted) depicted Zuma loosening his trousers while (since then expelled) ANC Youth League president Julius Malema, (then) Congress of South African Trade Unions general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, South African Communist Party general secretary Blade Nzimande, and ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe hold Lady Justice down, saying: "Go for it, boss" (IOL 2012).

In light of Noah's ability (as demonstrated, albeit briefly) to convene conversations and open up dialogues about race from a seemingly non-racist perspective, I argue that he carves out a space to discuss objects or topics that have historically been marginalized on the public stage. In this way Noah is able to highlight the implicitly censored cracks in the consensual world-order, and thus challenge the notions of a harmonious 'rainbow nation.' Take for instance the following excerpt from his first one-man show, "The Day-walker," named after a famous routine he did about being mistaken for an albino who can actually go outside in the daytime:

> There's always a panic around election time in South Africa. You heard them in 1994: (*mimics*) "I'm leaving, I'm leaving, I'm going to Australia, Mary. It's been fun, but it's time to go. I'm leaving. You know now they're going to take

over.' And then Nelson Mandela became president. And they all stayed. (*Mimics*). 'He's a wonderful man, a wonderful man, hey. I love him, he's amazing. If it wasn't for him I'd have left' . . . Then it was Jacob Zuma, and people panicked again. But then it was different. For the first time in South African history you had black people going like (*scratches his head*) '*Eish*! How much is that ticket to Australia again?' (Noah 2009)

The above joke chronicles historical anxieties about black leadership in South African politics with reference to race-specific responses to the various moments in black government. In particular, the joke satirizes Zuma's inability to lead the country in that when he ascended to power, even black people wanted to emigrate. Elsewhere, commenting on the absurdity of the current South African government, Noah turns his attention to Julius Malema and his response to South African athlete Caster Semenya's case, where the gold medalist was subjected to 'gender-testing' following her dramatically improved performance in the 2009 World Athletics Championships in Berlin, Germany. The incident provoked extensive global media attention and outrage from local politicians, among them, Malema: "Then Julius [Malema] jumped up: (*mimics* Malema) 'That's racist! How can you ask a question like that? It's racist. Gender what? Gender what? It's obvious. You're coming here with your hermaphrodite, there's no such thing in my culture. Can't you see? It is obvious, can't you see man? *He* is a woman'" (Noah 2009).

What the above instances of comedic performances demonstrate (albeit at a relatively superficial level, due to space constraints), is that Noah's controversial navigation of race in South Africa (and the extent of his poetic license and repertoire), in large part due to his own mixed heritage (which allows him to straddle the racial spectrum, poking fun at *every* racial group and pointing out what people think but are unable to say), provides a 'safe space' where comedy cannot instantly be condemned as racist by virtue of the comedian's 'race.' Audiences (of all races) can thus reflect on the status of reality and discuss prospects for effecting concrete social change. More than this, by articulating the tensions involved in South Africa's transition (from apartheid to so-called 'contemporary democracy'), which, in Rancièrian terms, amounts to rendering perceivable the fractures in the political order, Noah provokes a re-arranging and reexamining of the country's archive (the boundaries between 'reality' and 'appearance'), thereby transforming the stories, images, and knowledge that it contains.

In addition, Noah's ability to negotiate cultural change and difference, and ease racial tensions across the country and across the different races through humor, functions as a vehicle for catharsis in the Freudian sense. And it is again this fluidity of identity (in addition to his foreignness) that has become the primary lens through which Noah (as the ultimate 'outsider' in the US) approaches his comedy performances in America, allowing him to

critique myopic American attitudes to international affairs. However, in the United States (unlike in South Africa), Noah is not termed 'colored,' but rather black, or is ofttimes mistaken for a Latino—if his shows ("African American") and interviews (such as with *Jimmy Kimmel*, among others) are to be understood as being based on his lived reality.

While the above instances of 'dissensual operations' certainly mark a rupture of the South African sensible order, it is Noah's entry into the American entertainment industry—culminating in his appointment as host of *The Daily Show*, whereby he became the first-ever non-white, non-American to fill that role—that readily lends itself to an (in-depth) analysis in terms of the primary theoretical framework of this book, in that it makes the operation of 'dissensus' perceptively evident and interpretively comprehensible. To be clear, at this time (previous to Noah's appointment on the aforementioned show), other networks were overwhelmingly mono-cultural in their late-night sequencing, for instance, with Jimmy Fallon on *The Tonight Show* on NBC, Jimmy Kimmel on ABC, *Late Night* with Seth Myers on NBC, *The Late Show* with Englishman James Corden on CBS, and with Stephen Colbert set to replace David Letterman on CBS's *Late Show* (Clark 2015). Speaking about the challenges of late-night television with regard to race, Noah himself admitted to *The New York Times*, just days before his debut on *The Daily Show*, that the program had "a blind spot" when it came to race (and the same is true of gender), stating that its writing room lacked diversity, thereby unwittingly falling prey to "let's call it, an institutionalized segregation" (Berg 2015). Furthermore, this race-and-gender disparity behind the scenes is also reflected in front of the camera, in terms of anchors and correspondents (Berg 2015).

Within Rancièrian terms, Noah's entrance into "The unbearable whiteness of late night"—to reference the title of an article published by comedian W Kamau Bell in 2014, seemingly alluding to Milan Kundera's well-known book, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—thus disrupted the 'color bar' at a highly mediatized level. By Rancière's standards, this amounts to introducing "new subjects and heterogeneous objects" into the field of American visibility (and audibility); subsequently marking a reorientation of the general perceptual space of late-night American television and denoting a disturbance of cultural and identity 'belonging,' as well as of the hierarchical nature of American public discourse (Rancière 2010, 2). In other words, to the extent that Noah introduced a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within late-night American television programming, his identity can thus be construed as part of the reconfiguration of experience. To phrase this differently, and more in line with Rancière's terminology, Noah's dissident potential involved dislocating the ostensible self-evidence of the consensual narrative of America as a democratic system (i.e., the 'American dream' of the land of the free [and the home of the brave]) which has been internalized as always-already apparent, and which purports that we live in

a unified, inclusive world, but which actually functions according to a system of boundaries and modes of exclusion (that still haunt post-civil rights America as a result of its repressed past). In these terms, Noah's role as host on *The Daily Show* can be considered an inherently political one. However, this assertion requires further clarification if I am to support my initial claim that (instances of) Noah's comedy constitutes a contemporary aesthetics of humor.

Continuing with an analysis of Noah in terms of his reign on *The Daily Show,* I now turn to specific instances of how his comedy (on the show) can be thought to operate as an exemplary form of the said politics. In this regard, I reference particular moments of dissent/dissensus—all of which are not necessarily framed in chronological order, but serve the overall purpose of developing thematic similarities—that strongly affect the visual and political landscape of our contemporary world and provoke a reconfiguration of the way our social and political systems are perceived (and operate). Once again, such dissensual practices pertain to his engagement with race relations and racism in America. To this end, I refer to the hour-long stand-up set he performed for a handpicked crowd of TV critics and other media types in Santa Monica, California, on 28 July 2015, prior to his debut on *The Daily Show:*

> There was a time when black people and the police had an unspoken agreement . . . We knew there were certain protocols to observe . . . You smiled. If [a police officer] told you to do something, you did it. Very slowly. [*Raises hands and in a sing-song voice says*] 'Don't kill me 'cause I got a family' . . . I feel like that used to work. Maybe that used to work. Now, I don't know how not to die [*this last phrase turns into a refrain that was scattered throughout that section of his set*]. Every time I turn on the news, another black person's been killed, for seemingly fewer and fewer reasonable reasons. (Ryan, 2015)

Recalling the names of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Walter Scott (all of whom were killed by police officers), Noah sarcastically explored the "lessons" learned from their deaths: do not wear a hoodie; do not resist; put your hands up; and "[d]on't be a big, black, scary guy," to which Noah adds, "Every day I look in the mirror and say, 'Good job!'" (Ryan 2015). In addition to the random and absurd reasons that police have used to justify the taking of black lives, Noah also calls attention to the concomitant ludicrous news reporting by the media which attempts to rationalize such events. With reference to Walter Scott, for instance, Noah reminded the audience that some media outlets frequently brought up the fact that he (Scott) owed unpaid child support, to which Noah reacted: "To the cop? . . . If that was the case, that's a totally different story . . . you shoot him, girl" (Ryan 2015).

In between the scenes of a segment on *The Daily Show* (which aired on 20 June 2017, on Comedy Central), Noah once again calls attention to state racism, this time referencing the police shooting and death of a black motor-

ist, Philando Castile, who informed officer Jeronimo Yanez that he was carrying a licensed weapon. Yanez (who was later acquitted of all charges), however, testified that Castile was pulling his gun out of his pocket despite commands not to do so, and further claimed that Castile was not of sound mind as he had been smoking marijuana (arguably yet another absurd attempt at rationalizing police violence again black citizens). Noah himself admitted that in his six years of living in America, he has been stopped between at least eight and ten times by cops:

> I've been stopped a s--t ton of times, I've been stopped in rental cars, I've been stopped in my car, I've been stopped in a car with tinted windows, a car with rims, a car with no rims, a car with . . . I've been stopped in a Tesla, like a Tesla people. Like I don't know what silent crime you think I'm on my way to commit . . . But I've been stopped in a Tesla. (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2017a)

Noah adds that whenever he is pulled over (by police), the first thing he does is throw his arms out of the window: "It looks so stupid when you see me [but . . .] I'd rather have the cop go, 'You are weird' . . . I'm like, 'OK, cool, but you saw where my hands are'" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2017a). Here Noah's jokes could be said to constitute a powerful metaphor for understanding the distribution of power within the American community. While post-racial narratives in US culture often downplay racial injustice, especially those involving law enforcement which often goes unchecked below the surface, Noah reminds one that the scourge of racism remains in countless daily manifestations, such as the above violent micro-aggression against racial minorities. In light of the above comedic performances, and bearing in mind Rancière's aesthetic-political philosophy, it would be safe to say that in these instances Noah challenges the 'common' understanding of racism in America (and indeed, provides a global stage from which to discuss the issue) by presenting two conflicting perceptions of American law and equality. On the one hand, there is the notion of a post-civil rights era America, in which the interests of minority groups are of equal value to the interests of the white majority (i.e., 'appearance'), and on the other hand, there is the way in which the *status quo* effectively perpetuates racial discrimination (i.e., 'reality'). Indeed, while America promotes itself as the global leader of democracy and human rights (as pointed out by Hardt and Negri), Noah demonstrates that this is not the case.

This is made explicitly clear (visibly and audibly) by Noah who, by referring to his South African upbringing during apartheid—racial discrimination at its extreme—concomitantly highlights America's racial bigotry which is largely unacknowledged in political discourse. For instance, in an interview with National Public Radio's Linda Holmes (published 27 Novem-

ber 2015), Noah states that the blatant racism in the United States reminds him of South Africa:

> I've always said America feels like a second home to me because the racism is familiar out here, which is really wonderful . . . Because I understand it. It is very simple. You know, when you go to places, if you got to Europe, for instance, it's very subtle, it's a very different game that is being played. But in America I understand it. I understand the history of black people being oppressed. (Chasmar 2015)

Additionally, elsewhere in one of his skits prior to his debut on *The Daily Show,* Noah jokingly suggests that America is less enlightened about racial discrimination and prejudice than (apartheid) South Africa: "It [America's racial politics] kind of makes me a little nostalgic for the old days back home" (Itzkoff 2015). Following this, Noah turns his attention to Trump (who is often the subject of Noah's jokes, and with good reason) and his US immigration policy (which arguably also involves the issue of race). In the episode of *The Daily Show* that aired on 3 October 2015, Noah juxtaposes Trump's presidential campaign announcement with a press conference held by (then) South African president Jacob Zuma, both of which feature the said politicians linking immigration with increased crime rates. While Trump claimed that "Mexicans . . . are . . . rapists . . . And some, I assume, are good people," Zuma similarly stated that "The influx of illegal migrants [results in] crime, unfair business practices, [and] drugs," and that "It is also not true that all foreign nationals are involved in criminal activities . . . there are some who are, but not all" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). In this fragment, both politicians attempt to moderate their language by pointing out that there are exceptions to their nativist generalizations about immigrants, which Noah refers to as "light xenophobia with just a dash of diplomacy" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015).

More than simply highlighting Trump's racist comments, the episode also compares him to Zuma and other African totalitarians by featuring a photoshopped image of Trump in a Gaddafi-esque ensemble. Such a representation of the said politician arguably casts him as an African dictator, a supposition Noah confirms when he remarks, "there's something familiar about Trump that makes me feel at home," implying that he is accustomed to the repressive policies of politicians like Trump (having lived in South Africa under Zuma's rule) (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). Noah later supplements this remark (explicitly) by pronouncing that "Trump is basically the perfect African president" (*The Tonight Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). Continuing to draw a connection between the president of the United States and African dictators, this time more overtly, the segment also presents a compilation of speeches by African tyrants that resonates with statements made by Trump himself.

For instance, Trump makes a string of proclamations that point to his high, if not narcissistic, level of self-regard, such as his claim to making "billions and billions of dollars," having a great temperament, and his statements that "They love me," "I've done an amazing job," "I was born with a certain intellect," and "God helped me by giving me a certain brain" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). Following this, Noah plays a series of clips (taken from a number of different televisual sources and interviews) of former president of Uganda, Idi Amin, who states that "The people like me very much . . . I am very popular . . . I am very powerful . . . I am the one who has got the money . . . I have got a very good brain" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). Noah then goes on to point out the similarities between Trump and Zimbabwe's (then) president, Robert Mugabe (who is known for his brutality and oppressive tactics), by alternating between specific video clips of each:

> [*Video clip of Mugabe*]: "My people have great praise for me."
> [*Video clip of Trump*]: "People love me. Everybody loves me."
> [*Video clip of Mugabe*]: "Land is ours, it's not European, it's our land . . . and we have taken it."
> [*Video clip of Trump*]: "We'll take our country back."
> [*Video clip of Mugabe*]: "We will win. We will be winning all the time."
> [*Video clip of Trump*]: "We will have so much winning if I get elected, then you may get bored with winning."
> (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015)

Thereafter, Noah sums up the characteristics of an African dictator which he sees in Trump: "He [Trump] loves himself, he believes that only he can fix the problems, and he speaks in the third person," adding that Trump is "the first African dictator to use Twitter" (*The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* 2015). By framing Trump in the above light, as analogous to African authoritarians, Noah arguably seeks to capacitate the audience by 'thresh-holding' settled frameworks of perception and cognition that deem Trump as anything other (or more civilized) than, or different to, African autocrats who have wielded their power in an oppressive and abusive manner by undermining state judiciaries, espousing 'alternative facts,' and vilifying the press, among other things. It is precisely this dissensual concept of political development in the work of Rancière—the attempt to evoke a perceptual reversal by trying to bring about a reconfiguration of the visible and audible in the shared common of the community—that is proposed as an antidote to the immobilizing depoliticization typical of our neoliberal capitalist society, for which Trump stands as the epitome.

Directing my focus now to instances of Noah's comedic routines/performances that resonate with the theoretical background of this study with regard to the signs, 'symptoms,' and daily manifestations of 'Empire,' I refer to

an episode of *The Daily Show* which aired on Comedy Central on 28 September 2017. In the particular segment, titled "Trump performs a tax miracle (allegedly)," Noah simultaneously deals with two major neoliberal interventions, namely the decrease in public expenditure for social services and the reduction of taxes on business and wealthy individuals which, as I have indicated in chapter 2, serves to reengineer the political system to serve the economic elite. The piece begins with a juxtaposition of a clip from MSNBC and Fox News, respectively, with the former reporting that "The White House and Republicans pivot after another failed health care push," while the latter states that "Republicans are trying to come together in tax reform after bruising and divisive battles on health care" (Comedy Central 2017). The intention of positioning the two topics (taxes and health care) collectively (especially in this last excerpt), in relation to the idea of 'unity' and 'discordance' (which corresponds to the above topics, respectively), arguably serves as an important indicator of the Republican Party's high-priority interests. This assumption is confirmed by Noah when he says: "Yes, finally, taxes—that's a much better subject for Republicans than health care. Republicans are like that jock at school who's bad at every subject but kills it at P.E." (Comedy Central 2017). Noah then goes on to play a clip of Trump's speech regarding the new tax plan that took place in Indiana one day before the airing of the said episode:

> Democrats and Republicans in congress should come together, finally, to deliver this giant win for the American people, and begin middle-class miracle. It's called a middle-class miracle, once again. It's also called a miracle for our great companies. A miracle for the middle-class; for the working person . . . Our framework includes our explicit commitment, that tax reform will protect low-income and middle-income households. Not the wealthy and well-connected; they can call me all they want, it's not gonna help. I'm doing the right thing. And it's not good for me, believe me. (Comedy Central 2017)

In response, Noah sarcastically asserts that Trump's tax plan actually seems to be quite generous, in that this "middle-class miracle" (quoting Trump) *stays* in the middle class, adding (in the same ironic tone) that "It sounds real good for the common man" (Comedy Central 2017). However, turning to a closer look at the Republicans' tax policy through the lens of a news report on MSNBC, Noah dissects all the 'miracles' that will *not* benefit Trump and the American rich. According to the bulletin, Trump stands to benefit from the new tax plan in three major ways, namely from the new tax bracket/measure, by eliminating alternative minimum tax, and by eliminating estate tax—all of which significantly benefit those with high incomes and investments (Comedy Central 2017). The implication here is that the said policy is a neoliberal tax cut masquerading as tax reform, to which Noah feigns surprise:

What? This whole plan is a cash-cow for Trump? I'm starting to wonder if the only reason he ran for president was to lower his own taxes? I hope so—I hope so—because it means he might resign the second he signs this thing into law. He might just be like, 'And, done. O.K., that's it for me, America. You've been great. Good luck with North Korea. I'm out. Bye bye!' (Comedy Central 2017).

With the above instances of comedic performance in mind, it is not difficult to make a connection between the proposed tax policy and the inevitable economic suffering such a reform would engender (on the part of the lower-income groups), which resonates with Hardt and Negri's characterization of one of the 'subjectivities' produced in the era of 'Empire,' namely the 'in-debted.' Remembering that 'Empire' functions at many levels, including the economic, the social, political, technological, and cultural, yet always with the advancement of capital in mind, I am inclined to revert back to Naomi Klein's thesis of 'disaster capitalism' in relation to Trump, which contends that neoliberal capitalism employs and harnesses disasters as an opportunity to facilitate its expansion. As a case in point (and to conclude this chapter), I reference Trump's Twitter reaction and response (posted on 13 September 2017) to Hurricane Harvey (which wreaked havoc on the Texas Coast in August 2017), and Hurricane Irma (which caused widespread and catastrophic damage throughout parts of the north-eastern Caribbean and the Florida Keys one month later), in which he links his endeavors to pass tax cuts with the need for recovery efforts pertaining to the mentioned storms: "With Irma and Harvey devastation, tax cuts and tax feform is needed more than ever before. Go Congress, go!" (Jackson 2017).

NOTES

1. It is worth noting that following Ellen's 'coming out,' ABC even placed a parental advisory at the beginning of each episode.

2. The title of the episode was significant for two reasons: firstly, it signified the nature of the episode, which was to keep its contents a secret until being aired, and secondly, it was a jab at a studio executive who, upon hearing DeGeneres's idea to have her character come out on the show, told her to get a dog instead (Fallon 2017).

3. This was significant of the time in that DeGeneres's own public announcement of her sexuality was made on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

4. Again, paying homage to the public unfolding of DeGeneres's own coming-out on *TIME* magazine's cover which read "Yep, I'm gay!"

5. Not limited to theatrical writing, Uys has established himself as a notable author, having written and published several books, most notably the biography of his most famous character creation, Evita Bezuidenhout, in *A Part Hate A Part Love* and *No One's Died Laughing*, as well as his novel *Trekking to Teema* (2000), which became South Africa's first internet book in 2000, before being published in print-format (South African History Online 2017; Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016). Uys also lays claim to two memoirs—*Elections and Erections* (2002) and *Between the Devil and the Deep* (2005)—as well as another novel, *Panorama*, in 2013, and even two cookbooks—*Evita's Kossie Sikelela* in 2010, and *Evita's Bossie Sikelela* in 2012

(South African History Online 2017; Pieter-Dirk Uys CV 2016). Most of Uys's books are now available as eBooks.

6. Uys, Pieter-Dirk. 1997. *Live from Boerassic Park.* Johannesburg: Live performance at the Civic Theatre and Agfa Theatre on the Square.

7. Similar to Uys's female personae, who are defined by, and in relation to, the men in their lives (or their search for a man), the limited judicial interest in lesbian women during apartheid's sexual prohibitions was even predicated on the ontology of heterosexual men, as Glen Retief intimates in "Keeping Sodom out of the laager: The policing of sexual minorities in South Africa:" "The MPs [members of parliament] were rather worried about the sizes, shapes and attributes of the different kinds of 'dilders' used by lesbians"—with one MP enquiring whether "this instrument [is] of normal or abnormal size" (1994, 103).

8. Each of these racial categories sometimes operate as stand-alone identities, while at other times they are all framed as 'black' or 'African'; that is, as 'other' to whiteness (and the associated conception of purity as discussed with regard to Uys).

9. In one of his routines in "The Daywalker" (2009), Noah makes a distinction between phenotypic racial identity and racial-cultural identity, which renders him racially colored but culturally black, highlighting the complexity of race in South Africa. In the skit, Noah indexes his own personal experiences as a biracial man who often gets confused for a colored man in Cape Town: "I always explain to people that I am colored by color but not by culture, which is a difficult thing for people to understand. Being colored is a cultural thing, not just a racial thing. I like to think of myself as a BEE baby: 51% black, 49% white."

10. While comedians, by profession, place themselves in a position to scorn the tyranny of 'political correctness' and are granted a certain taboo-breaking moratorium, at a time (in South Africa) when racial tensions are high, such complex issues need to be approached sensitively, if at all.

Conclusion

Comically Paradoxical and Paradoxically Comic

The driving force behind this book has been to establish whether or not a contemporary aesthetics of humor exists today, given the ideological situation of global capitalism. As demonstrated through the theoretical work of Žižek, the current ideology represents a definite limit for a critical and resistant comedy practice in that capitalism is an endlessly 'reterritorializing' force that expends and incorporates codes of both culture and state. Hence, from where does a site of resistance emerge? Answering this question became an intertwined process of critical reflection on humor studies and poststructuralism-driven theoretical work, made clear by the use of principles from the much larger generic field of 'comedy' and philosophy.

Firstly, in tracing the contours of a 'political stand-up comedy' today, I have sought to redefine, within certain parameters, the definition of stand-up comedy which, in its current state, I consider to be inadequate (too vague, restrictive, or contradictory) in terms of both its past and present. That is to say, as noted in chapter 1, stand-up comedy has its origins in ancient rites, rituals, and customs that are diverse and complex in their experiences; thus, to restrict the art form to a 'simplified' description (limiting it to a few specific characteristics) is to neglect its rich heritage altogether (and with it, the political concerns these traditions might illuminate). Moreover, the ever-changing landscape of mass media further necessitates a new understanding and conceptualizing of the genre, in that stand-up is constantly evolving in terms of production, distribution, and consumption, and subsequently also in terms of its reception.

Following this, I have sought to contribute to a new political reading of stand-up comedy in terms of its role in contemporary human society, as well as its relationship to ideology and democracy. As demonstrated in chapter 2,

stand-up comedy's burgeoning appeal in the twenty-first century is not only attributable to the rise of the internet and a fanatically loyal fan base (which arguably functions at a rather superficial level). More importantly, in light of the widespread suffering in the age of 'Empire,' comedy (understood in terms of Freud's theory of humor in relation to the unconscious) offers a form of 'escapism' and cathartic inner release from the dehumanizing and fracturing processes, and exploitative economic practices, that neoliberalism justifies. Accordingly, comedy and humor thus come to play a vital role in contemporary society (in particular), as a means of counteracting (to varying degrees and extents) the devastating psychological effects of the capitalist ideology; with comedy functioning as an antidote for anxiety, if you will.

My purpose in 'reading' comedy within the larger socioeconomic context has been to contribute additional knowledge to psychoanalytic readings of comedy and humor. This is not to say that this book posits a new theory of humor against the traditional superiority, incongruity, and relief theories; but rather that it contributes to a more complex and developed understanding of the relation of jokes, joking, and humor to the unconscious mind in relation to ideology and discourse. Furthermore, by placing the art-routines of DeGeneres, Uys, and Noah, as Adorno would say, in "constellation with" the entire socioeconomic context within which they work or have worked, this study contributes to bringing to the fore (like light refracting through a prism) a spectrum of (often unspoken) social issues that are of fundamental cultural importance (especially with regard to challenging the assumptions of mainstream society), despite perhaps not usually being in the public eye, as it were, where such issues and representations can be challenged, modified, reinforced, contradicted, erased, and so on. To this end, this book can be seen as a deepening of the discourses surrounding the possibility of a contemporary 'political comedy.'

Continuing to trace the contours of a contemporary 'political comedy,' I explored comedy as a sociopolitical phenomenon, which rarely considers the question of its determination by ideology. I have sought, therefore, to contribute to a redefinition of the political dimension of stand-up comedy and the limits of satire in the ideological situation of hegemonic neoliberal and global capitalism. From Žižek's perspective, as outlined in chapter 3, ideology needs to absorb all ironies for it to exist as ideology (to be something that we cannot really see and would naturally argue that we cannot be the slave or victim of). In this regard, ideology in the current moment *needs* comedy, and laughter, strange as this may sound. Subsequently, what appears to be subversive in contemporary comedy, is allowed (or sanctioned) because it can be contained—the comic jester is a kind of useful idiot in this regard. In other words, comedy in the current moment could be said to function as a form of ideological maintenance and perpetuation, rather than as a form of dissent against official authoritative discourses. In light of what has been argued here

(and in chapter 3), how then could comedians escape an ideology that constantly territorializes their actions, rendering any form of critique complicitous and appropriated?

Answering this question (which is correlative to the one posed at the opening of this concluding chapter) requires abandoning the Western philosophical tradition's tendency for defining meaning in terms of binary oppositions (dialectical 'logic'), and adopting a logic of paradox and 'aporia' in an effort to articulate the irreducibly complex nature of stand-up comedy in the present era. That is to say, while the ideology of late capitalism has undoubtedly delimited the contours of comedy today, it is my conviction that mass-cultural status in and of itself does not vitiate contemporary stand-up comedians' ability to offer significant social and political critique *if* its 'ambivalence' is taken into account.

This may be demonstrated, theoretically, by way of Hutcheon's (1988) notion of "complicitous critique," whereby she argues that postmodern cultural forms of representation are ideologically grounded, and therefore any attempts at interrogating the conventions of late capitalist and liberal humanist discourses are rendered simultaneously 'complicitous' *and* 'critical'—a position of ambiguity that runs throughout this book. While many scholars (who adopt an 'either/ or' logic) argue that postmodernist art's compromised position renders it bereft of critical potential, Hutcheon (1988) embraces the inclusivist ('both/and') logic of poststructuralism, insofar as she refutes the idea that one could render social critique from a position of vaunted purity, thus acknowledging the full paradoxical complexity of life experience in the current era.

In light of the above, this book produces a set of three theoretical propositions. Firstly, as Rancière argues, antagonisms and contradictions (both social and political) are constitutive of the social, rather than operating as a division within it, but are hidden beneath the mask of ideology, endorsed by the 'police.' Operating on this principle, in comic practice, this antagonism can be made visible (to the audience) by breaking with and from the official ideology/status quo. To the extent that jokes (structurally) rely on a (momentary) gap or fissure in 'categorical' reason, my research (informed by Rancièrian theory) suggests that, to a degree, stand-up comedy is immanently 'political' in its form, and as such can always be a site for the possibility of democratic politics.

Working from this assumption, the second proposition made by this book is that the work of 'political comedy' (as argued in chapter 4) relies on a process of disidentification—the ability of demonstrations, speech situations, creative practices, and so on, to distance oneself explicitly from the mono-dimensional fabric of the 'police' order by producing a sensory form of 'strangeness' in relation to everyday life, so as to call attention to the fabricated and contingent nature of social experience. To this end, as argued in chapter 5, DeGeneres's and Uys's sex-gender hybridity, and Noah's racial

hybridity, grant them the opportunity to navigate between standard gendered and racial responses within the comedic realm. In this way, they render the hierarchical and cratological manifestations of social categories, like gender and race, provisional, constructed, and contingent, thereby restructuring the 'distribution of the sensible' in aesthetic-cratological (that is, political) terms.

Thirdly, this redefined 'political comedy' is characterized by division, instead of (consensual) unity, and approaches the much more radical condition of polemics and paradox. This assumption resonates with my interest in making 'sense' of the layered contradictions that haunt stand-up comedy's transgressive possibilities, as signaled by the comedic routines of the above stand-up comedians. In that the genre has risen to new heights in terms of popularity (and success), it is important to reflect on the ways in which the ambiguities embedded in the art form (in light of mass culture) complicate our assumptions about resistance and, indeed, invite us to embrace contradiction as a potentially transgressive force. That is, the theoretical framework established in this book allows one to think of ambivalence, hybridity, and polemics as a strategic self-location that facilitates the breaking of hierarchical and cratological arrangements and boundaries, allowing the above comedians to articulate alternative readings of a situation that challenge hegemonic 'common sense(s).'

In light of the above (and what has been demonstrated in greater detail elsewhere in this book), *Taking Comedy Seriously: Stand-Up's Dissident Potential in Mass Culture* contributes a formal theoretical model for the understanding, interpretation, and evaluation of contemporary comedy as critical and resistant political praxis, which has been actualized through analyses of several comedic routines by DeGeneres, Uys, and Noah. However, I acknowledge that to some extent such an interpretive analysis is always haunted by the inescapability of its own failure to completely account for all possible interpretations of its textual examples. This 'model,' so to speak, conceptualizes the 'genre' of contemporary comedy as a complex and complicated aesthetic mode that plays a central role in the mediated cultural life of contemporary subjects, particularly as a form of expression of political assumptions and priorities through a structuring aesthetic logic built around dissent, disruption, and difference.

Comedy so conceived, as a cultural category, points to a demand for further study due to the massive economic, affective, psychological, and aesthetic role it plays in contemporary society. Indeed, one cannot understand or account for our world, particularly its mediated existence, without accounting for comedy. Furthermore, if figures in the context of state power are employing comedy to further their own ends, and the ideology of global capital is bombarding the modern subject, at every turn, with injunctions to 'enjoy,' then there has never been a better time for those interested in radical emancipatory politics to start *taking comedy seriously*.

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About the Author

Jennalee Donian is currently pursuing postdoctoral research in South Africa with a focus on political humor and humorous politics. In the past, she has worked as a writing and research specialist, editor, and proofreader in a university setting, where she specialized in academic writing, collecting, analysing, and presenting data in a variety of formats, and writing for publications across a broad array of disciplines. She has also taught classes in media studies, film theory, scriptwriting, communication studies, and English literature. Her passion for research and writing, combined with an insatiable quest for knowledge (inspired by Socrates's teaching that the only thing we know with certainty is how little we know), has seen her complete an honors degree in English literature, a master's in media studies, and a PhD in philosophy. Armed with this 'doctra ignorantia' and her interdisciplinary educational background, Donian approaches life, writing, and teaching in a way that always encourages one to "dare to think for yourself" ('*Sapere aude*!'); to question, always, and to critique, indefinitely.